The Transition from Naturalism to Symbolism in the Theater from 1880 to 1900

By Evert Sprinchorn

Like Pre-Raphaelitism, which anticipated it, and Expressionism, which succeeded it, the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth century cut across the fields of both literature and painting. Consequently, it would seem that one could understand the movement and grasp what lay behind it either by looking at pictures or by reading books. But, distorting those blinkered approaches, cultural historians have preferred to compare the two forms of expression, hoping to find similarities in technique and parallel developments in thought. In theory, the most revealing art form would be that in which the verbal and visual elements are fused. That art is, of course, the art of the theater, and a look at what happened in the theater at the end of the nineteenth century may help us to understand why Symbolism came to the fore at that particular time and what its function was in the development of European thought.

As in literature and painting, the crucial years for Symbolism in the theater were the 1880s and 1890s. It was during those years that one kind of symbolism was brought to technical perfection and could not be developed further without undergoing a transformation. Much of the confusion that still exists about Symbolism arose from that transformation. The first kind of symbolism was associated with the naturalistic movement, which is the very thing that the self-styled Symbolists reacted against. Numerous examples of Naturalistic symbolism can be found in the novels of Emile Zola, the father of literary naturalism. The market place in The Stomach of Paris (1873), the cathedral in The Dream (1888), the mine in Germinal (1885), and the train in The Human Beast (1890) function as symbols insofar as they represent something intangible or invisible, an idea or a state of mind. Zola’s method consists in giving these symbols, these dominant images, an enormous suggestive power by endowing them with a life of their own larger than the life of the characters in the novels. In Germinal the mine gathers to itself all those forces that are undermining capitalist society. And in The Human Beast, a novel about a psychopathic murderer, the uncontrollable passions that impel the protagonist to commit his sexual crimes are represented or symbolized by the locomotive that he drives. The extraordinary passages in which Zola describes the locomotive roaring across the French countryside vividly convey to the reader the irresistible force of the engineer’s compulsions.

Based on science and the experimental method, Zola’s Naturalism proceeded on the assumption that heredity (as in the case of the locomotive engineer) and environment (as in that of the miners) were the fundamental determinants in life. Zola’s symbols operate in a universe of matter, and their primary function is to unite the various elements in the story, to bring them into relationship with one another. In this respect they are similar to the leitmotifs in Wagner.

Zola’s contemporary Henrik Ibsen employed symbols for much the same purpose in the realistic dramas that brought him international fame. Ghosts (1881), the most notorious of these, is usually seen as a thoroughly naturalistic drama touched up with a few symbols, such as the rising sun at the end, apparently intended to provide an ironic commentary on the tragic events of the story. In fact, the symbols in this naturalistic play are just as much a part of its fabric as are the events that occur in it.

In the broadest sense, the ghosts of the play are all the conventions, traditions, and received ideas that inhibit the human spirit. “The traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” Marx wrote that in 1852, thirty years before Ghosts was published, but Mrs. Alving in Ibsen’s play says something very much like it. She is a reformer who wants to make life better by getting rid of some of the ghosts. Her son, Oswald, however, wants simply to enjoy life and to bring joy to others. Mrs. Alving has the zeal of a missionary; her son has the artist’s commitment to create beauty. Ibsen sets these two philosophies—the one built on sacrifice, the other on pleasure—on a collision course by having them both seek as their goal the destruction of ghosts of the past.

There are two strands to the plot. The first demonstrates how the ghosts annihilate Mrs. Alving’s hope of improving the world. The second shows how the ghosts destroy her son and make a mockery of his hedonistic philosophy. And Ibsen uses a symbol to interweave these two strands of the plot.

To represent the ineluctable forces of the past, to give them a specificity, Ibsen chose a disease—syphilis—that, like old ideas that had wormed their way into the souls of the living, could be transmitted from parent to child. In Ghosts this disease is passed from Mr. Alving to his son Oswald and has been lying dormant in his body for twenty years. Knowing that he will collapse into idiocy, he has asked his mother (his father had died...
revealed not in the dialogue but in the symbols that underpin the action and the words. Although Ibsen's realistic plays were famous for giving audiences the feeling that they were eavesdropping on scenes from actual life, their unique quality derives from their symbolism. In A Writer's Diary, Virginia Woolf said she wanted to eliminate the waste that comes from "this appalling narrative business of the realist." She wanted to rid her writing of "all waste, deadness, superfliuity." "Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry—by which I mean saturated." Ibsen's best dramas are saturated with poetry in precisely this way.

