

Marisa Verna

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano

**The correspondence of the arts in a Fin de Siècle Magazine.  
The “Livre d’Art” at the crossroads of Modernism**

**Introduction**

The main topic of this article is, as the title says, a rare and precious French magazine of the late Nineteenth century, in which a vivid and crucial discussion about arts and their inter-relationship grew more and more intense. The *Livre d’Art* is an art *object*, in the physical and conceptual sense of the word<sup>1</sup>. Its material existence is crucial for our purposes, because its cultural programme and even its foundation are rooted in the most and least material art of all, the theatre.

The most material, for obviously theatre needs stages, real actors, sceneries, costumes, and money. The least material, because nothing is left of a show, once the show is off. We are told that Molière was an unsurpassed interpreter of his own plays, we know it for sure, but we are not able to experience it. This is true for classical authors, but also for contemporary ones: even when a play is recorded, filmed, and we have pictures of actors and stages, the *artefact* of the representation has disappeared for ever. Not only our experience, but most of the material objects that have been used to perform it are reused, sometimes destroyed. That is why it is so arduous to study theatre, for theatre is as complicated and as complex as real life is. There is more to it than meets the eye, so to say. The *Théâtre d’Art* was an ephemeral avant-garde theatre, of which nothing is left but two projects of set decoration and some issues of an art magazine, the *Livre d’Art*, indeed, and, last but not least, the spiritual heritage of the whole contemporary dramatic aesthetics. While studying the *Livre d’Art*, we are, therefore,

---

<sup>1</sup>The definition of “objet d’art” that is to be found in the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art terms* does not imply magazines or books (“small, precious objects such as ceramic, metalwork, and curiously intended for private

going to focus first on the Théâtre d'Art, and recall some of the main phases of its history<sup>2</sup>.

### The Théâtre d'Art

The Théâtre d'Art was founded in 1890 by Paul Fort, a seventeen years-old High School pupil at that time, who played truant to distribute fliers of his new theatre and wanted to revolutionize all existing dramatic institutions. The ideal that inspired the new theatre was grounded in Symbolist poetry, as Baudelaire and Mallarmé had theorized it, and nothing less than the Absolute was the goal of the young Paul Fort: not just to conceive it, but to perform it on stage. In the Symbolists' conception theatre is the perfect Synthesis of all arts, and needs to be reinvented, as the current Bourgeois and Utilitarian culture betrayed its very nature, which is metaphysical and symbolic. To reach this goal, artists have to look both backward, to the very origins of dramatic art — Greek classical tragedy — and forward, to a new, perfect fusion of perceptive and spiritual dimensions, a fusion that is meant to represent Eternity.

---

<sup>2</sup> For Symbolist Theatre scholarship see Jacques Robichez, *Le Symbolisme au théâtre. Lugné-Poe et les débuts de l'Œuvre*, L'Arche éditeur, Paris 1957, pp. 568 ; Mariangela Mazzocchi Doglio, *Una ricerca sul teatro simbolista francese*, Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milano 1975, pp. 149 ; Liana Nissim, « Une lecture moderne du théâtre symboliste. Axel de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam », in *Le texte dramatique, la lecture et la scène, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis*, n° 895, Romanica Wratislaviensis XXIV, Wrocław 1986, pp. 185-201 ; Deak Frantisek, *Symbolist Theater : the formation of the avant-garde*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1993 ; Marisa Verna, « Teorie estetiche teatrali : Péladan », *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, 2, 1994, II, pp. 499-554 Jean-Pierre Sarrazac ed., *Mise en crise de la forme dramatique*, Actes du Colloque organisé par l'Université de Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle, le Musée d'Orsay, le Théâtre National de la Colline, le centre d'Etudes Théâtrales de l'Université catholique de Louvain, *Etudes Théâtrales*, 15/16, 1999 ; Mariangela Mazzocchi Doglio, « Teatro Naturalista e teatro simbolista : due idee a confronto », in *Simbolismo e naturalismo*, S. Cigada ed., Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2006, pp. 415-431 ; Marisa Verna, « La Révolte di Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Storia di un malinteso », in *Ibid.*, 463-490. Pour une histoire du décor théâtral cfr. Denis Bablet, *Le décor du théâtre de 1870 à 1914*, Editions du CNRS, Paris 1965 ; Jean-Jacques Roubine, *Théâtre et mise en scène 1880-1980*, Puf, Paris 1980

