ARTHUR SYMONS

(28 February **1865–**22 January **1945)**

As both a poet and a critic, Arthur Symons was arguably the most significant figure in the Modernist initiative that emerged from Aestheticism, Symbolism, and nineties "Decadence." He was one of the key members of the famous Rhymers' Club and in late 1895 helped found and was literary editor of *The Savoy,* probably the era's best literary magazine. He was also certainly one of the greatest critics of his time and surely the most prolific. Writing with great speed, he produced—not including many unpublished works—an astonishing total of some 60 books, 75 editions, and 1300 articles, reviews, and notes over his career. His productivity was Herculean: he *averaged* in *every year* between 1892 and 1908 over 65 articles, reviews, poems, stories, or other works. Moreover, as a devotee of London's risqué music-halls, he was revolutionary in applying high-art principles to the previously denigrated art of popular culture. By the end of the century, he was known by virtually everyone who was anyone in literary and artistic circles of England and France, and in the process had become a major spokesperson for the cultural avant-garde.

Although his bloodlines were reportedly much more Cornish than Welsh, Arthur Symons was born in Milford Haven, Wales, the son of a puritanical Wesleyan minister Mark Symons and Lydia Pascoe, a quiet and sensitive woman fond of the arts. Symons's modest formal education ended abruptly when he notified his parents that he would no longer attend church and that he would rather starve than go into business, then left for London to pursue a literary career. He began publishing scholarly studies regularly at only 17 years old, and despite the lack of a university education, within a very few years was a respected critic winning accolades from the leading figures in London literary circles. His first book of criticism, at age 21, was *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (1886), and his first book of poetry *Days and Nights* (1889), modeled on Browning's work, was a series of psychological dramatic monologues. Symons's aesthetic principles would also derive from Browning (as well as Walter Pater), emphasizing the need to isolate and reveal the human soul in strikingly significant dramatic moments. He modeled his prose style after Walter Pater, whose famous *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) he claimed "opened a new world to me, or, rather, gave me the key or secret of the world in which I was living." He would amplify and greatly extend his version of this key in his second and third books of poetry, *Silhouettes* (1892) and the notorious *London Nights* (1895), which probed life in the "modern" city.

The foundation of Symons's "modern" world view lay across the Channel in France. In September 1889, Symons made his first trip to Paris, an "unforgettable" eight-day visit that "truly enchanted" him and reinforced in him his Baudelairean ties with bohemian life and his allegiance to the fin-de-siècle "Religion of Art." The latter commitment was no doubt strengthened when he shared rooms with William Butler Yeats in 1895–96 at 2 Fountain Court in the Temple area of London, which was Symons's home and base of operations for virtually the entire decade of the nineties. His second visit to Paris between mid-March and mid-June 1890 was even more significant, perhaps the most important experience of his youthful career, as he established contacts with numerous important French writers and artists—not least, his idols Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé. He would later host many of these famous artists and writers at Fountain Court, including Paul Verlaine during his much-cited visit to England in November 1892. Reacting against nineteenth-century scientific

materialism and Benthamite utilitarianism, Symons envisioned writers and artists as the necessary new priests of the imagination, who treated art as "a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual." Such "religion" would be a new way of seeing and conveying the world, "a form of expression . . . for an unseen reality," establishing "the links which hold the world together, the affirmation of an eternal, minute, intricate, almost invisible life, which runs through the whole universe"—even though such vision might be purchased at the price of "divine madness." It was perhaps a reflection of Symons's attraction to unconventional and dangerous modes of life that he tended throughout his life to associate genius and intense sensitivity with insanity and to dwell on the danger that dreams might loosen one's hold on "external things."

Symons increasingly believed the creative key to this transcendental and spiritual insight lay in the principles of the French Symbolist Movement. His famous article "The Decadent Movement in Literature," which originally appeared in November 1893, would be the seed of his later landmark critical study *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). In these texts Symons speaks of a necessary quest for *la vérité vraie*, "the very essence of truth," to "flash upon you . . . the soul—the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident." The "ideal of Decadence" was "To fix 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." He urged a "revolt from the ready-made of language, from the bondage of traditional form, of a form become rigid." His *Symbolist Movement* would become virtually a sacred book to such modernist British and American writers as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. Ezra Pound praised Symons for "knocking bombast, & rhetoric & Victorian syrup out of our verse." Mathilde Blind, one of the age's most powerful intellectuals, confidently predicted that Symons would be "the coming poet, the Poet of the New Time, for whom we were all looking."

