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Pamela A. Genova, *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence*. Series "Studies in European Cultural Transition." Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002. xviii + 352 pp. Notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$84.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-7546-0010-6.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

In *Symbolist Journals*, Pamela A. Genova provides an erudite intellectual history of Symbolist aesthetics and criticism in the realms of poetry, painting, and music in late nineteenth-century France. The heart of the book concerns *la guerre des petites revues*, debates between Symbolist critics in a plethora of literary journals over a variety of aesthetic issues during the 1880s and 1890s. Historians will particularly appreciate the archival depth of Genova's study, in sharp contrast to theory-driven literary criticism, as well as the book's chronological breadth, ranging from old regime and nineteenth-century origins to echoes of Symbolist influence in various twentieth-century French literary movements. The book is monographic and detailed, more genealogical than synoptic. In these ways, *Symbolist Journals* is an exemplary canonical literary history, evidentially exhaustive and well constructed. However, both historians and theorists may be less satisfied with the "culture of correspondence" promised by the book's subtitle. The somewhat narrow focus upon aesthetic debates over poetry, painting, and music circumscribes the meaning of interdisciplinary correspondences to a limited number of high cultural realms and largely leaves unaddressed questions about the wider relationship of Symbolism to late nineteenth-century French culture, society, and politics. Yet the virtues of the book exceed its limitations. All scholarly studies have their bounds, and historians and literary critics who specialize in *fin-de-siècle* intellectual movements will find *Symbolist Journals* invaluable reading.

The critical and historical agenda of the book is distributed across a preface, introduction, and prelude. In Genova's words, the purpose of the book is to study "the phenomenon of the Symbolist literary journal itself, exploring the significance of an unusual forum for intellectual cultural activity during a particularly fertile aesthetic period" (p. xiii). Symbolism, as both literary movement and school of criticism, eludes categorical classification. In Rémy de Gourmont's 1896 definition, Symbolism meant "individualism in literature, freedom in art, rejection of set formulae, a tendency towards the new, the strange, and even the bizarre," an aesthetic that was philosophically idealist and best expressed through free verse poetry (p. 13). The Symbolist *cénaclé* (inner circle of writers, artists, and critics) had its literary roots in Romanticism, but within its immediate context emerged in reaction to the Parnassian and Naturalist movements in literature. The *cénaclé* journals of these earlier movements — *Le Globe* for the Romantics and *Le Parnasse Contemporain* for the Parnassians — established the model for the Symbolists to follow, and they surpassed their forebears both in the scope of their debates and the plethora of literary journals in which they published.

The body of *Symbolist Journals* divides into three thematic sections on word (poetry), image (painting), and sound (music and *la musicalité*). Genova locates the origins of a Symbolist poetic aesthetic in *le*

fumisme, as articulated by bohemian *Hydropathe* leader Emile Goudeau, “a kind of internal madness visible on the outside by imperturbable antics” (p. 61). The ludic verbal banter of puns, parody, and burlesque, Genova reminds us, was not the exclusive purview of bohemian clubs such as the *Hydropathes*, *Hirsutes*, *Zutistes*, or *Jemenfoutistes*, but was common currency among cafe and street culture, as well as in *fait-divers* and satirical newspapers. According to Genova, the Symbolists transformed such a sensibility into the high aesthetic realm of poetry. Early on, it was uncertain whether such an aesthetic would find its form in pessimistic Decadent poetry, most closely associated with Paul Verlaine and the journal *Lutèce*, or in Symbolist poetry and criticism championed by the more charismatic and visionary Stéphane Mallarmé and the journal *La Dernière Mode*. The controversy was resolved in favor of Symbolism over a period of some years in *la guerre des petites revues*, critical debates over the aesthetics of modern poetry conducted not only in numerous and short-lived Decadent and Symbolist *cénacle* journals, but also in emergent avant-garde literary reviews such as *La Plume*, *Le Mercure de France*, *L’Ermitage*, and *La Revue Blanche*, and in mainstream newspapers such as *Le Figaro*, *L’Événement*, and *Le Temps*, as well.

Parts two and three of *Symbolist Journals* concern the correspondences, or interdisciplinary crossing, of Symbolism with the visual and musical arts. In support of the Impressionist movement in painting, Decadent J.-K. Huysmans and Symbolist Mallarmé published favorable critiques in leading literary journals. But it was the subject of Symbolist painting that forced the issue of whether Symbolism characterized an interdisciplinary aesthetic beyond poetry itself. From an article by Georges-Albert Aurier on Symbolism in Paul Gauguin’s art in *Le Mercure de France* (1891), Genova recounts Aurier’s five precepts toward establishing such a broader Symbolist aesthetic: the primacy of the idea; the expression of the idea through form; synthetic understanding; subjective perception; and the decorative function of art (pp. 174–175). Controversy remained, however, over whether this Symbolist aesthetic in the visual arts could be articulated through written criticism or whether, in Genova’s paraphrase of Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, “a painting should never be explained, that the visual image is integral, complete in itself, and that any attempt to explicate its meaning can only lessen its artistic appeal, diffuse its emotive impact and debase its internal harmony” (p. 182). For critics of both salon and Symbolist art, the topic of whether Symbolist painting could be subjected to written criticism constituted its own *petite guerre*.