<sup>3</sup> See Merel Van Tilburg, *Staging the Symbol: the Nabis, theatre decoration, and the total work of art*, Université de Genève, Thèse, 2013. On the influence of poets on pictorial aesthetics see C. Dessy, *Les écrivains et les Nabis*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2015.

The Symbolist dramatic aesthetic was theorized between 1886 and 1887 by Stéphane Mallarmé, who exposed it in some dense and obscure articles in the *Revue Indépendante*, which had replaced in November 1886 the *Revue Wagnérienne* as the 'official media outlet' of the Symbolist movement. Mallarmé's famous — but unknown, as very few had understood it — article on Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* had brought to an end the intellectual exchange between Symbolist French poets and the promoters of the magazine dedicated to Richard Wagner.

Houston Stewart Chamberlain was especially outraged by the veiled criticism that showed through the lines of the French Poet, who did not know music well enough to judge the wagnerian symphonic opera, but had a clear notion of the role of language in an ideal 'total work of art', which should be conceived as *consonant with* music, painting and plastic representation, and not subordinate to the gigantic presence of the vocal and instrumental element of the Opera.

Paul Fort had this conception in mind, when he first envisaged representing on stage the Symbolist poetic principles. Lugné-Poe, the future founder of the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, had introduced him to the young painter Maurice Denis, who was one of his former schoolmates in the Lycée Condorcet<sup>5</sup>. As we will see, this encounter was going to be crucial to build up the idea of unity of arts.

### **The Symbolist Theatre**

For Mallarmé, theatre is a collective ritual meant to celebrate the immortal destiny of mankind, and, in its quality of art of Synthesis, its aim is not to represent infinitesimal details of psychological and social patterns, as theorized by the Utilitarian and Naturalist schools. Its only necessary character is the 'absolute hero', condensing in himself all human features and aspirations, and asking the sole, immortal question, the same as the one Hamlet has been asking for centuries:

---

<sup>4</sup> S. Mallarmé, "Rêverie d'un poète français", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », p. 541-543.

<sup>5</sup> The Lycée Condorcet was a progressive and liberal high school, where many of the most remarkable French artists of the late Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth Century have been educated.

L'adolescent évanoui de nous aux commencements de la vie et qui hantera les esprits hauts ou pensifs par le deuil qu'il se plaît à porter, je le reconnais, qui se débat sous le mal d'apparaître : parce qu'Hamlet extériorise, sur des planches, ce personnage unique d'une tragédie intime et occulte, son *nom* même affiché exerce sur moi, sur toi qui le lis, une fascination, parente de l'angoisse.<sup>6</sup>

The Absolute Character encapsulates in itself the two further dramatic structures, time and space, that are completely incorporated in the eternal present of the human soul acting on stage. No historical facts, neither descriptions of any specific spatial situation are envisaged, as "artificiality is more essential to drama than to any other writing genre". Drama is, in effect, assimilated to a "logical dream", in which "images that are harmonious only among themselves (in the eternal moment of the performed play) [are displayed] in a solely artistic language"<sup>7</sup>. Action on the stage is meant "to expand the space, reaching for Infinity"<sup>8</sup> through spiritual 'vibrations', whilst the spectator is invited to live a complete sensory experience, following the Baudelaire's theory of *Correspondances*.