One of the special features of Ibsen's symbols is that they have a life of their own. They grow and change. This is possible because a play moves through time. Taking advantage of the basic difference between painting and poetry, between the art of space and the art of time, Ibsen could let his fire symbol grow from a small beginning in the first act to stage-filling radiance in the last act, becoming increasingly rich in meaning all the while. A symbol in a painting cannot grow in the same way. Although Zola's symbols are more akin than Ibsen's to those one finds in painting, they, too, like the symbols in a painting, lack the power to grow. Ibsen himself drew a distinction between his way with symbols and Zola's. "The symbols Zola uses," he said, "are the result of the events, a conclusion to the drama. My symbols are the beginning, the premises—are even the reason for the existence of things. They contain reality, while those of Zola are explained by reality." In one fundamental respect, however, Ibsen's symbols are like Zola's: they are not otherworldly. They exist as objects in the real world, objects that acquire significance by being related to one another. This relationship constitutes the meaning of the work.

Three points about Ibsen's symbolism in Ghosts should be stressed. First: the symbol of the fire is highly effective on stage. Ibsen, who in his youth aspired to be a painter, used the stage as a painter uses canvas. Second: the symbol undergoes a change as the play progresses. And third: the symbol is rooted in a naturalistic, Darwinistic view of human existence.

The transition from Naturalist symbolism to Symbolism proper occurred when the possibilities of the first kind had been thoroughly explored and exhausted by Ibsen's genius. In Hedda Gabler (1890) Ibsen continued to invent new techniques of Naturalist symbol-
ism. But in his next play, *The Master Builder*, written in 1892, he modified his naturalist outlook and introduced into his work the kind of symbolism that suited the young generation of writers in France.

It is ironic that just when Naturalism had gained wide acceptance and Zola could feel that he had won his battle against the defenders of idealism in literature, a reaction set in. By 1887 Naturalism had even conquered the theater, the most conservative of artistic institutions. It was in that year that André Antoine founded the Théâtre-Libre in Paris and staged naturalist plays in a thoroughly naturalistic manner. Yet in that very same year a group of writers, some of whom had been Zola-ites, animadverted on the master’s most recent novel, *The Earth (La Terre)*, calling it sordid and bestial, and attributing its obscenity to a “malady of the lower organs of the writer.” A year earlier, the poets Jean Moréas and Gustave Kahn had laid the foundations for this attack in articles defining the aims of Symbolism, some of which were diametrically opposed to the aims of Naturalism. In one of his most famous pronouncements Zola had defined a work of art as a corner of nature (or reality) seen through a temperament; that is, seen through the eyes of an artist. In his manifesto of Symbolism, printed in *Le Figaro*, September 18, 1886, Moréas declared that the representation of the abstract idea rather than the representation of reality was of supreme importance for art. A few days later, in the September 28, 1886, issue of *La Vogue*, Kahn proclaimed that the Symbolist, bored by hackneyed depictions of reality, sought to replace it, as the background to action, with the brain. “The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the idea) instead of subjectivizing the objective (nature seen through an individual’s temperament).”

What this means in practice is perhaps made clearer by some remarks of Van Gogh’s. “I want to paint men and women,” he wrote, “with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring. . . . To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is no delusive realism in that, but isn’t it something that actually exists?”

The form of symbolism that developed at the very end of the nineteenth century differed from the symbolism of the naturalists, of Ibsen and Zola, in its concern with spiritual ideas. For that reason the Swedish writer and dramatist August Strindberg preferred the term “supernaturalism” to “symbolism,” feeling that his word for it placed the movement historically as the successor to Naturalism while also suggesting what lay at the center of the new movement. Whereas the Naturalists were positivists and materialists, concerned primarily with the world of matter, the supernaturalists or Symbolists believed in the primacy of the spirit or idea. They were more interested in what went on in man’s soul or psyche than in the relation of man to his environment or his past. Ibsen in his heart of hearts was an idealist who was compelled by the astounding progress of science to accept, at least for a while, the premises of materialism and determinism. Significantly, in his last plays, he returned to his original idealist principles and joined forces with the French Symbolists. *The Master Builder* is in part a rejection of Darwinism and determinism. The striving individual counts for more than the social aggregate, as in Nietzsche, and the human will rather than the environment becomes the mainspring of the action. The master builder’s struggle is primarily with himself, and the organizing symbol, the tower, stands for his guilty conscience, his inner fears and self-doubts, as well as the drive to overcome them. To the Symbolist, this is a true symbol, rooted as it is in the soul.

