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ARTHUR SYMONS AND W. B. YEATS: THE QUEST FOR COMPROMISE

WHEN ARTHUR SYMONS DIED in 1945 at the age of eighty, his death was acknowledged by the few who noticed it as little more than the belated departure of a literary anachronism. Richard Jennings, for example, in his obituary in the February 17 issue of *The New Statesman*, noted his passing with these words:

Last month died—physically, officially, notifiably—Arthur Symons, born in 1865: poet, dramatist, impressionist traveller, eager enquirer into the theory and practice of what it pleased him to enumerate the 'seven arts': the arts of literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, handicraft, dancing and the stage. I make them eight; but it does not matter. It is, however, important to note that the indefatigable writer who in 1886 produced a slim volume on Browning which Browning tried to dissuade him from writing, the associate of all the 'Ninetyish' poets and critics of the Rhymers' Club, the too faithful disciple of Walter Pater, the friend and companion of George Moore and W. B. Yeats, died mentally—or to all creative effort—in 1908. Thereafter, all that was published under his name must be 'received with caution'.

Jennings was right, of course, in making 1908 the end of Symons' career as an effective writer, for it was then, while vacationing in Italy, that he suffered the mental breakdown which necessitated his confinement in a mental institution, and though two years later he was released and allowed to resume his interrupted literary career, it was evident that he was only in imperfect control of his faculties. His work after 1908 is rambling and undistinguished, usually a clumsy revision of material he had composed before his breakdown, liberally interlarded with personal reminiscence, the point of which is sometimes difficult to determine. Before 1908, however, he had been one of the foremost critics of his day, a poet of considerable talent if somewhat limited range, and on intimate terms with most of the leading literary figures both in England and on the Continent.

It is not my purpose, however, to re-examine Symons' achievement and

attempt to rescue him from the facetious disparagement of such people as Richard Jennings, though, indeed, a thorough re-appraisal of Symons' work is long overdue; rather, I propose to consider those years when Symons and W. B. Yeats were close friends, and, I hope, to demonstrate the importance of this relationship for both men.

The exact date of their first meeting is not known, but in a letter to Katherine Tynan dated March 29, 1891, Yeats refers to his recently published poem, "The Man Who Dreamed of Fairyland", asks his correspondent if she liked it, and adds: "Henley liked it very much and some friends here say it is my best; that is to say Arthur Symons and Edward Garnett do." As this is Yeats' first recorded reference to Symons, it seems likely that the two men became acquainted at the Rhymers' Club, which flourished at this time and to which both Symons and Yeats belonged. At first, though, Yeats was not taken with Symons at all, and preferred the company of Lionel Johnson. Indeed, Yeats has said in his *Autobiography* that initially he was "repelled" by Symons, because "with a superficial deduction" from "Anima Vagula", a chapter in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, he believed that Symons saw nothing in literature other than a "source of impassioned philosophy". But when Johnson's alcoholism became noticeably excessive and his impressive anecdotes of his intimacy with the great became more obviously fictitious, Yeats' friendship cooled and he became more closely attached to Symons instead.

For one thing, Yeats came to admire Symons' poetic technique. Johnson used to sneer at Symons' "Parisian impressionism . . . a London fog, the blurred, tawny lamplight, the red omnibus, the dreary rain, the depressing mud, the glaring gin shop, the slatternly shivering women, three dexterous stanzas telling you that and nothing more". Nevertheless Symons, together with Herbert Horne, Dowson, and Johnson himself, had what Yeats at this time felt he lacked, "conscious deliberate craft", and what he felt he must always lack, "scholarship."