Intermediality was, indeed, at the origin of this theatrical project, in which spectators were considered as the 'last creators' of the play and were, therefore, invited to sense a complete spiritual and physical experience. In effect, in a metaphysical theatre the audience cannot be but active, as the Absolute cannot be passively 'watched'. This is the very revolution that Symbolism brought into Modernity, the very critical point that differentiates it from the Naturalist school with its theory of the 'fourth wall', that was meant to create a perfect illusion of reality, in which the audience passively *attends* an action

---

<sup>6</sup> S. Mallarmé, *Hamlet*, in *Crayonné au théâtre*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Morice, Henry Bauer cited, *La Ville et le Théâtre*, « Echo de Paris », 6 avril 1891.

<sup>8</sup> S. Mallarmé, *De Même*, in *Offices*, in *Variations sur un sujet*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 396. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> See A. Antoine, *Behind the Fourth Wall*, in *Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theater*, trans. Joseph M. Bernstein, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, 1963).

occurring behind a wall, “transparent for the public, opaque for the actor”<sup>10</sup>. There is obviously “a paradox in it” and “illusionist theatre is not less artificial than other theatre, it is differently artificial”<sup>11</sup>; still Symbolists were the first ones to “break the fourth wall”, as contemporary performance theory now conceptualizes the creative relationship between the stage and the audience<sup>12</sup>. As stated by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, in effect

Implicit in this model of theatre are other interesting assumptions about the dramatic medium which bear directly on the question of how modernism developed on the stage: the subjugation of text to performance, the staging of an abstract aesthetic or concept, the direct involvement of the audience and the metatheatrical consequent on that involvement. Many of these elements inform later theatrical innovators like Brecht and Artaud, linking Roinard’s seemingly isolated and anomalous experiment directly to the main developments of theatrical modernism.<sup>13</sup>

Provided that the scenery is conceived by the Symbolists as a ‘universal analogy’, no realism is needed in the *mise en scène*, which does not *represent*, but only *evokes* the situation and the plot of the play. This conception of staging was loudly and clearly expressed in a famous article that served as preface to the Pierre Quillard’s drama *La fille aux mains coupées*, performed at the Théâtre d’Art in March 1891, and whose title became afterward the Symbolist Theatre manifesto: *On the absolute uselessness of detailed mise en scène*. Quillard’s article was primary published in the first version of the *Livre d’Art*, a mere playbill

---

<sup>10</sup> “Il faut que l’emplacement du rideau soit transparent pour le public, opaque pour le comédien” (J. Julien, *Le théâtre vivant. Essai théorique et pratique*, Charpentier, Paris 1891, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> J. Chotia, *André Antoine* (“Directors”), Cambridge University Press, New York 1991, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> See E. Bell, *Theories of performance*, Sage Publications, New York 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (1999). ‘*Mise en Scène*’: *The Théâtre d’Art’s Cantique des cantiques and the Use of Smell as a Theatrical Device*. “*Theatre Research International*”, 24, pp 152-159, p. 153.

that portrayed also some lithographs of Nabi's painting: the *Journal du théâtre. Théâtre d'Art*<sup>14</sup>.

The definition of scenery that is stated in this text can be regarded as the core of the project of the *Livre d'Art* itself, as the Théâtre d'Art and the magazine are part of the same global undertaking, involving Nabi painters and Symbolist poets. Following this definition the scenery is to be understood, in effect, as a "pure ornamental fiction which completes the illusion by analogies of colours and lines with the drama". The idea of correspondence of the arts is evidently implied in this theorization of theatre, and is rooted in a sole and unique idea: the total work of art, which originated in Wagnerian aesthetic but was deeply modified by French Symbolism. As Van Tilburg points out, the modernity of the collaboration between Nabi painters and Symbolist poets within the *Théâtre d'Art*

lies in the mobilisation of the full semiotic potential of the *mise en scène* as a sign language in space and in movement, for which the Nabi contribution was of crucial importance. The notion of the total work of art was the theoretical basis for this development.<sup>15</sup>

Theatre was indeed a theoretical necessity for both poets and painters, in order to create a new aesthetic, which would break the boundaries between different expressive means, and lead to the creation of a metaphysical artistic 'language', able to appeal to all the senses and meant to achieve the perfect synthesis of a universal Harmony.

