

Copyright  
by  
Laura Kathleen Valeri  
2011

**The Thesis Committee for Laura Kathleen Valeri  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:**

**Rediscovering Maurice Maeterlinck and His Significance  
for Modern Art**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

---

Linda D. Henderson

---

Richard A. Shiff

**Rediscovering Maurice Maeterlinck and His Significance  
for Modern Art**

**by**

**Laura Kathleen Valeri, BA**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2011**

## **Abstract**

### **Rediscovering Maurice Maeterlinck and His Significance for Modern Art**

Laura Kathleen Valeri, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Linda D. Henderson

This thesis examines the impact of Maurice Maeterlinck's ideas on modern artists. Maeterlinck's poetry, prose, and early plays explore inherently Symbolist issues, but a closer look at his works reveals a departure from the common conception of Symbolism. Most Symbolists adhered to correspondence theory, the idea that the external world within the reach of the senses consisted merely of symbols that reflected a higher, objective reality hidden from humans. Maeterlinck rarely mentioned symbols, instead claiming that quiet contemplation allowed him to gain intuitions of a subjective, truer reality.

Maeterlinck's use of ambiguity and suggestion to evoke personal intuitions appealed not only to nineteenth-century Symbolist artists like Édouard Vuillard, but also to artists in pre-World War I Paris, where a strong Symbolist current continued. Maeterlinck's ideas also offered a parallel to the theories of Henri Bergson, embraced by the Puteaux Cubists Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes. Bolstered by new scientific discoveries that legitimized the existence of unseen realms, and intrigued by the idea of

the fourth dimension as infinite higher space, Cubists such as Metzinger responded to Maeterlinck's highly popular 1908 play *L'Oiseau bleu*, finding there an analogy to the Cubist quest for higher realities.

Despite Maeterlinck's popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he has been largely ignored, especially with regard to twentieth-century art. By examining the responses of artists and contemporary critics to Maeterlinck, as well as the intersection of his theories with the larger cultural context, this thesis aims to bring Maeterlinck back into focus.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Maeterlinck and the Symbolist Milieu.....	3
Maeterlinck's Theatre as Vehicle for Symbolist Ideas .....	16
Diffusion of Maeterlinck's Ideas: Theatre.....	26
Publications and Translation.....	36
Texts on Maeterlinck by his Contemporaries .....	38
Maeterlinck and Visual Artists .....	45
Maeterlinck and Visual Artists, I: Édouard Vuillard.....	48
Maeterlinck and Visual Artists, II: Jean Metzinger's <i>L'Oiseau bleu</i> and Cubism.....	57
Maeterlinck's <i>L'Oiseau bleu</i> .....	58
The Early Twentieth-Century Context of Cubist Theory .....	60
Maeterlinck and Cubist Theory .....	65
Maeterlinck and Bergson .....	72
Metzinger's <i>L'Oiseau bleu</i> .....	82
Conclusion .....	88
Figures.....	93
Bibliography .....	99

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Édouard Vuillard, <i>L’Intruse</i> , 1891. ....	93
Figure 2. Édouard Vuillard, <i>L’Intruse</i> , 1891. ....	93
Figure 3. Édouard Vuillard, <i>L’Heure du dîner</i> , circa 1889. ....	94
Figure 4. Édouard Vuillard, <i>Intérieur, mère et soeur de l’artiste</i> , 1893.....	94
Figure 5. Édouard Vuillard, <i>Soirée familiale</i> , 1895.....	95
Figure 6. Édouard Vuillard, <i>Le Palier, rue de Miromesnil</i> , 1891.....	95
Figure 7. Édouard Vuillard, <i>Intérieur, Mystère</i> , 1896. ....	96
Figure 8. Jean Metzinger, <i>L’Oiseau bleu</i> , 1913.....	97
Figure 9. Alvin Langdon Coburn, <i>Maurice Maeterlinck</i> , 1915.....	98
Figure 10. Edward Steichen, <i>Maeterlinck</i> , 1891.....	98

## Introduction

Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), Belgian poet, playwright, and mystic, is one of the most important figures of the Symbolist movement and, consequently, central to the development of Modernism. However, his impact on artists of the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century has not been explored in art historical literature. Surrealist founder André Breton retrospectively declared Maeterlinck “one of the two Symbolists who would endure,” but scholars have not explained his singular impact beyond Symbolism.<sup>1</sup>

While scholars generally acknowledge the centrality of Symbolism to Modernism, most do not recognize Maeterlinck as a prominent and influential figure. For example, in his *Cubism* anthology of 1966, Edward Fry writes of Metzinger’s *L’Oiseau bleu* [*The Blue Bird*], “There is no significant connection with Maeterlinck’s 1910 play of the same name.”<sup>2</sup> Considering Robert Beachboard’s estimation that Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu* was staged in over one hundred different cities in Europe and the United States between 1908–1915, it is nearly impossible to argue against artists’ awareness of Maeterlinck.<sup>3</sup>

His poetry, prose, and early plays explore inherently Symbolist issues such as death, anxiety, alienation, mystery, invisible forces, ambiguity, and especially the interior spiritual world of the soul.<sup>4</sup> However, a closer look at his works reveals a departure from

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman, *Émigré New York: French Intellectuals in Wartime Manhattan, 1940-1944* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Edward F. Fry, *Cubism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 193 n. 25. Note also that Fry dates Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu* to 1910, when the play debuted in Moscow in 1908. Fry may be thinking of the 1910 New York premiere.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Beachboard provides a helpful chart of a selection of productions of Maeterlinck’s plays. See Robert Beachboard, *Le Théâtre de Maeterlinck aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Société d’Édition d’Enseignement Supérieur, 1951), 195-217.

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, when referring to Maeterlinck’s plays, I intend to indicate his early plays of the 1890s, such as *L’Intruse*, *Les Aveugles*, *L’Intérieur*, and others. These earlier plays more closely espouse Symbolist values, while his later plays such as *Monna Vanna* of 1902 take a more dramatic, action-driven approach. I



the common conception of Symbolism. Most Symbolists adhered to correspondence theory, the idea that the external world within the reach of the senses consists merely of symbols that reflect a truer, ideal reality hidden from humans. In his poem “Correspondances” of 1857, Charles Baudelaire had pictured nature as a “forest of symbols” that artists could decipher to understand the ideal world beyond surface appearances. Maeterlinck abandoned this interpretation, instead relying on suggestion as the means to evoke a higher reality.

As Symbolist thought continued to serve as a source for the avant-garde of pre-World War I Paris, the emphasis on Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols,” as embraced by writers like G.-Albert Aurier in the 1890s, gave way to more general ideas of a higher reality for which Maeterlinck’s emphasis on suggestion proved more useful. This thesis explores the ways in which Nabi artist Édouard Vuillard and Cubist painter Jean Metzinger responded to Maeterlinck. A figure of international renown in the early twentieth century, Maeterlinck’s position declined significantly after World War II. Histories of Modernism have overlooked a crucial aspect of its Symbolist roots by neglecting to discuss his impact.

---

will also discuss his most famous play, *L’Oiseau bleu* of 1908, as it signaled a return to the Symbolist themes of the earlier plays.

## Maeterlinck and the Symbolist Milieu

Maeterlinck was working in a mode that could be termed “Symbolist” as the movement was just beginning in the mid-1880s. However, he is often not recognized as appearing on the scene until 1890, with the success of his play *La Princesse Maleine*, encouraged in part by Octave Mirbeau’s effusive article in *Le Figaro*. In fact, he had published his first poem, “Les Joncs” [“The Rushes”], in the Belgian literary periodical *La Jeune Belgique* in November of 1883 and visited Paris in October 1885. He traveled to Paris again in 1886 and helped found the literary review *La Pléiade*, in which he published a short story, “Le Massacre des Innocents” [“The Massacre of the Innocents”], in May and six poems in June. All of this activity occurred before Jean Moréas concretized the tenets of the movement in his Symbolist manifesto “Le symbolisme,” printed in *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886.<sup>5</sup> Maeterlinck also published his collection of poetry, *Serres chaudes* [*Hothouses*], at his own expense in 1889 before the appearance of Mirbeau’s article. Although he did not achieve widespread fame until after the appearance of Mirbeau’s text, he was working in a Symbolist mode as the movement developed, and he continued to shape its ideas with his plays, poetry, and prose.

Symbolists turned away from academic values and Naturalism, believing that “a preoccupation with visible reality . . . led to degeneration, materialism, and superficiality.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, these poets turned inward to a world of thought and feeling and endeavored to go beyond surface appearances to identify hidden eternal truths. The primary belief around which all others revolved was that of a higher reality, an invisible world that could not be perceived by the senses.

---

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in Guy Michaud, ed., *La Doctrine Symboliste: Documents* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1947), 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 37.

The steadfast belief in unseen realms emerged in part as a reaction to positivist science. As Patricia Mathews explains: “The epistemological premise of nineteenth-century science was positivist: knowledge was believed to be gained objectively through the analysis and observation of exterior reality, with the result that the spiritual realm lost much of its legitimacy.”<sup>7</sup> Symbolists wanted to restore the importance of the spiritual realm because, as art critic G.-Albert Aurier and many others believed, scientists’ preoccupation with observable superficial details caused them to neglect higher truths. Aurier was sure that such heavy reliance on the world of the senses and immediate fact would cause man’s spiritual faculties to atrophy.<sup>8</sup> Neoplatonic philosophy was a key source of support for Aurier’s views, as demonstrated by the evocation of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* in his essay “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin” of 1891.<sup>9</sup>

Not all Symbolists shared such a negative view of science. As Filiz Burhan points out, most Symbolists tried to reconcile science with their spiritual and metaphysical ideas as opposed to dismissing it totally.<sup>10</sup> Burhan notes that scientists themselves supported this reconciliation: “Claude Bernard, Louis Pasteur, and above all Herbert Spencer had each affirmed that something eternal, mysterious, and essentially ‘Unknowable’ lay at the heart of creation, beyond the reach of scientific inquiry.”<sup>11</sup> Some sciences, especially psychology and occult sciences like hypnosis, legitimized the Symbolists’ search for unseen realms and their belief in the subjective nature of reality. In addition, belief in the ether, “the imponderable medium thought to fill all space and to

---

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Townley Mathews, *Aurier’s Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> See G.-Albert Aurier, “Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin,” *Mercure de France* 2 (March 1891): 155-164.

<sup>10</sup> See Filiz Eda Burhan, “Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

serve as the vehicle for transmission of vibrating electromagnetic waves”—and possibly other waves, including thought waves—supported the Symbolist notion of unseen forces as well as contact with higher realms.<sup>12</sup> Later scientific discoveries, such as that of the X-ray by Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895, provided the Symbolists and the next generation of artists with proof of the existence of unseen realms beyond the reach of the human eye.

A suprasensible, higher reality, at times identified with Plato’s world of ideas, was central to Symbolist doctrine. Villiers de l’Isle Adam, a proponent of the occult and metaphysical world and one of Maeterlinck’s idols, believed that the universe was a living being that manifested itself in all aspects of the phenomenal world. Therefore, according to de l’Isle Adam, all things were interconnected and linked to the universal.<sup>13</sup> Remy de Gourmont expressed a similar idea in his essay “The Roots of Idealism” in his 1905 book, *Promenades philosophiques*: “A being, whatever it might be, whether vague and quasi-amorphous, or clearly defined, is not isolated in the vital universal milieu. It is the molecule of a diapason. It vibrates, not of its own accord, but in obedience to a general movement.”<sup>14</sup>

In Gourmont’s view, all objects, beings, or entities were part of the universal unseen world, linked together and vibrating or reverberating, and thus, the objects themselves carried no meaning. One could not trust one’s senses. Gourmont writes: “The object known remains exterior to ourselves. Moreover, the qualification ‘known’ is not very appropriate to the object perceived, since it has an interior face, inaccessible at

---

<sup>12</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka, and the Ether of Space,” in *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Linda Dalrymple Henderson and Bruce Clarke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Bettina Knapp, *Maurice Maeterlinck* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Remy de Gourmont, “The Roots of Idealism” (1905), in Remy de Gourmont, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), 163. The repeated mentions of vibration and oneness of things also support the prevalence of the ether as an interconnective and uniting force.

first contact with our senses.”<sup>15</sup> Gourmont asks: “What is the object itself, since we cannot know it except in the state of representation?”<sup>16</sup> The object could not be trusted, because it was only a representation of the idea. Therefore, one could not trust one’s senses. According to Gourmont, the senses “must . . . correspond to external realities. They have been created, not by the perceiving being, but by the perceptible environment. It is light which has created the eye, just as, in our houses, it has created the windows. In environments without light, fish become blind.”<sup>17</sup> In his 1892 article “Les Peintres symbolistes,” Aurier quoted Plotinus: “We attach ourselves to the exterior of things, ignorant of the fact that what moves us is hidden within them.”<sup>18</sup> Maeterlinck’s close friend, the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren, wrote one of the first articles on Symbolism in the visual arts for *L’Art moderne* in 1887. In the article, “Un peintre symboliste: Fernand Khnopff,” he expressed a similar distrust of outward appearances:

In symbolism fact and world become mere pretexts for ideas; they are handled as appearances, ceaselessly variable, and ultimately manifest themselves only as the dreams of our brains. The idea, whether responding to them or evoking them, determines their manifestation; and much as naturalism made room for objectivity in art, symbolism, equally and to an even greater degree, reinstates subjectivity. In it the idea is imposed on the entire work of art with full tyrannical force.<sup>19</sup>

Because the world of the senses and objects merely *represented* the world of ideas, one needed special intuitive abilities to transcend it. Consequently, a current of individualism prevailed. Gourmont describes the individualistic flavor of idealism

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>18</sup> Aurier, quoted in Mathews, *Aurier’s Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, 21. Like many other Symbolists, Aurier adopts a Neoplatonic view. Neoplatonists believed in the One, the infinite, the Idea—a single objective higher reality—that manifested itself in the phenomenal world. For them, the phenomenal world was merely an image of higher reality.

<sup>19</sup> Emile Verhaeren, “Un peintre symboliste” (1887), in Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 62.

particular to Symbolism: “Schopenhauer, who did not invent it, has given it the best formulation: the world is my representation—that is, the world is such as it appears to me. If it has a real existence in itself, it is inaccessible to me. It is what I see it, or feel it, to be.”<sup>20</sup> While all Symbolists believed that what they saw in the phenomenological world was merely representation, and they aimed for transcendence beyond the world of the senses, their definitions of higher reality differed. For some, higher reality derived from the self, and was, therefore, purely subjective and unique to each person. Others believed in an objective reality—one true reality common to all.<sup>21</sup>

In either case, only a true artist, poet, or other gifted individual—a mystic, for instance—possessed the special ability to perceive higher reality. Aurier especially promulgated the idea of the rare gift of the artist-genius in his 1891 “Symbolism in Painting” article:

Oh, how rare, in truth, among those who flatter themselves that they have “artistic dispositions,” how rare are the blessed, the eyelids of their souls unsealed, who can exclaim with Swedenborg, the inspired seer: “This very night, the eyes of my inner man were opened: they became capable of peering into the heavens, into the world of ideas and into hell!”<sup>22</sup>

Aurier casts the artist as a superior individual who is able to wander Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols” described in his poem, “Correspondances,” and perceive the correspondences between each object and the idea.<sup>23</sup> Aurier describes the artist’s superior perception over that of the average human:

---

<sup>20</sup> Gourmont, “The Roots of Idealism” (1905), in Gourmont, *Selected Writings*, 155. Regarding the term “idealism,” Gourmont states, “It would have been better to call [it] ‘ideaism.’” For Symbolists, “idealism” meant privileging an ideal reality (a true reality, unlike the false one perceived by the senses), and endeavoring to express that ideal reality in their work. Aurier called it “ideaism” as Gourmont does here, to relate the concept more closely to the Neoplatonic Idea.

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, *Aurier’s Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Aurier, “Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin” (1891), in Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> Mathews explains Baudelaire’s correspondence theory: “Its principle is the reality of mystical essence or being to which all things correspond, but which is superior to anything found in this world.” Mathews, *Aurier’s Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, 28.

He alone, tamer of the monster illusion, knows how to stroll as a master in this fantastic temple “in which living pillars/Sometimes emit confused words” whereas the stupid human, fooled by the appearances that will make him repudiate essential ideas, remains blind as he travels through “forests of symbols/That observe him with familiar glances.”<sup>24</sup>

According to Aurier, the artist acts as kind of interpreter, recognizing that objects are merely “relative entities that translate ideas (absolute and essential entities) in a way suited to our apprehension.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore the phenomenal world consists “only [of] *signs*, letters of an immense alphabet that only the genius knows how to read.”<sup>26</sup> Not only is the artist-genius endowed with special perceptual abilities, but he or she must actively choose higher consciousness. Otherwise, according to Aurier, the individual will remain blind to the world of signs and the ideas they represent.

For Maeterlinck, however, opening up the world of ideas means putting oneself completely at the service of the eternal, rather than depending on the symbol. In an interview with Jules Huret for *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* [*Inquiry into Literary Evolution*] in 1891, he casts the poet as a conduit for eternal thoughts:

[The poet] is more or less powerful, not because of what he does himself, but because of what he manages to carry out . . . through the mysterious and eternal order and the occult force of things! He must put himself in the position where Eternity supports his words, and each movement of his thought must be approved and multiplied by gravitational force and unique and eternal thought!<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Aurier, “Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin” (1891), in Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 199.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1999), 155. “Il est plus ou moins puissant, non pas en raison de ce qu’il fait lui-même, mais en raison de ce qu’il parvient à faire exécuter . . . par l’ordre mystérieux et éternel et la force occulte des choses ! il doit se mettre dans la position où l’Éternité appuie ses paroles, et chaque mouvement de sa pensée doit être approuvé et multiplié par la force de gravitation de la pensée unique et éternelle!” Jules Huret’s *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* was a series of interviews with writers of the day, published serially in *L’Écho de Paris* from March to July of 1891. The *Enquête*’s “unprecedented success warranted publication as a book later the same year. . . . [The] startling success . . . suggests that the intense polemics and rivalries of the period, normally pursued through the pages of small, short-lived periodicals, in cafés or in intimate gatherings, had seized the public’s attention. . . . The book’s popularity also suggests that the readers of *L’Echo de Paris* were aware that this was a unique period in the literary culture of France, and that at a time of extraordinary social,

Therefore, Maeterlinck's higher reality has less to do with Baudelairean correspondence theory and more to do with a direct perception of the infinite. According to Maeterlinck, once one has perceived the infinite, the symbol then grows out of the work of art organically. He states, "I do not believe that the work can be viably born of the symbol; but the symbol is always born of the work if the work is viable. The work born of the symbol cannot be anything but an allegory. . . . The symbol is a force of nature, and the spirit of man cannot resist its laws."<sup>28</sup> Maeterlinck believed that a human searching within him or herself could perceive the infinite without recourse to the commonly invoked "forest of symbols." He did not adhere to the typical Symbolist procedure of first finding a symbol in nature, then perceiving the infinite in that symbol, and finally producing an artwork that evoked the infinite. Instead, he looked inward to perceive the infinite directly, then produced a play that evoked the infinite, and finally, the symbol grew organically out of that work.

Maeterlinck did not need the phenomenal world as physical manifestation of the idea. Instead, he glided freely between worlds by looking inward for the symbol that emanates from living beings. He privileges this type of subconscious symbol over all others:

I believe that there are two types of symbols: one that one could call the symbol *a priori*; . . . it departs from abstraction and attempts to cover its abstractions with humanity. . . . The other type of symbol would be instead unconscious, it would be unbeknownst to the poet, always in spite of him, and it would occur almost

---

economic and scientific change, the activities of writers and artists still retained some measure of raw newsworthiness." Patrick McGuinness, ed., *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>28</sup> Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, 155. "Je ne crois pas que l'oeuvre puisse naître viablement du symbole; mais le symbole naît toujours de l'oeuvre si celle-ci est viable. L'oeuvre née du symbole ne peut être qu'une allégorie. . . . Le symbole est une force de la nature, et l'esprit de l'homme ne peut résister à ses lois."



always, well beyond his thought: it is the symbol that is born of all brilliant creations of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

For Maeterlinck, the symbol is almost beyond thought and resides inside each living being rather than in the physical world as a manifestation of the idea. He states, “The symbol that emanates from each living being is higher and more impenetrable than the most marvelous preconceived symbol, and simple living beings contain truths one thousand times more profound than all of those that our highest thoughts can conceive.”<sup>30</sup> Maeterlinck’s fellow Belgian and close friend Emile Verhaeren seems to share a similar conception of the symbol. He states that the symbol “purifies itself through the process of evocation as it becomes an idea; it is a sublimation of perceptions and sensations; it is not demonstrative but suggestive; it destroys any contingency, any fact, any detail; it is the highest and most spiritual artistic expression possible.”<sup>31</sup>

It seems, then, that Maeterlinck and Verhaeren believe in a somewhat different process than Aurier and many other Symbolists. According to them, one must look inward to find a symbol and in evoking that symbol—always in a suggestive, vague way—one communicates an idea. Patrick McGuinness summarizes the differences perfectly:

Maeterlinck insists on the active power of this profound and secret heart of reality, and on the mysterious ways in which it connects us with our neighbours and surroundings. Symbolism means an attunement to the unconscious depth of our human nature, this “central spontaneity” (Emerson) which connects us to the whole. Symbolism is not a deliberate effort to shape symbols which would be the mediate forms of expression of an ideal subjectivity; it is rather a passive and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 154-155. “Je crois qu’il y a deux sortes de symboles : l’un qu’on pourrait appeler le symbole *a priori* ; . . . il part d’abstraction et tâche de revêtir d’humanité ces abstractions. . . . L’autre espèce de symbole serait plutôt inconscient, aurait lieu à l’insu du poète, souvent malgré lui, et irait presque toujours, bien au-delà de sa pensée : c’est le symbole qui naît de toute création géniale d’humanité.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 156. “Le symbole qui émane de la vie de tout être est bien plus haut et plus impénétrable que le plus merveilleux symbole préconçu, et la simple vie des êtres contient des vérités mille fois plus profondes que toutes celles que peuvent concevoir nos haute pensées.”