Not only that, but as Yeats became better acquainted with Symons he discovered that unlike the other Rhymers he did seem to regard poetry as a vital force, an art which invited theoretical speculation. This attitude appealed to Yeats, even though it annoyed the other members of the Club. In a newspaper article of 1892, Yeats mentions the irritation he provoked when he attempted "to explain a philosophy of poetry in which [he] was profoundly interested, and to show the dependence, as [he] conceived it, of all great art and literature upon conviction and upon heroic life." And Symons fared no better either. He would sometimes say, "We are concerned with nothing but

impressions", but that too "was a generalisation and met with a stony silence." The trouble was, so it seemed to Yeats, that the Rhymers had ceased to see literature as the "handmaid of humanity", and had come to regard it instead as a "terrible queen, in whose service the stars rose and set, and for whose pleasure life stumbles along in the darkness." But for Symons, as for Yeats, poetry was a useful art, and just because it was useful, it deserved to be talked about and examined closely in an effort to establish dogmas which might clarify its function and make apparent its usefulness. So Yeats did find that he had something in common with Symons after all; their friendship ripened; and together they visited Paris in 1894 when Symons took him to see Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axel*, and supplemented Yeats' imperfect understanding of the French language with paraphrases and comments, sufficient to enable him to write a review of the play for *The Bookman*.

By 1895, Yeats had moved into rooms adjoining those of Symons in Fountain Court, where the two men shared an ever-increasing intimacy. Symons was apparently a good man to talk to, for he, as Yeats said in his *Autobiography*, more than anyone else he had ever known "could slip as it were into the mind of another", and Yeats found that his thoughts gained in richness and clarity from his friend's sympathy and understanding. To Symons, Yeats confided his hopeless passion for Maud Gonne and told him about his affair with Olivia Shakespeare, but most of the time the two men seemed to have talked about art and literature. In his *Autobiography* Yeats wondered how much of his own theory and practice he owed to the passages Symons read to him from Catullus, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, and on looking back it seemed to him that they "always discussed life at its most intense moment, that moment which gives a common sacredness to the Song of Solomon, and to the Sermon on the Mount, and in which one discovers something supernatural, a stirring as it were, of the roots of the hair." At that time, wrote Yeats, Symons was "making those translations from Mallarmé and from Verlaine, from Calderon, from St. John of the Cross, which are the most accomplished metrical translations of our time, and I think that those from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the later poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to *The Shadowy Waters*, while Villiers de l'Isle Adam had shaped whatever in my "Rosa Alchemica" Pater had not shaped." Once, too, after reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Yeats considered whether

. . . an individual of great emotional intensity might follow the pilgrims as it were to some unknown shrine, and give to all that abstract love and melancholy, a symbolical, a mythological coherence. Not Chaucer's rough-tongued riders, but

rather an ended pilgrimage, a procession of the Gods! Arthur Symons brought back from Paris stories of Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, and so brought me confirmation, as I thought, and I began to announce a poetry like that of the Sufi's.

That Symons should have been the agent responsible for Yeats' determination to write "poetry like that of the Sufi's" is perhaps rather curious, for Symons' aesthetic preoccupations up until this time were far from mystical. Born into a strict, nonconformist home in the West country, Symons had quickly rebelled against all that the provinces and John Wesley stood for, had left for London before he was barely out of his teens, and had thrown himself into the gay, bohemian whirl. He had written rather self-conscious poems of a frankly erotic nature, which extolled the charm of the artificial and the rapture of bought kisses, and in his leisure time had pursued chorus girls with a grave and relentless enthusiasm. Such a poem as "Maquillage", for example, included in Symons' 1892 collection, *Silhouettes*, praises

The charm of rouge on fragile cheeks,
 Pearl powder, and, about the eyes,
 The dark and lustrous eastern dyes;
 A voice of violets that speaks
 Of perfumed hours of day, and doubtful night
 Of alcoves curtained close against the light,—

which hardly betokens an interest in mysticism. And in "Idealism", another poem typical of Symons at this time, only in this instance from his 1895 collection, *London Night*, he avers that "woman has no soul . . . but merely is the masterpiece of flesh." Indeed, none of the poems Symons wrote during the early years of the Nineties suggest that he was at all interested in spiritual values, and Yeats' own description of Symons in his *Autobiography* does not suggest that he was much interested in mysticism either. Yeats believed that Symons

was not interested in passion. A woman drew him to her by some romantic singularity in her beauty or her circumstance, and drew him the more if the curiosity she aroused were half intellectual. A little after the time I write of, throwing himself into my chair after some visit to a music-hall or hippodrome, he began, 'O Yeats, I was never in love with a serpent-charmer before!' He was objective. For him 'the visible world existed,' as he was fond of quoting, and I suspect him of a Moon that had entered its fourth quarter.