### **The Journal du Théâtre d'Art**

The primary version of the *Livre d'Art* was a mere « theatre programme », distributed among the spectators before the *mise en scène*, the ambition of which was nothing less than the creation of a true artistic *object*. More than a playbill, the theatre programme would be a magazine, and would host

---

<sup>14</sup> *Journal du théâtre. Théâtre d'Art*, Mars 1891, p. 1. Later on Quillard's article was published in the *Revue d'Art Dramatique*, Mai 1891, pp. 180-3. See M. Verna, "Vers un art total. Synesthésie théâtrale et dramaturgie symboliste", *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 2005, Octobre, 307-332.

<sup>15</sup> M. Van Tilburg, *Staging the Symbol*, p. 9.

theoretical articles and lithographs of the *décors*, that were for the first time assigned to painters and not, as it was the rule, to professional scene painters. Since the second issue of the *Journal du Théâtre d'Art*, its cultural proposal reached in effect for the cutting edge of artistic theory, as the Théâtre d'Art did for dramatic practice. In this issue was published, as previously recalled, Quillard's groundbreaking manifesto, which broke with all established staging conventions (which constitutes, in the country of the most strictly ruled theatrical tradition in all of Europe, a true revolution)<sup>16</sup>. Some lithographs by Paul Sérusier, who had painted the *décor* of Quillard's drama, were associated with the text: the foundations of the new 'synthetist'<sup>17</sup> aesthetic were laid, and the few sheets of the playbill were elevated to the material witness of a mystical event, which the dramatic representation was meant to be.

As stated by Van Tilburg, both elements of *synthesis* — synthesis as a stylistic pattern heading to a formal abstraction — and *mysticism* — synthesis as a spiritual feature — are crucial to define this cultural experience:

Contrary to the Symbolism of the "painters of the soul" or of Gustave Moreau, who continued to resort to a formal language with a high degree of naturalism, this "Symbolist" symbol is characterised [...] as comprising two elements: first, the use of an abstract formal language and, secondly, the element shared with the "painters of the soul", "the suggestion of mystery". Whereas Nabi scholarship, especially in relation to the study of modernism, has at times displayed a tendency to neglect the second term of the Symbolist symbol [...] both the formal and the metaphysical element [need to

---

<sup>16</sup> See J. Simpson, "Defiant acts: the *Théâtre d'Art*, *Décor*, and the radical Symbolist 'Total Work'", in K. Grossman, M. E. Lane, B. Monicat, W. Z. Silverman ed., *Confrontations. Politics and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century France*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2001, p. 174-186.

<sup>17</sup> "Synthetism, in art, [is a] method of painting evolved by Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, and others in the 1880s to emphasize two-dimensional flat patterns, thus breaking with Impressionist art and theory. The style shows a conscious effort to work less directly from nature and to rely more upon memory" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/art/Synthetism>). For a critic discussion of the matter, see J. Simpson, *Symbolism and Visual Arts*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1999.

be integrated] in the study of Nabi art. Moreover, the mise en scène of Symbolist theatre cannot be studied without either of the two terms – or the project of their synthesis.<sup>18</sup>

The *Journal du Théâtre d'Art* is then to be considered as material evidence of this project, and what could have been confused with a students' magazine is, as a matter of fact, an *art object*, within which the correspondence — the consonance, better to say — of arts is effective.