<sup>31</sup> Verhaeren, “Un peintre symboliste” (1887), in Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 61-62.

quasi-mediumnic receptiveness to the archetypal images which impose themselves in the work “in spite of the writer himself.”<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, Maeterlinck emphasizes the universal, uniting aspect of Symbolism rather than the individualistic viewpoint. He does not make the distinction, like so many other more pessimistic Symbolists (Baudelaire, Aurier, and Villiers de l’Isle Adam included), between the elite audience capable of understanding Symbolist works, and the ignorant crowd or blind herd. Even though Maeterlinck’s Symbolism is more inclusive and idealistic, he still agrees that some people are more capable of accessing higher reality and that one must do so privately, remaining isolated.

While Maeterlinck’s interpretation of symbols differs from other perhaps more common interpretations like Aurier’s, existence of a higher realm is consistent with both as a goal, since the artist-genius must contact that higher realm. For many Symbolists, including Maeterlinck, higher perception can only be reached through isolation and contemplation, always of an intuitive character. With the new conception of the artist-genius, advocated by Aurier, came the near-necessity for the artist to search out these truths in isolation, and at times even suffering to do so.<sup>33</sup>

Maeterlinck strongly believed that quiet contemplation and isolation was the key to accessing other realms for several reasons. First, he felt that isolating himself from everyday life allowed him to tap into eternal feelings. Huret recounts a conversation between Maeterlinck and his friend Duc-Quercy, who tells Maeterlinck he does not understand why intelligent writers isolate themselves, under the pretext of pure art, from the ideas of their times. Maeterlinck responds, “In order to make enduring works . . . is it not necessary precisely to fly below one’s time, free oneself from the accidents of

---

<sup>32</sup> McGuinness, ed., *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle*, 205-6.

<sup>33</sup> The title of Aurier’s 1890 article on Vincent van Gogh speaks to the prevalence of the idea of the lone artist. Aurier titled his article “Les Isolés: Vincent Van Gogh” [“The Isolated Ones: Vincent van Gogh”] and portrayed van Gogh as a suffering, isolated genius.

civilization, of the contingencies of immediate current events?”<sup>34</sup> Later, he clarifies that it is not to free oneself of the influence of one’s time but rather to distill the essential feelings by leaving behind the events of the present: “I remain of the opinion not that one must abstract himself from the times to which he is subjected, in spite of himself, and naturally influence him, but that it is good, if one wants to make an enduring and strong work, to disengage it from details of the present . . . Enduring, as enduring as possible!”<sup>35</sup> For Maeterlinck, these eternal feelings (like love, jealousy, and anger) make a work durable because they are common to all humanity and, therefore, future generations will always understand and be interested in the work. Charles Morice expresses a similar idea in *La Littérature de tout à l’heure* of 1889 (his attempt to chronicle the Symbolist movement as it progressed): “Genius consists—like Love and like Death—in freeing from accidents, habits, prejudices, conventions, and all contingencies the element of eternity and unity that glows, beyond appearances, at the base of all human essence.”<sup>36</sup>

Maeterlinck also advocates quiet contemplation because he feels he must take on an almost passive role in the face of the eternal order. As he tells Huret:

An image is able to redirect my thinking; this image is precise and gentle from an organic life, it obeys the laws of the Universe much more strictly than my thoughts; and that is why I am convinced that it [the image] will almost always be right as opposed to my abstract thinking; if I listen to it, it is the universe and the

---

<sup>34</sup> Huret, *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire*, 152. “Pour faire des oeuvres durables, répondait Maeterlinck, ne faut-il pas justement s’élever au-dessus de son époque, se dégager des accidents de la civilisation, des contingences de l’actualité immédiate?”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 154. Ellipsis in original. “Je reste d’avis non pas qu’on doive s’abstraire de son temps dont on subit, malgré soi, et naturellement l’influence, mais qu’il est bon, si l’on veut faire oeuvre durable et puissante, de la dégager des détails d’actualité . . . Durable, entendons-nous, aussi durable que possible!”

<sup>36</sup> Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l’heure* (Paris: Librairie Académique Didier, 1889), 355. “Le Génie consiste—comme l’Amour et comme la Mort—à dégager des accidents, des habitudes, des préjugés, des conventions et de toutes les contingences l’élément d’éternité et d’unité qui luit, au delà des apparences, au fond de toute essence humaine.”

eternal order of things that thinks in my place, and I will go without tiring to the base of myself; if I resist it, one could say that I am struggling against God . . .”<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Maeterlinck seeks to obey the laws of the infinite in his expressions of the eternal and is willing to set aside his own abstract thoughts in order to give precedence to intuitions of the universe. Like all Symbolists, he abides by feeling and intuition, leaving no place for rational thinking. This attitude permeates his process for creating characters for his plays. He states:

If I manage to create human beings, and if I let them grow in my soul as freely and naturally as they grow in the universe, it is possible that their actions would completely contradict the primitive truth that was in me and of which I thought them sons; and yet I am sure that they are right against this tentative truth and against me, and that their contradiction is the mysterious daughter of a more profound and essential truth. And that is why my task is therefore to be quiet, to listen to these messengers of a life that I do not yet understand, and to bow down humbly before them.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Maeterlinck sees his characters as messengers from the universe—he does not *create* them through abstract thought. Instead, he comes into contact with the universe and retrieves intuitions that at times he himself does not understand, but trusts in and abides by them nonetheless.

It is clear that Maeterlinck privileged the subjective world of feelings and the unknowable over the objective world of the senses, and he accessed the former through quiet intuitive contemplation. Like all other Symbolist artists, poets, or dramatists,

---

<sup>37</sup> Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, 157. Ellipsis in original. “Une image peut faire dévier ma pensée ; cette image est exacte et douce d’une vie organique, elle obéit aux lois de l’Univers bien plus strictement que ma pensée ; et c’est pourquoi je suis convaincu qu’elle aura presque toujours raison contre ma pensée abstraite ; si je l’écoute, c’est l’univers et l’ordre éternel des choses qui pensent à ma place, et j’irai sans fatigue au-delà de moi-même ; si je lui résiste, on peut dire que je me débats contre Dieu . . .”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 156. “Si je parviens à créer des êtres humains, et si je les laisse agir en mon âme aussi librement et aussi naturellement qu’ils agiraient dans l’univers, il se peut que leurs actions contredisent absolument la vérité primitive qui était en moi et dont je les croyais fils ; et cependant je suis sûr qu’ils ont raison contre cette vérité provisoire et contre moi, et que leur contradiction est la fille mystérieuse d’une vérité plus profonde et plus essentielle. Et c’est pourquoi mon devoir est alors de me taire, d’écouter ces messagers d’une vie que je ne comprends pas encore, et de m’incliner humblement devant eux.”

honing one's gift in order to access the universal world of ideas was only the first step. Next, one had to find ways to express the eternal feelings and ideas in his or her chosen art form. As Facos asserts, "Symbolist artists sought to clothe ideas in perceptible forms, while believing that art should direct viewers toward immaterial entities and metaphysical truths."<sup>39</sup> All Symbolists, despite their differing definitions of the infinite or how to access it, obsessively chased after this goal. Odilon Redon often spoke of placing the visible at the service of the invisible; Maurice Denis stated that "the visible is the manifestation of the invisible"; and Gustave Kahn asserted that "the aim of Symbolism is to 'objectify the subjective.'"<sup>40</sup>

Because Symbolist art aims to express the inexpressible infinite, Maeterlinck claims, "Art always seems evasive and never speaks face-to-face. One might say it is the hypocrisy of the infinite. It is the temporary mask under which the faceless unknown intrigues us. It is the substance of eternity within us, introduced by the distillation of the infinite. It is the honey of eternity extracted from a flower we do not see."<sup>41</sup> Symbolists aimed at vagueness or suggestiveness in their works because the world of ideas was vague and intuitive itself, and they believed that evocation would be more accurate than description.<sup>42</sup> Verhaeren illustrates this point in *L'Art moderne* in 1887: "If . . . a poet evokes a mental image [of Paris] as 'an immense algebra the key to which was lost,' this

---

<sup>39</sup> Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Maurice Denis, quoted in *ibid.*, 23; Gustave Kahn, quoted in Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, "Menus propos—le théâtre," *La Jeune Belgique* 9 (September 1890): 331. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 144-145. "L'art semble toujours un détour et ne parle jamais face à face. . . . Il est le masque provisoire sous lequel nous intrigue l'inconnu sans visage. Il est la substance de l'éternité introduite en nous, à la suite d'une distillation de l'infini. Il est le miel de l'éternité extrait d'une fleur que nous ne voyons pas."

<sup>42</sup> As noted earlier, this attitude also stems from a distrust of positivist science and the senses.

evocation, unique of its kind, will succeed apart from any description or enumeration of facts, . . . in bringing forth luminous, tenebrous, and formidable Paris.”<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Verhaeren, “Un peintre symboliste” (1887), in Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 61. Verhaeren does not provide a source for his quotation regarding algebra; Dorra suggests it may be Verhaeren’s own.

## Maeterlinck's Theatre as Vehicle for Symbolist Ideas

Maeterlinck aimed at evocation rather than description in his plays by using a variety of techniques. He conceptualized the stage sets to enhance the mysterious and vague feeling. For several plays, he hung a gauze curtain in front of the stage to partially obscure the action (and the actors) and to limit specificity. Maeterlinck also often employed dim lighting of various colors in tandem with the gauze curtain that “gave an impression of shadowy indistinct forms barely moving and barely distinguishable in dim light from the soft pastel and grey backgrounds . . . and [dissolved] the action into an insubstantial vision.”<sup>44</sup> He also often eliminated footlights to decrease the separation between the audience and the stage, hoping to create an immersive experience that allowed the audience to transcend the reality of the senses.

The sets were also very simple in an effort to evoke the idea as opposed to providing a naturalistic, descriptive representation. Often, simple objects stood in for monumental ones. For instance, Wassily Kandinsky praised “Maeterlinck’s use of imagination in his set designs and referred to a production of one of Maeterlinck’s plays in St Petersburg, supervised by the dramatist himself. Kandinsky specifically mentioned the production’s abandonment of complicated scenery and its use of a piece of hanging linen to represent a tower.”<sup>45</sup> This artifice left room for the spectator’s imagination. As Reinhold Heller has argued, “Anti-illusionism and palpable artifice are crucial to Symbolist art because they prevent the viewer from interpreting images as illusions of

---

<sup>44</sup> David Whitton, *Stage Directors in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 34.

<sup>45</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 61.

reality.”<sup>46</sup> Maeterlinck intended his sets to encourage the audience’s imagination and allow them a glimpse of the universal world of ideas.

Maeterlinck also placed words at the service of evocation. Instead of using words in a descriptive manner to explain the action taking place, he used words to evoke feelings and heighten ambiguity. Symbolists harbored a distrust of any words and images serving a descriptive purpose. Gourmont highlighted this distrust in the image: “Seeing is the most natural thing in the world. Yet, what do we see when we see a tree? A tree, to be sure, but not the tree itself. What comes to us, as an object perceived, is not the tree in the state of a tree, but the tree in the state of an image. What is the image worth? Is it exact?”<sup>47</sup> In other words, no image should ever be understood as representing the thing in itself, or the essence of an object. For Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, naming an object has the same detrimental effect: “To *name* an object is to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure of a poem which comes from the happiness of discovering little by little; to *suggest*, that is the dream.”<sup>48</sup> Symbolists like Mallarmé recognized the arbitrary, artificial relationship between an object and the words or images used to represent it.<sup>49</sup> For a Symbolist, words and images (though professing to be exact representations of the essence of an object—the idea) could never be accurate. Therefore, Symbolists only used words and images in an evocative manner to convey feelings and hint at the idea.

Attempting a Symbolic and ambiguous use of language, Maeterlinck’s dialogue did not advance a linear plot. Instead, dialogue consisted of monosyllables or short phrases with words seemingly out of context and often spoken to almost inaudible effect.

---

<sup>46</sup> Reinhold Heller, quoted in Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Gourmont, “The Roots of Idealism” (1905), in Gourmont, *Selected Writings*, 157.

<sup>48</sup> Huret, *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire*, 103. Emphasis in original. “Nommer un objet, c’est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu ; le *suggérer*, voilà le rêve.”

<sup>49</sup> Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 5.



He employed continuous repetition (to the point of fatiguing the listener) and also long silences between words and between sentences. As Rose-Carol Washton Long explains, “Since ‘truth’ was hidden, only an appropriately elusive use of language could be used to express it. . . . Ordinary language was too rooted in its external context to stretch the limits of consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> Kandinsky, a great admirer of Maeterlinck, explains the effect of repeating words in *On the Spiritual in Art*, 1911:

The skillful use of a word (according to a poetical feeling), a repetition of the same word, twice, three times, several times successively, determined by *inner* necessity, can not only lead to the growth of the inner sound but can bring to light unsuspected spiritual properties of this word. Finally, frequent repetition of the word (a favourite game of children, later forgotten), deprives the word of its external reference.<sup>51</sup>

In his widely read collection of essays, *Le Trésor des humbles* [*The Treasure of the Humble*] published in 1896, Maeterlinck explains both the inadequacy of ordinary language and the importance of silence, in effect elucidating his use of dialogue in his plays.<sup>52</sup> Akin to Mallarmé, he laments the feebleness of words to express the infinite in his essay “Mystic Morality”:

Our myriad intuitions are the veiled queens who steer our course through life, though we have no words in which to speak of them. How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words! We believe we have dived down to the most unfathomable depths, and when we reappear on the surface, the drop of water that glistens on our trembling finger-tips no longer resembles the sea from which it came. . . . There is something between ourselves and our soul that nothing can penetrate.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Long, *Kandinsky*, 67.

<sup>51</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, quoted in *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>52</sup> Contemporaries writing on Maeterlinck liberally quoted from and made reference to this work, attesting to its popularity.

<sup>53</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, trans. Alfred Sutro (Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2001), 61-62.

Thus, words used in an everyday manner have no chance at approximating the infinite. Maeterlinck later uses a simile in his essay “The Admirable Ruysbroeck” to sum up the inadequacy of words for higher purposes: “Words, as has been noted, were invented for ordinary uses in life, and they are hapless, anxious, and surprised like vagabonds around a throne, when from time to time, some royal soul leads them elsewhere.”<sup>54</sup>

Since conventional usage of words cannot be elevated in order to convey the infinite, Maeterlinck makes unusual use of language instead. In the essay “The Tragical in Daily Life,” he states, “There must perforce be another dialogue besides the one which is superficially necessary [the conventional one that explains the action]. And indeed the only words that count in the play are those that at first seemed useless, for it is therein that the essence lies.”<sup>55</sup> The dialogue that seems superfluous, according to Maeterlinck, is “the only one that the soul can listen to profoundly, for here alone is it the soul that is being addressed.”<sup>56</sup> In eliminating any descriptive or explanatory language completely, as in poetry, one comes closer to expressing the eternal:

One may even affirm that a poem draws the nearer to beauty and loftier truth in the measure that it eliminates words that merely explain the action, and substitutes for them others that reveal, not the so-called “soul-state,” but I know not what intangible and unceasing striving of the soul towards its own beauty and truth. And so much the nearer, also, does it draw to the true life.<sup>57</sup>

Maeterlinck’s sparse, repetitive, evocative words work in tandem with and are augmented by interspersed silence. As mentioned earlier, he prized silent contemplation as the best way to come into contact with the infinite. Thus, the silence in his plays offers

---

<sup>54</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles* (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1904), 124. “Les mots, ainsi qu’on l’a fait remarquer, ont été inventés pour les usages ordinaires de la vie, et ils sont malheureux inquiets et étonnés comme des vagabonds autour d’un trône, lorsque de temps en temps, quelque âme royale les mène ailleurs.”

<sup>55</sup> Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, 111.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 112.

the audience the same opportunity. Maeterlinck believed that more communication occurred in silence than with words:

We must cultivate silence among ourselves, for it is then only that for one instant the eternal flowers unfold their petals, the mysterious flowers whose form and colour are ever changing in harmony with the soul that is by their side. As gold and silver are weighed in pure water, so does the soul test its weight in silence, and the words that we let fall have no meaning apart from the silence that wraps them round.<sup>58</sup>

Silence is the language of the soul and of the infinite and it is in silence that the soul is able to step forward: “At a time when my friends are about me it may happen that, in the midst of talk and shouts of laughter, there shall suddenly steal over the face of one of them something that is not of this world. A motiveless silence shall instantly prevail, and for a second’s space all shall be unconsciously looking forth with the eyes of the soul.”<sup>59</sup> Maeterlinck repeatedly emphasizes that silence is the language of the unconscious and prizes unconscious experience over all words, even those of great sages:

Everything that can be said is nothing in and of itself. Place in one tray of the scale all the words of great sages, and in the other tray the unconscious wisdom of this child that passes, and you will see that that which Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Schopenhauer and Pascal revealed to us will not raise by a millimeter the great treasures of the unconscious, because the child that keeps silent is one thousand times more wise than Marcus Aurelius who speaks.<sup>60</sup>

The protracted silences in his plays make any spoken word seem like an intrusion from the everyday world upon the mysterious world of the infinite. Because the words are ambiguous and seemingly purposeless, the silences become even more important.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>60</sup> Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles*, 158. “Tout ce que l’on peut dire n’est rien en soi. Mettez dans un plateau de la balance toutes les paroles des grands sages, et dans l’autre plateau la sagesse inconsciente de cet enfant qui passe, et vous verrez que ce que Platon, Marc-Aurèle, Schopenhauer et Pascal nous ont révélé ne soulèvera pas d’une ligne les grands trésors de l’inconscience, car l’enfant qui se tait est mille fois plus sage que Marc-Aurèle qui parle.”

Not only did words threaten to destroy evocations of the infinite by their descriptive nature and general inadequacy, but the human presence of the actors also posed a threat to Maeterlinck's suggestion of the infinite. He states that the poem or the work of art has a mystical density that disappears on the stage. In his 1890 article for *La Jeune Belgique*, "Menus propos—le théâtre" ["Small Talk—The Theatre], Maeterlinck writes, "The theater, unlike the poem, produces just about what would happen if you were to give substance to the subject matter of a painting and in doing so turn it into everyday life."<sup>61</sup> Because the action on the stage is often too much like actions in everyday life, mystery does not survive. According to Maeterlinck, "The stage is where masterpieces die, because the presentation of a masterpiece by *accidental* and *human* means is a contradiction. All masterpieces are symbols, and the symbol never withstands the active presence of man."<sup>62</sup> He claims that man's presence effaces the mysterious power of the poem:

The poem draws back as man steps forward. The poem wants to tear us away from the power of our senses and allow the past and the future to predominate, man only acts on our senses and only exists insofar as he can erase the predomination of the past and the future by the invasion of the moment in which he speaks. If man enters the scene with all his strengths and free as though he was entering into a forest, if his voice, his gestures and his attitude are not veiled by a vast number of synthetic conventions, if one perceives for one instant the human being that he is, the poem is interrupted and we are witnessing a scene from everyday life that, just as a scene on a street, on a river or on a battlefield, has its affinities with Eternity, but that is nevertheless powerless to tear us from the

---

<sup>61</sup> Maeterlinck, "Menus propos—le théâtre," 331. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 145. "Elle produit à peu près, par rapport au poème, ce qui se produirait si vous étendiez une peinture dans la vie."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 334. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 145. Emphasis in original. "La scène est le lieu où meurent les chefs-d'œuvre, parce que la représentation d'un chef-d'œuvre à l'aide d'éléments *accidentels et humains* est antinomique. Tout chef-d'œuvre est un symbole et le symbole ne supporte jamais la présence active de l'homme."

present, because in that instant we are not in a position to perceive and appreciate these unsolicited and new affinities.<sup>63</sup>

To preserve mystical density on the stage, then, Maeterlinck employed several “synthetic conventions” to alter the actors’ voices, gestures and attitudes in order to obscure their humanity as much as possible and turn them instead into archetypes. As already discussed, he rendered voices as inhuman as possible by instructing actors to sometimes speak almost inaudibly, interspersing many long silences, and featuring repetition in the dialogue to suggest “the mysterious chant of the Infinite” instead of everyday conversation.<sup>64</sup> The characters remained practically immobile, and when they did move, their gestures were slight, barely perceptible, and inhuman. This aspect gave Maeterlinck’s “static theatre” its name. In many of his plays, including *L’Intruse* [*The Intruder*], the characters wear masks to ensure that they remain expressionless and impersonal. Masks “succeed in concretizing sensation, stifling feelings, and imposing the stamp of eternity. . . . Divested of personal elements, the characters . . . are mythlike, mediumistic.”<sup>65</sup> Maeterlinck explains his use of masks by evoking ancient Greek theatre: “The Greeks did not ignore this antinomy [the contradiction of the accident with the symbol], and their masks that we no longer understand only served to attenuate the

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 335. “Le poème se retire à mesure que l’homme s’avance. Le poème veut nous arracher au pouvoir de nos sens et faire prédominer le passé et l’avenir, l’homme n’agit que sur nos sens et n’existe que pour autant qu’il puisse effacer cette prédomination du passé et de l’avenir par l’envahissement du moment où il parle. Si l’homme entre en scène avec toutes ses puissances et libre comme s’il entrait dans une forêt, si sa voix, ses gestes et son attitude ne sont pas voilés par un grand nombre de conventions synthétiques, si on aperçoit un seul instant l’être humain qu’il est, il n’y a pas de poème s’interrompt et nous assistons à une scène de la vie extérieure qui, de même qu’une scène de la rue, de la rivière ou du champ de bataille, a ses affinités avec l’Éternité, mais qui est néanmoins impuissante à nous arracher au présent, parce qu’en cet instant nous n’avons pas qualité pour apercevoir et apprécier ces affinités imprévues et nouvelles.” (Note that Maeterlinck seems to use “poem” interchangeably with “masterpiece” or “symbol.”) This quotation contributes another explanation for Maeterlinck’s use of silence in his plays. Speech jolts the audience into the present. Therefore, long silences and minimal or ambiguous dialogue in the play would allow the past and future to predominate, permitting the spectators prolonged glimpses into the infinite and preventing them from living in the immediate present dominated by their senses.

<sup>64</sup> Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Knapp, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, 41.

presence of the man and ease the burden on the symbol.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, by introducing an artificial element, he hoped to obscure the actor’s humanity and allow the symbol to come forth.

