

# **‘The measure of past waltzes’: Time and Memory in Arthur Symons’s Poetry**

Wojciech KLEPUSZEWSKI, *Assistant Professor Ph.D*  
*Department of Cultural and Language Studies,*  
*Institute of English, German and Communication Studies,*  
*Koszalin University of Technology, Poland*  
*wojciech.klepuszewski@tu.koszalin.pl*

## **Abstract**

*As Eric Warner and Graham Hough observe, “Arthur William Symons has long been one of the ghosts of literary history”. Indeed, he tends to be neglected and forgotten, though at the time his poems stirred the imagination, fascinated and inspired such literary figures as W.B.Yeats. It seems that there is an ironic parallel between Symons’s poetry and the place of his literary heritage in contemporary criticisms. The article focuses on a selection of poems in which Symon’s links the past and the present in what seems both a symbolic and decadent treatment of time and the way it transfigures the memory of the past.*

**Keywords:** *British literature, Poetry, Symons, Symbolism, Decadence, Time, Memory.*

“To say that the work of Arthur Symons has been undeservedly neglected is to invoke one of the most shop-worn clichés of literary scholarship, but it is nonetheless true.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed it is difficult to disagree with Munro, whose comment reflects a general attitude towards Symons and his literary achievement. As early as 1934, Thouless referred to Symons as “an aloof figure, survivor of the bygone age,”<sup>2</sup> the word “age” referring, presumably, to the closing years of the nineteenth century. Five decades later, in 1983, Warner and Hough, on a similar note, call Symons “an obscure, rarely glimpsed figure.”<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, Symons tends to be

---

<sup>1</sup> John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons* (New York: Twayne, 1969), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Thouless, *Modern Poetic Drama* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1934), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Warner and Graham Hough (eds.), *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910*. Vol 2. Pater to Arthur Symons (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), 210.

neglected and forgotten, though at the time his poems stirred the imagination of the readers and men of letters, to mention W. B. Yeats.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all this, Symons “has virtually dropped from sight” and remains “much neglected as his grave in Wittersham, Kent.”<sup>5</sup> It seems that there is an ironic divergence between Symons’s poetry and the level of critical appreciation he has received. To a lesser extent, this article revives the memory of Arthur Symons and claims his role in literature, but predominantly it focuses on the way Symons links the past and the present in what seems both a symbolic and decadent treatment of time.

In his *History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins devotes relatively much attention to Arthur Symons, though he does not appear to be fully consistent in his assessment. Listing a number of poets of the 1890s, namely Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and John Davidson, Perkins claims that “they are minor poets, and there is perhaps no poem of the 1890s that is not minor.”<sup>6</sup> In his further discussion on the poetry of the period, Perkins seems to contradict himself by stating the following:

If we usually think of the 1890s as Aesthetic, Decadent, or fin-de-siècle, one reason is that the late Victorian avant-garde was unusually colorful and magnetizes attention. With Yeats, Dowson, Johnson, and Symons, the group included much of the poetic talent of the time.<sup>7</sup>

However, as far as Symons is concerned, Perkins appears to rate his achievement more in the realm of literary criticism than poetic output. This appreciation comprises *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*,<sup>8</sup> and *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*,<sup>9</sup> the latter hailed by Perkins as “the most important single work in transmitting the ideas and practices of the French poets to

---

<sup>4</sup> An account of their friendship and mutual appreciation can particularly be found in epistolary exchanges. See Bruce Morris, *Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats: a biographical and critical study*. PhD Thesis (University of Denver, 1977); Bruce Morris (ed.), *Letters to W.B. Yeats, 1892-1902 / Arthur Symons* (Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1989); *Letters from W.B. Yeats to Arthur Symons, Miss Boughton, Mrs. Arthur Symons and Rhoda Symons*, circa 1904-1922. Manuscript held at the National Library of Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> Warner and Hough, *Strangeness and Beauty*, 210. It has to be admitted, though, that most graves in Britain tend to be neglected. See, for example, Stephen Butler and Wojciech Klepuszewski, *All the Vs of Life: Conflicts and Controversies in Tony Harrison’s Poetry* (Koszalin: Wydawnictwo Uczelniane Politechniki Koszalińskiej, 2013), 7.

<sup>6</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Published in 1886, when Symons was only twenty-one.