### **The *Livre d'Art*. First series**

The table of contents of the *Livre d'Art*'s first issue, published on May 1892, clearly exhibited the idea that was aimed by the two editors of the magazine (Paul Fort and Remy de Gourmont): to make the arts correspond and respond to each other's features, having a metaphysical purpose as common ground and shared ethical structure. The necessity of synthesis as a stylistic feature is, indeed, generated by the belief in the unity of the universe, as Swedenborg had enounced it and Baudelaire had spread it through his sonnet *Correspondances*<sup>19</sup>. It is not by chance that this sonnet was quoted in one of the first statements of the Théâtre d'Art, announcing that

Performances in the Théâtre d'Art will be followed by the staging of an unknown painting or of an artistic project of the New School. The curtain will stay up and the painting will be visible for three minutes [...]. Background music and perfumes matching with the subject are going to perfect and complete the impression emanating from the painting. "Perfumes, sounds, and colours correspond", Baudelaire said.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> On Swedenborg's influence on Baudelaire's aesthetic see P. Labarthe, *Baudelaire et la tradition de l'allégorie*, Genève, Librairie Droz, 1999. The first time that Baudelaire mentions Swedenborg's work is in his unique novella, *La Fanfarlo* (1847), but the influence of the Swedish philosopher is widely recognized by Baudelaire's scholarship.

<sup>20</sup> The announcement was published in the *Echo de Paris* in January 1891.

This project was not fulfilled, but its mere forecasting is a clear example of the interdependent relationship in which different arts were to be represented in the new theatre. The new theatre magazine was as well envisaged as a physical space of *representation*, a silent exhibition of this eternal artistic correspondence. The two sections of the *The Théâtre d'Art's* first issue alternate, in effect, poetry and painting in a crossing and reciprocal relationship, theatre being the bond between them. Remy de Gourmont signed the editorial, *Le Paraclet des poètes*, in which he lamented the absence of a « Holy Poetic Spirit » which would inspire the new generation of poets, whose youth would be lost in a slightly morbid Decadence without a clear sign of salute. This shows that the Symbolist edifice was starting to crumble, as the last issue of the magazine in 1896 would clearly state. The crucible of this cultural evolution would be, indeed, the *Livre d'Art* itself. In fact, several Symbolist epigones were published in the poetry section, such as Paul-Napoléon Roinard (*Le Cantique des Cantiques. Troisième paraphrase*); Saint-Pol-Roux (*Le Paon*, dedicated to Camille Mauclair); Ferdinand Hérold, (*Rachilidis*); Rachilde (*Piété mondaine*); Remy de Gourmont himself (*Anciens poèmes mystiques*). Three tendencies are to be detected in this table of contents: first, Mysticism, which is common to all texts; a subtle kind of Vitalism, which is to burst forth in the last issues of the magazine but is already identifiable in *The Peacock* by Saint-Pol-Roux, for instance; intermediality, which is discernible in the attempt to create a new type of *ekphrasis* (again, in *The Peacock*) and, above all, in Roinard's paraphrase of the biblical *Song of Song*. This text referred to the adaptation of the Salomon poem, which had been performed at the *Théâtre d'Art* in December 1891. As Shepherd-Barr points out,

Roinard's synaesthetic experiment drew on a range of sources including Baudelaire, Wagner and Rimbaud, and, most strikingly, featured scents pumped into the auditorium on cue by young symbolist poets stationed in the far edges of the proscenium and in the balcony and using hand-held vaporizers. According to the outline Roinard provided in the programme, nine scents were used: frankincense, white violets, hyacinth, lilies, acacia, lily of the valley, syringa, orange blossom, and jasmine. Each of these odours had corresponding

orchestrations of speech (specific vowel sounds), tones (original music composed by Mme Flamen de Labrély), and colours.<sup>21</sup>

The second part of the magazine is composed of

- A section on the Théâtre d'Art (*Les Chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont and *Loth et ses filles* by Paul Lacomblez).
- An art section : lithographs of Honoré Daumier, Odilon Redon, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Paul Bernard, Maurice Denis, Filiger, Sérusier, Henry de Groux, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, Jan Verkade, Paul Ranson.