A person "for whom the visible world existed" would seem ill-suited for the role of one who would make apparent the possibilities of a poetry "like that of the Sufi's", but around 1895, Symons, for all his evident determination to

find happiness through gratification of the senses, had come to feel the inadequacy of the hedonist's position.

The forces which prompted Symon's changes of attitude are various and complex. For one thing, he had not really escaped from his non-conformist background. His bohemianism was, if not exactly a pose, at least a sub-conscious attempt to free himself from the restrictive demands of his religious upbringing, an attempt to break with the past. But as he grew older he became aware that his Methodism was more deeply rooted than he thought, and had left him with a strong sense of right and wrong and a belief in the spirit. Furthermore, around 1893 Symons had met "Lydia", a dancer from the Empire, who captivated him entirely and by whom he was ultimately rejected; he never fully recovered from the shock. In his writings he refers to her constantly, sometimes by name and sometimes by a pseudonym, and even as late as his seventy-fifth year the memory of her was still sufficiently strong to prompt him to publish privately a pamphlet called *Amoris Victima*, in which he described the affair in some detail and reprinted some of the poems which she had inspired. This is not the place to discuss Symons' relationship with "Lydia", yet it is perhaps worth noting that Lydia was also the name of Symons' mother, who died shortly after the unhappy ending of his love affair, and it is possible that the coincidence was not lost on Symons, serving as reminder of the transience of earthly things, perhaps even as an indication that a vengeful God was watching over him and punishing him for his former transgressions. In 1895 there had been the trial and subsequent imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, which prompted a number of his *fin-de-siècle* contemporaries, Symons included, to take refuge in France until the fuss had died down. This too, though Symons was in no way connected with the Wilde scandal, must have brought home to him the dangers which attached to an indiscriminate pursuit of sensual pleasure. Finally, we cannot discount the effect which the previous conversions of Verlaine and Huysmans must have made upon him. Both writers were intensely admired by Symons, and he believed that they had turned to the Church simply because they had exhausted all the pleasures life had to offer them.

In short, around 1895-96—interestingly enough, the same date which Max Beerbohm chose to mark the end of what he called "the Beardsley Period"—Symons had reached a crucial stage in his development. The loss of a beloved mistress and a mother in quick succession, the impact of the Wilde affair, and the previous example of the conversions of Huysmans and Verlaine, must have made a profound effect on Symons, who was a sensitive man, prone to super-

stitious fears and oppressed by the guilt which attended the rejection of his religious upbringing. Indeed, in many ways Symons must have felt rather like des Esseintes, the hero of Huysman's *A Rebours*, who, at the end of the novel, his nervous system at the point of collapse, feels that there are only two alternatives open to him: a choice, in Barbey d'Aureville's words, between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross. But Symons was not to convert to Roman Catholicism; instead he fell under the influence of Yeats, who introduced him to his own version of the spirit world and encouraged his interest in mysticism.

There are explicit signs of Symons' change of attitude in an account of a holiday he spent in Ireland with Yeats during the summer of 1895, which he later published in *The Savoy*. The greater part of the essay is simply descriptive, but he concluded with these words:

Among these solid and shifting things, in this castle which is at once so ancient a reality and so essential a dream, I feel myself to be in some danger of loosening the tightness of my hold upon external things, of forgoing many delectable pleasures, of forgetting many things I have passionately learnt in cities. If I lived here too long I should forget that I am a Londoner and remember that I am a Cornishman. And that would so embarrass my good friends of the Celtic Renaissance! No decidedly, I have no point among these remote idealists: I must come back to London, for I have perceived the insidious danger of idealism ever since I came into these ascetic regions.