<sup>9</sup> First published in 1899.

the younger writers in English,"<sup>10</sup> an opinion echoing that of T. S. Eliot who, more than half a century earlier, praised Symons's book by referring to it as "an introduction to wholly new feelings" and "a revelation."<sup>11</sup>

*The Symbolist Movement in Literature* mirrors Symons's interest in symbolist poetry, not only as a critic, but also as a poet. Roger Lhombreaud's claim in the preface to *Arthur Symons: A Critical Biography* that "Symons lived aside and aloof from any movement" seems to be a highly idiosyncratic point of view, and one that is hard to account for, if only because of the publication of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which was Symons's critical contribution in terms of introducing French symbolist poetry, also through the translation of French poets, a contribution which influenced English poets, but, more importantly, Symons as a poet. In the introduction to *London Nights*<sup>12</sup> Symons writes:

The whole visible world, we are told, is but a symbol, made visible in order that we may apprehend ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

And this outlook permeates many of his poems. Much as the French Symbolists, Symons employs the unequivocal to suggest and represent the invisible. Poetic rendition in much of Symons's poetry is consequently symbolist, one in which meaning is manifold, if not, at times, evasive, and its aim is to stir the readers' imagination.

As to the main themes in Symon's poetry, there is a transparent strand that links many of his poems, namely a recurrent motif of passing time and the memory it evokes. Typical lines that reveal the role of time in Symon's poetry can be found in a great number of poems, to mention *The Last Memory*<sup>14</sup> or *An Ending*.<sup>15</sup> In many of the poems memory is often "an instant from oblivion," to quote a line from *Stella Maris*,<sup>16</sup> and expressed in a symbolic dimension, as can be seen in *Perfume*:<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, 51. Particularly Verlaine and Baudelaire, the two precursors of Symbolism that Symons translated abundantly.

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Symons, *London Nights* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1895).

<sup>13</sup> Symons, *London Nights*, xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Symons, *Poems by Arthur Symons*, Vol. I. (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 177.

<sup>15</sup> Symons, *Poems by Arthur Symons*, 161.

<sup>16</sup> Symons, *London Nights*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Perfume is often used by Symons in his poems as a poetic means of relating to the past. As Gaston Bachelard observes, 'scent or perfume in its association with the general symbolism of the air is tantamount to the wakes or tracks that mark the passage of solid bodies through the

You fade, a ghost, upon the air;  
Yet ah! the vacant place still keeps  
The odour of your hair.<sup>18</sup>

However, the means through which Symons renders the theme in his poems is not entirely symbolist, as his admiration for the movement might suggest. To fully comprehend this, one has to remember that the literary scene of the fin-de-siècle was somewhat complex, for the last two decades of the century were influenced not only by Symbolism, but also Decadence, a post-romantic movement<sup>19</sup> that preceded Symbolism, and was mainly associated with the French symbolist poets, who often shocked the public. Besides, Symbolism and Decadence partly overlap, not only in the temporal context, but also because both literary trends use symbols in a manner that is very much similar, so when Guy observes that for the Decadents “symbols were by their very nature polyvalent; open to multiple interpretations,”<sup>20</sup> it is a comment that may well refer to Symbolism.

By the same token, Symons, though usually associated with Symbolism, is not homogenous as a poet and while he remains principally symbolist, he simultaneously retains decadent moods. The decadent trends are discernible particularly in two of his collections, namely *Images of Good and Evil* (1899) and *Silhouettes* (1896), which came under a barrage of accusations suggesting the essential immorality of the poems in the collection. Consequently, it seems that no critical appreciation of Symons’s poetry can be undertaken without encompassing both literary trends, at least in some of his poems, one of the most representative examples being *The Old Women*, published in *Images of Good and Evil*:

They pass upon their old, tremulous feet,  
Creeping with little satchels down the street,  
And they remember, many years ago,  
Passing that way in silks. They wander, slow  
And solitary, through the city ways,  
And they alone remember those old days  
Men have forgotten. In their shaking heads

---

atmosphere, and consequently symbolic of memories or reminiscences, (quoted in J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1971), 252.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Symons, *Silhouettes* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Decadence was a new outlook that was a negative reaction to Romanticism, but Kermode suggests that Symons drew much inspiration from the Romantics. Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge, 2002), 127. To an extent this view may be justified, at least in terms of the time/memory dimension, which echoes Keatsian moods.

<sup>20</sup> Josephine M. Guy (ed.), *The Victorian Age: An anthology of sources and documents* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 319.

*'The measure of past waltzes': Time and Memory in Arthur Symonss Poetry*

A dancer of old carnivals yet treads  
The measure of past waltzes, and they see  
The candles lit again, the patchouli  
Sweeten the air, and the warm cloud of musk  
Enchant the passing of the passionate dusk.  
Then you will see a light begin to creep  
Under the earthen eyelids, dimmed with sleep,  
And a new tremor, happy and uncouth,  
Jerking about the corners of the mouth.  
Then the old head drops down again, and shakes,  
Muttering.