The Nabi group is strongly represented in this publication: with a few exceptions (Honoré Daumier, who is mainly known for his satiric engravings, Odilon Redon, whose pictorial style can be ascribed to the group of the «Painter of the Soul», Van Gogh and Gauguin, whose production is not ascribable to any specific current)<sup>22</sup>, all the painters that participated to this publication belong to the Nabi group. As highlighted by Van Tilburg, the role of the Nabi's pictorial theory is crucial to understand the Symbolist theatre, but also to evaluate the turning point in European culture that is commonly identified as Modernism.

In effect, if several decadent texts, as well as reports of the Bayreuth wagnerian pilgrimage (by Emile de Saint-Auban), are still announced in the "reviews section", the forthcoming *Autobiographie de Walt Whitman* by Viellé-Griffin is much more interesting from our point of view. In effect, in the second series of the magazine that is to be published in 1896, Walt Whitman will be the "Paraclét of the Poets" still invoked by Remy de Gourmont in 1892, and his poetry will be the symbol of a new "Aesthetic of life", allowing the new generation of artists to switch from Symbolism to Modernism. This theoretic evolution is evident from the time of issues 2 and 3 of the first series,

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Mise en Scène': *The Théâtre d'Art's Cantique des cantiques and the Use of Smell as a Theatrical Device*, p. 152. On this mise en scène see also my article *Vers un art total*, cited in *Infra*.

<sup>22</sup> See J.-D. Jumeau-Lafond, *Painters of the Soul, Symbolism in France*, Tampereen Kaupunki, Tampere 2006.

which are published together in July 1892. In the Table of Contents we find Charles Morice (*Les yeux de l'Insomnie*), Pierre Quillard (*Fragment d'un poème d'autrefois*), Pierre-Napoléon Roinard (*Fontaine scellée*), who were among the authors of the new 'synthetic dramas' that were being represented at the time in the *Théâtre d'Art*, while Gabriel-Albert Aurier (*Le coeur cristallisé*) was one of the most important theorists of the synthetist Nabis's painting<sup>23</sup>. On one side their articles are all permeated by a deep sentiment of melancholy, that is rooted in the abandonment of the Absolute ideal of Symbolism, and on the other side they exhibit also a strong interest in perception and psychological border-line phenomena, like insomnia, perversity or catalepsy (Gabriel Randon, *Perversité*; Charles-Henry Hirsch, *L'Amour. Confidences du solitaire*). Despite their doubtful literary quality, these texts show an important stylistic experimentation, aimed at representing the complexity of sensorial perceptions and merging figurative and poetic art. The art section publishes lithographs of Emile Bernard, Xavier Roussel, Jan Verkade, Edouard Vuillard, Vincent Van Gogh, with a clear predominance of the Nabi's group; in the review section are mentioned for the first time some Belgian magazines, as *La Wallonie* and *La jeune Belgique*. Internationalism will be, indeed, one of the further outcomes of the new tendencies that we have detected in this first series of the *Livre d'Art*.

### ***L'Épreuve* and *L'Épreuve littéraire*. Towards the second series**

After the closure of the *Théâtre d'Art* in 1893, the magazine's publication was interrupted, but the experimentation of a new kind of text-image editorial product was carried on by Paul Fort and Maurice Dumont, who founded *L'Épreuve. Journal-Album d'Art* in 1894. The new magazine was a luxurious product, meant only for subscribers and members, but it was also a typographic centre, giving artists access to innovative techniques as the 'lavis typographique', which enabled them to print chromolithographs of more than two

---

<sup>23</sup> His article "Le Symbolisme en peinture. Paul Gauguin" (*Mercure de France*, mars 1891, pp. 155-65) was very influential in the further development of the pictorial theories. On Aurier's aesthetic thought see J. Simpson, *Symbolism and Visual Arts*.

colours. Its aesthetic project is clearly stated in the front page of the first issue:

Our goal is to make the elite know that young talents exist, who strive for the complete revelation of an Ideal that is still badly defined, but sensed by everyone, in Art as well as in Philosophy and Literature.