By 1899, however, the publication date of Symons' best known work, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, he is no longer wary of the "insidious danger of idealism" and has in fact decided that he does have some "point" among the "remote idealists" after all. The book itself is dedicated to Yeats, and in the Preface Symons makes clear his debt to his friend in encouraging the view of literature he propounds. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is the way Symons' treatment of such writers as Verlaine, Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, and Huysmans differs from the way he had regarded them earlier. Previously Symons had written about those writers whom he now calls "Symbolists" in "The Decadent Movement in Literature", an article which had appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in November, 1893. At that time, as the title of the essay would suggest, that which distinguished them was their "decadence", a "restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity", and the essence of the movement, as typified by the poetry of Verlaine, was the "fixing of the last fine shade,

the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul", for poetry ought to be "something vague, intangible, evanescent, a winged soul in flight 'toward other skies and other loves'." In *The Symbolist Movement*, however, there is a modification of emphasis. "Decadence" is used only in relation to style, "that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé, for instance", and the main impetus behind the movement as he now sees it is an "attempt to spiritualise literature." So Symons looks to the future, conscious of the heavy responsibility poetry has taken on: "For in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual." It will not provide us "with a guide to conduct" nor "with a plan for our happiness" nor even "with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art." The final uncertainty remains, but we seem to knock less helplessly at closed doors, coming so much closer to the once terrifying eternity of things about us, as we come to look upon these things as shadows, through which we have our shadowy passage." And so,

As we realise the identity of a poem, a prayer, or a kiss, in that spiritual universe which we are weaving for ourselves, each out of a thread of the great fabric; as we realise the infinite insignificance of action, its immense distance from the current of life; as we realise the delight of feeling ourselves carried onward by forces which it is our wisdom to obey; it is at least with a certain relief that we turn to an ancient doctrine, so much the more likely to be true because it has so much the air of a dream. On this theory alone does all life become worth living, all art worth making, all worship worth offering.

If we know something of Symons' life previous to the publication of *The Symbolist Movement*, it is impossible not to catch the personal note here. Exhausted by a life dedicated to the gratification of the senses, Symons sought transcendence, and the surest way to heaven was up a Symbolist Parnassus. Like Arnold, only in a different way and for different reasons, Symons had come to find in literature, or at least in a certain kind of literature, a surrogate for religion.

Thus it was the author of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* rather than the poet of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* who made Yeats want to write poetry "like that of the Sufi's." Yet it would be a mistake to assume that "Symbolism" was precisely the same thing for Yeats as it was for Symons.

Unlike Symons, Yeats was a man for whom the spirit world existed, and so he was not looking for intimations of the reality which lay beyond the senses. He accepted the spirit world for a fact, and was concerned with making that world known to his readers. So while Symons found in Symbolist literature a possible substitute for religion, Yeats regarded it primarily as a possible model for the kind of poetry he wished to write. Before his association with Symons, Yeats' poetry had been somewhat restricted in its scope. His knowledge of Irish folklore and myth and his study of Blake and Mme. Blavatsky had given him a useful symbology which enabled him to extend the spiritual dimensions of his poetry, but even so it lacked universality: Irish symbols were too local, and Rosicrucian symbols were too esoteric. Hence Yeats' enthusiasm for the French Symbolists, whose deliberately vague and evocative symbols seemed to provide him with an effective solution. So, in "The Autumn of the Body", an essay occasioned by what Symons himself had written about the French Symbolists, though antedating *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by one year, Yeats described how in his early poetry he had "desired to describe outward things as vividly as possible", and how he then moved from this position to a delight in the "spiritual and unemphatic." Possibly with Symons in mind, Yeats goes on to tell us that "man has wooed and won the world, and has fallen weary", and that now "he must be philosophical above everything, even about the arts, for he can only return the way he came, and so escape weariness, by philosophy." Then, in language which foreshadows Symons' Conclusion to *The Symbolist Movement*, he tells us:

The Arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essence of things. We are about to substitute once more the distillation of alchemy for the analyses of chemistry and for some other sciences; and certain of us are looking everywhere for the perfect alembic that no silver or golden drop may escape.