Alternating between the decadent and symbolist moods, the poem perfectly embodies the palette of features typical of both literary trends. In a characteristic symbolist manner, it lingers on connotations and associations in phrases such as “the measure of past waltzes”, or “warm cloud of musk”, evoking the past events. At the same time, what is sensuous instantly falls into decay in other lines of the poem – “shaking heads [and] earthen eyelids, dimmed with sleep.” Much as the poem’s temporal reference oscillates between the past and the present, its diction shifts from symbolist to decadent:

Sometimes, when the swift gaslight wakes  
The dreams and fever of the sleepless town,  
A shaking huddled thing in a black gown  
Will steal at midnight, carrying with her  
Violet bags of lavender,  
Into the taproom full of noisy light;  
Or, at the crowded earlier hour of night,  
Sidle, with matches, up to some who stand  
About a stage-door, and, with furtive hand,  
Appealing: “I too was a dancer, when  
Your fathers would have been young gentlemen!”  
And sometimes, out of some lean ancient throat,  
A broken voice, with here and there a note  
Of unspoiled crystal, suddenly will arise  
Into the night, while a cracked fiddle cries  
Pantingly after; and you know she sings  
The passing of light, famous, passing things.  
And sometimes, in the hours past midnight, reels  
Out of an alley upon staggering heels,  
Or into the dark keeping of the stones  
About a doorway, a vague thing of bones  
And draggled hair.

The quoted lines reflect what Perkins calls “fugitive moods”<sup>21</sup> in Symons’s poetry. The ephemeral is rendered in a symbolic dimension of light (“the swift gaslight wakes the dreams”), sound (“broken voice”, “fiddle cries”) and scent (“bags of lavender”). And again, the sublime transforms into final degeneration of “bones and dragged hair”. The closing lines of the poem are predominantly decadent:

And all these have been loved.  
And not one ruinous body has not moved  
The heart of man’s desire, nor has not seemed  
Immortal in the eyes of one who dreamed  
The dream that men call love. This is the end  
Of much fair flesh; it is for this you tend  
Your delicate bodies many careful years,  
To be this thing of laughter and of tears,  
To be this living judgment of the dead,  
An old gray woman with a shaking head.<sup>22</sup>

Symons concludes the poem with an air marked by pessimism and a sense of alienation. The mood of the poem is well-framed within the end-of-the-century pessimistic outlook, so characteristic of Decadence, which in *The Old Women* depicts the passing time and the transfiguration it entails. To an extent, the poem retains moods reminiscent of some of Yeats’s poems, particularly the last line of *The Old Men Admiring Themselves in The Water*, in which the title “old men” conclude:

“All that’s beautiful drifts away  
Like the waters.”<sup>23</sup>

In the case of Symons’s poems, the Yeatsian “old men” are replaced, as it were, by “old women”, and this is so in a number of Symons’s poems, to mention another brilliant example, *The Unloved*, in which Symons reverses the setting and portrays women who have never experienced the ecstasy of youth, as depicted in *The Old Women*:

These are the women whom no man has loved  
Year after year, day after day has moved.  
These hearts with many longings, and with tears  
And with content; they have received the years  
With empty hands, expecting no good thing;  
Life has passed by their doors, not entering.

---

<sup>21</sup> Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Symons, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), 57-59.

<sup>23</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 1990), 91.

...

They too in certain windless summer hours  
Have felt the stir of dreams, and dreamed the powers  
And the exemptions and the miracles  
And the cruelty of Beauty.

...

And they have wept, with bowed heads; in the street  
They hear the twittering of little feet,  
The rocking of the cradles in their hearts.  
This is a mood, and, as a mood, departs  
With the dried tears; and they resume the tale  
Of the dropt stitches; these must never fail  
For a dream's sake; nor, for a memory,  
The telling of a patient rosary.<sup>24</sup>

The poem strikes a note similar to that of *The Old Women*: Symons merges symbolist and decadent moods in a general aura of transience, and women in his poems seem to function somewhat as “a symbol comparable with the volatile principle in alchemy, signifying all that is transitory”.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the image of old women evokes all that is bygone and forever enfolded in memory.

### *Conclusions*

Much as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Rimbaud in France, Symons was in the vanguard of Symbolism in England, though unlike his French counterparts, he was in a way a solitary figure, as other English poets were inspired by Symbolism, but did not necessarily become its followers. More to the point, again, much as the French poets, Symons “espoused Decadence,”<sup>26</sup> though with time he diverted from it, labelling it as “a noisy moment in literary history”.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Symons, *Images of Good and Evil*, 60-62.