A related aesthetic emerged in the realm of music criticism, which had been in development in France since the eighteenth century. By the *fin de siècle*, a heated debate had emerged over whether music aesthetics and criticism were best handled by composers and musicians or by professional critics. The Symbolists embraced contemporary currents in music theory and expression, founded upon both their own sense of *la musicalité* of free verse poetry and critical insights provided by Baudelaire into synesthetic *correspondances* between the arts. That connection, Genova points out, is most directly seen in musical titles given to particular collections of Symbolist poetry, such as Mallarmé’s *Symphonie littéraire*, Camille Mauclair’s *Sonnettes d’automne*, and Paul Verlaine’s *La Bonne Chanson*. It was in the artistic genius of Richard Wagner, however, that the French music criticism found its greatest inspiration and expression in the pages of *La Revue Wagnérienne*. Mallarmé’s own response to Wagner, Genova informs us, was ambivalent. The synesthetic union of the arts in Wagnerian opera had its obvious attractions for the Symbolist critic, particularly, as Genova notes, “the intuitive rapport between poetry and music, between the language of words on a page and of notes in a score” (p. 286). Yet Mallarmé believed that the nationalist spirit and Teutonic mythology Wagner drew from German legends severely limited the appeal of the composer’s music for a universal audience, or even one with a French *esprit*. But such judgments secured Mallarmé’s own status as a Symbolist critic entitled to write on the aesthetics of music.

Genova’s conclusion is less a summing up than an articulation of a research agenda into the aesthetics of Symbolism that results from, yet remains beyond the purview of, *Symbolist Journals*: that is, the international scope of the Symbolist literary and artistic movements in England; America; Germany; Italy; Russia and other Slavic countries; as well as Wagner’s global reception. Genova also looks

forward temporally by suggesting the need to explore the influence of Symbolism in later movements, such as Surrealism, and in French literary and critical journals, such as *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Tel Quel*. This self-recognition of the limitations of the present study and the need for its placement within a larger cultural matrix is admirable. Yet it also signals what cultural historians will likely find least satisfying about the book: the nearly exclusive attention paid to the internal preoccupations of French Symbolism to the neglect of wider social and cultural networks. Cafes, cabarets, the press, art salons, and music criticism serve as background and points of departure for Genova's discussions of Symbolist aesthetics and criticism, yet are not fully considered as dynamic sources of cultural modernism in their own right (equal to, or perhaps even surpassing, Symbolism itself).^[1] Even at the level of the Symbolist movement, the exclusive focus upon French writers and critics is a missed opportunity to highlight international influences. No mention is made, for example, of the critical and aesthetic influence of Englishmen Thomas de Quincey, Aubrey Beardsley, or Oscar Wilde upon French Decadence and Symbolism, or of the importance of Norwegian Henrik Ibsen's plays in the development of French Symbolist theatre. On both historical and theoretical levels, the "culture of correspondence" could have been woven into a broader and more far-reaching network.

Social historians may also feel somewhat misled by the book's title. Genova follows debates among Symbolists across various journals but neglects the business of their actual production and distribution (along the lines of the social diffusion of ideas, as Robert Darnton has done for the Enlightenment in terms of the eighteenth-century press). The proliferation of publications and a new freedom of the press in the late-nineteenth century receive general treatment in Genova's preface, but the discussion does not reach down to the level of the everyday vicissitudes of life for fledgling and ephemeral literary journals. The political dimension is somewhat wanting as well. The Commune, anarchism, and the Dreyfus Affair are mentioned by Genova in passing, but in fact these and other political issues were significant topics among literary circles and in their journals.^[2] Explicit consideration of the impact the dramatic historical shift from the Second Empire of Napoleon III to the fledgling Third Republic had upon the literary community would have been welcome as well. While Genova charts transitions in literary movements across the nineteenth century, these movements did not exist as some literary genealogy set apart, but were embedded in a century of social transformations and political upheavals. Without sufficient attention paid to historical context, Genova's book conveys the notion that the Symbolist movement was developing according to its own internal dynamic, a favoring of the *cénacle* over the milieu.

Yet, these are criticisms of the historian. Genova is an associate professor of French literature, and what may be at issue here are disciplinary differences between canonical literary history and a more heterogeneous approach to cultural history. In this regard, within her academic terrain Genova has produced an exemplary, erudite study. Cultural and intellectual historians of the early Third Republic are indebted to her for an indispensable, scholarly treatment of the French Symbolist movement.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking, 1986), and more recently, Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

[2] See, for example, Richard Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), and Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

Robin Walz
University of Alaska Southeast
rwalz@uas.alaska.edu

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