In conclusion, resting his argument on what Symons had said about Mallarmé in an essay later to be included in *The Symbolist Movement*, Yeats asserts that "poetry will henceforth be a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little intense poems", the result of "an ever more arduous search for an almost disembodied ecstasy."

Just what this entailed is made clear by another essay of these years, "Symbolism in Poetry", in which Yeats insists upon "a casting out of description of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral

law, a casting out of all anecdotes and . . . brooding over scientific opinion . . . and of that vehemence that would make us do certain things. . . ." Moreover,

with this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running . . . , and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing, when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of voluptuous life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.

These theories Yeats put into practice in a number of poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, as for example in "The Valley of the Black Pig", which incidentally was also published in Symons' own *Savoy*. It is an effective poem, but as A. Norman Jeffares in his revised *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* has pointed out, it seems not entirely "honest." There is something factitious about the recondite literary and mythological allusions and the elaborate notes which accompanied the poem, drawing the reader's attention to *The Golden Bough* and Rhys' *Celtic Heathendom*; there is the inescapable feeling that vengeance has been deliberately cultivated, that the symbols have been put in to throw a cloak of too palpable mystery over the poem. It is, in short, too obviously "poetic."

But Symons liked this kind of poem, as he made clear in a most flattering review of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, later included in his 1904 collection, *Studies in Prose and Verse*. In this volume of poems, wrote Symons, Yeats had become "completely master of himself and of his own resources." Here indeed was a poet, the "only one among the younger poets who has the whole poetical temperament, and nothing but the poetical temperament." Symons further demonstrated his approval of Yeats' achievement by adopting many of his mannerisms in his own poetry of the time. In *Images of Good and Evil*, for example, a collection of poems published in 1899 and evidently intended as a sort of companion piece to Yeats' collection of essays, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, which included both "The Autumn of the Body" and "Symbolism in Poetry", Yeats' influence is unmistakable. In "The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias", for instance, the dance is used with full consciousness of its symbolic

possibilities, and in the same poem there is a dancer, Salome, compared to a tree, a comparison favoured by Yeats; in "Stella Maligna", "Rosa Flammea", and "Parsifal", the roses which blossom there seem to have been plucked from the Cabbalistic tree rather than picked up from where Dowson had flung them; and in such a poem as "The Last Memory", Yeatsian echoes are particularly noticeable:

When I am old, and think of the old days,
 And warm my hands before a little blaze,
 Having forgotten love, hope, fear, desire,
 I shall see, smiling out of the pale fire,
 One face, mysterious and exquisite;
 And I shall gaze, and ponder over it,
 Wondering, was it Leonardo wrought
 That stealthy ardency, where passionate thought
 Burns inward, a revealing flame, and glows
 To the last ecstasy, which is repose?
 Was it Bronzino, those Borghese eyes?
 And, musing thus among my memories,
 O unforgotten! you will come to seem,
 As pictures do, remembered, some old dream.
 And I shall think of you as something strange,
 Which I beheld and carried in my heart;
 But you, I loved, will have become a part
 Of the eternal mystery, and love
 Like a dim pain; and I shall bend above
 My little fire, and shiver, being cold,
 When you are no more young, and I am old.

Here, the opening lines are obviously an echo of Yeats'

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
 And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
 And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep,—

But it is also interesting to note that Yeats seems to have taken something from Symons too, for the lines:

... was it Leonardo wrought
 That stealthy ardency?

 Was it Bronzino, those Borghese eyes?

seem to foreshadow Yeats' "Among School Children":

Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

Clearly, in *Images of Good and Evil* Symons owes a considerable debt to Yeats, and in his next volume of poems, *The Loom of Dreams* (first published in 1901), as the very title suggests, Symons makes an attempt to weave his own "cloths of heaven." Of course, it is not always possible to determine who is influencing whom, but it seems likely that Symons benefited more than his friend, and anyway this is not what matters here. Sufficient it is to demonstrate that at this time both men subscribed to a similar aesthetic, wrote on similar themes, and sometimes used similar images and symbols.