In both his poetry and essays Symons was fascinated by the exotic and bizarre, and emphasizes the importance of intense, unconscious, primitive impulses. He saw strangeness as an essential characteristic of beauty, at times even tending to identify abnormality, the grotesque or the perverse, with artistic quality. His poems view the world in relation to its imperfection, its corruption, and suggest that in art's perfect expression of sin is a means of transcending sin, a form of morality itself, "sin transfigured by beauty," which is unavailable in the chaotic and disordered natural world. A frequent companion of actresses and dancers, Symons saw circus and music-hall performers as representing a liberation from puritanism, and demonstrating the exotic beauty and strength of the human form constantly seeking some means of merging the spiritual and the carnal, two forces which seemed constantly at war within Symons himself. In late 1893 Symons became deeply involved with a ballet dancer whom he met at the Empire Theatre and whom we know only as "Lydia" (interestingly, also his mother's name). This torrid and tempestuous relationship, which lasted some two and a half years and was Symons's "grand passion," became an obsession for the remainder of his life and shaped much of the focus of, and ideas in, his art. *Amoris Victima* (1897), which was modeled on George Meredith's famous *Modern Love* (1859), in effect traces the transformation from love to hate in Symons's relationship with Lydia. It is a record of the pain of deception and the agonizing memory of a once ecstatic love (or lust) now lost. The poems reflect a sense of imprisonment and a view of sex as separate from love, essentially cruel and victimizing, even pressing at the limits of human sanity. Symons's "love"poems in volumes like *London Nights* and *Amoris Victima* include frank depictions of sexual desire, yet much of the love-making is almost clinical rather than erotic. Its

intensity is often distanced by transforming the lover into a reflection (or projection) of the speaker's desire, a living work of art often uniting sinner and saint, innocence and corruption, voluptuousness and detachment, transient movement and frozen eternality.

Symons was increasingly struck by what he took to be "the universal instinct of cruelty" and his own share in it, being as a consequence often preoccupied by themes of punishment. At least in part as a result of his affair with the dancer Lydia, women often serve in Symons's work, at least in their roles as *femme fatales,* as cruel and relentless archetypes of desire, mythic symbols of lust—as vampires or entrapping sirens. It was a characterization in line with a general Decadent tendency to play the sacrificial victim as a means of neutralizing implicit guilt. The figure of Salome, for instance, was a lifelong obsession of Symons—a symbol of sterile, narcissistic autonomy and Symons's own potential for self-destructive isolation. His later essay "The World as Ballet" (1898), a continuation of his attempt to reconcile flesh and spirit through art, describes dance as an embodiment of both flux and stasis, a living symbol combining both animalistic sensory experience and spiritual transcendence, yet also an emblem for the isolated, perverse, sometimes dangerously self-absorbed artist. Symons repeatedly throws into question the "nature" of the woman dancer—turning her at various points into a erotic lover, demonic snake, predatory vampire, mysterious androgyne, or even a double of the desiring male narrator—the result being a fundamental erotic intensification, but also a dangerous neurotic erosion of the narrator's security.

Symons continued to produce high-quality work into the twentieth century. *Images of Good and Evil* (1900) was one of his better volumes of poetry and a technical advance over some of his previous verse. In 1905 he published a volume of fictional "character studies," *Spiritual Adventures,* most of which were written years earlier and modeled on Walter Pater's famous *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). In *Plays, Acting, and Music* (1903) he began "the concrete expression of a theory, or system of aesthetics, of all the arts," a mission he largely fulfilled in *Studies in Prose and verse* (1904) and in *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906), perhaps his most important book of criticism (next to *The Symbolist Movement*). *William Blake* (1907), one of his more important critical studies, draws parallels between Blake and Nietzsche, arguing for the existence of a "vital contradiction of opposites equally true" and the difficulty in coordinating those oppositions.