The fire in *Ghosts* meant nothing to the Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, but the “atmosphere of the soul” that he encountered in *The Master Builder* entranced him and prompted him to write his influential essay “The Tragical in Daily Life.”

As a means to understanding the new artistic movements at the end of the nineteenth century, Strindberg’s career is more instructive than Ibsen’s. He was both a more determined determinist and a more committed Symbolist, eagerly embracing the naturalist philosophy and espousing Darwinism in the 1880s, and then completely abjuring them in the 1890s. When he endeavored to explain in dramatic form what had happened to him to cause this change, he created a new kind of drama.

The problem that confronted him as a dramatist was the same problem that confronted the Symbolist poets and painters: how to render the world of spirit or the inner world of man’s soul using words and objects, how to render the intangible by means of the tangible. The difficulty was great enough for the poet and the painter; it was considerably more difficult for the playwright because of the physical presence, the corporeality, of the actor. In the theater the most spiritual of living creatures was, paradoxically, the most solid and the most palpable. Incorporating the very thing that was to be revealed, the human being was the greatest obstacle to its revelation. Sets could be painted to appear symbolic, but how does an actor act symbolically? In French Symbolist plays he usually chanted, putting the audience to sleep and giving the critics headaches. Maeterlinck put his finger on the difficulty when he pointed out that the spirit of the poem and the body of the actor are at odds. “A symbol cannot,” he wrote, “bear the active presence of a man.”

There is a continual discord between the forces of a symbol and the forces of a man; the symbol of a poem is a centre, the rays of which stretch into infinity; and these rays, as long as they come from a masterpiece, have an importance that is limited only by the might of an eye following them. But an actor’s eye oversteps the sphere of the symbol. In the passive subject of a poem (the spectator) there appears a phenomenon of polarisation; he does not any more see the diverging rays; he sees only the converging ones; an accidental thing spoiled the symbol, and the masterpiece in its essence was dead during the whole time of that presence. The Greeks felt that antimony, and their masks, which seem incomprehensible to us, served to smooth down the presence of the man and to facilitate the symbol... If man enters on the stage with all his faculties and his whole freedom, if his voice, gestures, attitude are not veiled by a great number of synthetic conditions, if even for a moment the human being appears such as he is, there is not a poem in this world which could stand that event. In that moment, the spectacle of the poem is interrupted and we are present at some scene of outward life.

Just how disruptive and shattering the physical presence of the actor could be in a symbolic play Maeterlinck was to learn when his one-act play *The Blind Men (Les Aveugles)* was performed in 1891. The little drama was, as might be surmised from its title, about spiritual blindness, about human beings who are unaware of the mysterious forces that affect our lives. These ignorant beings are portrayed as blind men groping their way to the grave. On stage, a dummy figure represented a dead priest. A dog was supposed to guide one of the blind men to the corpse, but of necessity the actor playing the blind man had to guide the dog. Watching the little tug of war
between the confused dog and the seeing blind man, the hostile members of the audience broke into laughter. The sympathetic part of the audience tried to silence them, and the gentle symbolic drama on stage was accompanied by fisticuffs in the auditorium. No wonder that Maeterlinck dreamed of seeing his plays enacted by puppets.12

Despite his lack of practical stage experience, Maeterlinck was the most vocal and articulate of the Symbolist playwrights. Protested against the essential unreason and falseness of conventional drama with its artificial characters, improbable plots, extravagant deeds, and horrible crimes, Maeterlinck wanted the stage to picture those moments in life when quietly and almost imperceptibly the human soul experiences a revelation and gains an insight into the meaning of existence, those moments when nothing much happens outwardly but everything happens inwardly. James Joyce was to call such moments “epiphanies.” It is in those moments, asserted Maeterlinck, that man’s loftier existence is laid bare to us. “The poet adds to ordinary life something, I know not what, which is the poet’s secret, and there comes to us a sudden revelation of life in its stupendous grandeur, and in its beauty and richness to the unknown powers, in its endless affinities, in its awe-inspiring mystery.”13

These are lovely words, but unfortunately Maeterlinck could not transform them into effective drama. His most successful play, Pelléas et Mélisande, dealt with strong and violent passions. Its plot is essentially the same as that of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde.

