2 Symbolism, Impressionism and ‘Exteriority’

Chapter 1 offered a critical vocabulary and a philosophical model for empathetic and abstract expressionist Symbolism. This dual perspective will now be utilised to investigate the immediate context of ideas and influences for the period 1908–14 on which this study focuses. The key theme is the determined rejection of the dispassionate objectivity of the prevailing Naturalist aesthetic and consequent emergence of the varieties of anti-materialist aesthetics which dominated all pre-war movements in art and poetry.

My account concentrates on the literary impact of developments in the visual arts. There are two reasons for this approach: first, its anticipation of my analysis of Imagism/Vorticism as a movement intended to unite all the arts; secondly, the widespread and reiterated emphasis in the 1890s on innovations in both art and literature as complementary expressions of the same anti-materialist sensibility. I make no pretence to an all-inclusive survey of art-criticism in the 1890s; this would lead me far from the continuum of aesthetic theory which I am tracing. Instead my inquiry is mainly restricted to writers of acknowledged stature, such as Yeats, Symons and Moore, and to artists or minor literary figures with whom they enjoyed friendships and who were in a position to influence the formation of their ideas—for example, Selwyn Image, Walter Sickert, D. S. MacColl and Wilson Steer. Only incidental treatment is devoted to technical innovations in painting, for these were almost entirely ignored by the literary figures under discussion.

Several external factors precipitated the aesthetic revolution of the 1890s. In the post-Romantic world varieties of nature mysticism had assumed the role of a surrogate religion. A more popular specific for agnosticism was, however, a secular faith in indefinite human perfectibility, derived either from evolutionary positivism or historical theories based on still rudimentary sociological investigation. The widespread mid-Victorian conviction that social problems...
would be eradicated necessarily as the result of advances in science and industry (losing its hold as optimistic dreams remained unrealised at the end of the century), provoked an artistic reaction against middle-class complacency, accompanied by aesthetic revulsion from the vulgarity of contemporary taste. The widespread cultivation of a Baudelairean, dandy-like aloofness was an individualistic assertion of the artist's singularity in a world of bourgeois mediocrity and utilitarian practicality. Flamboyant nonconformism was the social counterpart of the supposed 'Idealist' philosophies adopted by many French Symbolists, which in practice were generally reducible to detached slogans justifying the uniqueness of personal perception.  

In England Idealism tended to reflect more narrowly anxiety about the loss of religious assurances; the creation of an alternative world of the imagination fulfilled an emotional need in the spiritual vacuum produced by nineteenth-century materialism. Herbert Spencer offered a reformulation of d'Holbach's mechanistic universe, all the more devastating and apparently irrefutable in its determinism for the intervening growth in scientific expertise, while urban and industrial expansion literalised the worst nightmares of the Romantics, creating squalor, isolating man from the natural world and further fragmenting society. The higher criticism of the Bible undermined the confidence of those hitherto able to maintain their religious faith, while geological and astronomical discoveries cast scriptural truth further into question. Man's moral dignity demanded that he devise an emotionally and imaginatively satisfying alternative which would restore some significance to existence. The resulting anti-materialism found divergent expression in the Oxford neo-Hegelian movement, culminating in the Idealism of Bosanquet and Bradley; the strengthening of the Anglo-Catholic ritualistic faction within the Church of England (although this had a detrimental effect on popular religious faith); and the many conversions to Catholicism during the 1890s. Less orthodox and more fashionable solutions were offered by the Theosophical Society founded in New York in 1875 to propagate the doctrines of 'Esoteric Buddhism', which soon expanded in England, where its monthly, \textit{Lucifer}, began publication in 1877. A comparable appeal was exercised by the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882), whose surprisingly extensive membership combined professional psychologists, men of letters, artists, politicians and socialites. It answered the requirements of scientific research in an era which