For all his intellectual intensity and belief in the virtues of passion, Symons was a fundamentally shy and gentle person, characteristically kind and compassionate even to those who wronged him. Despite purportedly being a womanizer, he was a rather submissive personality, often placing himself in the position of being dependent on strong but emotionally volatile women. In 1898, he met such a person in the aspiring actress, Rhoda Bowser, the daughter of a wealthy Newcastle businessman. Although she was wary of a relationship with Symons (she correctly assessed that they were both emotionally self-absorbed) and feared he would not be able to support her extravagant tastes (he categorically refused to live off any inheritance she received), they eventually set up house in a fourth-floor flat in Maida Vale, a bourgeois part of London, and subsequently married on January 19, 1901—Symons being dressed as usual all in black, which had become virtually a "signature" for him. As feared, despite Symons's enormous productivity, fairly regular employment as a drama and music critic (a job for which he had increasing distaste), and a rather frugal lifestyle aided by a mutual desire not to have children, the couple soon found it difficult to live on Arthur's earnings as a writer. He was soon under constant and increasing financial pressure, suffering depression. In 1906 the Symonses bought a late-17th-century timbered cottage in Wittersham, Kent, a purchase that provided

the sought-after restful country retreat but also placed an even more crushing financial burden on Arthur, which he sought to meet by taking on still more literary projects and hoping to complete them at an even more frenetic pace. Then on Christmas Day, 1907, he was stunned by the sudden death of his dog Api, a "surrogate child" to which he was profoundly attached and which had momentarily made him feel, as he said, "normal, human, like other people."

As a consequence, in late September 1908, having "rashly" accepted an invitation to stay in Venice, Symons had a psychotic breakdown, a "thunderbolt from hell"—suddenly disappearing to wander about various Italian cities in panic, falling into deep muddy ditches and ponds, and ending up manacled hand and foot in a dungeon. He was transferred to England, certified "incurably insane," and committed. His doctors, holding out no hope of recovery, predicted death within eighteen months. However, remarkable as ever, Symons miraculously improved and returned to a relatively normal life by the middle of 1910. He resumed his literary career, but although he continued to be quite productive through the late 1920s, he was never able to restore himself to his former brilliance or even raise his level of thinking to its previous lucid acuity, instead intermittently manifesting varying degrees of incoherence. He continued to keep company with the literary world, spending much time with Joseph Conrad and Maud Gonne, among others, and even trying to relive the period of his previous glory through nightly carouses in London or sentimental sojourns to Paris. However, for the most part, especially after the mid-1920s, Symons remained at Island Cottage in Wittersham, except for visits to the quiet Clifton Hill home that Rhoda was renting in London while pursuing an anemic acting career. In 1926, Rhoda's physical and psychological health began to worsen significantly, and a housekeeper, Mrs. Bessie Seymour, was retained to look after Symons until his death in 1945.

Although Symons often claimed that art had no obligation to morality—that art and morality were separate spheres—much of his own art is distinctly moral (even moralistic) in its premises and themes, among the most prevalent being an implicit respect for the moral will, an unrelenting guilt over forbidden desires, and a fear of eternal damnation. While he placed particular value and importance on passion, intensity, personally he also saw life in terms of extremes—to be authentic, the choice had to be "hell or heaven." He typically dwelt on psychological and spiritual crisis, particularly the impulse to self-destruction and the inherent danger of surrendering to a stronger will and having the security of one's self obliteration.

As a poet, fiction writer, playwright, theorist, scholar, editor, translator, unusually sensitive critic of all the arts, and writer of extraordinary prose, Arthur Symons was the embodiment of the Victorian *fin de siècle.* He championed the need for "aristocratic" Art as a necessary protest against a barbaric civilization indifferent to aesthetic and spiritual values. Symons's reputation declined after 1910, when Aestheticism (and certainly the "Decadence") fell into great disfavor, as it did during most of the twentieth century. However, his place in literary history is secure as a central figure in the Victorian nineties and as a major stimulus to Modernism, not least for the key insights his art and criticism have provided.