Maeterlinck felt so strongly that a human presence interfered with the symbol that he proposed eliminating humans completely from the stage:

Will the human being be replaced by a shadow? a reflection? a projection of symbolic forms, or a being who would appear to live without being alive? I do not know; but the absence of man seems essential to me. Whenever man penetrates a poem, the immense poem of his own presence snuffs out everything around him.<sup>67</sup>

A lifeless being that appears to be alive appealed to him greatly as a possible solution:

It seems that the strange impressions experienced in galleries of wax figures, for instance, could long since have led us to the traces of a dead art or a new art. We would then have onstage beings without a destiny, whose identity would no longer erase that of the hero. It also seems that any being apparently alive but deprived of life elicits extraordinary powers, and these powers may be exactly the same as those the poem calls for.<sup>68</sup>

Maeterlinck continues, wondering why these figures have the power to frighten us, and in listing possible reasons, he reveals his attitude about the connectedness of living beings to eternity. Wax figures and other such beings have an “absence of eternity”—they are “bodies without a destiny.”<sup>69</sup> Most importantly, the “gestures and words [of these

---

<sup>66</sup> Maeterlinck, “Menus propos—le théâtre,” 334. “Les Grecs n’ignorèrent pas cette antinomie, et leurs masques que nous ne comprenons plus ne servaient qu’à atténuer la présence de l’homme et à soulager le symbole.”

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 335. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 145. “L’être humain sera-t-il remplacé par une ombre, un reflet, une projection de formes symboliques ou un être qui aurait les allures de la vie sans avoir la vie ? Je ne sais ; mais l’absence de l’homme me semble indispensable. Lorsque l’homme entre dans un poème, l’immense poème de sa présence éteint tout autour de lui.”

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 335-336. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 146. “Il semble que les étranges impressions éprouvées dans les galeries de figures de cire, par exemple, auraient pu nous mettre, depuis longtemps, sur les traces d’un art mort ou nouveau. Nous aurions alors sur la scène des êtres sans destinées, dont l’identité ne viendrait plus effacer celle du héros. Il semble aussi que tout être qui a l’apparence de la vie sans avoir la vie, fasse appel à des puissances extraordinaires ; et il n’est pas dit que ces puissances ne soient pas exactement de la même nature que celles auxquelles le poème fait appel.”

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 336.

beings] reverberate nowhere and reveal nothing of eternity.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the opposite applies to living beings. Maeterlinck believes living beings are controlled by outside forces (they have a destiny—a theme in most of his plays) and that their gestures and words reverberate and reveal eternity. Because human beings reveal their own eternity, Maeterlinck felt that they competed with the eternity the playwright attempted to express. Therefore, he wanted to eliminate human beings from the stage to prevent the competition of multiple eternities because, as previously noted, he believed in a subjective higher realm individual to each person.

Maeterlinck found another solution to the problem of a human presence overpowering the infinite in his plays. In three plays published in 1894—*Alladine et Palomides*, *L’Intérieur* [Interior], and *La Mort de Tintagiles* [The Death of Tintagiles]—he dispensed with human actors altogether and used marionettes. As Knapp explains: “What impressed Maeterlinck in particular was the passive, remote, impersonal and automaton-like nature of the marionette as it fruitlessly confronted the forces of destiny. He saw an analogy between man and the marionette: both are manipulated by outer forces, both are unaware of this control over their lives.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, he thought that with the human presence (and its conflicting eternity) gone, the soul of the poet (his personal intuition of eternity) would be free to communicate with the audience. Maeterlinck writes, “It is possible, finally, that the soul of the poet [as communicated by the work], no longer finding the place destined to him occupied by a soul as powerful as his own—all souls having exactly the same strength—no longer objects to descending for

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 146. “. . . ces gestes et ces paroles . . . ne retentissent nulle part et n’indiquent le choix d’aucune éternité.”

<sup>71</sup> Knapp, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, 177.

a moment into a hero whose jealous soul no longer forbids it to enter.”<sup>72</sup> The marionettes served as empty vessels, allowing the soul of the poet to communicate through them. In an interesting parallel, as mentioned earlier, Maeterlinck saw himself as a kind of passive conduit like the marionettes, allowing the infinite to communicate through him.

Having solved the challenges the theatre as a medium posed, Maeterlinck was free to pursue the inherently Symbolist goal of evoking exterior forces and interior psychological states—anxiety and terror especially. In terms of exterior forces, he always focused on the inescapable nature of fate and the constant presence of death. In his 1890 play, *Les Aveugles* [*The Blind*], for instance, twelve blind people leave their home and travel into the forest with a priest who wants them to expand their knowledge of the world. The priest leaves the group to explore the surroundings and ends up dying, leaning against a tree. The audience can see what has happened, but the blind are unaware. The subject of the play, then, is the anxiety of the group as they wait for the priest, their feelings of terror when they discover him dead, and their own impending death. Maeterlinck emphasized the inescapable aspect of the characters’ fate: at the end, the group thinks that they hear footsteps approaching, but in reality, the audience concludes, it is the approach of death. The play ends with one character’s plea for pity.

---

<sup>72</sup> Maeterlinck, “Menus propos—le théâtre,” 336. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 146. “Il est possible, enfin, que l’âme du poète, ne trouvant plus la place qui lui était destinée, occupée par une âme aussi puissante que la sienne,—puisque toutes les âmes ont exactement les mêmes forces,—il est possible, alors, que l’âme du poète ou du héros, ne se refuse plus à descendre, un moment, en un être, dont une âme jalouse ne vient pas lui défendre l’entrée.”



## Diffusion of Maeterlinck's Ideas: Theatre

Maeterlinck's plays met with great success among his contemporaries and the public as evidenced by the array of writing on Maeterlinck, the many stage productions of his plays, and the wide availability of his works in translation. Although he did not move to Paris permanently until 1896, literary and artistic exchange between France and Belgium (especially Paris and Brussels) was already underway. McGuinness emphasizes that this exchange characterizes Symbolism perhaps more than any other movement:

The names of Belgian writers and poets who contributed to the elaboration and development of the aesthetic ideals of Symbolism, such as Rodenbach, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, have acquired an international reputation which probably exceeds that of their French counterparts, especially outside the French-speaking world. There is no other literary movement or sensibility in the history of French-language literature—with the possible exception of the Surrealist movement—in which Belgian contributions played such a central and powerful role.<sup>73</sup>

Anne Pingeot and Robert Hoozee emphasize the equal footing of the two countries: “The relationship between French and Belgian art was so strong that one would falsify the study of the period by neglecting the existence of a privileged dialogue between the two active centers.”<sup>74</sup>

This Franco-Belgian exchange was encouraged in part by Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings, a cornerstone of the Symbolist period initiated in 1880, where artists and literary figures met for discussion. Maeterlinck and Verhaeren attended regularly and

---

<sup>73</sup> McGuinness, ed., *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle*, 194.

<sup>74</sup> Anne Pingeot and Robert Hoozee, *Paris-Bruxelles, Bruxelles-Paris: réalisme, impressionnisme, symbolisme, art nouveau: Les relations artistiques entre la France et la Belgique, 1848-1914* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997), 21. “L'enchevêtrement de l'art français et de l'art belge fut si fort que l'on falsifierait l'étude de cette période en négligeant l'existence d'un dialogue privilégié entre ces deux centres actifs.”

spread those Symbolist ideas abroad. Literary figures also traveled between France and Belgium for conferences or lectures.<sup>75</sup>

The most prevalent form of exchange occurred in literary journals. Many of the Belgian literary journals such as *La Jeune Belgique* (1881–1889), *La Wallonie* (1886–1892), and *L'Art moderne* (1881–1914) had Paris correspondents, and nearly all published guest articles by French writers. As Nicole Savy states, “Almost all of the French writers who mattered at the turn of the century were writing in Belgian reviews.”<sup>76</sup> Paris journals also had Belgian correspondents—for example, Octave Maus was the Brussels correspondent for *La Revue indépendante* (1886–1895). In addition to having Brussels correspondents for their journals, French writers themselves professed admiration for Belgian literary figures.<sup>77</sup> For example,

The *Mercure de France* took an interest in a variety of European literature prioritizing Belgium, especially in the initial years. Remy de Gourmont knew Belgium well and informed his readers of the principal Belgian reviews. . . . When Jules Huret published his *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* in 1891 in

---

<sup>75</sup> In an 1892 letter from Paul Verlaine to Henri Carton de Wiart included in the exhibition *Paris-Bruxelles, Bruxelles-Paris*, Verlaine asks whether he might attend a Brussels conference and present a paper titled “De La Littérature belge et française contemporaine,” attesting to the fluidity of exchange between French and Belgium. Furthermore, he mentions that Maeterlinck has assured him personally that he could earn money at Ghent and Bruges for doing so. Ibid., 241.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 228. “Presque tous les écrivains français qui comptèrent au tournant du siècle écrivaient dans les revues belges.”

<sup>77</sup> Some of the French even believed that Belgium provided a special environment that cultivated a higher sensibility in its artists and writers than one could develop in Paris. Camille Maclair expresses this sentiment in a letter to Belgian poet Max Elskamp: “I regret not having been born in your admirable country of legends of such lofty character, so enhanced by the bond of solitude. Our dear Maeterlinck knows my perpetual regret of that. Many times I told him over and over these past few days in Paris, between rehearsals of ‘Pelléas.’ I sense well some fresh source of sensibility that constantly renews and invigorates your assessment of phenomena, all of you.” “Je regrette de n’être pas né dans votre admirable pays de légendes si hautain de caractère, si rehaussé de la complicité de solitudes. Notre cher Maeterlinck sait mon regret perpétuel de cela. Que de fois ne lui ai-je dit et redit ces jours derniers à Paris, entre deux répétitions de ‘Pelléas.’ Je sens bien quelle source fraîche de sensibilité renouvelle et vivifie sans cesse votre estimation des phénomènes, à vous tous.” Camille Maclair, quoted in *ibid.*, 277–278.

*L'Écho de Paris*, he naturally interviewed all of the Belgian writers like Edmond Picard or Maeterlinck.<sup>78</sup>

Before fascination with Belgium truly took hold in Paris (and before Octave Mirbeau's 1890 article praising *La Princesse Maleine*), Maeterlinck already had a reputation as a poet in Belgium. As noted earlier, he published his first poem, "Les Joncs," in November of 1883 and *Serres chaudes* in 1889. In *L'Art moderne* on July 21, 1889, Verhaeren responded to *Serres chaudes*, proclaiming, "Really these things are at the turning-point of contemporary poetry, so new as to shatter all we are accustomed to."<sup>79</sup> Maeterlinck also published articles, short stories, and poems before 1890 in *L'Art moderne*, *La Société Nouvelle* and *La Wallonie*. His *La Princesse Maleine*, the play that would launch his career abroad, appeared as a serial in *La Société Nouvelle* beginning in 1889. Later that year he also published *La Princesse Maleine* at his own expense in an edition of thirty copies. Although it would be over a year after its publication before Mirbeau published his review, Maeterlinck's Belgian contemporaries reacted immediately. In a November 1889 issue of *L'Art moderne*, Verhaeren declared, "Nowhere else can we find, to such a degree, such independence of convention, such a passionate desire to break with tradition."<sup>80</sup> Iwan Gilkin, writing for *La Jeune Belgique* in December 1889, imagined that *La Princesse Maleine* "must mark an important moment in the history of contemporary theatre."<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 229. "Le *Mercur de France* s'intéressa à l'ensemble des littératures européennes avec une priorité pour la Belgique, surtout dans les premières années. Remy de Gourmont connaissait bien la Belgique et informait ses lecteurs sur les principales revues belges. . . . Quand Jules Huret mena en 1891 son *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* dans *L'Écho de Paris*, il s'adressa tout naturellement à des écrivains belges comme Edmond Picard ou Maeterlinck."

<sup>79</sup> Verhaeren, quoted in Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>80</sup> Verhaeren, quoted in *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Iwan Gilkin, quoted in *ibid.*

Maeterlinck sent one of his limited copies of *La Princesse Maleine* to Mallarmé, who in turn lent it to Mirbeau. While Mirbeau's article in *Le Figaro* is regularly hailed as Maeterlinck's first introduction in France, it clearly was not. In reality, Maeterlinck had been publishing in *La Pléiade* since 1886, when he helped found the review. Furthermore, Adolphe Retté reviewed *La Princesse Maleine* in the Paris journal *Art et Critique* on January 4, 1890, seven months before Mirbeau. Retté heralded *La Princesse Maleine* as the first truly Symbolist theatre: "We have proof, there is such a thing as Symbolist theatre."<sup>82</sup> It is likely that avant-garde theatre director Aurélien Lugné-Poe read Retté's article and was thus familiar with Maeterlinck before Mirbeau's review. Jean Jullien, then the director of *Art et Critique*, was one of Lugné-Poe's friends. As Jacques Robichez reasonably suggests, Lugné-Poe probably read Retté's article.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, while Mirbeau did in large part introduce Maeterlinck to the general public via the more mainstream *Figaro*, it is highly likely that those closely involved with the theatrical and literary worlds had an awareness of him before August 1890.<sup>84</sup>

While Maeterlinck owed his sustained popularity in large part to the writing about him and his works, he owed his initial popularity largely to the independent theatre directors that staged his first productions. As David Whitton points out, directors' theatres were a new phenomenon, an attempt to "provide stages for original new plays which were denied an outlet in the commercial theatre of the day; and, scenically, to rescue dramatic literature from a morass of empty spectacle and superabundant embellishment in an age when *mise en scène* had become virtually synonymous with

---

<sup>82</sup> Adolphe Retté, quoted in McGuinness, ed., *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle*, 74.

<sup>83</sup> Jacques Robichez, *Le Symbolisme au théâtre: Lugné-Poe et les débuts de L'Oeuvre* (Paris: L'Arche, 1957), 81.

<sup>84</sup> For more detailed discussion of Mirbeau's article, see pp. 38-39 of this thesis.

decoration.”<sup>85</sup> The avant-garde theatre directors of the 1880s aimed to support new writers and to reach a new public in order to renew French drama. The first theatre of this kind was the Théâtre Libre, founded by André Antoine in 1887. Antoine, however, did not stage any Maeterlinck plays, instead producing Naturalist plays in opposition to Symbolist goals. He is worth mentioning, however, because his theatre provided the model that other directors like Lugné-Poe and Paul Fort followed.<sup>86</sup> After his example, over twenty avant-garde theatres emerged in the early 1890s, including Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’Art and Aurélien Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

Paul Fort was only seventeen years old when he launched the Théâtre d’Art, but he had clear goals in mind as he announced in *L’Écho de Paris* on February 24, 1891: “The Théâtre d’Art will become totally Symbolist. It will henceforth be at the service of the masters of the new school. . . . At the end of March it will give the first Symbolist presentation, for the benefit of Verlaine and the admirable Symbolist painter Paul Gauguin.”<sup>87</sup> The first presentation on May 21, 1891 featured Maeterlinck’s *L’Intruse*. Some months before the performance, the Théâtre d’Art published illustrations and information in its eponymous journal on the upcoming plays and their authors. The first issue announced *L’Intruse*, along with works by Mallarmé, Rachilde, and Verlaine.<sup>88</sup> Lugné-Poe, who acted in the play, later wrote in his memoirs: “The performance of *The Intruder* began before an indifferent audience. It woke up the drowsy theater and became a triumph. The next day all Paris was talking about the astonishing and tragic Flemish

---

<sup>85</sup> Whitton, *Stage Directors in Modern France*, viii.

<sup>86</sup> This model included the theatre’s subscription system. When André Antoine began Théâtre d’Art, he delivered 1,300 prospectuses personally in Paris, yielding only thirty-seven subscribers. However, within a couple of years, he had several thousand subscribers, attesting to the necessity of a new avant-garde theatre. Ibid., 18.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Fort, quoted in *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Patricia Eckert Boyer, *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris, 1887-1900* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 89.

author.”<sup>89</sup> Fort also staged *Les Aveugles* seven months later on December 11, 1891. In his productions, Fort espoused the same Symbolist staging aesthetic as Maeterlinck did: vague non-descriptive settings, simple scenery, dim lighting, and symbolic gestures rather than natural ones.

Although Fort’s theatre lasted only seventeen months, it represented a turning point in modern theatre, because it was “the first modern theatre to put into practice the idea that theatre is above all a place to exercise the imagination” and the first to introduce Maeterlinck.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, even in such a short time period, Fort furthered the doctrine of Symbolist theatre among fellow artists, literary figures, and the general public. Subscribers to the theatre included Paul Claudel, André Gide, Jules Renard, and Claude Debussy among many others. Critics, far from indifferent, contributed to the stir:

The influential critic of *Le Temps*, [Francisque] Sarcey, with his famous “Je ne comprends pas!” regularly recorded his bewilderment at Fort’s antics. *Le Figaro*’s critic [Henri Fouquier] was not so much baffled as fearful of the imminent collapse of the national culture. “There are those who laugh at the vaporisers of the Théâtre d’Art,” he wrote, “but can one be sure that the perfumes they exhale are not seriously turning our heads? I am inclined to think they are and I am starting to wonder if we are not losing the genius of our race: our reason.”<sup>91</sup>

Avant-garde theatre therefore had the attention not only of Symbolist subscribers, but began to command the attention of the general public as well through reviews in mainstream publications.

Aurélien Lugné-Poe, who acted in the two Maeterlinck plays presented at the Théâtre d’Art, founded his own theatre called Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in October 1893 with Camille Mauclair and Édouard Vuillard, in which he carried on the aesthetic principles of

---

<sup>89</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, quoted in *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>90</sup> Whitton, *Stage Directors in Modern France*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Paul Fort's Théâtre d'Art. Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* was the catalyst for the formation of Lugné-Poe's theatre. In December 1892, Lugné-Poe was still a member of Cercle des Escholiers, the amateur theatre group he formed in 1886 with his classmates from Lycée Condorcet. Lugné-Poe proposed a presentation of *Pelléas et Mélisande* on a double bill with Camille Lemonnier's *Madame Lupar*. When the committee met, Lugné-Poe was unable to attend. They found the play "incomprehensible without the scenery and felt that it was impossible to do justice to it at the moment."<sup>92</sup> Lugné-Poe sensed Maeterlinck's importance so strongly that he later wrote about the incident in his memoirs: "The failure of Maeterlinck's 'Pelléas' in front of the Committee . . . was irritating. The earth seemed to be missing underneath my feet. One time, I dreamed of creating a theatre where poetry partnered with silence, but I knew of the difficulties."<sup>93</sup> With the help of Camille Mauclair, he tried to interest his friends in the play, because he felt "it was up to [him] to reveal 'Pelléas et Mélisande' at all costs."<sup>94</sup> Lugné-Poe and Mauclair continued to encounter difficulty: "Everywhere we turned there was either mockery or indifference, but we did not give up hope."<sup>95</sup>

Lugné-Poe and Mauclair decided to open their own theatre and announced that *Pelléas et Mélisande* would be the inaugural performance. Encouragement came from other Symbolists such as Rachilde. Her letter to Lugné-Poe on February 15, 1893 demonstrates the importance Maeterlinck had already gained in Symbolist circles:

---

<sup>92</sup> David Grayson, *The Genesis of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>93</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, *La Parade: Le Sot du tremplin; souvenirs et impressions de théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), 223. "L'échec de Maeterlinck avec 'Pelléas' devant le Comité . . . était irritant. Le terrain semblait me manquer sous les pieds. Un temps, je songeais à créer un théâtre où s'associeraient poésie et silences, mais j'en concevais les difficultés."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 224. "Il me restait donc le devoir de révéler à tout prix ce 'Pelléas et Mélisande.'"

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 225. "De tous les côtés vers lesquels nous nous tournions c'était ou de la raillerie ou de l'indifférence, tout de même nous ne désespérions pas."

I understand through Paul Fort, Monsieur Lugné-Poe, that you are well aware that the production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, even if the production does not achieve perfection, was for the Théâtre d'Art the door to glory and that you have decided to open it completely for us. . . . As the most avid admirer of Maeterlinck I thank you, and let us now adopt the motto of our courageous director: Forward!<sup>96</sup>

Although Maeterlinck's reputation was solidified among Symbolists, he was still somewhat of a curiosity in the eyes of the general public as evidenced by the explanatory articles Maclair wrote "in advance of the opening to educate the public about the nature of [the] performance."<sup>97</sup> In an article appearing in *Le Journal* on the day of the premiere (May 17, 1893) entitled "Une première sensationnelle : *Pelléas et Mélisande*," Maclair tries to explain the Symbolist aesthetic to the new public:

They have tried to devise an ornamental frame around the characters, instead of wasting time making real apartments or actual forests, following the conventional route. They also wished to give the actors costumes that hewed to a new aesthetic, looking not for period re-creations but for the nature of the whole, beyond any fashion and any period—in a word, costumes for fairytales and legends. In that way, the details harmonize with the feeling, like a kind of musical accompaniment.<sup>98</sup>

The single matinee performance met with success, and Maeterlinck's reputation continued to grow after this performance both in France and abroad. Mallarmé's review of the performance, titled simply "Théâtre," appeared in the London-based *National Observer* on July 1, 1893. Mallarmé highlights the way the aesthetics of Symbolist theatre can enable an audience to see the essential, unencumbered by descriptive detail or extraneous elements:

---

<sup>96</sup> Boyer, *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris*, 102. Most Symbolists supported Maeterlinck immediately and fervently. Even before the first stage production of a Maeterlinck play, André Gide appointed Maeterlinck as one of a trio of elite representatives of the Symbolist movement. In a letter to Paul Valéry, Gide declares: "So, Mallarmé for poetry, Maeterlinck for theatre—and although beside these two I feel myself a little green, I add Myself for the novel." André Gide, quoted in McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Boyer, *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> Maclair, quoted in *ibid.*, 102.



*Pelléas and Mélisande*, on a stage, exhales the delight of the page. To elaborate? These tableaux, brief, supreme: anything preparatory or mechanical has been rejected, so that there appears, extracted, what the spectator's mind frees itself of the performance, the essence. . . . Almost silently and abstractly to the point that, in this art, where everything becomes music in the proper sense, the part of an instrument, even meditative, violin, would spoil things, by its uselessness.<sup>99</sup>

The fact that a Paris premiere would be of interest to the public in England speaks to Maeterlinck's international reputation that increased with each stage production performed abroad.