The *Épreuve. Journal-Album d'Art* published a series of artists' proofs ('L'épreuve' means literally 'the proof') that were meant to be collected by the readers (it was an "Album"), and this gives evidence, among other things, of the development of new techniques of photomechanical reproduction in the late Nineteenth Century, which made it possible to insert captions commenting on pictures without using descriptions. This helped the extraordinary flourish of art magazines, but also the search for a correspondence among the arts themselves.

*L'Épreuve* was associated with *Pan*, a Berliner art magazine founded by Julius Maier Gräfe and Otto Julius Bieberbaum to diffuse and support the new international artistic currencies, that soon became the main organ of the German *Jugendstil*. Again, *Pan* was a luxurious product, whose wealthy backers were able to provide a large amount of capitals and thus allow artists to express themselves without money constraints. Broader internationalism, vitalism and 'decoration style' were widely represented in the Berliner periodical, which published German, French, British and Belgian artists: Maurice Dumont, Ferdinand Khnopff, Félicien Rops, Richard Dehmel, Theodor Fontane, James Whistler, Detlev Von Lilienkron are some of the names that appear in the Table of Contents of April 1895. On the same date, a Parisian « literary section » of the « Pan Gesellschaft » was founded in Paris, thanks to the association of Julius Maier-Gräfe with Henry Albert, German by birth but with a French cultural background: it was *L'Épreuve Littéraire*.

Like *Pan*, *L'Épreuve Littéraire* exhibited a clear tendency towards Vitalism and Internationalism, publishing texts of many German and Belgian poets and philosophers, such as Robert Shaeffer, Max Elskamp, Maurice Mæterlinck, Émile Verhaeren, Richard Dehmel, Theodor Fontane, Detlev Liliencron, Friedrich Nietzsche. German texts were translated for the first time into French, while the Belgian Francophone

poetry found in this magazine an important broadcast medium. When publication ceased, the *Livre d'Art* (second series) took over.

### **The *Livre d'Art*. Second series**

In March 1896 the *Livre d'Art*, art and literature review was issued, illustrated with Original Plates; it was a “logical continuation of the *Épreuve Littéraire*”. The front page theoretical statement gives evidence of the way things had gone on since Remy de Gourmont’s invocation for a new Paraclete: Symbolism is overcome, and the rallying cry is now “back to Nature”. Sensualism will be the new poetic ideal, while *Art Nouveau* and *Arts and Crafts* are leading the artistic principles supported by the *Livre d'Art* :

[The review] will support the modern decorative movement, from the pictorial ornamental decoration of houses, theatres and the street, to the decoration of cloth furniture, stained-glass, ceramic, costumes, and finally the transformation of everyday objects.

Among the painters, the original Nabi group is represented by the sole Maurice Denis, but the aesthetic outcome achieved by their ‘school’ is clearly detectable in any lithograph published in the second series of *Le Livre d'Art*: everyday life scenes, melancholic clowns and housewives, edgy outlines and odd perspectives show in all the lithographs that Maurice Dumont, Charles Huard, Henry Guérard, Jean Danguy had learnt the lesson of synthesis. No longer Symbolist, but Synthetist, and, above all, modern: art is now bound to be united with Life.

Despite the presence of Pierre Louÿs, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Henry de Régnier, whose texts, although permeated with a new vitalistic ferment, are still bound to Symbolism, the tendency is now clearly its renunciation and replacement by Naturism, represented by Albert Fleury, Maurice Le Blond and Saint-Georges de Bouhéliér<sup>24</sup>. Not by

---

<sup>24</sup> On Naturism, see *L'écriture naturaliste*, by MariaCristina Pedrazzini, in *Simbolismo e Naturalismo fra lingua e testo*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2010, p. 459-475.

chance, *Le Livre d'Art* will publish *King Ubu* by Alfred Jarry in the second issue of the second series.