<sup>25</sup> Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 376.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 1. Sebastian Hayes seems to be more extreme in framing Symons within the context of Decadence, evidence of which can be found in his criticism. See Sebastian Hayes, *Arthur Symons: Leading Poet of the English Decadence* (Shaftesbury: Brimstone Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Zabriskie Temple, *The Critic's Alchemy: A Study of the Introduction of French Symbolism into England* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1953), 155. Beckson argues that it was Yeats who became “instrumental in luring his friend away from the perversity of Decadence to the mystical association with the French Symbolists.” Karl Beckson, “The Tumbler of Water and the Cup of Wine: Symons, Yeats, and the Symbolist Movement,” *Victorian Poetry* 28, No. 3/4 (1990): 125.

Much more important is the fact that Symon's poetry, be it in its symbolist or decadent dimension contradicts the claim, not singular among critics, that "Symons's creative achievement is much inferior to his criticism."<sup>28</sup> In the preface to *London Nights* Symons writes:

whatever I find in humanity – passion, desire, the spirit of the senses, the hell or heaven of man's heart – is part of the eternal substance which nature weaves in the rough for art to combine cunningly into beautiful patterns...<sup>29</sup>

And these patterns are indeed beautifully rendered in Symons's poetry, particularly when they pertain to time and memory. In poems such as *The Old Women* these memories link the past and the present in what seems both a symbolic and decadent treatment of time, or to be more precise, a transfiguration in which the past, embedded in the vivid, though fleeting recollections, is juxtaposed against the morbid decay, much as it is in *The Lamentation Of The Old Pensioner* by W. B. Yeats, a poem similar in theme and rendition:

My contemplations are of Time  
That has transfigured me.

...

And yet the beauties that I loved  
Are in my memory;<sup>30</sup>

This transfiguration of time is perfectly pronounced in Symon's poetic oeuvre, in which feelings and emotions are conveyed both in the symbolist and decadent dimension. At the same time, one must emphasise that while the essence of Symons's poetry is generally symbolist, he does embrace Decadence, particularly in the poems discussed above, though his is never extreme as some of the French representatives of Decadence. So, if there is general pessimism and a sense of deterioration and decay, it never evolves into the more radical, if not perverse tastes with which the French poets often scandalized the society. As can be seen in the poems discussed in this article, Symons fuses the two literary trends in his rendition of time and memory/ies it evokes, all in the ambience of, to quote another poem, *Memory*, "fragrant memories [that] come and go."<sup>31</sup>

### **Bibliography:**

1. Beckson, Karl. *Arthur Symons: A Life*. Oxford: OUP, 1987.

---

<sup>28</sup> Warner and Hough, *Strangeness and Beauty*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Symons, *London Nights*, xiv.

<sup>30</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 1990), 52.

<sup>31</sup> Symons, *London Nights*, 98.



2. Beckson, Karl. "The Tumbler of Water and the Cup of Wine: Symons, Yeats, and the Symbolist Movement." *Victorian Poetry* 28, No. 3/4 (1990): 125-133.
3. Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1971.
4. Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1920.
5. Guy, Josephine M. (ed.) *The Victorian Age: An anthology of sources and documents*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
6. Hayes, Sebastian. *Arthur Symons: Leading Poet of the English Decadence*. Shaftesbury: Brimstone Press, 2007.
7. Kermode, Frank. *Romantic Image*. London: Routledge, 2002.
8. Munro, John M. *Arthur Symons*. New York: Twayne, 1969.
9. Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976.
10. Roger Lhombreaud. *Arthur Symons: A Critical Biography*. London: The Unicorn Press, 1963.
11. Symons, Arthur. *London Nights*. London: Leonard Smithers, 1895.
12. Symons, Arthur. *Silhouettes*. London: Leonard Smithers, 1896.
13. Symons, Arthur. *Images of Good and Evil*. London: William Heinemann, 1899.
14. Symons, Arthur. *Poems by Arthur Symons*, Vol. I. London: William Heinemann, 1916.
15. Temple, Ruth Zabriskie. *The Critic's Alchemy: A Study of the Introduction of French Symbolism into England*. New Haven: College and University Press, 1953.
16. Thouless, Priscilla. *Modern Poetic Drama*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1934.
17. Warner, Eric and Hough, Graham (eds.). *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910*. Vol 2. Pater to Arthur Symons. Cambridge: CUP, 1983.
18. Yeats, W. B. *Collected Poems*. London: Picador, 1990.