What eluded Maeterlinck’s grasp was captured by Strindberg in his play in seventeen scenes, To Damascus, Part One, which he wrote in 1898. Usually studied as a precursor of Expressionist drama—which indeed it is—To Damascus cannot be properly appreciated unless it is seen in the context of Symbolist drama and as a fulfillment of Maeterlinck’s intentions. Strindberg did succeed in putting on stage those moments when the soul undergoes a change and comes to understand that there are, in Maeterlinck’s words, “many regions more fertile, more profound, and more interesting than those of his reason or his intelligence.”14 To Damascus is doubly relevant because it dramatizes a pilgrim’s progress from naturalism to supernaturalism.

As it should be in a Symbolist work, the plot is extremely simple. The middle-aged protagonist feels he is in a state of crisis. Financially, domestically, and artistically, he is bankrupt. He meets a married woman, and the two of them go off together. As they travel from one place to another, the man is increasingly tormented by the thought that he has hurt someone. The woman’s husband comes first to mind, of course, but that thought only opens old wounds and revives old memories, so that the journey takes on the aspect of a self-analysis. At the end of the play the man and the woman find themselves at the street corner where they first met. By this time, however, they have come to understand themselves much better, and together they enter a church, which is not meant as their final destination; it is only symbolic of their new view of life.

The notorious Strindbergian battle of the sexes is only fleetingly glimpsed in this drama. The conflict is not between the man and the woman but between the hero and mysterious forces that he cannot comprehend, cannot even come to grips with. The arena in which this conflict takes place is the mind of the protagonist. The whole drama can be interpreted as a kind of dream, a waking dream. Reality and the psyche of the hero mutually affect each other, reality providing the material that the psyche reworks according to its needs. Kahn had said that the aim of Symbolist art was to objectify the subjective and that the brain should provide the background to the action. These are precisely Strindberg’s aims in To Damascus.

On the most obvious level, the play is an allegory, as its title suggests. Saul, temporarily blinded on the road to Damascus, heard a voice ask, “Why persecutest thou me?” and was converted from a belief in the Law to a belief in Christian love. Strindberg’s hero suffers a heart attack, asks himself why he is suffering, sees the morning star rise after a fearful night, and gradually realizes that the laws of science and the naturalist philosophy provide an inadequate explanation of his torment. He comes to believe that spiritual forces are at work in his life and that they are more significant than physical or natural forces.

The alternatives are set up symbolically at the very beginning of the play, the scene at the street corner. At one side is a café, at the opposite side a chapel, and between them is a post office. The café represents the naturalist position. The hero can attribute his troubled state of mind, his general malaise, to the alcohol he is accustomed to drinking, as the hero of a Zola novel might do. The chapel obviously represents the antinaturalist or religious position. Now what gives the play its special symbolic quality is that Strindberg offers yet another alternative, represented by the post office. For the hero, as for most of us, good news and bad news emanate from there—checks, bills, summons from his former wife’s lawyer, and so on. As seen through the hero’s eyes, however, the real post office becomes the source and symbol of mysterious, undefined powers that nudge the hero in a certain direction. These powers are akin to those Maeterlinck described as operating in those regions “more profound . . . than those of his reason or his intelligence.” In a word, this region is the unconscious.