In general, the poems of both *Images of Good and Evil* and *The Loom of Dreams* are, in Yeats' own words, "spiritual and unemphatic", but by the time the second of these two volumes had appeared, Yeats was having second thoughts about the effectiveness of the kind of poetry he had described in "The Autumn of the Body" and "Symbolism in Poetry." Previously, he had maintained "that the renewal of belief which is the great movement of our time, will more and more free men to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves like all great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with old faiths, myths and dreams, the accumulated beauty of the age." Now, however, Yeats asserted a different doctrine which brought poetry closer to physical reality without sacrificing its spiritual qualities. He recognized that "delight in the whole man—blood, imagination, intellect, running together" had been lost, and in its place had come an enthusiasm for "essences . . . states of mind . . . pure imagination, in all that comes . . . most easily in elaborate music." It was necessary, therefore, as he remarked in *Discoveries*, that one should remember that

There are two ways before literature—upward into ever-growing subtlety, with Verhaeren, with Mallarmé, with Maeterlinck, until, at last, it may be, a new agreement among refined and studious men gives birth to a new passion and what seems literature becomes religion; or downward, taking the soul with us until all is simplified and solidified again. That is the choice of choices—the way of the bird until common eyes have lost us, or to the market-carts; but we must see to it that the soul goes with us, for the bird's song is beautiful, and the traditions of modern imagination, growing always more musical, more lyrical, more melancholy, casting up now a Shelley, now a Swinburne, now a Wagner, are, it may be, the frenzy of those that are about to see . . . the Crown of Living and Melodious

Diamonds. If the carts have hit our fancy we must have the soul tight within our bodies, for it has grown so fond of beauty accumulated by subtle generations that it will be for a long time impatient with our thirst for mere force, mere personality, for the tumult of the blood.

The ideal was, of course, where the two extremes could be brought together, joined in harmony, and so in his important essay of 1907, "Poetry and Tradition", Yeats asserted that

The nobleness of the Arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, marmorean stillness. . . .

Lady Gregory is usually given the credit for leading Yeats out of the Mallarméan mists and bringing him back to earth, because it was she who at the turn of the century sensed that the poet's mystical wanderings were leading nowhere, and whisked him off to her dignified and well-ordered household at Coole Park, Ballylee, where she gave him fortifying cups of hot broth and encouraged him to tramp about the countryside, calling on the peasantry to collect first-hand accounts of traditional Irish myths. It is possible, however, that Yeats became sharply aware of the deficiencies of his previous aesthetic by noting Symons' frustrations in attempting to live up to the mystical demands implicit in the kind of poetry both men had aspired to write.

In both *Images of Good and Evil* and *The Loom of Dreams* there are signs that Symons found some difficulty in rejecting earthly pleasures for those of the spirit. Certainly he seems to have tried to leave this world behind, as is clear from the conclusion of "Faustus and Helen", the last poem in *The Loom of Dreams*, where Faustus dismisses Helen with these words:

The colour of the world is washed away,
Helen, and there is nothing in the world
Worth looking on; your eyes have looked on Greece.
Desire not life, there is no room for life,
There is no place for beauty in the world.
I did not call you hither for your peace,
Not for your peace, although I sought for peace
In finding you; and now I cannot find
The peace I sought; this prison of the world,
These massy walls, barred windows, iron bolts,
Would close upon you and suck out your breath
Like a slow sickness; but now rejoice, return

To the universal nothingness of air:
Depart, it is your freedom.