After the groundbreaking premiere of *L'Intruse* and *Les Aveugles* at Paul Fort's Théâtre d'Art, stage productions abroad increased in number.<sup>100</sup> Less than a year after *L'Intruse* premiered in Paris, London had its own premiere at the Haymarket Theatre on January 27, 1892. The United States was not far behind, premiering *L'Intruse* at the Berkeley Lyceum in February 1893. In 1895, Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was invited to London to perform two Maeterlinck plays, *L'Intruse* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, at the Opéra-Comique. Maeterlinck attended the openings. A short article in *The Cosmopolitan* by Israel Zangwill captures the impact of his visit:

M. Maurice Maeterlinck's recent visit to London has given concreteness to the slowly-gathering rumor of his fame. The next after Ibsen to "arrive" in the international go-as-you-please, end-of-the-century literature, and but a few years ago regarded as the most exotic of modern novelties, he is already an established fact. . . . The presence of the dramatist caused such a run upon his plays, that eminent English critics with rusty French were at their wits' ends to purchase copies.<sup>101</sup>

Zangwill also gives a somewhat flippant description of the production, but makes clear that the new aesthetic did not impede the impact on the audience and success of the play:

The most ambitious play of Maeterlinck's that has been seen in England—"Pelléas et Mélisande"—was given with decorations that recalled the *mise en*

---

<sup>99</sup> Mallarmé, quoted in McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*, 163.

<sup>100</sup> See Beachboard, *Le Théâtre de Maeterlinck aux Etats-Unis*, 195-217.

<sup>101</sup> Israel Zangwill, "Maeterlinck, The Belgian Shakespeare," *Cosmopolitan* 19 (1895): 241.

scène of Shakespeare's time, a background of canvas, apparently covered with palette scrapings, serving for a forest, and the same with two chairs, for an apartment in a castle. A green gauze, veiling the whole front of the stage, was intended to suggest the dream-like atmosphere of the play. . . . But despite the bareness of the setting, the beauty of many of the passages entranced the audience.<sup>102</sup>

In addition to the success of the productions, Maeterlinck's visit also allowed him to meet his literary contemporaries abroad, including W. B. Yeats, William Archer, and Arthur Symonds. Stage productions abroad enabled him to reach a wider general audience with his plays and also a wider literary circle.

Productions continued to increase with Maeterlinck's growing reputation. That tendency culminated in a veritable craze in the United States revolving around his later and most popular play, *L'Oiseau bleu*, which premiered in 1908 in Moscow and 1910 in the United States. According to Beachboard, in the United States alone, the play was staged around 1,200 times in a period of five years, yielding over 1,500,000 spectators.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Beachboard, *Le Théâtre de Maeterlinck aux Etats-Unis*, 44.

## Publications and Translation

Maeterlinck's stage productions sparked an increasing interest in the Belgian writer and spread his ideas to a broad audience, while the written criticism helped to sustain interest between his productions and to explain his version of Symbolism more fully. Texts on Maeterlinck by his contemporaries and texts by Maeterlinck himself spread his ideas more quickly and widely than would have been possible through stage productions alone.

Translations of Maeterlinck's plays and prose also appeared quickly and in great number. Not only were his works published in great quantity in French and English in Paris, London, and New York, but translations were published in many other countries, including Italy, Spain, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Mexico and Canada.<sup>104</sup> For instance, Maeterlinck's 1896 collection of mystical essays *Le Trésor des humbles*, portions of which contemporaries quoted endlessly in their texts, was reprinted or issued anew thirty times in France between 1896 and 1915, and twenty times in the United States and England between 1897 and 1915. The fact that within a year of its original publication *Le Trésor des humbles* was translated into English for British and American editions (and also into Dutch in Amsterdam) attests to his international importance.

Maeterlinck's plays received similar treatment. For instance, *La Princesse Maleine* appeared in English translation in New York and London within two years of its original publication in 1890 in Brussels. *Pelléas et Mélisande* saw forty-six different imprints from 1892 to 1944, many in translation. Further attesting to his continued popularity, *L'Oiseau bleu*, in addition to many imprints and translations, existed in a

---

<sup>104</sup> See *The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints*, vol. 354 (London: Mansell, 1974), 615-660.

children's version published in the United States beginning in 1914. Radio adaptations of the play began in the 1930s. Maeterlinck's *La Vie des abeilles* [*The Life of the Bee*] was also published in a children's version in 1919 and subsequently. In addition to these publications, Maurice Lecat estimates in his 1939 bibliography that Maeterlinck's writings appeared in various periodicals 230 times from 1886 to 1939.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Note that the majority of these publications date within the twenty-year period from 1890 to 1910, which makes this estimation more striking than it first appears. See Maurice Lecat, *Bibliographie de Maurice Maeterlinck* (Brussels: Ancienne Librairie Castaigne, 1939), 85-101.

## Texts on Maeterlinck by his Contemporaries

Maeterlinck's contemporaries published actively on his work.<sup>106</sup> Not only did countless literary figures produce countless reviews of stage productions, there exists an equally vast body of writing examining his ideas and using them to further Symbolist doctrine. Many texts serve both functions. Assessing a sample of writing from France, England, and the United States helps to reconstruct Maeterlinck's appeal and determine which ideas elicited the greatest response from his peers.

As previously discussed, Octave Mirbeau's August 1890 article in *Le Figaro* was not technically the first assessment of Maeterlinck. However, Mirbeau did introduce Maeterlinck to the majority of the general public for the first time and his article anticipates some of the main themes of future responses. Mirbeau's text is indeed effusive: he names Maeterlinck a "Belgian Shakespeare" and critics endlessly repeated this epithet, sometimes in a scornful manner. However, underneath his emotion, Mirbeau detected the main ideas Maeterlinck attempted to communicate. As Maeterlinck told Huret, he wished to create eternal works of art that centered on timeless feelings. According to Mirbeau, Maeterlinck succeeded in creating "a masterpiece . . . an admirable, and pure, and eternal masterpiece that suffices to immortalize a name."<sup>107</sup>

In Mirbeau's opinion, Maeterlinck also succeeds in his mission of expressing the inexpressible: "Here [in *La Princesse Maleine*] there are, truly, . . . feelings still not expressed in literature; here there is, truly, the unspoken."<sup>108</sup> Mirbeau anticipates that

---

<sup>106</sup> Lecat estimates that from 1889-1939, 992 articles on Maeterlinck appeared in various periodicals—an average of about twenty articles per year during a fifty-year period. See Ibid., 141-201. In addition, he counts about 280 books in which the author devotes a portion, or the entire work, to Maeterlinck.

<sup>107</sup> Octave Mirbeau, "Maurice Maeterlinck" (1890), in Octave Mirbeau, *Combats littéraires*, ed. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme, 2006), 309. ". . . un chef-d'œuvre . . . un admirable, et pur, et éternel chef-d'œuvre qui suffit à immortaliser un nom."

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. "Il y a là, vraiment, . . . des sensations encore inédites dans la littérature ; il y a là, vraiment, de l'inexprimé."

some critics will accuse Maeterlinck of obscurity and counters this by stating that the new writing requires a new kind of understanding as well: “The truth is that no one is clearer in language than Mr. Maeterlinck. To understand him in the privacy of his thoughts and the strangeness of his analogies, one must, somehow, adopt his states of soul and live in him as if oneself lives in these things. It is not only a matter of intelligence; a matter of the soul also.”<sup>109</sup>

Mirbeau recognizes also that Maeterlinck aims to express the infinite not through descriptive action, but to hint at it through a building terror evoked by slight gestures and near-inaudible voices. He writes, “Recount this drama in its details? I cannot. That would spoil the immense charm, to attenuate the immense terror into which [Maeterlinck] plunges souls.”<sup>110</sup> Mirbeau recognizes that Maeterlinck creates the “*crescendo* of horror” unconventionally—his characters, uninvolved in crime or other dramatic actions do not speak long descriptive monologues but instead make small gestures and utterances. Maeterlinck’s unconventional otherworldly approach proves effective for Mirbeau: “The small screams of these little souls are those which I know to be the most terrible, the most profound and the most exquisite, beyond life and beyond the dream.”<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 309-310. “La vérité est que personne n’a plus de clarté dans le verbe que M. Maeterlinck. Pour le comprendre en l’intimité de sa pensée et l’étrangeté de ses analogies, il faut, en quelque sorte, épouser ses états d’âme et se vivre en lui comme lui-même se vit dans les choses. Ce n’est qu’une affaire d’intelligence ; une affaire d’âme aussi.” Note that usually “*états d’âme*” translates as “states of mind.” However, with the importance of the soul in a Symbolist context, it is better to interpret it for my purposes as “states of soul.” I (along with Maeterlinck’s critics and translators) feel that “state of mind” has too much of a rational character to fit into this context. Indeed, Alfred Sutro (Maeterlinck’s official translator until 1904) translates “*état d’âme*” as “soul-state” in *The Treasure of the Humble* (see quotation on p. 19 of this thesis). James Huneker uses the term in French suggesting that there is not an adequate English phrase: “There is wise and charming talk, the action *nil*. We get instead *états d’âmes*.” James Huneker, *Iconoclasts* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 408. For further discussion of *Iconoclasts*, see pp. 43-44 of this thesis.

<sup>110</sup> Mirbeau, “Maurice Maeterlinck” (1890), in Mirbeau, *Combats littéraires*, 311. “Raconter ce drame dans ses détails ? Je ne le puis. Ce serait en gâter le charme immense, en atténuer l’immense terreur où il jette les âmes.”

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. “Les petits cris de ces petites âmes sont ce que je connais de plus terrible, de plus profond et de plus délicieux, au-delà de la vie et au-delà du rêve.”

Remy de Gourmont admires similar elements of Maeterlinck's dramas in his 1896 book *Le Livre des masques* [*The Book of Masks*], a collection of studies on writers. Gourmont praises the eternal aspect of Maeterlinck's characters as Mirbeau did: "His characters, with the appearance of phantoms, are steeped with life, like those seemingly inert balls, which, when charged with electricity, grow fulgent at the contact of a point; they are not abstractions but syntheses; they are states of soul or, better still, states of humanity, moments, minutes which shall be eternal. In short, they are real, by dint of their unreality."<sup>112</sup>

Remembering a recent time when theatre was "too explicit and the characters [bore] names that [were] truly too evident," Gourmont praises the subtlety of the new theatre that evokes the infinite with Maeterlinck at the helm: "Does one, in any free theater, see a drama played by beings called Courage, Hate, Joy, Silence, Care, Longing, Fear, Anger, and Shame? The hour of such amusement has passed or has not returned."<sup>113</sup> Readers or spectators of Maeterlinck's plays "would learn the meaning of very humble gestures and very futile words, and that an infant's laugh or a woman's prattle equals, by what it holds of soul and mystery, the most resplendent words of sages. . . . [Maeterlinck] assumes the courage only to attribute to things the importance they will have in an ultimate world."<sup>114</sup>

Like Mirbeau, Gourmont recognizes new feelings in Maeterlinck's plays, unexpressed in previous literature. He reproduces dialogue from *Alladine et Palomides*

---

<sup>112</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *The Book of Masks*, trans. Jack Lewis (Boston: John W. Luce, 1921), 23.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. Gourmont has clearly been reading Maeterlinck's *Le Trésor des humbles*, as this idea is almost identical to Maeterlinck's assertion that an ordinary child's silence holds more wisdom and mystery than the words of great sages (see quotation on p. 20 of this thesis). Indeed, *Le Livre des masques* and *Le Trésor des humbles* were published in the same year and Gourmont quotes directly from *Le Trésor des humbles* elsewhere in his text.

(1894) and describes the effect of new emotions on the reader or spectator: “Before such delicate sighings, all objection grows mute; one is silent at having felt a new way of loving and expressing love. New, truly. . . . He has achieved a true work; he has found an unheard muffled cry, a kind of lamentation.”<sup>115</sup>

Gourmont also shares Maeterlinck’s ideas about infinity, fate, and the necessity to transcend the world of the everyday. Maeterlinck told Huret that he must free himself from the accidents of civilization to make enduring works, and Gourmont expresses a similar idea in his text. He writes that “mysticism may be called the state in which a soul, abandoning the physical world and scornful of its shocks and accidents, gives its mind only to relations and direct intimacies with the infinite.”<sup>116</sup> Gourmont also clearly agrees with Maeterlinck’s idea that the infinite governs humans’ smallest actions and that, consequently, eternity manifests itself in every living being:

How little we really participate in our most decisive and best considered acts. Such an ethics, leaving the care of useless judgments to wretched human laws, snatches from life its very essence and transports it to the upper regions where it blossoms, sheltered from contingencies and from the humiliations which social contingencies are. Mystic morality ignores everything not marked at the same time with the double seal of the human and divine.<sup>117</sup>

Thinkers outside France expressed interest in nearly identical ideas to those that attracted the French writers. Arthur Symons’ “Le Mysticisme de Maeterlinck” first appeared in 1897 in French in *La Revue des revues* and later in English as part of his groundbreaking book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Published in 1899 in London, Symons’ book was one of the first to present Symbolism as a cohesive movement to the English-speaking public.

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 27.



Symons praises Maeterlinck's precision in the face of the mysterious inexpressible infinite: "Maeterlinck has apprehended what is essential in the mystical doctrine with a more profound comprehension, and thus more systematically, than any mystic of recent times."<sup>118</sup> At the same time, Maeterlinck does not seek to explain the mysteries. Symons states that while other mystics "have occupied themselves, very profitably, with showing how natural, how explicable on their own terms, are the mysteries of life[,] the whole aim of Maeterlinck is to show how mysterious all life is, 'what an astonishing thing it is, merely to live.'"<sup>119</sup>

Like previous writers, Symons also admires the way Maeterlinck's characters act as conduits for eternal ideas and emotions: "It is a drama in which the interest is concentrated on vague people, who are little parts of the universal consciousness, their strange names being but the pseudonyms of obscure passions, intimate emotions. They have the fascination which we find in the eyes of certain pictures, so much more real and disquieting, so much more permanent with us, than living people."<sup>120</sup> Maeterlinck's puppet theatre especially leads Symons to recognize the same eternal aspect controlling the motions of human beings as it does Maeterlinck's characters:

Are we not all puppets, in a theatre of marionettes, in which the parts we play . . . have all been chosen for us . . . , our motions controlled from behind the curtain, so the words we seem to speak are but spoken through us, and we do but utter fragments of some elaborate invention, planned for larger ends than our personal display or convenience, but to which, all the same, we are in a humble degree necessary.<sup>121</sup>

Because Symons sees a parallel between Maeterlinck's characters and human beings manipulated by greater unseen forces, he agrees with Maeterlinck's self-imposed

---

<sup>118</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 161.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 165. The source of the quoted phrase is unidentified.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

humble role in the face of eternity. Maeterlinck told Huret that his task was “to be quiet, to listen to these messengers of a life that [he does] not yet understand, and to bow down humbly before them.”<sup>122</sup> Symons advocates a similar stance: “Whatever we perceive or do is not perceived or done consciously by us, but unconsciously through us. Our business, then, is to tend that ‘inner light’ by which most mystics have symbolised that which at once guides us in time and attaches us to eternity.”<sup>123</sup>

In his 1905 book *Iconoclasts*, the American critic James Huneker admires Maeterlinck’s ability to make an overall mood the subject of his plays rather than dramatic action.<sup>124</sup> Huneker writes, “The spiritual renascence may be at hand. . . . Plot, action, trickeries, cheap illusions, must be swept away into the limbo of things used up. Atmosphere, the atmosphere of unuttered emotions, arrested attitudes, ideas of the spiritual subconscious, are to usurp the mechanical formulas of to-day.”<sup>125</sup> For Huneker, Maeterlinck’s theatre represents a new approach that other modern works lack: “Modern thought and literature lack this mystic element, lack the atmosphere of the spiritual, perfect as is its technic and its intellectual equipment.”<sup>126</sup>

Huneker agrees with other critics that Maeterlinck has managed to “exteriorize the mystery, the significance of the soul life” by “break[ing] with the conventions of the past.”<sup>127</sup> Mystery is the most important element for Huneker:

---

<sup>122</sup> Huret, *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire*, 156.

<sup>123</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 164.

<sup>124</sup> *Iconoclasts* is a series of essays on modern European dramatists. Gourmont said Huneker was, “among foreign critics, . . . the one best acquainted with French literature and the one who judges us with the greatest sympathy and with the most freedom.” Maeterlinck called *Iconoclasts* “the only book of high and universal critical worth that we have had for years.” Gourmont and Maeterlinck quoted in David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>125</sup> Huneker, *Iconoclasts*, 379.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

Without the mystery of life, life is not worth the living. The static opposed to the dynamic theatre is [Maeterlinck's] ideal mood, not action; the immaterial not the obvious. Hamlet is not awake—at every moment does he advance to the very brink of awakening. The mysterious chant of the Infinite, the ominous silence of the soul and of God, the murmur of Eternity on the horizon, the destiny or fatality that we are conscious within us, though by what tokens none may tell—do not all these underlie King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet? Are there not elements of deeper gravity and stability in happiness in a single moment of repose than in the whirlwind of passion?<sup>128</sup>

Huneker is interested in the same main aspects of Maeterlinck's work as previous critics: eternity and destiny or fatality—and according to him, Maeterlinck succeeds in expressing these elements subtly instead of relying on new complicated techniques. In fact, Huneker privileges Maeterlinck's ability to express new emotions and ideas above more material innovation: "Above all, he has imparted to the contemporaneous theatre new poetic ideas. A new technic—on the material side—is of less importance than the introduction of new modes of expression, of atmosphere, of ideas."<sup>129</sup>

All of these critics focus on Maeterlinck's evocation of the inexpressible and immaterial. Mirbeau, Gourmont, Symons, and Huneker recognize that Maeterlinck's devices—from dim lighting and simplified scenery to the slight gestures and near-inaudible words of the actors—are all at the service of suggestion. His rejection of descriptive action in favor of slow-building emotions allows him to transcend everyday life and bring the eternal to the fore. As Symons points out, although Maeterlinck aims to express the inexpressible, he never attempts to explain these mysteries, but only suggests them.

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 375-376.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 394.

## Maeterlinck and Visual Artists

Maeterlinck's focus on suggestion resonated with visual artists as well. Rose-Carol Washton Long has documented Wassily Kandinsky's interest in Maeterlinck in *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*.<sup>130</sup> Kandinsky was especially interested in Maeterlinck's use of words to evoke hidden truths. As mentioned earlier, Maeterlinck believed that ordinary dialogue served to advance a linear plot and thus had no place in his plays. Instead, he used ambiguous language interspersed with long silences to suggest hidden truths to the audience. Maeterlinck felt that art should be "a detour and not act directly."<sup>131</sup> Similarly, Kandinsky believed that obscuring the descriptive details of objects in his paintings would allow them to act indirectly, involving the spectator by encouraging his or her imagination and soul to interact with the painting.

Long astutely compares Maeterlinck's ambiguous language to Kandinsky's concept of the hidden object. She states,

Kandinsky proposed that the object could be made more meaningful by placing it in an unusual context, or by hiding its external form beneath veils of colours or by stripping it into a hidden construction in the same way that Maeterlinck tried to make the specific quality of the word ambiguous by placing it in an unusual context or by dislocating it from the narrative, or by constant repetition.<sup>132</sup>

Thus, both Maeterlinck and Kandinsky prized ambiguity as the only method one could use to communicate abstract hidden truths. Long emphasizes that both eschewed the

---

<sup>130</sup> Kandinsky, working in Munich, was not detached from the Paris scene by any means. Artists such as Henri Le Fauconnier linked France to Germany in the twentieth century. Le Fauconnier joined the Künstlervereinigung in Munich, where he encountered Kandinsky. See Ann H. Murray, "Henri Le Fauconnier's 'Das Kunstwerk': An Early Statement of Cubist Aesthetic Theory and Its Understanding in Germany," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 4 (December 1981): 125-133. It is also important to note that Maeterlinck's plays were still being staged in pre-World War I Munich and Berlin (*Pelléas et Mélisande* in winter 1908-1909 and *L'Oiseau Bleu* in 1912).

<sup>131</sup> Maeterlinck, quoted in Long, *Kandinsky*, 67.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

external world to concentrate on the inner world of higher truth: “For Kandinsky, the object based directly on nature would cause the spectator to become involved with questions of verisimilitude rather than with content. Similarly, in Maeterlinck’s dramas, the choice of words was not to be dictated by the external demands of the plot or the words would lose the power to expand one’s consciousness.”<sup>133</sup>

In his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art* of 1911, Kandinsky writes about Maeterlinck’s plays and poetry, concluding with this statement: “The word which has two meanings, the first direct, the second indirect, is the pure material of poetry and of literature, the material which these arts alone can manipulate and through which they speak to the spirit.”<sup>134</sup> Maeterlinck’s privileging the indirect, suggestive use of words over their primary descriptive use was clearly a useful model for Kandinsky. Long argues that both Kandinsky and Maeterlinck sought to reveal “evidence of the cosmic force in even the humblest of things.”<sup>135</sup> She compares Maeterlinck’s marveling at “all the unexpected that lies hidden in a stone, a grain of salt” (in *The Measure of the Hours*, 1907), with Kandinsky’s assertion in his autobiography regarding the inner being of ordinary objects: “Everything ‘dead’ trembled. . . . Everything shows me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul, which is more often silent than heard.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, both sought to take an ordinarily descriptive object, word, or gesture and call to the spectator’s attention its secondary indirect meaning—“its secret soul”—and, in doing so, evoke hidden truths.

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>134</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 16.

<sup>135</sup> Long, *Kandinsky*, 68.

<sup>136</sup> Maeterlinck and Kandinsky, quoted in *ibid.*

To expand the evidence of visual artists' interest in Maeterlinck, I will add two additional examples of artists who responded to the writer. Édouard Vuillard exemplifies the response of a contemporary artist in the 1890s, and Jean Metzinger demonstrates Maeterlinck's continued relevance in the milieu of Cubism. Both shared Maeterlinck's view that suggestion was the only way to communicate the hidden truths of an invisible, indistinct world, but that idea manifested itself quite differently in both artists' work.