How can the unconscious be shown on stage? Like the poets and painters who wanted to go beyond the portraying of the real world, Strindberg had to use indirect means. He began by evoking a dreamlike atmosphere in which it is difficult to tell what is real and what is illusory, what is symbolic of something and what is the thing itself. Then he proceeded to create an elaborate network of visions, intimations, and literary allusions. In the first scene several pallbearers appear and a funeral march is heard. A description of the dead man turns out to fit the protagonist himself. The woman he has fallen in love with is compared to Medea, who had the power of reviving the dying and the reputation of destroying her enemies by using witchcraft. The hero more or less places his fate in her hands. Through intimations such as these the viewer perceives that the hero is in the process of dying spiritually and being reborn. This perception is reinforced by the image of the journey built up scene by scene, the journey that parallels Saul’s

Fig. 2 Paul Gauguin, Self-Portrait, 1889, oil on wood, 31¼ × 20¼”. Washington, National Gallery, Chester Dale Collection.
As the play progresses, the hero is associated with other figures from myth and legend in such a way that the inner life of the hero can be constituted out of these fragments. Gauguin painted symbolic self-portraits in which he appears as Adam with halo and apple (Fig. 2) or in the guise of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Imagine a whole series of similar self-portraits in which Gauguin would appear also as Cain, as Dante in the Inferno, as Jacob wrestling with the angel, and you would have some idea of the effect of the literary allusions in Strindberg's play. I use the example of Gauguin because Strindberg visited the artist's studio on several occasions in the 1890s and saw many of his paintings. It was to Strindberg that Gauguin turned when he needed a preface to the catalogue for the public sale of his paintings in 1895.15

To Damascus is an omnium-gatherum of symbolist techniques, old and new. The plot of the play is a triple allegory, simultaneously a journey on the road to Damascus, a descent into Dante's Inferno, and a pilgrimage through the Stations of the Cross. Within the triple allegory are a host of truncated allegories or metaphors, and surrounding these is a host of symbols, sometimes aural (the funeral march), sometimes visual (a derelict ship with three masts, an obvious allusion to Calvary) (Figs. 3 and 4). Unlike the locomotive in Zola's novel or the fire in Ibsen's play, no one single element obtrudes itself. Instead, To Damascus is a vastly complicated symbolic structure that vibrates with intimations in the same way that a Van Gogh painting vibrates with radiance and coloring. What the Symbolist poets hoped to accomplish by refusing to name the thing they were trying to get at, Strindberg accomplished by using all the resources of the stage, creating a poetry of the theater. And, incidentally, he found a solution to the vexing problem of the actor, who, no matter how symbolic the set was and no matter how suggestive and evocative his words were, always brought a palpable and disconcerting reality onto the stage. In To Damascus, the actor playing the hero is not expected to symbolize anything. He appears only as what he is in reality: a human being wandering in a forest of symbols.

From Ibsen's Ghosts to Strindberg's To Damascus is only eighteen years, but those years saw a great change in the artists' perception of reality. In Ghosts, the physical events in the lives of its principal figures constitute reality, and the function of the symbol is
to sort out the events and to give significance to them. The symbol explains reality in much the same way that a mathematical or chemical formula explains it. In To Damascus, the events that occur represent the world of spirit. The symbols adhere to material objects but point to what transcends reality. The action in Ghosts is a working out of events that happened in the past. The events in To Damascus form a parallel to what is actually happening in the soul of the hero. In Ghosts, certain objects are singled out and given symbolic significance. In To Damascus, everything is symbolic because Strindberg has stripped down the set, dematerialized it, to use his term, and allowed on stage only what is symbolic. Consequently, the play is entirely permeated with symbols. Unhappy with the sets for the original production in 1900, Strindberg made various attempts to "dematerialize" the stage, to divorce it from reality. In one proposal (Fig. 5), never realized, he thought of using the simultaneous set of the medieval stage. All the scenery required in the play would be on the stage from the start and remain in view. Each set would have its emblematic stage property, and the actors would move from place to place as required by the plot.

When To Damascus was first published and performed, it seemed the work of a man who had lost touch with the world around him. Drama critics thought it too subjective, too autobiographical, and too obscure to be considered a successful work of art. Yet all Strindberg was doing was transferring to the stage the techniques and artistic ideas of the most experimental painters.