*Ubu roi ou les Polonais* was issued as a pre-publication in *Le Livre d'Art* of April-May 1896 ; the wheel had turned full circle, and the periodical ended its life with the same artistic experience that had inaugurated it, theatre. This "Five Acts prose Drama, fully reported as it was first presented by the Puppets of the Théâtre des Phynances in 1888"<sup>25</sup> was, in effect, featured to disrupt not only the classical dramatic structures, but the Symbolist ones too. This play is nowadays universally known as the first modernist drama, opening the doors to the contemporary staging. However, its cultural and ethical roots were to be found in Symbolism, as Jarry himself tirelessly repeated: his ideal audience were indeed "these five hundred people [the Symbolists] being partly Shakespeare and partly Leonardo, if compared to the infinite mediocrity"<sup>26</sup>. As Deak Frantisek lucidly points out, "*Ubu roi* is a part of, and a further development of symbolist theater"<sup>27</sup>. As a further development, it put an end to it, and marked the final and definitive break-up of the *Livre d'Art* (and of the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, which had replaced the *Théâtre d'Art* in 1893) with Symbolism.

In the last issue of the magazine, Le Blond calls upon it to quit without hesitation:

I frankly confess that this conception of theatre is idealistic and detestable. Its gloomy, icy and inhuman allegories [...] neither make us shudder, nor thrill us. It seems that reading is sometimes a pretext for dreaming but not necessarily the Theatre, which is above all an occasion for emotion.<sup>28</sup>

Life seems to be the new rallying cry for theatre, poetry, painting and philosophy. Although presented as a 'Revolution',

---

<sup>25</sup> I am quoting from the First Print Run: *Le Livre d'Art*, April - May 1896, front page. First edition: *Mercure de France*, June 1896.

<sup>26</sup> A. Jarry, *De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, M. Arrivé ed., Gallimard, Paris 1972, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", p. 406.

<sup>27</sup> Deak Frantisek, *Symbolist Theater: the formation of the avant-garde*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1993, p. 228.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Le Blond, *Le Livre d'Art*, juin-juillet 1896, p.90.

this aspiration to infuse life in art had always been at the origin of the Symbolist dream of *Gesamtkunstwerk* :

A careful analysis of the theoretical writings of Maurice Denis and Édouard Vuillard shows that during the first half of the 1890s, the members of the Nabi group dreamed of the future realisation of a more complete artwork paralleling nature or life. They thus continued the project formulated by René Ghil for Symbolist poetry in 1886 : chercher, induisant de Symbole en Symbole, la raison de la Nature et de la Vie.<sup>29</sup>

In a final *Conversation about art and life*, Edmond Pilon draws the line that separates Symbolist aesthetic (and ethic) from the contemporary ones, that are to be found in British and American thinkers and artists:

For the Art Nouveau, William Morris is now as crucial as Emerson was for Philosophy, and Walt Whitman for contemporary Poetry. All of them follow the same cult of Life and share the same admiration and curiosity for its manifestations; all of them prepare, in the same direction, the way towards a new ethic, that is to be born from a farseeing esthetics [...] All of them belong to this Anglo-American race for whom concrete fulfillment is necessary, whoever is concerned, might it be the most peaceful of the apostles or the wisest of the thinkers.<sup>30</sup>

Although apparently dismissing Symbolism, the last issue of the *Livre d'Art* fulfills its deepest aesthetic nucleus: to divinize Life through Art.

Marisa Verna

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano

---

<sup>29</sup> Van Tilburg M., *Staging the Symbol*, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Edmond Pilon was an essay writer, today almost unknown, he works in most of the symbolist magazines. This quotation is to be found in the *Livre d'Art*, Juin-Juillet 1896.

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Marisa Verna, « The correspondence of the arts in a Fin de Siècle Magazine. The “Livre d’Art” at the crossroads of Modernism », *Nouvelle Fribourg*, n. 1, juin 2015. URL : <http://www.nouvellefribourg.com/universite/the-correspondence-of-the-arts-in-a-fin-de-siecle-magazine-the-livre-d-art-at-the-crossroads-of-modernism/>