## Maeterlinck and Visual Artists, I: Édouard Vuillard

The advent of avant-garde theatres in the 1890s brought an unprecedented collaboration between visual artists and the theatre. Lugné-Poe especially supported visual artists by working to find buyers for their canvases and enlisting them to produce frontispieces for programs published in journals such as *La Plume*, which helped them reach a wider public. In a letter to Lugné-Poe in 1891, Maurice Denis emphasizes Lugné-Poe's important role in introducing new artists to the public: "You know what we were saying the other day? All in all, it's Lugné who holds the key to Gauguin's success. Remember what happened in a year: the article in *Art et critique*, the relationships with the symbolists, the number of people you got interested in painting."<sup>137</sup>

In addition to helping new art reach the public, theatre directors like Lugné-Poe introduced the artists to other directors and literary figures. Paul Sérusier writes about Lugné-Poe in his *ABC de la peinture* of 1921:

My classmate from Condorcet, Lugné-Poe, was our initiator into the world of the theatre and the literature of the Symbolists. It was he who introduced me to Jean Jullien, the dramatic author, director of *Art et Critique*, where I met the poet Adolphe Retté, who introduced me to Verlaine and Moréas. Through Lugné also we were matched up with Antoine's *Théâtre Libre*, for which Vuillard made a program, and with Paul Fort's *Théâtre d'Art*. . . . The link was made with the new literature.<sup>138</sup>

The main participants in Fort and Lugné-Poe's ventures were the Nabis, a collective brotherhood of avant-garde artists that formed in 1888. Many of the members had been art students together at the Académie Julian. The group included Paul Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, and Édouard Vuillard. Although all of the members worked in differing styles, they all believed that the artist must infuse his or her

---

<sup>137</sup> Denis, quoted in Boyer, *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris*, 86.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Sérusier, *ABC de la peinture* (Paris: Librairie Floury, 1942), 63.

subject with his or her own unique viewpoint. In other words, they privileged the artist's subjectivity and wished to evoke that unique vision rather than describe what they saw objectively. As Paul Sérusier wrote to Denis in 1889, "I respect personality; it is an abstract entity. A certain number of lines and colors constituting a harmony can be arranged infinite ways."<sup>139</sup> Thus, for the Nabis, like Maeterlinck, one objective reality did not exist; reality was unique to each perceiver.

Considering the collective nature of their group, the Nabis were predisposed to a collaborative attitude and gravitated toward the avant-garde theatres. Indeed, the Nabi Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) was, by far, the artist most involved with the theatre. Lugné-Poe recognized Vuillard's pronounced role: "The one who from the outset showed the most interest in the theatre and proved the best general adviser was Édouard Vuillard."<sup>140</sup> Before joining the Théâtre d'Art and then the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Vuillard illustrated many programs for the Théâtre Libre and made numerous drawings and paintings depicting actors on stage.

Vuillard commenced his stage design work in 1891 with Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* at the Théâtre d'Art. He created the backdrops and undoubtedly assisted with the emotive lighting effects.<sup>141</sup> Vuillard proved so instrumental in augmenting the mood of Maeterlinck's play that he gained recognition for his design. Pierre Quillard, a Symbolist poet and playwright, noted in his review of the play in *Mercure de France* that the "effect

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 51. English translation after Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 237. "La personnalité, je la respecte : c'est une chose abstraite. Étant donnée une certaine quantité de lignes et de couleurs formant une harmonie, il y a une infinité de manières de les arranger."

<sup>140</sup> Lugné-Poe, quoted in Guy Cogeval and Antoine Salomon, *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance: Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels* (Milan: Skira, 2003), 3 vols., I, 157.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., I, 158.



created by the smoky gray decor, designed ‘with great intelligence’ by Vuillard, was similar to the distinctive and mystical style of a contemporary artist, Eugène Carrière.”<sup>142</sup>

Vuillard’s greatest involvement with the theatre, however, was in his co-founding of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre with Lugné-Poe. He shared a studio with Lugné-Poe and fellow Nabis Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard. In his memoirs, Lugné-Poe evokes the resulting spirit of collaboration: “There [at the studio] a brotherhood was cemented that did not separate for fifteen years. . . . The four of us, like the sergeants, 28 Rue Pigalle: Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard and me.”<sup>143</sup> Further characterizing Vuillard’s close involvement with the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, Lugné-Poe claims that Vuillard was responsible for its name: “One night . . . we were looking for a title for the theatre; up until then, we did not have one. Vuillard opening a book at random, pointed to ‘l’Oeuvre.’ We, that is the four apostles! . . . Maclair, Vuillard, sometimes Malaquin and myself.”<sup>144</sup> Scholars debate the veracity of this anecdote, but even if it is false, Lugné-Poe’s story attests to Vuillard’s high level of involvement with the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. Further demonstrating his dedication to Lugné-Poe’s theatre, Vuillard created all but one of the programs for the inaugural season.

Close involvement with the Théâtre d’Art and the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre doubtless encouraged Vuillard’s interest in Maeterlinck. Vuillard made two sketches of *L’Intruse*, one, an illustration for the Théâtre d’Art program and the other, an oil sketch (Figures 1 & 2). The illustration conveys the austerity of the scene and some of the anxiety of

---

<sup>142</sup> Boyer, *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris*, 93.

<sup>143</sup> Lugné-Poe, *La Parade: Le Sot du tremplin*, 189. Lugné-Poe is referring to the four sergeants of La Rochelle, guillotined in Paris in 1822 for plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Thus, his reference conveys brotherhood and also the subversive nature of their creating a new theatre. “Nous étions quatre, comme les sergents, 28, Rue Pigalle : Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard et moi.”

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 231. Emphasis in original. “Un soir, . . . on chercha un titre à ce théâtre; jusque-là nous n’en avions pas. Vuillard ouvrant un livre au hasard, indiqua ‘l’Oeuvre.’ On, c’est-à-dire les quatre apôtres! . . . Maclair, Vuillard, quelquefois Malaquin et moi-même.”

waiting, but the oil sketch truly aims to recreate the mood of Maeterlinck's play. The viewer can make out the lamp on the table, the clock in the corner, and five figures. The figures, however, seem to be dissolving into the surrounding space. The premise of the play is that a family, including a blind grandfather, await the mother's recovery after childbirth. She resides in the next room, and the play centers on the family's nearly unbearable anxiety and the work of unseen forces, including Death (the intruder), who finally arrives at the end. Vuillard clearly succeeded in evoking the indeterminacy and mystery of Maeterlinck's play in this oil sketch. After it was exhibited in 1891 at the first Nabi exhibition at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, the critic Georges Roussel, writing in *La Plume*, "noted that Vuillard's painting gave a sensation of oppressive terror and compared his figures to those seemingly immobilized actors in Maeterlinck's dramas."<sup>145</sup>

Vuillard's concern with Maeterlinck is apparent beyond the fact that he created stage sets and illustrations for his plays. Many of Vuillard's paintings, both before and after his exposure to Maeterlinck's theatre, embrace ambiguity, indeterminacy, and suggestion, rejecting naturalistic description. In addition, the emotive use of light figures prominently in Vuillard's paintings as it does in Maeterlinck's drama. In my opinion, "suggestion" could also encompass these emotive light effects. Vuillard did not use light to merely illuminate his surroundings and enable him to capture more descriptive detail. Instead, he used light subjectively to suggest a mood.

Vuillard's painting *L'Heure du dîner* [*Dinnertime*], circa 1889, embodies both of these themes (Figure 3). With only two open flames to light the scene—the candle in the background and the match in Vuillard's mother's hand at left—the figures become somewhat indeterminate and a mysterious mood prevails. The low lighting shrouds the

---

<sup>145</sup> Gloria Groom, *Édouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator: Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 13.

faces in obscurity—Vuillard suggests only some facial features, allowing others to blend into shadow.

Some scholars espouse a rather dramatic view of this painting, claiming that Vuillard has imbued an everyday dinner scene with a sense of utter terror. Guy Cogeval claims that Marie, at right, holding a loaf of bread, “has a positively diabolical look on her face” while Vuillard, in the doorway, has a “terrified look.”<sup>146</sup> He even claims that the surroundings are menacing, stating that the candle in the background “sheds a funereal backlight over the absurdly melodramatic trio” and that the lamp at the left seems “enormous and threatening.”<sup>147</sup> Elizabeth Wynne Easton takes a somewhat less dramatic stance, but does agree with Cogeval that the painting “seems full of grim portents” and has a “claustrophobic and airless atmosphere.”<sup>148</sup>

While, in my opinion, the feeling of terror is not so extreme, I do agree with Cogeval and Easton that Vuillard has taken an ordinary scene and imbued it with an incongruous mood. Vuillard attempted to cast a sense of mystery over an otherwise ordinary occurrence by using emotive light effects, much as Maeterlinck would do two years later in dramas such as *L’Intruse*. The suggestion of facial features in this painting also seems to anticipate Maeterlinck’s partially obscuring his actors’ facial features with a gauze curtain in order to heighten the sense of ambiguity.

After Vuillard began work in stage design for plays by Maeterlinck and other Symbolists, Cogeval claims that Vuillard “imposed on his family his dramatic view of life” and “invented for them a range of theatrical situations and gestures.”<sup>149</sup> According

---

<sup>146</sup> Guy Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 55.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Elizabeth Wynne Easton, *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 58.

<sup>149</sup> Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard*, 15-16.

to Cogeval, the members of Vuillard's family, acting as the protagonists in his paintings, were "a 'precipitate' of immaterial theatrical form."<sup>150</sup> Cogeval and Easton recognize a psychological drama in Vuillard's paintings of his mother and sister especially. For instance, in Vuillard's 1893 painting, *Intérieur, mère et soeur de l'artiste* [*Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*], Cogeval claims that "the psychological tension and the intimations of maternal domination and filial submission in those earlier works are here made manifest in an image that is ominous and disconcerting in the extreme" (Figure 4).<sup>151</sup> Both Easton and Cogeval also point out a sense of confinement, claiming that Marie struggles against the ever-shrinking boundaries of the picture plane as she melts into the wallpaper.<sup>152</sup> Patricia Ciaffa likewise suggests that Vuillard manipulated his mother and sister especially to try to create "a kind of Symbolist psychodrama."<sup>153</sup>

I do not see such an explicit correlation between the theatre and Vuillard's manipulations of his family into scenes for his paintings. Rather than overtly mimicking Symbolist drama, it seems to me that Vuillard constructed everyday scenes that allowed him to explore themes of Symbolist interest, such as ambiguity, as reinforced by Maeterlinck plays. In *Intérieur, mère et soeur de l'artiste*, Vuillard explores ambiguity and indeterminacy by placing Marie, in her patterned dress, against the patterned wallpaper. In doing so, the boundaries separating her body from her surroundings dissolve and create a fairly indeterminate form. As Dario Gamboni observes, the figure and ground become interchangeable and "flecks of colour weaken or destroy the internal boundaries of the composition and homogenize the texture."<sup>154</sup> Cogeval describes this

---

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>152</sup> Easton, *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard*, 83, and Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard*, 143.

<sup>153</sup> Patricia Ciaffa, "The Portraits of Edouard Vuillard" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1985), 210.

<sup>154</sup> Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 104.

surface texture as “a screen of short, separate brushstrokes [that] evens out the surface, reduces the sense of depth and distorts relationships of scale.”<sup>155</sup> Maeterlinck’s gauze screen performed a similar function by limiting specificity and heightening vagueness. In Vuillard’s paintings his “screen” of pattern adds to an already prevalent spatial ambiguity.

Vuillard’s contemporaries praised him for the ambiguity in his canvases. Camille Mauclair, a co-founder of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, praised Vuillard in the preface for the Fifth Exhibition of Impressionist and Symbolist painters at the Barc de Boutteville gallery in 1893 (the same year as this painting). Mauclair lauded Vuillard’s use of mysterious half-light, his “sense of that which is hidden,” and his “divinations of attitudes.”<sup>156</sup> Mauclair’s recognition of Vuillard’s ability to perceive the hidden and evoke it in his work by using techniques of ambiguity helps to explain the appeal of Maeterlinck, who exercised the same practice in theatre.

Vuillard continued to evoke mystery in his later paintings and also intensified his exploration of the emotional effects of light. In his 1895 painting, *Soirée familiale* [*A Family Evening*], a lamp at the side illuminates the scene rather than the lamp hanging over the table, causing the figures to be shrouded in ambiguity and creating a mysterious mood (Figure 5). Cogeval calls the scene a “nocturnal interior reminiscent of a stage set for a Symbolist play” and points out that the isolated static figures seem to block all escape routes from the scene and thus convey a claustrophobic feeling.<sup>157</sup> Patricia Ciaffa suggests that this painting may even be a depiction of the last scene of Maeterlinck’s

---

<sup>155</sup> Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard*, 15.

<sup>156</sup> Mauclair, quoted in Ursula Perucchi-Petri, “Edouard Vuillard,” in *Nabis, 1888-1900* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 343. “Camille Mauclair, cofondateur du Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, appréciait Vuillard entre autre ‘pour le respect de la pénombre, un sens de ce qui est caché, des divinations d’attitudes . . .’”

<sup>157</sup> Cogeval, *Édouard Vuillard*, 154-155.

*L'Intérieur*.<sup>158</sup> She points out that the positioning of the figures in the interior closely mimics the positioning of the family, as Maeterlinck describes it in the stage directions for *L'Intérieur*. Furthermore, the principal actors in the play remain outside the house, discussing the impending impact of the news of their daughter's drowning on the family indoors. According to Ciaffa, the spectator of Vuillard's painting possibly occupies the same removed position as the principal actors in Maeterlinck's play, observing the family inside the house from without.

Aside from the idea of *Soirée familiale* as a direct depiction of *L'Intérieur*, it is clear that Vuillard's initial interest in light effects was no doubt supported and deepened by his heavy involvement in the Symbolist avant-garde theatre. Ciaffa points out that sketches of the effects of artificial lights and especially single lamps increase in Vuillard's journal in 1893 when his involvement in avant-garde theatre was at its peak.<sup>159</sup> Speaking further to the impact of the theatre productions, Gloria Groom points out that Vuillard explores artificial light much more than his fellow Nabis.<sup>160</sup> The importance of artificial light for Vuillard is especially apparent in paintings of interiors with no figures or practically indistinct figures such as *Le Palier, rue de Miromesnil* [*The Staircase Landing, Rue de Miromesnil*] of 1891, and *Intérieur, Mystère* [*Interior, Mystery*] of 1896 (Figures 6 & 7). In the 1891 canvas, the figure melds almost completely with the background, and the dark shape of her dress could be mistaken for a doorway. The later painting has no figures, yet Vuillard still manages to evoke a mood with lighting alone. Maeterlinck's use of dim lighting and other staging devices instead of dramatic action

---

<sup>158</sup> Ciaffa, "The Portraits of Edouard Vuillard," 139-140.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 211-212.

<sup>160</sup> Groom, *Édouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator*, 12-13.

and gesture to evoke the unseen paralleled Vuillard's interests as evidenced by his barely-there or completely absent figures and evocative lighting.

Vuillard, like Maeterlinck, eschewed descriptive details in favor of ambiguity. By embracing the ambiguous and subordinating his figures to an overall pattern—and sometimes eliminating them altogether, relying instead on emotive lighting effects—Vuillard tried to evoke a mood. Maeterlinck's manipulation of everyday words and gestures to suggest the unseen likely inspired Vuillard to continue his explorations of everyday scenes for his paintings. Vuillard set up scenes that allowed him to express notions of ambiguity, and he manipulated artificial light to create a mood incongruent with his everyday subject matter.

## Maeterlinck and Visual Artists, II: Jean Metzinger's *L'Oiseau bleu* and Cubism

Interest in Maeterlinck extended far beyond Symbolist artists and those directly in contact with his stage productions. One of Cubist painter Jean Metzinger's (1883–1956) most successful compositions, painted in 1913, takes its name from Maeterlinck's *L'Oiseau bleu* (Figure 8). As noted earlier, this highly popular play premiered in Moscow in 1908, in New York in 1910, and in Paris in 1911. *L'Oiseau bleu* captivated a worldwide audience, as evidenced by the play's numerous imprints and stage productions. Its popularity even merited radio and children's versions of the story, as well as merchandise, such as candy boxes, playing cards, women's hats, and harmonicas.<sup>161</sup> The ubiquity of *L'Oiseau bleu* in the early twentieth century makes it difficult to argue that Metzinger and other artists would *not* have encountered it.

Although Metzinger's painting elicited praise from his contemporaries—Guillaume Apollinaire called it “a very brilliant painting” and “his most important work to date”—there has been little sustained discussion of the painting and none with regard to Maeterlinck's play.<sup>162</sup> Edward Fry's comment that Metzinger's *L'Oiseau bleu* has “no significant connection with Maeterlinck's 1910 play of the same name” indicates the lack of attention to this possible link.<sup>163</sup> Admittedly, there is no iconographic evidence

---

<sup>161</sup> Beachboard, *Le Théâtre de Maeterlinck aux Etats-Unis*, 45.

<sup>162</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, “The Salon des Indépendants on the Quai d'Orsay” (1913), in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902-1918*, ed. Leroy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 284-285. Two months later, Yvonne Lemaitre called Metzinger's painting “one of the sensations of the Independents.” Yvonne Lemaitre, “An Interview with Jean Metzinger on Cubists and What They Are Doing in the Art World” (1913), in Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 548.

<sup>163</sup> Fry, *Cubism*, 193 n. 25.



relating to the play aside from the presence of the blue bird itself.<sup>164</sup> However, the play's main themes correlate closely with Cubist concerns.

### ***Maeterlinck's L'Oiseau bleu***

In the play, a fairy, Berylune, appears to two children, Tytyl and Mytyl, and takes them on a mystical journey in search of the blue bird of happiness. The play's two main themes—the ability to perceive unseen truths and the continuity of time—both coincided with Cubist interests. When Berylune arrives, she appears as an ugly woman to the children. She asks whether Tytyl can see her plentiful golden hair and holds up two gray strands. He replies, “Oh no; I can see all that isn't hidden. . . .” Berylune answers, “But you ought to see the rest with as little doubt! . . . Human beings are very odd! . . . Since the death of the fairies, they see nothing at all and they never suspect it. . . .”<sup>165</sup> Thus, Maeterlinck introduces the theme of the inability of humans to see beyond surface appearances very early in the play.

To solve this problem, Berylune gives the children a hat with a diamond on it and tells the children it “makes people see. . . .”<sup>166</sup> She instructs, “When you've got the hat on your head, you turn the diamond a little. . . . Then it presses a bump which nobody knows of and which opens your eyes. . . . You at once see even the inside of things: the soul of bread, of wine, of pepper, for instance. . . .”<sup>167</sup> Thus, the theme of the limitations of sense perception and the existence of a higher reality in which one could perceive the interiors, or souls, of ordinary objects figures prominently in Maeterlinck's play. When

---

<sup>164</sup> Interestingly, the character holding the blue bird that appears to be biting it may have a basis in the play. In an infinite garden full of blue birds, the little boy Tytyl attempts to gather blue birds and tells his dog not to bite them. Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Blue Bird*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), 120.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 31-32. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 32. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

the children see the souls of the objects walking around, they ask the fairy what is happening. She replies that the souls are merely “taking advantage of the reign of truth.”<sup>168</sup> What the children see, then, with the aid of the diamond, is a higher reality truer than the one accessible to sense perception only.<sup>169</sup>

Because the diamond enables Tytyl and Mytyl to see the truth of things, it also enables them to see time in new ways. As Berylune explains, with the aid of the diamond, the children can behold different aspects of time at will: “One little turn more and you behold the past. . . . Another little turn and you behold the future. . . .”<sup>170</sup> For instance, the children are able to see their deceased grandparents just as if they were alive in the Land of Memory. The grandparents tell Tytyl and Mytyl, “Every time you think of us, we wake up and see you again. . . .”<sup>171</sup> Tytyl asks, “So you are not really dead? . . .” and the grandfather replies, “What do you say? . . . What is he saying? . . . Now he’s using words we don’t understand. . . . Is it a new word, a new invention? . . .”<sup>172</sup> Through this exchange, Maeterlinck suggests that, in truth, time is continuous, with no separation between past, present, and future. This separation, according to him, is an arbitrary one imposed by the intellect, and not recognized in the world of the spirit or higher reality. The grandmother expresses her astonishment that the living have not recognized the true

---

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>169</sup> What one does with the ability to perceive the truth also factors into the play. The children visit the Palace of Night, where Night keeps all of the mysteries of the world kept behind several doors in a hallway. Night laments man’s treatment of the mysteries, claiming that he has ceased to take them seriously and has been so unkind to them. She states, “I cannot understand Man, these last few years. . . . What is he aiming at? . . . Must he absolutely know everything? . . . Already he has captured a third of my Mysteries.” Ibid., 94. Similarly, Gleizes and Metzinger write, “But if all the same [the painter] ventures into metaphysics, cosmogony, or mathematics, let him be content with obtaining their savor, and abstain from demanding of them certitudes which they do not possess.” Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, “Cubism,” in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 18. In other words, the artist should continue to observe mysterious higher reality, rather than try to explain it.

<sup>170</sup> Maeterlinck, *The Blue Bird*, 33. All ellipses in this paragraph in original.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 74.

nature of time yet: “It’s astonishing, up there. . . . They don’t know yet. . . . Do they never learn anything? . . .”<sup>173</sup> The grandfather replies, “It’s as in our own time. . . . The Living are so stupid when they speak of the Others. . . .”<sup>174</sup>

In addition to a temporal continuity, Maeterlinck touches briefly upon a temporal simultaneity. When Tytyl first turns the diamond, in addition to the souls of ordinary objects, he sees several ladies and asks Berylune who they are. She replies, “Don’t be afraid; they are the hours of your life and they are glad to be free and visible for a moment.”<sup>175</sup> The hours, therefore, have broken out of their usual linear sequence and are visible now in their simultaneity under the reign of truth. Although Maeterlinck only refers to the notion of simultaneity once, and it conflicts somewhat with his overarching theme of a linear continuity, this episode nevertheless emphasizes that humans’ intellectual understanding of time does not approximate its true nature.