Viewed as a purely symbolic work, To Damascus emerges as a synthesis of all the techniques by means of which artists in both literature and painting were attempting to portray man's spiritual life as effectively as possible. Strindberg was perfectly in tune with the most advanced artistic thought. The theater critics with their narrow perspective could not see that Strindberg's progress as a dramatist closely paralleled the development of modern art. To Damascus has both the blatant allegorical quality of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, in which the objects are virtually labeled with their symbolic import, and the more subtle allegorical quality of a painting by Puvis de Chavannes (whom Strindberg admired), in which the canvas as a whole shimmers with meaning. Added to this is the witty kind of allusiveness we find in the Gauguin self-portraits. Finally, it has the radiance of a Van Gogh, in which colors express the passions.

The emergence of Symbolism at the end of the nineteenth century should be seen as a response to the triumphs of science. It was a warning and a protest against the belief that Newton and Darwin had discovered the fundamental laws of the universe—a protest that is perhaps more relevant now than it was in the 1890s. The scientists then appeared to be able, given enough time, to answer all the questions that man might properly ask. The naturalist writers had enrolled themselves in the school of science, recognizing that in doing so they could study only what science allowed. For Zola this was enough. Beyond the domain of science there was nothing but a vast sea of empty speculation. The Symbolists took the opposite view. If the scientist had preempted the world of matter, it was incumbent on the artist to explore that uncharted sea. This is what Van Gogh meant when he said:

Science—scientific reasoning—seems to me an instrument that will lag far, far behind. . . . Scientists persist nowadays in believing that life is flat and runs from birth to death. . . . Future generations will probably enlighten us on this so very interesting subject; and then maybe Science itself will arrive—willy-nilly—at conclusions more or less parallel to the sayings of Christ with reference to the other half of our existence.16

It is to this other half of existence that Maeterlinck refers when he writes of regions "more fertile, more profound, and more interesting than those of his reason or his intelligence." It is Strindberg's conviction that this other half of existence is the more crucial one for mankind's survival that leads him to ridicule the scientists for having set up as their paradigm "an automobile universe—self-propelled, but without a motor."17

These remarks show that the Symbolists were not so much contradicting or gainsaying the findings of the scientists as pointing out the shortcomings. Both the scientists and the Symbolists were seekers after knowledge, and the desire to explore the unknown united them, although they chose to investigate different fields and sail different seas. The true Symbolist could no more rest content with the old truths and the old methods of eliciting the truth than could the experimental scientist.

Usually the Symbolist movement is thought of as having its roots in German Romanticism. I certainly would not argue against that view. But I believe it is an incomplete view that ignores the close connection that exists between Naturalism and Symbolism, isms that are often taken to be opposites. The accepted version of the advent of Symbolism is that it burst forth as a violent reaction against Realism and Naturalism. The Symbolists are pictured as lying in wait throughout the century for a chance to hurl themselves upon the naturalists. But why were they given this chance? And why at that particular time, in the late 1880s? And who gave them that opportunity? Not the scientists surely, who put no weapons in the hands of the Symbolists and who moved ever further away from a belief in a transcendental order. No, it was the naturalist writer and the naturalist painter, the Impressionist, who opened.
the door to the Symbolist. The whole development is spelled out in Strindberg, who more than any other artist bridges the gap between the two schools and reveals them as being joined together, like two sides of the same coin. In painting, the path from Realism to Impressionism to Postimpressionism is fairly clear and straight. And so is the path in literature and drama from Realism to Naturalism to Symbolism. Once the solid world of objects began to dissolve into impressions, it could only end as a world of light and color. And once physical things were endowed by the novelist and playwright with special significance, they became things of the spirit—symbols. And once matter was spiritualized, spirit became all that mattered.\(^{15}\)

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**Notes**


2 Munch was asked by the German theater director Max Reinhardt in 1906 to prepare sketches that would inspire the set designer for the production at the Kammerspiele, Berlin.


7 "Manifeste des Cinq." *Le Figaro* (August 18, 1887).


10 The first version of Maeterlinck's essay appeared with the title "A propos de Solness le Constructeur," in *Le Figaro* (April 2, 1894).


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14 Ibid., p. 119.


18 Compare Maurice Denis's view in 1896 of the development from Naturalism to Symbolism: "Phenomena signified states of mind, and that is symbolism. Matter had become expressive; the flesh was made word. Taine and Spencer showed us the way." Quoted in Delevoy (cited n. 8).

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