In a poem in his 1906 collection, significantly entitled *The Fool of the World and Other Poems*, Symons, however, makes what he calls "Amends to Nature", and complains that he has wasted more than half his hours "without the comradeship of things." But perhaps the most explicit statement of Symons' dilemma is in a poem called "Felpham", included in the same volume. At Felpham, writes Symons:

Blake saw the seventy-seven
Stairs and golden gates of heaven;
He said, 'Come, for heaven is there;
He saw heaven where I see
Only divine earth and sea.

What is it, then, "what strong lust of mortal eyes/ Shuts me out of Paradise?"
But, he goes on, never mind,

I can see, and 'tis enough
For my appetite of love,
Waters yellow, rose and green,
Like the meadow-colours seen
In an opal absinthine
To the sea's pale and level line;
Lavender and yellow sand,
With painted pebbles near the land;
Moss-grown groins all over-hung
With brown-leaved wreaths of seaweed, flung
By the sea to cover them. . . .

In short, what seems to have happened is that Symons, with Yeats' encouragement, had striven to transcend the actual and contemplate the eternal, but as he was, as Yeats noted, "a man for whom the visible world existed", he was never entirely successful.

In Symons' poetry the worlds of flesh and spirit are kept apart and the poet oscillates uncertainly between them, but in his less personal, more theoretical writings, Symons manages to effect the kind of synthesis Yeats believed necessary for those who would attain the "nobleness of the Arts." Instead of a tension between the two worlds we have a true "mingling of contraries", where "overflowing turbulent energy" and "marmorean stillness" are reconciled. In the conclusion to his essay, "The World as Ballet", originally

published in *The Dome* but later included in *Studies in Seven Arts*, Symons asserts the desirability of syncretism:

Something in the particular elegance of the dance, the scenery; the avoidance of emphasis, the evasive winding turn of things; and above all the intellectual as well as the sensuous appeal of a living symbol, which can but reach the brain through the eyes, in the visual, concrete, imaginative way; has seemed to make the ballet concentrate into itself a good deal of the modern ideal in terms of artistic expression. Nothing is stated, there is no intrusion of words used for the irrelevant purpose of describing; a world rises before one, the picture lasts only long enough to have been there: and the dancer, with her gesture, all pure symbol, evokes from her mere beautiful motion, idea, sensation, all that one need ever know of event. There, before you, she exists, in harmonious life; and her rhythm reveals to you the soul of her imagined being.

The equilibrium between inactivity and motion, soul and body, "marmorean stillness" and "turbulent energy", is similarly suggested in Symons' remarks about the acting of Eleonora Duse in the same volume: "The outline of the face is motionless, set hard clenched into immobility, but within that motionless outline every nerve seems awake, expression after expression sweeps over it"; it is also suggested in his description of the Cathedral Church of Our Lady of Amiens, also from *Studies in Seven Arts*: "Every part has the finish of a miniature, and there is something actually dainty in this vast church; in which a singular precision in its proportions never becomes a mechanical regularity, is never cold, but retains the heat of that first 'excitement' out of which it was first created"; and finally, also from the same volume, it is suggested in his approval of the work of Rodin, "who turns sculpture into life."

In other words, where Symons' deepest emotions were uninvolved, where he could be, above all, theoretical and dispassionate, he found little difficulty in making the necessary compromise. But in situations which demanded of him more than a distant, intellectual involvement, he failed. Thus he hated Russia as a result of his trip to that country during the hot summer of 1897, described in his volume, *Cities*, where he found the physical discomfort almost more than he could bear, and his one enduring impression was the cool seclusion of the Strasnoi Convent, where Moscow and its "noise and heat seemed shut off as by a veil of quiet." In his relations with women, as Yeats had pointed out, Symons was "not interested in passion." Of the fullness of love he knew nothing.