### ***The Early Twentieth-Century Context of Cubist Theory***

To understand why Metzinger concluded that Maeterlinck’s play was deserving of a Cubist treatment, and, in general, why Maeterlinck’s ideas resonated in Cubist circles, it is necessary to establish the Cubist view of the nature of reality. In the twentieth century, unseen realms were still very much at the forefront of modern thought. Science, no longer viewed as an enemy, as positivist science had been for many early Symbolists, formed a base of support for mystical ideas. Scientific discoveries proved the existence of a world beyond the reach of the senses that Aurier and other nineteenth-century Symbolists had only been able to intuit and supported with Neoplatonic theory. In addition, belief in the ether—the unifying impalpable substance filling all space that

---

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 35.

conducted light, sound, and vibrations—existed well into the twentieth century, even after Einstein introduced his Theory of Relativity in 1905.<sup>176</sup>

As Linda Henderson notes, the world-filling ether was a longstanding concept that reemerged in the 1820s, when Augustin Jean Fresnel proposed the “‘luminiferous ether’ as the necessary medium for the propagation of light waves.”<sup>177</sup> James Clerk Maxwell, who, with Lord Kelvin, “concluded that a material ether must also be the source of and vehicle for electromagnetic fields” by the 1860s, wrote of the ether in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1875–1889), “There can be no doubt that the interplanetary and interstellar spaces are not empty.”<sup>178</sup> As new waves were discovered, scientists imposed new, and often contradictory, characteristics on the ether to explain new phenomena. James Bixby described the mysterious ether in 1896:

We have to invest this ether with absolutely contradictory properties, inconsistent with material substance. It must be rarer than hydrogen gas and more tenacious than steel, frictionless and yet with power to transmit motion and pressure with inconceivable speed and elasticity. If the ether has porosity and interspaces, then another finer ether must be conceived to fill these.<sup>179</sup>

As Donald Benson explains, the ether “provided a means for resolving apparent discontinuities in the spatial-material order, and even for resolving the fundamental discontinuity between material and non-material orders.”<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>176</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Editor’s Introduction: I. Writing Modern Art and Science—An Overview; II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Science in Context* 17 (Winter 2004): 451–452.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>178</sup> James Clerk Maxwell, quoted in Donald R. Benson, “Facts and Fictions in Scientific Discourse: The Case of the Ether,” *Georgia Review* 38 (Winter 1984): 831.

<sup>179</sup> James T. Bixby, “Professor Roentgen’s Discovery and the Invisible World around Us,” *The Arena* 15, no. 78 (May 1896): 877.

<sup>180</sup> Benson, “Facts and Fictions in Scientific Discourse: The Case of the Ether,” 830.

The concept of the ether persisted well into the twentieth century. In his 1905 book *The New Knowledge*, R. K. Duncan describes the ether's ability to fill infinite space as well as infinitesimal portions of matter previously thought to be solid:

Filled this empty space is, however, and to the brim. There is no such thing as emptiness. From corner to corner of the universe, wherever a star shines or light darts, there broods this vast circumambient medium—the ether. Not only through interstellar spaces, but through the world also, in all its manifold complexity, through our own bodies; all lie not only encompassed by it but soaking in it as a sponge lies soaked in water.<sup>181</sup>

That scientists now relied on a theoretical concept beyond vision did not go unnoticed by laypersons. Bixby, for example, points out that the “invisible but infinite ether, pervading space . . . rests, not on direct observation, but on inferential and analogical reasoning and the intuitions of consciousness.”<sup>182</sup> He asks, then, why the spiritual world should “be rejected as theological fiction because its foundations are of the same kind and order?”<sup>183</sup>

Scientific discoveries in the 1890s had already pointed to the existence of unseen realms beyond the human eye. William Röntgen's discovery of the X-ray in 1895 established clearly the inadequacy of sense perception. Suddenly, the invisible world beyond the senses that the Symbolists had proposed was no longer speculation, but proven by the science that many had supposed was intuition's enemy. According to Henderson, “X-rays made solid matter transparent, revealing previously invisible forms and suggesting a new, more fluid relationship of those forms to the space around them.”<sup>184</sup>

---

<sup>181</sup> R. K. Duncan, *The New Knowledge* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1905), 5.

<sup>182</sup> Bixby, “Professor Roentgen's Discovery and the Invisible World around Us,” 879-880.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 880.

<sup>184</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Modernism and Science,” in *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 2 vols., I, 385.

Interest in the X-ray did not wane in the twentieth century, as thinkers continued to emphasize the limits of sense perception. In 1900, astronomer Camille Flammarion stated in his book *L'Inconnu* [*The Unknown*]: “The late discovery of the Röntgen rays, so inconceivable and so strange in its origins, ought to convince us how very small is the field of our usual observations. . . . This is indeed a most eloquent example in favor of the axiom: it is unscientific to assert that realities are stopped by the limit of our knowledge and observation.”<sup>185</sup> In 1903, Carl Snyder wrote in *Harper's Magazine*,

Beyond all that the eye may see, that ear may hear, that hands may feel, outside of taste or smell,—outside of any native sense,—there lies an unseen, unheard, unfelt universe whose fringe we are just beginning to explore. A flash, so to speak, from this supra-sensual world came with the discovery of the Roentgen rays. It is now eight years since we first learned that we may look straight into our bodies and see our bones, that in this light even great books of philosophy become quite clear—transparent even; and the wonder has little died.<sup>186</sup>

For Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, the first artist to make a published reference to X-rays (in 1910), X-rays called sense perception and the nature of matter into question. In his “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting,” he asks, “Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies? . . . Why should we forget in our creations the doubled power of our sight, capable of giving results analogous to those of the X-rays?”<sup>187</sup> Not only did the discovery of X-rays prove the inadequacy of the senses to see the truth of things, it placed the nature of matter into question as well. How could one believe in the opacity of any supposedly solid matter if X-rays could penetrate to the body's unseen core, and the ether passed through it freely? As Bixby states, “The solidity of matter, say

---

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>186</sup> Carl Snyder, “The World Beyond Our Senses,” *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 107 (June 1903): 117.

<sup>187</sup> Umberto Boccioni, quoted in Henderson, “Modernism and Science,” 385.

the physicists, is a fiction. If our eyes were but microscopic enough, we should look through a block of granite as through the openings of a wire fence.”<sup>188</sup>

Additional scientific discoveries in the twentieth century contributed to the doubt in matter’s solidity and stability. After Henri Becquerel first detected radioactivity in 1896, and Pierre and Marie Curie isolated the radioactive elements polonium and radium in 1898, Ernest Rutherford put forth the theory of radioactive decay in 1902. Widespread popular coverage of Rutherford’s work, along with that of the Curies, drew the general public’s attention to radioactivity.<sup>189</sup> It was even proposed that all matter was radioactive, a view popularized by French writer Gustave Le Bon in his bestselling book *L’Évolution de la matière* [*The Evolution of Matter*] of 1905. According to Le Bon, “A small number of bodies, such as radium, uranium, etc., possess the property of very rapid dissociation, and this it was that lead to the discovery of this phenomenon. But all bodies possess in a feeble degree this same characteristic which the radio-active substances possess to such a high degree.”<sup>190</sup> Le Bon argues that as matter dematerializes, “the stable form of energy called matter is simply transformed into its unstable forms known under the names of electricity, light, heat, etc. Matter, therefore, is being continually transformed into energy.”<sup>191</sup> That energy, then, according to Le Bon, would dissipate into the “immensity of the ether which fills space, and no more form a part of the universe.”<sup>192</sup>

This process of dematerialization linked the worlds of the seen and unseen. As Le Bon explains, “The products of the dematerialization of matter [energy] constitute by

---

<sup>188</sup> Bixby, “Professor Roentgen’s Discovery and the Invisible World around Us,” 873-874.

<sup>189</sup> Henderson, “Modernism and Science,” 386.

<sup>190</sup> Gustave Le Bon, “The Decay of Matter,” *The Independent* 61 (July 26, 1906): 184.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 185.

their properties substances which are intermediary between ponderable bodies and the imponderable ether—that is to say, between the two worlds which science has heretofore considered as widely apart as the poles.”<sup>193</sup> Therefore, in Le Bon’s view, between the ponderable and imponderable “lies an indeterminate world.”<sup>194</sup>

Le Bon’s theories also would have reinforced the philosopher Henri Bergson’s idea of reality as flux. For example, in his 1896 *Matière et mémoire* [*Matter and Memory*], Bergson had argued that “all division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.”<sup>195</sup> Between science and the highly popular ideas of Bergson, the idea of reality as stable and constant had been converted into an image of transformation and diffusion. With matter dematerializing into the ether around it, and ether permeating its interstices, why should young artists like the Cubists continue to focus on objects as perceived by the senses or the supposed boundaries seemingly separating them from surrounding space?

### ***Maeterlinck and Cubist Theory***

Such a world view would have made Maeterlinck’s ideas seem highly relevant. Maeterlinck’s emphasis on suggestion and his insistence on acknowledging and evoking, rather than explaining, the mysteries of the unseen were perfectly suited to this cultural moment. In addition, given the twentieth-century public’s continued fascination with the X-ray, the faceted diamond central to *L’Oiseau bleu* would have seemed particularly relevant in the context of Cubist theory. The diamond endowed Tytyl and Mytyl with sight analogous to the new X-rays, allowing them to see “the inside of things” as well as distant times and places.

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Henri Bergson, quoted in Henderson, “Modernism and Science,” 387.



Another element of Maeterlinck's theories—his focus on the eternal as well as the infinite—paralleled contemporary reactions to the new science and would have been relevant in Cubist circles as well. Because sense perception could not capture a true, unchanging view of the world, many sought permanence in the newly legitimized invisible realms. As Bixby states, "Everything visible we know is transient. If there be anything permanent it must be in the invisible sphere."<sup>196</sup> He emphasizes the eternal in a similar statement: "As daily experience shows that all that is seen is temporal, we may rationally look to the realm of the unseen for whatever shall be eternal."<sup>197</sup> According to Bixby, the existence of the infinite and eternal in an unseen realm is certain:

Science both implies, and in many cases distinctly recognizes, the immaterial. Think for a moment of the fundamental conditions of all physical knowledge—time and space. All objects exist in space; all events occur in time. Now, sense may tell us of the finite extension of an individual object; but sense never has told and never can tell us of the *infinite space* which the apprehension of each particular extension presupposes. From experience and observation we may learn of the order and duration of particular events; but from experience we cannot learn of the *eternal time*, which is the implied condition of all temporal things. They are not material things. Shall space and time, then, be set down as fictions? But that equally is impossible. They are, as all *intuitively perceive*, the atmosphere which embraces all, the *infinite ocean of reality* within which all float, the fundamental conditions of experience.<sup>198</sup>

Thus, the Cubist goal to transcend the limitations of ordinary sight to perceive a higher reality and express ultimate truths found support in both scientific discoveries that legitimized the invisible, and in Maeterlinck's quest for infinity in unseen realms. In fact, Guillaume Apollinaire equated the Cubist search for higher truth with notions of infinity in his writing. In his 1913 essay *Les Peintres cubistes* [*The Cubist Painters*], Apollinaire

---

<sup>196</sup> Bixby, "Professor Roentgen's Discovery and the Invisible World around Us," 881.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 885.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 876. Emphasis added.

declared, “The art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as its ideal.”<sup>199</sup> Further, according to Apollinaire,

We will not waste our energy trying to capture the fleeting present moment which, for an artist, can only be the mask of death, known as fashion. The painting will have an incontrovertible existence. Its vision will be totally complete and the infinity it contains will not reveal imperfection, but only highlight the relationship between a new creature and a new creator and nothing more.<sup>200</sup>

Critic Olivier Hourcade expressed a parallel viewpoint in 1912, writing of the second Société normande exhibition and evoking the much-admired Symbolist Gourmont:

In this exhibition (which has gathered together the best elements of the new painting), a different aesthetic can be drawn from each artist. Each is as logical as the next. All of them ought to bear this line—written by Remy de Gourmont—as an epigraph: “Everything I think is real. Thought is the only reality. The external world is relative. Everything is transitory but thought.” Yes, that is the point in common in the dream of art of these fervent creators, that is the tendency that guides them: “The external appearance of things is transitory, fleeting, and RELATIVE. One must therefore search for THE TRUTH and no longer sacrifice to the pretty effects of perspective or graduated shading in the manner of Carrière. One must seek the *truth* and no longer sacrifice to the ordinary illusions of optics.”<sup>201</sup>

Because true reality exists beneath the transitory external appearance of things, Hourcade states that the painter who continues to abide by the laws of perspective “tells an intentional lie” and “makes a concession to the lies of optics.”<sup>202</sup>

While Symbolists like Maeterlinck had provided a basis for the discussion of the infinite and invisible forces, and previous scientific discoveries had legitimized the existence of a world beyond sense perception, the highly popular idea of a possible fourth

---

<sup>199</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, trans. Peter Read (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>201</sup> Olivier Hourcade, “La tendance de la peinture contemporaine” (1912), in Antliff and Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader*, 216. Emphasis in original.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

dimension of space further extended the Cubists' discussion of the unseen. Cubists were interested in the fourth dimension from a geometric standpoint, but the idea also served as a metaphor for the infinite higher reality they sought.<sup>203</sup> In a 1912 interview, Albert Gleizes states, "But, beyond the three dimensions of Euclid we have added another, the *fourth dimension*, which is to say the figuration of space, the measure of the infinite."<sup>204</sup> Apollinaire especially equated the fourth dimension with infinity and added the theme of the eternal. According to Apollinaire in *Les Peintres cubistes*, the fourth dimension "represents the immensity of space eternalizing itself in all directions at any given moment. It is space itself, the dimension of the infinite."<sup>205</sup>

The idea of the fourth dimension, as Henderson has argued, could not be dismissed in the wake of the X-ray's discovery simply because it was not visible. The fourth dimension proved an important support for the endeavor to transcend the world of three dimensions to perceive infinite higher reality.<sup>206</sup> As Apollinaire declared, "Until now, the three dimensions of Euclidian geometry were enough to answer the disquiet that a sense of infinity instills in the soul of great artists."<sup>207</sup> Gourmont, too, recognized a sense of infinity that resides in the soul, and identified Maeterlinck as a guide. In his 1905 book, *Promenades philosophiques*, Gourmont writes: "Mysticism . . . makes no appeal except to that infinity which resides in us. . . . I seek, with Maeterlinck . . . [the] 'possibility of superior life in the humble and inevitable daily reality.'"<sup>208</sup> Because

---

<sup>203</sup> For more on the Cubists' interest in the fourth dimension, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 44-116.

<sup>204</sup> Albert Gleizes, quoted in *ibid.*, 61. Emphasis in original.

<sup>205</sup> Apollinaire, quoted in *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>206</sup> See Henderson, "Editor's Introduction."

<sup>207</sup> Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, 15.

<sup>208</sup> Remy de Gourmont, quoted in Glenn S. Burne, *Remy de Gourmont: His Ideas and Influence in England and America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 37-38.

“reality” lay out of reach of the senses, it now resided in the mind and could be understood as a product of the artist’s thinking.<sup>209</sup> With a heightened intuitive sense, on the Symbolist model, the artist would be the individual who could give form to invisible higher realities.<sup>210</sup> And because the Cubists sought a subjective higher reality unique to the mind of each artist and not a single abstract truth, Maeterlinck’s more general idea of looking inward to intuit the infinite was more applicable than those of his fellow Symbolists, whose discussions were rooted in correspondences and posited a single abstract truth communicated by nature through concrete symbols.

Gleizes and Metzinger clearly recognized Symbolist ideas, especially Maeterlinck’s, as valuable support for their beliefs, considering the Symbolist overtones of their seminal 1912 essay *Du Cubisme* [*On Cubism*].<sup>211</sup> At the beginning of the essay, Gleizes and Metzinger establish their case against surface appearances in decidedly Symbolist language. According to them, “In order to discover one true relationship it is necessary to sacrifice a thousand surface appearances. . . . The visible world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought.”<sup>212</sup> Therefore, the artist must exercise intellectual control and carefully choose objects “whose existence is richest in plastic truths.”<sup>213</sup> As in Symbolism, in *Du Cubisme*, only the visionary artist can perceive and express these truths—“to the eyes of most people the external world is amorphous. To discern a form is to verify it by a pre-existing idea, an act that no one,

---

<sup>209</sup> Christopher Gray, *Cubist Aesthetic Theories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), 159-160.

<sup>210</sup> According to Aurier, the artist had capabilities beyond ordinary sense perception, enabling him or her to perceive higher truths. He conceived of such artists as “seers” or “voyants.” See G.-Albert Aurier, “Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin,” *Mercure de France* 2 (March 1891): 155-164.

<sup>211</sup> Mark Antliff gives an excellent Bergsonian reading of *Du Cubisme*. See Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian avant-garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 39-66. With my Symbolist reading of the text, I am to add to Antliff’s scholarship and hopefully reconstruct the context of the blend of Symbolist and Bergsonian ideas at the time.

<sup>212</sup> Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” 3.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

save the man we call an artist, can accomplish without external assistance.”<sup>214</sup> These assertions lie at the heart of Symbolism—the artist-visionary can transcend ordinary objects to perceive the true reality of things, and in turn evoke that original intuition using plastic forms.

Akin to Maeterlinck, the Cubist goal is “to express supposedly inexpressible notions.”<sup>215</sup> Once the artist has found a form that seems to contain something of the inexpressible, “a form which presents a certain intensity of analogy with his pre-existing idea, . . . he endeavors to enclose the quality of this form (the unmeasurable sum of the affinities perceived between the visible manifestation and the tendency of his mind) in a symbol likely to affect others.”<sup>216</sup> In this way, the Cubists align with Maeterlinck as opposed to a correspondence-based Symbolism. Cubists seek forms that are as analogous as possible to their *pre-existing idea*. Maeterlinck, instead of searching in a forest of symbols to perceive an objective truth, looks inward to his consciousness and uses his intuition in order to perceive the infinite. Then, once he has an intuition, he seeks the best way to evoke it using ordinary gestures, lighting, and other devices in his plays. Similarly, the Cubists use whatever forms they find best evoke their original intuition.

In both cases, higher reality lives only within the visionary. Just as Maeterlinck advocates looking inward in quiet contemplation to perceive higher reality, Gleizes and Metzinger assert, “There is nothing real outside ourselves. . . . Far from us any thought of doubting the existence of the objects which strike our senses; but, being reasonable, we can only have certitude with regard to the images which they make blossom in our mind.”<sup>217</sup> Therefore, Maeterlinck’s variety of Symbolism that did not put stock in

---

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 13.

outward appearances—he did not depend upon signs found in the world of the senses to perceive the infinite—found much more affinity with the Cubist emphasis on personality than correspondence-based Symbolism. For Cubists, each person had his or her own view of higher reality, rather than one objective reality. Gleizes and Metzinger write, “As many images of the object as eyes to contemplate it, as many images of essence as minds to understand it.”<sup>218</sup> They specify further: “We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality, and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously fitted out by mathematicians and philosophers.”<sup>219</sup> This is not to say that ideas of eternity or infinity did not fascinate the Cubists—as determined earlier through the writings of Apollinaire, the fourth dimension was often synonymous with infinity. Gleizes and Metzinger’s statement means only that, for them, there is no *objective* essential, no ultimate reality. Reality remains subjective, specific to each person.<sup>220</sup> Maeterlinck never implied that his intuition of the unseen world was an objective one, an intuition of the one true higher reality. His process of looking inward to perceive a personal higher reality, then, resonated with Cubists’ interest in a purely subjective higher truth.

Lastly, once the artist has created the painting, Gleizes and Metzinger ascribe to it a nearly identical role as the Symbolists assigned to their work—to communicate indirectly with the spectator. As Maeterlinck and all Symbolists insisted, evocation is the only effective way to communicate an intuition. Similarly, Gleizes and Metzinger state that a painting “need not immediately satisfy the mind: on the contrary, it should lead it, little by little, toward the imaginative depths where burns the light of organization. . . . It

---

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> For more on the conflict between an objective and subjective reality in Cubism, see J. M. Nash, “The Nature of Cubism: A Study of Conflicting Explanations,” *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980): 435–447.

harmonizes with the totality of things, with the universe.”<sup>221</sup> Thus, like Maeterlinck’s plays, Cubist paintings seek to hint at the totality of things. Furthermore, just as Maeterlinck rejected descriptive everyday language in his plays, Gleizes and Metzinger state that “it is . . . not in the language of the masses that painting should address the masses, but in its own, in order to move, to dominate, to direct, and not in order to be understood.”<sup>222</sup> The goal of this indirect communication with the spectator again has its basis in Symbolism. The Cubist painting “reflects the personality back upon the understanding of the spectator, and thus pictorial space is defined: a sensitive passage between two subjective spaces.”<sup>223</sup> The ultimate goal for Gleizes and Metzinger is for the spectator to “adopt the same relationship [the artist] established with nature.”<sup>224</sup> The Symbolist goal, too, is to allow the spectator, not endowed with the special perceptive abilities of the artist, to perceive at least a glimpse of the artist’s original intuition.

### ***Maeterlinck and Bergson***

Time also figured into the Cubists’ perception and evocation of higher reality. As Apollinaire declared,

We must encompass past, present and future in a single glance. The canvas must exhibit that essential unity which alone induces ecstasy. No transient detail will then randomly lead us astray. . . . We will not wander into the unknown future which, separated from eternity, is no more than a word for leading man into temptation. We will not waste our energy trying to capture the fleeting present moment which, for an artist, can only be the mask of death, known as fashion.<sup>225</sup>

Apollinaire embraces a cyclical notion of time, rather than distinguishing between past, present, and future, and believes it fruitless to attempt to isolate a fleeting moment from

---

<sup>221</sup> Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” 5.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>225</sup> Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, 8.

the overall continuity of time, as, for example, Impressionist painters had done. As Mark Antliff has amply proved, Cubist ideas about time such as these aligned with those of philosopher Henri Bergson. It is much less often recognized, however, that Maeterlinck's ideas about time, expressed in his 1902 book *Le Temple enseveli* [*The Buried Temple*], parallel those of Bergson. Consequently, Maeterlinck, in tandem with Bergson, was likely an important additional source for Cubists on the subject of time.

