

A supplementary point about the Moreau exhibit

David Walsh
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When I mentioned my interest in Gustave Moreau to a political colleague, he indicated to me, more or less, that *he* was not in the habit of appreciating “Symbolists.” I took this mild rebuke to mean that socialists ought to prefer the company of Realists, Naturalists, Impressionists and the like to that of “mystics” and “decadents,” which is what I suspected he meant by his use of the word “Symbolists.” Is there some truth to this? I don't see why, in any event, it should be accepted without undergoing historical and theoretical analysis.

To simplify the issue somewhat, there are two possible meanings to the argument under consideration. First—confining oneself to the art of the late nineteenth century—there is the implication that contemporary opponents of the existing order should find Realism or Impressionism more congenial as artistic styles, because the latter explored the then existing reality, including social reality, instead of wandering off into more obscure territory. Or, second, the case might be made that the Realist or Impressionist painters themselves were *en bloc*—as a result perhaps of tendencies inherent in their approach to art and the world—more sympathetic to the ideals of social change than their symbolist counterparts and thus a healthier crowd. I am not rejecting these points out of hand, but I don't take them for granted either.

In his *Nature of Abstract Art* (1937), Meyer Schapiro noted that in the 1880s there were “several aspects of Impressionism which could be the starting points of new tendencies ...” After describing the criticisms of the classicist painters and the neo-Impressionists, he observed: “For still others, Impressionism was too photographic, too impersonal; these, the symbolists and their followers, required an emphatic sentiment and aesthetic activism in the work.”

In his essay Schapiro considered the symbolist response *historically*, in the context of the growth of modern capitalism in France, with its inevitable disruption of previously existing relations and values. He wrote: “The French artists of the 1880's and 1890's who attacked Impressionism for its lack of structure often expressed demands for salvation, for order and fixed objects of belief, foreign to the Impressionists as a group.... But since the artists did not know the underlying economic and social causes of their own disorder and moral insecurity, they could envisage new stabilizing forms only as

quasi-religious beliefs or as a revival of some primitive or highly ordered traditional society with organs for a collective spiritual life....”

“The reactions against Impressionism ... issued from the responses that artists as artists made to the broader situation in which they found themselves, but which they themselves had not produced.”

Moreau is said to have been searching for “a higher reality.” Obviously, this is a phrase with multiple meanings. It can simply denote mysticism, God-chasing and the rest. It most often does. But is that all it must mean? Aren't we as Marxists also concerned with getting beyond the surface of life and probing its latent content? Was there not something potentially valuable in the rejection of positivism, as well as the unthinking (and worse) application of Darwinism to social life?

Huysmans revolted against Zola's Naturalist group when it became clear that their future artistic plans amounted to little more than writing fictional accounts of all the professions and trades in France. I think he was right to reject that project. One either takes art *truly* seriously or one doesn't. How could someone like Moreau, steeped in the art of the Renaissance and the ancient world, possibly have been satisfied with such aesthetic small change?

It was a weakness of the socialist movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century that it refused, in general, to validate any art except social realism. It would not be difficult to establish that this was more than simply an occupational hazard peculiar to socialists, that it was bound up with deeper ideological problems of the movement. Writing about the leading American socialists in the first decade of this century, Schapiro notes that, with the exception of individuals like John Reed, they were “most often conservative in art. Their minds fixed upon politics alone and expecting from artists works directly useful to their movement—easily legible images of misery, class struggle and the radiant Socialist future, or relaxing pictures of nature's beauty—they were repelled, like any conservative bourgeois, by what struck them as the ‘nihilism’ of the new art” (*The Armory Show*.)

I take Trotsky's comment in *Literature and Revolution* that art accomplishes its work “quite independently of whether it appears in a given case under the flag of a ‘pure’ art or of a

frankly tendentious art” at face value. I am not convinced that there is a style of choice that goes along with being an opponent of capitalism. This is not to say that Marxists are indifferent to the need to examine social reality or history, and at certain moments, like the present, the hostility to treating such matters can reflect a general decline in the cultural level and becomes a genuine aesthetic, as well as a social problem. But there was hardly a shortage of social realism in Moreau's day. In part, he was suggesting through his work that much of this “realism” was shallow and did not address itself to deeper human issues, and he was quite right, whether or not one agrees with his solution to the problem.

Without descending into eclecticism or spreading oneself too thin, is it not possible to suggest that there are different artistic means at getting to the truth about life? The issue always is the truthfulness of the work, the depths which it explores, its incandescence, the seriousness of its attitude to life and art, and its ability to evoke new thoughts and feelings in the viewer. To establish as an *a priori* principle that one has nothing to learn from a symbolist seems to me, to put it politely, limiting in the extreme.

As to the political sympathies of the members of various artistic tendencies, the argument against the symbolists and the like is even more shaky. It might have seemed self-evident to socialists a century ago that Realists and Naturalists would be their more obvious natural allies, but from our vantage point we can see that the truth has proven far more complex.

Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Empire*, makes the following point about the 1890s:

“Nor did it seem strange that artists should express their passionate commitment to suffering humanity in ways which went beyond the ‘realism’ whose model was a dispassionate scientific recording: Van Gogh, then still quite unknown; the Norwegian Munch, a socialist; the Belgian James Ensor, whose ‘Entry of Jesus Christ into Brussels in 1889’ included a banner for the Social Revolution; or the German proto-expressionist Kathe Kollwitz, commemorating the revolt of the hand-loom weavers. Yet militant aesthetes and believers in art for art's sake, champions of ‘decadence’ and schools designed to be difficult of mass access such as ‘symbolism’, also declared sympathy for socialism, like Oscar Wilde and Maeterlinck, or at least an interest in anarchism. Huysmans, Leconte de Lisle and Mallarmé were among the subscribers to *La Revolte* (1894) [a leading anarchist publication]. In short, until the new century there was no general rift between political and artistic ‘modernity.’”

Eugenia Herbert in *The Artist and Social Reform* writes about the situation in France:

“Contemporary articles and subsequent memoirs comment abundantly on the importance of the social ferment among symbolists. Vielé-Griffin could write in 1895: ‘Our vision has become enlarged, and the cult of life has led many a young poet to the study of the extreme solutions of anarchism and

socialism.’” And she quotes a contemporary who “noted this ‘conversion of the majority of the young poets to doctrines of revolt, whether those of Bakunin or of Karl Marx.’”

Herbert continues: “Jean Maitron in his history of anarchism pointed to the anarchist sympathies among artists and writers, dating roughly from the early 1890's: ‘One was a symbolist in literature and an anarchist in politics.’ And Guy Michaud concurred that in this decade ‘literary revolution and social revolution seemed more and more to follow convergent paths.’”

One has to remember as well that the greatest contribution to a dialectical approach to aesthetics in the latter part of the nineteenth century was made by the Symbolist and socialist, Oscar Wilde, whose value as a thinker far exceeds anything his reputation as a “wit” would suggest. And one could certainly argue that those artists who played the most principled political role in the present century were Breton and the group of Surrealists, who consciously based themselves on certain relatively exotic figures and tendencies in the Romantic and symbolist movements. Not to mention the fact that the artists who first gravitated to the side of the Bolsheviks after October 1917 were Futurists and Cubists and Suprematists.

Where does this leave us? I am not arguing that socialists must now swing their allegiance fully behind anti-realistic artistic schools. That would be just as limiting as its opposite, and would also miss the point: there is nothing to be gained by backing any particular “artistic factory.” But isn't it high time that certain assumptions be placed under the microscope and seen for what they are, largely the products of inertia and habit, the uncritical acceptance of certain traditions?



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