In Symons' last published piece of writing before his breakdown, "Music In Venice", which he contributed to *The Saturday Review*, October 17, 1908,

the antinomies of experience, reconciled so convincingly in his criticism and constantly at odds in his more personal writings and in his life, finally clash in a discordant strain of forced gaiety and fearful pessimism, "turbulent energy" and "marmorean stillness." It is here in this confused, rather frightening account that we have a microcosmic view of the clash of forces which was perhaps responsible for the madness that was soon to overtake him:

The music of Venice which is most often heard is the harsh songs of the gondoliers; next the serenatas at night, and lastly the military bands in the Piazza. The songs are of few words, with a small tune; they are improvisations of folk-songs; they are the love of the people; the people can only express the deepest part of their heart in these monotonous, slow, wailing strains gathered out of the past. The music is fine, languid and melancholy, and poignant, with melodies full of tears and pain, and lamentations on the sea, in the boat, or by the hearth at home. Venice is the city of song, she is the earth's lyric voice, the vox populi.

The band has immense vigour and a pair of drums with an infinite number of brass instruments. They play with bangs and outbursts, and they play the music chosen by them with discretion. Pergolesi, Wagner, above all Boito, who is immensely and deservedly popular. What vivid, resonant and romantic strains, what a gay and rattling Mephistopheles with his sharp music in a jigging measure! The music spreads out broadly, the musicians heightened with it, and cries and praises go up to the sky with a triumphant acclamation. What colour, variety, with melody and harmony, in this brilliant and boisterous music! Patriotic songs are also popular and heroic chansons.

Every evening, as night approaches, the sound of singing at a great distance is heard across the water. It comes nearer and a gondola is seen, floating with the tide, decorated with Chinese lanterns, and carrying one or two men and women. Their voices are high and low, sometimes speech, and they sing what may be improvisations on folk-tunes, with lovely melodies of a peculiar kind. . . . Poignant, passionate songs, you tell some of the secrets of these narrow calles and canals and of the houses hidden away at the end of narrow lanes, sudden splendour among slums. Songs of Venice, poignant, passionate, melancholy and gay songs of Venice, what is really your meaning, what lies under the beauty of your melodies?

And so the account continues, the perspective shifting from the "gondolas gliding, gliding, pushing forward" along the canals, to the music of the military band which "blazes and crackles like hell-fire", to the Goldoni operatic farce, whose music was "gay, rattling, sipid, voluptuously melodious, drums and cymbals principal characters, with powerful brass", till at last Symons, aboard his personal *bateau ivre*, a Venetian gondola, drifts away "through many calles, dark and narrow, with glimpses of sky."

Ultimately, Symons found the dichotomies irreconcilable; he was unable to make the necessary compromise, and soon he entered a world where such things no longer mattered. It is ironic, therefore, that Richard Jennings, whose cruelly facetious obituary of Symons was quoted earlier, should have referred to him as "the too faithful disciple of Walter Pater." The trouble was that he was not faithful enough. In *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* Pater had written of the genius of the Greeks in achieving "*Allgemeinheit*—breadth, generality, universality", and had pointed out that they sought constantly the "type in the individual, to abstract and express only what is structural and permanent, to purge from the individual all that belongs to him, all the accidents, the feelings and actions of special moments, all that is apt to look like a frozen thing if one arrests it." But he had also said that such an ideal "involved to a certain degree the sacrifice of what we call *expression*", and as a result this "system of abstraction which aimed always at the broad and general type, at the purging away from the individual of . . . mere accidents of a particular time and place, imposed upon the range of effects open to the Greek sculptor limits somewhat narrowly defined." Michelangelo, however, brought to sculpture "individuality and intensity of expression", which led Pater to posit the ideal where the forces of what he called "medievalism" and "Hellenism" meet. If man was to be saved from "*ennui* which ever attaches itself to realisation . . . it was necessary that a conflict should come, that some sharper note should grieve the existing harmony and the spirit chafed by it beat out at last only a larger and profounder music." This "larger and profounder music" Symons did achieve in certain of his critical writings, but never in himself. For him the quest for order, the reconciliation of body and soul, "turbulent energy" and "marmorean stillness", or to shift to Paterian terminology, "medievalism" and "Hellenism", led ultimately to the padded cell; for Yeats, however, artistically and emotionally more sure of himself, the journey culminated in "the holy city of Byzantium."