Bergson believed in a psychological, subjective version of time as opposed to scientific, objective time.<sup>226</sup> He highlighted the artificiality of the intellectual conception of time that divides it into homogenous units (hours, minutes, seconds) and rejected this idea in favor of a heterogeneous conception of experienced time as ever-changing duration. In a related notion, he did not believe in divisions of that temporal continuity into past, present, and future. Bergson saw memories of the past, especially, as connected to the present. For instance, in *Matière et mémoire* (1896), he writes that "perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; and in truth every perception is already memory. *Practically we perceive only the past*, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing in the future."<sup>227</sup> Thus the notion of the past is not stable, as it continuously impacts what humans call present and future.

Maeterlinck, too, sees a continuity between the remembered past and the present in *Le Temple enseveli* of 1902. The past, for Maeterlinck and Bergson, forms part of the ever-changing duration and should not be separated into static concepts of past, present,

---

<sup>226</sup> Bergson established his theory of psychological, subjective time in his 1889 *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, later translated as *Time and Free Will*. For an overview of Bergson's concepts, see Mark Antliff, "Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment," *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 341-349.

<sup>227</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 194. Emphasis in original.



and future. Maeterlinck writes, “Our past depends entirely upon our present, and is constantly changing with it. Our past is contained in our memory: and this memory of ours, that feeds on our heart and brain, and is incessantly swayed by them, is the most variable thing in the world, the least independent, the most impressionable.”<sup>228</sup> He stresses that the past is alive, though it “would appear to be definitely motionless, immutable forever; divided from present and future by a river that shall not again be crossed. In reality it is alive; and for many of us, endowed with a profounder, more ardent life than either present or future.”<sup>229</sup> According to Maeterlinck, the past should be recognized as “incessantly changing beneath our eye” and should not be regarded as static, because “the force of the past is indeed one of the heaviest that weigh upon men and incline them to sadness.”<sup>230</sup> Even though Maeterlinck adds a more emotional element to the idea of continuity, his interpretation would still have interested Cubists as another qualitative interpretation of time in addition to Bergson’s that placed the subjectivity of the individual at the forefront and emphasized the ever-changing character of time. The temporal continuity in *L’Oiseau bleu*, with the Land of Memory connected to the present, would thus have attracted the attention of Cubists interested in Bergson.

Maeterlinck also parallels Bergson with regard to intuition. According to Bergson, one can only perceive the absolute ever-changing duration by intuition. In his 1903 book, *Introduction à la métaphysique* [*An Introduction to Metaphysics*], Bergson writes, “An absolute could only be given in an *intuition*, whilst everything else falls within the province of *analysis*. By intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it

---

<sup>228</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Buried Temple*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), 245.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

and consequently inexpressible.”<sup>231</sup> Maeterlinck’s ideas about the importance of intuition, then, parallel Bergson’s rather closely. Both thinkers point out the feebleness of the intellect in the face of the unknown and its inability to express the absolute using analytical language. Both seek to transcend shifting surface appearances to perceive, as Bergson says, “the movement the eye does not see.”<sup>232</sup> As Antliff explains, “Bergson regarded all forms of representation as distorted refractions of a profound, ineffable self. Thus any form of signification can only be an indirect conduit to the artist’s fundamental self, and all expressive mediums can only ‘suggest’ an intuition, which is inexpressible.”<sup>233</sup>

Bergson’s idea of a sympathetic attitude necessary to intuit the unseen and express the profound self sounds very similar to Maeterlinck’s quiet, inward-turning contemplation.<sup>234</sup> Antliff summarizes the rationale for Bergson’s sympathetic attitude expressed in his 1907 book *L’Évolution créatrice* [*Creative Evolution*]: “In order to act artistically, Bergsonian artists must first take up a sympathetic attitude with regard to their own being. Since intellectual modes of thinking and their signs afford only a superficial image of the self, they must be rejected—transcended—in favor of an empathetic but conscious relation to one’s inner self.”<sup>235</sup> Cubists, admiring Bergson’s rejection of signs as an indicator of intellectual thinking, would thus have admired

---

<sup>231</sup> Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912), 7. Emphasis in original.

<sup>232</sup> Bergson, quoted in Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 51.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>234</sup> In a 1911 interview, Bergson’s musing about interior forces sounds very close to Maeterlinck’s quiet contemplation: “You see, one must listen to what rises from the depths of our lives: there are forces within us, formidable forces! Man has infinite prolongations, but he does not yet know his power. The day he wrests from himself the great dormant, vegetating forces, when he knows how to channel the course of his intuitions into the precision of philosophical teachings, perhaps he will finally achieve superhumanity.” Maurice Verne, “Un jour de pluie chez M. Bergson” (1911), in Antliff and Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader*, 174.

<sup>235</sup> Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 46.

Maeterlinck's similar ideas regarding unmediated intuition of the unseen. Indeed, Metzinger declared in 1913: "We will not consider the forms as signs of an idea, but as living portions of the universe."<sup>236</sup>

Akin to Maeterlinck and Symbolist ideas in general, Bergson points out that to successfully suggest an intuition, the work of art must induce an alogical state of mind in the spectator.<sup>237</sup> As we have seen, Maeterlinck created this state in part by utilizing ordinary words and gestures in unusual contexts. For Bergson, successive images provided a mode of suggestion that could induce such a state in the mind of the spectator. In *Introduction à la métaphysique*, he explains the concept:

No image will replace the intuition of the duration, but many different images, taken from quite different orders of things, will be able, through the convergence of their action, to direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to seize on. By choosing images as dissimilar as possible, any one of them will be prevented from usurping the place of the intuition it is instructed to call forth. . . . By seeing that in spite of their differences in aspect they all demand of the mind the same kind of attention and, as it were, the same degree of tension, one will gradually accustom consciousness to a particular and definitely determined disposition, precisely the one it will have to adapt to . . . to produce the desired effort and, by itself, arrive at the intuition.<sup>238</sup>

Antliff highlights Gleizes and Metzinger's familiarity with Bergson's successive images in *Du Cubisme*. Gleizes and Metzinger describe the effect on the spectator of Cubism's multiple viewpoints: "In order that the spectator, ready to establish unity himself, may apprehend all the elements in the order assigned to them by creative intuition, the properties of each portion must be left independent, and the plastic continuity must be broken up into a thousand surprises of light and shade."<sup>239</sup> As in Bergson's description of successive images that "direct consciousness" and allow the spectator to "arrive at the

---

<sup>236</sup> Jean Metzinger, "Kubistická Technika" (1913), in Antliff and Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader*, 607.

<sup>237</sup> Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 49.

<sup>238</sup> Bergson, quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>239</sup> Gleizes and Metzinger, quoted in *ibid.*, 52.

intuition,” Gleizes and Metzinger stress the dissimilarity of the elements—“the plastic continuity must be broken up” and each element “left independent”—so that the spectator can “establish unity himself.”

For Antliff, Cubism’s multiple viewpoints tie in with Bergson’s successive images that aim to suggest the original subjective intuition to the spectator—they “evoke Bergson’s conception of psychological time, known as duration” and express “the artist’s individual vision of . . . things” rather than “the individuality of things themselves.”<sup>240</sup> According to Antliff, Gleizes and Metzinger “update an old avant-garde doctrine that allies nonconventional seeing directly to the expression of one’s personality.”<sup>241</sup> Therefore, “space is no longer an absolute category of experience, but a relative one.”<sup>242</sup> In other words, as I have argued, Cubists’ conception of reality was highly personal and subjective at this time—one of the many reasons Maeterlinck’s ideas endured into the twentieth century.

Contemporary critics even connected Maeterlinck and Symbolism with Bergson and Cubism. French critic and Symbolist poet Tancrède de Visan quickly recognized a parallel between Bergson and Maeterlinck. He proved instrumental in transmitting Maeterlinck’s Symbolism to twentieth-century Cubist circles, with Bergson as a connective point. Visan attended Bergson’s lectures before 1904 and was the first to highlight the parallels between Bergson and Symbolism in his 1905 book *Paysages introspectifs*.<sup>243</sup>

---

<sup>240</sup> Antliff, “Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment,” 342; Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 63.

<sup>241</sup> Antliff, “Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment,” 342.

<sup>242</sup> Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 43.

<sup>243</sup> Antliff, “Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment,” 342.

The journal *Vers et Prose* (1905–1914), for which Visan was one of the primary critics between 1905 and 1910, served as his mouthpiece.<sup>244</sup> The journal’s mission was the continuation of Symbolism into the twentieth century. Its directors, Alexandre Mercereau and Paul Fort, reprinted articles from French and Belgian Symbolist periodicals of 1885–1900 that had not circulated widely, including texts by Maeterlinck, along with new works.<sup>245</sup> The *Vers et Prose* circle gradually grew to include Cubists like Gleizes, Metzinger, and Apollinaire, and Futurists like Gino Severini, providing a locus for “the older Symbolist generation [to mix] with the Cubist nucleus” at the Closerie des Lilas café.<sup>246</sup>

The main connection Visan saw between Symbolism and Bergson’s philosophy was the notion of a temporal continuity that lay at the very center of life.<sup>247</sup> One could only understand this continuity by looking inward using intuition, just as Maeterlinck had proposed. According to Visan, artists and poets had to use disparate images to communicate this continuity, a new idea in the twentieth century. Visan put forth all of these ideas in his 1907 text “L’Oeuvre de Maurice Maeterlinck” in *Vers et Prose*, and developed them further (especially the idea of disparate images) in his 1910 text on Bergson and Symbolism, “La philosophie de M. Bergson et le lyrisme contemporain,” also in *Vers et Prose*. Both articles were reprinted in his 1911 book *L’Attitude du lyrisme*

---

<sup>244</sup> For more on *Vers et Prose*, see Kenneth Cornell, *The Post-Symbolist Period: French Poetic Currents, 1900-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 69-77.

<sup>245</sup> In the first six months, subscriptions numbered under 500, but by the end of the first year, *Vers et Prose* counted 1000 subscribers, suggesting Symbolism’s continued relevance in the twentieth century. Ibid., 70.

<sup>246</sup> Daniel Robbins, “From Symbolism to Cubism: The Abbaye of Créteil,” *Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1963-1964): 116 n. 18. Visan took these gatherings as his opportunity to connect the ideas of Bergson with the Cubists. As critic André Salmon notes in *Paris-Journal* in November 1911, Visan, “who encounters these men [Metzinger, Gleizes, Henri Le Fauconnier, and Fernand Léger] at the *Vers et Prose* soirées, seems absolutely committed to present them to the illustrious metaphysician.” André Salmon, quoted in Antliff and Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader*, 176. Antliff calls Visan the “primary Bergsonian theorist within Cubist circles,” further indicating his importance as a conduit between Bergson and Cubism, and, by extension, Symbolism and Cubism. Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 42.

<sup>247</sup> Cornell, *The Post-Symbolist Period*, 73-74.

*contemporain*, which, as Kenneth Cornell astutely points out, “paid tribute to symbolism, not as a school, but as an attitude or ideal in conformity with modern times.”<sup>248</sup> Through this book, a wider audience accessed Visan’s application of Bergson’s philosophy to a revised version of Symbolism, represented by Maeterlinck especially.<sup>249</sup>

In his text on Maeterlinck, Visan lauds the mystic’s ability to penetrate to the soul of things, and he develops the same idea in his text on Symbolism and Bergson. Both Symbolist poetry and Bergson’s philosophy, he states, are a pathway to inner life. The problem, according to Visan, is that “life is mobility, flux, the feeling of gradual growth, symphonic. . . . Thought does not have the same rhythm as Life.”<sup>250</sup> The challenge, then, for both Symbolists and Bergson was to “reestablish the continuity of Life, broken by the abstraction of intellectualist philosophers, rationalists or Parnassian poets.”<sup>251</sup> According to Visan, the Symbolists anticipated the teachings of Bergson by attempting to express the constant movement of reality, instead of trying to solidify it by capturing moments in analytic descriptive language.

---

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>249</sup> *L’Attitude du lyrisme contemporain* reached thinkers outside of France, and especially impacted those in England. T. E. Hulme wrote an enthusiastic review of the book in *The New Age* in August 1911, reprinted in Cyrena Pondrom, *The Road from Paris: French Influence on English Poetry, 1900-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 58-60. Pondrom points out that “a comparison of Pound’s descriptions of the function of the image with those of Visan’s suggests that Pound too—directly or indirectly—drew upon the Bergsonian reinterpretations of symbolism in his own poetics.” Ibid., 58. F. S. Flint, in his essay “Contemporary French Poetry,” published in August 1912, defined Symbolism in strikingly parallel language to Visan, further demonstrating Visan’s impact: “It was an attempt to . . . set vibrating the infinity within us, by the exquisite juxtaposition of images.” Ibid., 86. Pondrom also highlights the fact that Flint, in almost all of his articles, “spoke of the poets of the symbolist *cénacle* . . . as if they were the current generation in Paris.” Ibid., 84. Thus, Symbolism was far from a retired movement in the twentieth century.

<sup>250</sup> Tancrède de Visan, “La Philosophie de M. Bergson et le lyrisme contemporain,” *Vers et Prose* 21 (April-June 1910): 132. “La vie est mobilité, écoulement, sentiment d’un accroissement graduel, symphonique. . . . La Pensée n’a pas le même rythme que la Vie.”

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. “Le problème pour Bergson, comme pour les symbolistes, consiste à rétablir la continuité de la Vie, rompue par l’abstraction des intellectualistes philosophes, rationalistes ou poètes parnassiens.”

Both Bergsonists and Symbolists believed that “the movement of life is no longer seized upon from outside, but from within consciousness” by using intuition.<sup>252</sup> Using intuition allows one to express life’s movement without distorting it. Visan strengthens his case for expression of reality without the mediation of symbols. In his 1907 text on Maeterlinck, Visan claimed that Symbolists do not, in part, merit their name because symbols have an analytical nature. He develops the idea further in the 1910 text, stating that a symbol is nothing but a sign put in place of a reality. Poets that rely on exterior signs, he says, are analysts that remain on the outside of things, never penetrating them. Those who merely analyze and describe outer appearances are “like algebraists, substituting signs for the real: abstract ideas or visual forms.”<sup>253</sup> By contrast, Symbolists and Bergsonists apprehend the central vision or absolute reality of things, leading Visan to declare: “The Symbolist aesthetic, like Bergsonian philosophy, is therefore that which claims to *relinquish symbols*.”<sup>254</sup>

Because symbols and descriptive language belonged to the realm of intellect and analysis, Visan declared the solution: Bergson’s idea of successive images, supposedly anticipated by the Symbolists. In his 1907 article on Maeterlinck, Visan explains the Symbolists’ use of successive images:

To make us relive the instant of their sensation, the Symbolists, unable to situate us in an instant inside their own intuition, pull us gently toward them by way of accumulated images and, by successive integrations of which each one’s role is to

---

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 134. “Le mouvement de la vie n'est plus saisi du dehors, mais du dedans de la conscience.”

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 136. “. . . comme les algébristes, substituent au réel des signes : idées abstraites ou formes visuelles.” It is interesting that for Visan, the term “algebraist” is pejorative. Symbolists that espoused correspondence theory often referred to Baudelaire’s forest of symbols and Aurier’s algebra of signs that only an artist could decipher. Because Maeterlinck never embraced correspondence theory, his more general intuition-driven variety of Symbolism held much more appeal for Visan and others.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original. “L'esthétique symboliste, comme la philosophie bergsonienne, est donc celle qui prétend *se passer de symboles*.”

aid more and more this fusion between the soul of the reader and that of the poet, to make us identify with their own emotion.<sup>255</sup>

Significantly, Visan, citing examples from *Serres chaudes*, argues that this tactic is a Maeterlinckian approach: “Maeterlinck accumulates disparate images, turning over and over a primitive impression, a learned game of combined analogies, despite an apparent discord, aiming to grasp this impression in its total complexity.”<sup>256</sup> Visan builds on this concept in his 1910 text by citing examples from Bergson’s *Introduction à la métaphysique* from 1903. According to Bergson, the disparity of the images, for instance, prevents one image from usurping the other, and encourages an illogical, intuitive state in the viewer or reader. In this way, the creator of the work can “direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to seize on.”<sup>257</sup> Using this method, the poet or artist is able to “exteriorize his emotion and render it communicable.”<sup>258</sup>

Having established the presence of Maeterlinck in contemporary criticism, we may turn now to Metzinger’s painting, considering it in this context—as well as in relation to another key Cubist source, Henri Poincaré.

---

<sup>255</sup> Tancrède de Visan, “Sur L’Oeuvre de Maurice Maeterlinck,” *Vers et Prose* 8 (December 1906–February 1907): 91. “Pour nous faire revivre l’instant de leur sensation, les symbolistes, ne pouvant nous situer d’un coup dans leur propre intuition, vont nous tirer à eux doucement au moyen d’images accumulées et, par des intégrations successives dont le rôle à chacune est d’aider de plus en plus à cette fusion entre l’âme du lecteur et celle du poète, nous identifier à leur propre émotion.”

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 92. “Maeterlinck accumule les images disparates, tourne et retourne une impression primitive, un jeu savant d’analogies combinées, malgré un apparent discord, en vue d’enserrer cette impression dans son entière complexité.”

<sup>257</sup> Bergson, quoted in Antliff, “Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment,” 345.

<sup>258</sup> Visan, “La Philosophie de M. Bergson,” 137. The idea of exteriorizing thought comes from nineteenth-century occultists. For instance, Hippolyte Baraduc, psychical researcher of thought photography, used a photosensitive plate to attempt to record the interaction of the human soul with the surrounding environment. Henderson, “Vibratory Modernism,” 140–141.



### ***Metzinger's L'Oiseau bleu***

In his painting *L'Oiseau bleu*, Jean Metzinger embraces suggestion much differently than Édouard Vuillard (Figure 8). While Vuillard often incorporated patterned three-dimensional forms into patterned flat surfaces, yielding a two-dimensional overall decoration, Metzinger creates spatial ambiguity through a very different technique. The three female nudes he presents are made up of multi-faceted geometric shapes. Each facet of the figures represents a different perspective, or viewpoint, collected in succession, as Bergson suggested, and presented simultaneously. With this faceting, Metzinger attempts to evoke complex higher-dimensional bodies that he can only suggest in three dimensions. Furthermore, a grid-like overlay dissolves the boundaries of forms into the surrounding space, producing more spatial ambiguity and likely suggesting matter dematerializing into the ether. Metzinger also juxtaposes elements of an interior, signaled by the floor tile and bowl of grapes in the lower right, with exterior components suggesting travel and distance, such as the ocean liner at top right and the dome of the church of Sacre Coeur at upper center. Metzinger's purposeful spatial ambiguity thus denies a three-dimensional reading of the image and any sort of traditionally unified subject. Both succession and simultaneity play a role here.

In addition to the successive images of Bergson (and Maeterlinck), the impact of mathematician Henri Poincaré's thought on Cubism's simultaneous presentation of multiple viewpoints helps explain why Metzinger would have been interested in *L'Oiseau bleu's* multi-faceted diamond that allowed one to see true reality. Poincaré proposed that no objective space existed, thus "geometrical space is a construction of the mind under the influence of practical needs."<sup>259</sup> In *La Science et l'hypothèse* [*Science*

---

<sup>259</sup> Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 73.

and Hypothesis] (1902), he advocated subjective spaces that one could perceive using other senses than sight:

These are known to every one; they accompany all our movements, and are usually called muscular sensations. The corresponding frame constitutes what may be called *motor space*. Each muscle gives rise to a special sensation capable of augmenting or of diminishing, so that the totality of our muscular sensations will depend upon as many variables as we have muscles. From this point of view, *motor space would have as many dimensions as we have muscles*.<sup>260</sup>

More specifically, Poincaré proposed that one could intuit higher-dimensional space by conceiving of a four-dimensional figure in three dimensions, and rotating that figure in one's mind to gather different perspectives. He argues that because one is able to construct a three-dimensional figure in two dimensions, one should be able to construct a four-dimensional figure in three dimensions. Poincaré describes his method in *La Science et l'hypothèse*:

We can even take of the same figure several perspectives from several different points of view. We can easily represent to ourselves these perspectives, since they are of only three dimensions. Imagine that the various perspectives of the same object succeed one another, and that the transition from one to the other is accompanied by muscular sensations.<sup>261</sup>

For Cubists, then, the resulting faceted objects were meant to suggest the complexity of forms in a higher dimension and to capture on canvas the series of physical or mental movements the artist completed to perceive those forms.<sup>262</sup> As Henderson points out, it is not of great importance to know whether or not Cubist painters physically moved around their subjects or not. She highlights the fact that a “similar ‘fuller’ knowledge of an

---

<sup>260</sup> Henri Poincaré, quoted in Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*, 82. Emphasis in original. Gleizes and Metzinger were clearly familiar with Poincaré, given their reference to motor and tactile space in *Du Cubisme*: “To establish pictorial space, we must have recourse to tactile and motor sensations, indeed to all our faculties. It is our whole personality which, contracting or expanding, transforms the plane of the picture.” Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” 8.

<sup>261</sup> Poincaré, quoted in Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*, 84.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

object could also be gained by the artist's turning the form in his mind, just as a geometer would do in working with higher dimensional figures."<sup>263</sup>

Metzinger makes many written references to mobile perspective, attesting to his familiarity with Poincaré. In a 1913 interview, he declares "mobility in space" one of the primary contributions of the "new school":

What the new school claims to have discovered, what it hopes to apply is "mobility in space," to define our foremost principle in most succinct form. Art to this day has represented only the immobile, given only one aspect of form, as if substance had only one aspect, or the human eye were able to grasp only one, and were itself a fixed, immovable organ. The new school seeks to achieve a greater reality by portraying things in their entirety, that is, by giving them on the same canvas, as many of the aspects under which they may be seen, as the artist may choose to give.<sup>264</sup>

Not only does this statement demonstrate Cubist interest in Poincaré, it also supports the notion of the artist's subjectivity. According to Metzinger, the artist decides how many aspects to show in his or her painting in order to portray an object in its entirety.

In "Kubistická Technika" (1913), Metzinger characterizes mobile perspective as part of the artist's mental reality. He supports Henderson's point that the artist's movement could be mental, as a geometer's, rather than physical: "Cubist perspective attempts to satisfy not only the eye but also the spirit. It gives the artist the right to mentally grasp all the salient features of an object, from any angle."<sup>265</sup> Metzinger emphasizes that the purpose of mobile perspective is to capture the artist's shifting relation with reality:

For cubist perspective, the most important feature is motion. In other words, it facilitates the existence of an abundance of relations between the artist and reality. . . . If he were to yield merely to his emotion alone, his painting would lack unity.

---

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>264</sup> Metzinger, quoted in *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>265</sup> Metzinger, "Kubistická Technika" (1913), in Antliff and Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader*, 603.

Indeed, the relationship between an artist and reality develops gradually and becomes simultaneous when reality is transformed into a painting. In other words, the specific duration of those successive relationships determines the simultaneity in the work of art.<sup>266</sup>

In close relation to the Symbolist goal of communicating an original intuition through an artwork, the Cubist sought to communicate to the spectator a series of movements, or shifting relationship with reality in his or her painting. As Metzinger states, “It takes more talent to present the basic elements of a painting in such a way that the observer may easily understand changes in position. This means that one must recognize the natural laws of motion, so that the successive flow of ideas can intelligibly reveal itself.”<sup>267</sup>

Thus, through the lens of Poincaré’s theories, each facet of Cubist images represented a different viewpoint perceived as the result of a physical or mental movement. The Cubist obtained a series of images from different viewpoints in succession—gathered “successive images” through mobile perspective—and expressed them simultaneously on one canvas. By showing the viewer the results of all of the movements simultaneously, the Cubist hoped that the viewer would be able to reconstruct the artist’s original intuitions of higher space evolved over a length of time. Already in 1910 in his “Note sur la peinture,” Metzinger had described this aim as a “reconstitution of temporal duration [*la durée*] through the succession of simultaneous values [*valeur(s) simultanées*].”<sup>268</sup>

Considering Metzinger and other Cubists’ interest in Poincaré, Maeterlinck’s diamond in *L’Oiseau bleu* would have struck a highly responsive chord. As Tytly turns

---

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 605.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 612. Gleizes and Metzinger had expressed a similar idea in *Du Cubisme* a year earlier: “Then the fact of moving around an object to seize from it several successive appearances, which, fused into a single image, reconstitute it in time, will no longer make reasoning people indignant.” Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” 15.

the diamond, he exposes a new facet or new reality, just as a Cubist turning an object in his or her mind would imagine a new viewpoint in a higher dimension. Maeterlinck's evocation of simultaneity when Tyltyl sees the hours of his life "free and visible" would have also intrigued the Cubists, who expressed a succession of images simultaneously on one canvas.

Metzinger doubtless recognized the Cubist quest for true reality in Maeterlinck's play and created *L'Oiseau bleu* with the play in mind. Henderson points out that the indeterminacy of Metzinger's spaces, unable to be classified as three-dimensional, suggests a higher dimension or higher reality. The multiple planes and facets on the surface of the composition mimic the planes and facets of a diamond, and perhaps what one might expect to see if one looked through a diamond. Metzinger has adhered to his own dictum and used "several successive aspects" to provide "a concrete representation" of each object and figure, allowing the painting to reign in time. The presence of *Sacre Coeur* at the top, the ocean liner to the right, and what appear to be tropical trees at the left suggest a simultaneity that unites great distances, an idea prevalent in popular literature on the fourth dimension, which proposed that vast distances could be brought together by folding three-dimensional space through the fourth dimension.<sup>269</sup> The painting enables the viewer to perceive different places and different times easily and nearly at once, just as Maeterlinck's diamond allows the children to do. Henderson points to the following passage from *Du Cubisme*:

Without using any allegorical or symbolic literary artifice, but with only inflections of lines and colors, a painter can show in the same picture both a Chinese and a French city, together with the mountains, oceans, flora and fauna, peoples with their histories and their desires, everything which in exterior reality

---

<sup>269</sup> As Henderson notes, popular literature such as H. G. Wells' "The Strange Case of Davidson's Eyes" explores the notion that "distant three-dimensional spaces could be folded together in the fourth dimension like the corners of a napkin." Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*, 87.

separates them. Distance or time, concrete thing or pure conception, nothing refuses to be said in the painter's tongue.<sup>270</sup>

Daniel Robbins notes that Gleizes and other members of the Abbaye de Créteil group tried to create an “epic” art that united vast distances on one canvas, using images that “encompassed broad subjects which, although dealing with reality, were restricted neither by the limitations of physical perception nor by the separation of scientific fact from intellectual meaning.”<sup>271</sup> His statement describing Gleizes’ work applies equally to Metzinger’s painting, explaining the aim of this simultaneity:

Given the already established principle that the space of the physical world is not the same as the space of a picture plane and accepting the conviction that perception of the physical world is deformed by the effects of distance, Gleizes’ artistic concern was to reconstitute and synthesize the real world according to his individual consciousness.<sup>272</sup>

Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu*, with its faceted diamond and the extended seeing it produced, must have struck Metzinger as an ideal subject and means to illustrate Cubist theory. While Metzinger’s *L’Oiseau bleu* has continued to puzzle scholars, a major contextual source has remained undiscovered—Maeterlinck’s plot. The narrative of Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu*, with its themes paralleling Cubist theory (especially simultaneity, successive images, and higher reality), enables us, at last, to unlock some of the mystery of this enigmatic work.

---

<sup>270</sup> Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” 17.

<sup>271</sup> Daniel Robbins, *Albert Gleizes, 1881-1953: A Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1964), 14.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, a deep interest in Maeterlinck spanning literature, theatre, and visual art began in the 1890s and did not wane with the advent of Cubism in the twentieth century. Maeterlinck's ideas reached a wide audience in the 1890s through performances at avant-garde theatres as well as through his widely published works and criticism by his contemporaries. Symbolist artists, especially those who worked directly with Maeterlinck's plays such as Édouard Vuillard, found parallels in Maeterlinck's theories to their own interests and embraced ambiguity and suggestion.

Maeterlinck's Symbolism avoided the specificity of correspondence-based Symbolism and instead focused on inward contemplation of one's own subjective sense of higher reality. As a result, Maeterlinck's ideas resonated with twentieth-century artists, while those of many of his Symbolist contemporaries did not seem directly relevant to a younger generation. Cubists such as Jean Metzinger found in Maeterlinck's work a version of Symbolism adaptable to new ideas of space and time, especially those regarding the fourth dimension. The discovery of the X-ray, continued belief in the world-filling ether, and the concept of the fourth dimension (and its metaphoric association with infinity) all focused the Cubists' attention on unseen realms. With the X-ray making solid matter transparent, the concept of the ether permeating all its interstices, and the popular idea of radioactive decay of all matter into the surrounding ether, Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, and others no longer had any interest in painting the world as the senses perceived it, including the seemingly concrete boundaries of objects. Likewise, Cubists found in the concept of a fourth dimension of space a model for the higher, unseen realities that intrigued them. They also recognized a valuable source in Maeterlinck, with his focus on intuiting higher reality, which he then suggested (rather

than described) in his plays. Furthermore, Maeterlinck's references to infinity and eternity in connection with higher realms must have appealed to the Cubists, who considered the fourth dimension as "the dimension of the infinite," which was "eternalizing itself in all directions at any given moment."<sup>273</sup>

The Cubists also found support in Maeterlinck for their ideas regarding successive images and simultaneity. Contemporary critics like Visan recognized the parallel between Bergson and Maeterlinck, claiming that Maeterlinck had anticipated Bergson's technique of successive images in *Serres chaudes*. While Bergson argued that the artist must induce an alogical state in the beholder by juxtaposing images as disparate as possible to enable the spectator to reconstruct his or her original intuition, Maeterlinck took the same approach in *Serres chaudes*, according to Visan. Furthermore, Maeterlinck used words and gestures in unusual ways and placed them in strange contexts with the same aim in mind. Maeterlinck's highly popular *L'Oiseau bleu* and other writings, including *Le temple enseveli*, espoused a continuity of time previously suggested by Bergson. In addition, the faceted diamond of *L'Oiseau bleu* not only gave the children "true sight" that closely mimicked the X-ray, but also allowed them to perceive distant times and places. Clearly responding the play, Metzinger, in his painting of the same name, breaks the objects into facets and reveals a simultaneous view of places separated by great distance. Just as Poincaré advocated that a combination of multiple perspectives could represent a higher-dimensional object, Metzinger must have seen a parallel with Maeterlinck's diamond—a faceted object that revealed higher reality.

Maeterlinck's importance for artists and intellectuals in the twentieth century, both in Europe and in the United States, is deserving of future research. In a 1904 article

---

<sup>273</sup> Apollinaire, quoted in Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*, 62.



in *The Critic*, architect and writer Claude Bragdon celebrated Maeterlinck as “the mystic of the modern world.”<sup>274</sup> Bragdon argued, “Actualities have value to him only as they image or are eloquent of that spiritual world in which souls meet and dwell, and he communicates to our inner consciousness his interest in this immanent but invisible universe.”<sup>275</sup> A proponent of the fourth dimension, Bragdon wrote *A Primer of Higher Space (The Fourth Dimension)* in 1913. Maeterlinck’s ideas about higher reality doubtless held the same appeal for Bragdon as they did for the Cubists. In fact, Maeterlinck himself devoted a portion of his 1928 book, *La Vie de l’espace* [*The Life of Space*], to the fourth dimension. Thus, the Cubists, Bragdon, and others rightly recognized an application of Maeterlinck’s ideas to the new theories about higher space.

American artists in the twentieth century also responded to Maeterlinck. Photographers especially took notice, including Alvin Langdon Coburn, Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Steichen.<sup>276</sup> Coburn’s photographs illustrate Maeterlinck’s 1907 book, *L’Intelligence des fleurs* [*The Intelligence of Flowers*], and Stieglitz reprinted an article by Maeterlinck in his journal *Camera Work*.<sup>277</sup> As Dario Gamboni has suggested, Symbolism, especially Maeterlinck’s broad interpretation of it, attracted the Stieglitz circle because they sought to “convey the subjective and imaginative side of seeing, to ‘imbue with thought’ the action of light, to use Maeterlinck’s [language as it appears in *Camera Work*].”<sup>278</sup>

---

<sup>274</sup> Claude Bragdon, quoted in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tucker (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1986), 219.

<sup>275</sup> Bragdon, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> Both Steichen and Coburn took portraits of Maeterlinck, as early as 1901 and as late as 1915, respectively, demonstrating American artists’ early and enduring interest in him (Figures 9 & 10).

<sup>277</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, “Maeterlinck on Photography,” *Camera Work* no. 12 (1906), reprinted in Jonathan Green, ed., *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Aperture, 1973), 61-62.

<sup>278</sup> Gamboni, *Potential Images*, 161.

Artists and writers continued to discuss notions of higher reality in Symbolist and, indeed, Maeterlinckian, terms as art became more and more abstracted from a visible world that had been redefined by contemporary scientific discoveries focusing on invisible realities. In fact, Symbolism in all its guises gave future generations some of the vocabulary to discuss higher reality, the infinite, and the eternal. Jean-Claude Lebensztejn claims that the Symbolist movement was the crucible of the change in the meaning of the term abstraction. He states that abstraction was in opposition to realism from the moment Paul Gauguin wrote to Émile Schuffenecker in 1888: “A word of advice: don’t copy nature too closely. Art is an abstraction. Develop it from nature by dreaming in front of it, and pay more attention to the process of creation than the result, since this is the only way of ascending to God—by creating as God creates.”<sup>279</sup> While scholars like Lebensztejn have recognized the importance of Symbolism to later movements, these discussions often lack explorations of particular themes and artists. I have taken the specificity of Long’s discussion of Maeterlinck’s impact on Kandinsky as a model for my own study of Jean Metzinger. I hope that my identification of specific themes in Maeterlinck’s work that resonated with Metzinger’s interest will bolster the case for Symbolism’s continued importance in the twentieth century.

Further research on pre-World War I twentieth-century movements should thus recognize their solid grounding in Symbolist theory. Maeterlinck especially needs to be credited as an innovator of Symbolist thought in his departure from correspondence theory. Furthermore, scholars need to recognize his widespread impact, stemming in part from the fact that future generations could easily apply his ideas to new theories of space and time. Recognizing Maeterlinck’s central importance to Symbolism and the

---

<sup>279</sup> Paul Gauguin, quoted in Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, “Passage: Note on the Ideology of Early Abstraction,” in *Paths to Abstraction, 1867-1917*, ed. Terence Maloon (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2010), 35.

significance of his ideas in the early twentieth century will surely yield a more complete understanding of early Modernism.

## Figures

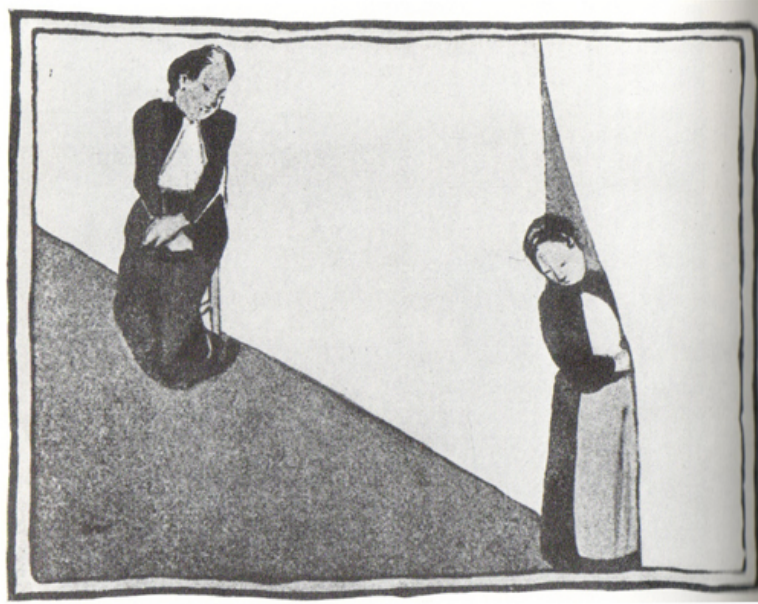


Figure 1. Édouard Vuillard, *L'Intruse*, 1891.



Figure 2. Édouard Vuillard, *L'Intruse*, 1891.



Figure 3. Édouard Vuillard, *L'Heure du dîner*, circa 1889.



Figure 4. Édouard Vuillard, *Intérieur, mère et soeur de l'artiste*, 1893.





Figure 5. Édouard Vuillard, *Soirée familiale*, 1895.

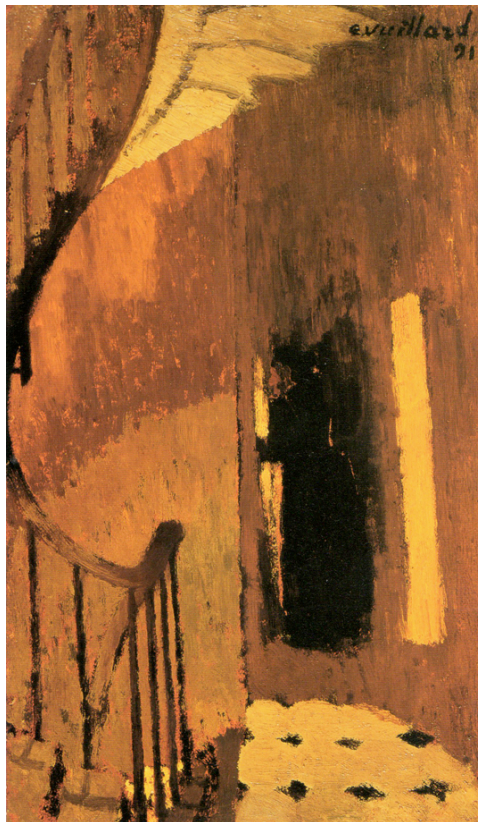


Figure 6. Édouard Vuillard, *Le Palier, rue de Miromesnil*, 1891.



Figure 7. Édouard Vuillard, *Intérieur, Mystère*, 1896.





Figure 8. Jean Metzinger, *L'Oiseau bleu*, 1913.





Figure 9. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, 1915.



Figure 10. Edward Steichen, *Maeterlinck*, 1891.

## Bibliography

- Antliff, Mark. "Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment." *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 341-349.
- . *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian avant-garde*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Antliff, Mark, and Patricia Leighton. *Cubism and Culture*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001.
- , eds. *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902-1918*. Edited by Leroy C. Breunig. Translated by Susan Suleiman. New York: Viking Press, 1972.
- . *The Cubist Painters*. Translated by Peter Read. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Beachboard, Robert. *Le Théâtre de Maeterlinck aux Etats-Unis*. Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1951.
- Benson, Donald R. "Facts and Fictions in Scientific Discourse: The Case of the Ether." *Georgia Review* 38 (Winter 1984): 825-837.
- Bergson, Henri. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by T. E. Hulme. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912.
- . *Matter and Memory*. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913.
- Bixby, James T. "Professor Roentgen's Discovery and the Invisible World around Us." *The Arena* 15, no. 78 (May 1896): 871-885.
- Boyer, Patricia Eckert. *Artists and the avant-garde theater in Paris, 1887-1900*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998.
- Burhan, Filiz Eda. "Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France." PhD diss., Yale University, 1979.
- Burne, Glenn S. *Remy de Gourmont: His Ideas and Influence in England and America*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963.
- Ciaffa, Patricia. "The Portraits of Edouard Vuillard." PhD diss., Columbia University, 1985.
- Cogeval, Guy. *Édouard Vuillard*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003.

- Cogeval, Guy, and Antoine Salomon. *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance: Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels*. 3 vols. Milan: Skira, 2003.
- Cornell, Kenneth. *The Post-Symbolist Period: French Poetic Currents, 1900-1920*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
- Dorra, Henri, ed. *Symbolist Art Theories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Duncan, R. K. *The New Knowledge*. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1905.
- Easton, Elizabeth Wynne. *The Intimate Interiors of Edouard Vuillard*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.
- Facos, Michelle. *Symbolist Art in Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Fry, Edward F. *Cubism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Gamboni, Dario. *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
- Gleizes, Albert, and Jean Metzinger. "Cubism." In *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, edited by Robert L. Herbert, 1-18. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964.
- Gourmont, Remy de. *The Book of Masks*. Translated by Jack Lewis. Boston: John W. Luce, 1921.
- . *Selected Writings*. Edited and translated by Glenn S. Burne. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966.
- Gray, Christopher. *Cubist Aesthetic Theories*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953.
- Grayson, David. *The Genesis of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986.
- Groom, Gloria. *Édouard Vuillard: Painter-Decorator: Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. "Editor's Introduction: I. Writing Modern Art and Science—An Overview; II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century." *Science in Context* 17 (Winter 2004): 423-466.
- . *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- . "Modernism and Science." In *Modernism*, edited by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, 2 vols., 383-403. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension." In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, edited by Maurice Tucker, 219-237. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka, and the Ether of Space." In *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, edited by Linda Dalrymple Henderson and Bruce Clarke, 126-149. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Huneker, James. *Iconoclasts*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969.
- Huret, Jules. *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*. Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1999.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by M. T. H. Sadler. New York: Dover Publications, 1977.
- Knapp, Bettina. *Maurice Maeterlinck*. Boston: Twayne, 1975.
- Le Bon, Gustave. "The Decay of Matter." *The Independent* 61 (July 26, 1906): 183-186.
- Lebensztejn, Jean-Claude. "Passage: Note on the Ideology of Early Abstraction." In *Paths to Abstraction, 1867-1917*, edited by Terence Maloon, 31-51. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2010.
- Lecat, Maurice. *Bibliographie de Maurice Maeterlinck*. Brussels: Ancienne Librairie Castaigne, 1939.
- Long, Rose-Carol Washton. *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Lugné-Poe, Aurélien. *La Parade: Le Sot du tremplin; souvenirs et impressions de théâtre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1930.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice. *The Blue Bird*. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Buried Temple*. Translated by Alfred Sutro. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Menus propos: le théâtre." *La Jeune Belgique* 9 (September 1890): 331-336.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Treasure of the Humble*. Translated by Alfred Sutro. Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Le Trésor des humbles*. Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1904.
- Mathews, Patricia Townley. *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986.
- McGuinness, Patrick. *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin de siècle*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000.
- Mehlman, Jeffrey. *Émigré New York: French Intellectuals in Wartime Manhattan, 1940-1944*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Mirbeau, Octave. *Combats littéraires*. Edited by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet. Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme, 2006.
- Morice, Charles. *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*. Paris: Librairie Académique Didier, 1889.
- Nash, J. M. "The Nature of Cubism: A Study of Conflicting Explanations." *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980): 435-447.
- Perucchi-Petri, Ursula. "Edouard Vuillard." In *Nabis, 1888-1900*, 303-352. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993.
- Pingeot, Anne, and Robert Hoozee. *Paris-Bruxelles, Bruxelles-Paris: réalisme, impressionnisme, symbolisme, art nouveau: Les relations artistiques entre la France et la Belgique, 1848-1914*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997.
- Pondrom, Cyrena. *The Road from Paris: French Influence on English Poetry, 1900-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Robbins, Daniel. *Albert Gleizes, 1881-1953: A Retrospective Exhibition*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "From Symbolism to Cubism: The Abbaye of Créteil." *Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1963-1964): 111-116.
- Robichez, Jacques. *Le Symbolisme au théâtre: Lugné-Poe et les débuts de L'Oeuvre*. Paris: L'Arche, 1957.
- Sérusier, Paul. *ABC de la peinture*. Paris: Librairie Floury, 1942.
- Snyder, Carl. "The World Beyond Our Senses." *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 107 (June 1903): 117-120.
- Symons, Arthur. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. London: Archibald Constable, 1908.
- Visan, Tancrède de. "La Philosophie de M. Bergson et le lyrisme contemporain." *Vers et Prose* 21 (April-June 1910): 125-140.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sur L'Oeuvre de Maurice Maeterlinck." *Vers et Prose* 8 (December 1906-February 1907): 82-93.
- Weir, David. *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
- Whitton, David. *Stage Directors in Modern France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.

Zangwill, Israel. "Maeterlinck, The Belgian Shakespeare." *Cosmopolitan* 19 (1895): 241-242.