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Lindsay Wilhelm

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Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman
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Lindsay Wilhelm

Oklahoma State University

It is probably safe to say that, with the exception of a few anthologized lyrical poems, Arthur Symons is best known for his critical rather than his creative work. And no wonder, for his criticism was instrumental in the theorization of that curious formation known as decadence: his 1893 essay ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, later expanded and retitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), was among the first attempts to unify what he called those ‘little separate cliques [of] brainsick young people’ – mystical poets, naturalist fiction writers, painters in the style of *Japonisme* – into a coherent tradition.¹ To the extent that he staked a claim for decadence as a serious movement worthy of critical study, Symons remains the unofficial patron saint for our research endeavours in *Volupté* and elsewhere.

Yet, there is a kind of irony in this image of Symons. While his modern reputation rests mostly on what he wrote about other writers (and, in his wider body of criticism, artists, dancers, and composers), much of his work is characterized by what Nicholas Freeman diplomatically calls ‘self-absorption’ (p. 13). As Freeman reminds us in his excellent introduction to Symons’s short fiction collection *Spiritual Adventures* (1905) – recently reissued as part of the Modern Humanities Research Association’s ‘Jewelled Tortoise’ series – Symons ‘saw almost everything from the same viewpoint’, often basing his critical analysis on subjective impressions and an idiosyncratic catalogue of recurring touchstones and allusions (p. 11). In a 1903 notice in the *Athenæum*, a less generous reviewer discerned in Symons’s writing a ‘voracious egoism of soul’ – an egoism that was symptomatic, in their view, of the broader ‘disease of civilization’ (p. 15). But with the benefit of retrospect, Freeman’s thoughtful edition of *Spiritual Adventures* both contextualizes the self-

reflexivity of Symons's broader oeuvre and makes a strong case for restoring the critic's fiction to a place of prominence in the decadent canon.

Like Oscar Wilde and Richard Le Gallienne – those other luminaries of the 1890s – Symons straddled the boundary between avant-garde coterie culture and the popular periodical press. He contributed to the infamous *Yellow Book* and went on to edit the influential, if short-lived, highbrow magazine *The Savoy*. Along with W. B. Yeats and Le Gallienne, Symons also belonged to the Rhymers' Club, an exclusive group of young bohemian poets active in the 1890s; his membership is in some ways reflected in his verse collections *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), both of which 'broke new ground' in their 'experiments with impressionism' and their 'willingness to tackle subject matter many deemed unsavoury' (p. 4). At the same time, and despite his public pronouncements on the vulgarity of Grub Street, Symons was very active in the less rarefied world of newspaper journalism. He regularly published reviews and features in the *Star*, the *Saturday Review*, and other general-interest papers, sometimes at a rate of one article per week. His financial reliance on the daily grind of print left him little time for longer projects, partly ensuring that *Spiritual Adventures* would remain his only short-story collection.

Indeed, we can think of *Spiritual Adventures* – the last major work that Symons published prior to his psychological breakdown in 1908 – as something of a swan song. As Freeman explains in his reception history of the volume, the cultural environment on its release in 1905 was not especially hospitable to Symons, associated as he was with a generation of writers that had seemingly flamed out since their heyday in 'Yellow Nineties' (his fellow Rhymers Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson had died around the turn of the century, as had Wilde). Sales were lacklustre, and the critical response tepid. Even appreciative readers felt that the stories of *Spiritual Adventures* were, in Freeman's summation, 'marred by excessive exposition, a lack of emotional variety (chiefly humour), and failures in characterization' (p. 21). Freeman reports that reviewers were also perplexed by the limited subject matter of the stories, which draw their personalities and scenarios primarily from Symons's own life.

Freeman's MHRA edition of *Spiritual Adventures* – the sole scholarly edition of the text available – largely foregrounds these autobiographical elements. Its title aside, only about half of the MHRA volume consists of stories from the first edition of *Spiritual Adventures*. Freeman dedicates the first half of the edition to selections from Symons's earlier prose, which shed light on his approach to fiction and its continuity with his criticism. Several of these pieces centre around artistic or otherwise sensitive personalities, sometimes from the perspective of more prosaic characters who briefly become the objects of the artist's ennobling, but pitiless, attention. The titular women of 'An Episode in the Life of Jenny Lane' (unpublished until 1986) and 'The Extra Lady' (1895), for instance, feel their humdrum existences expand in the presence of more cultured acquaintances, only to find themselves impoverished when alone once again. Freeman also includes two stories from Symons's Lucy Newcome cycle: a trio of fictional sketches that he later attempted, without success, to work up into a novel. Three non-fiction pieces – 'At the Alhambra' (1896), on Symons's experiences at the legendary London theatre, the travel essay 'Arles' (1898), and his ode to Frédéric Chopin, 'Pachmann and the Piano' (1902) – round out this first half of the volume.

This brings us to *Spiritual Adventures* proper. Like the early writings that open the edition, the eight stories collected in *Spiritual Adventures* are loosely plotted, episodic sketches of their protagonists, many of them composites of Symons and his associates. The most autobiographical of the tales, 'A Prelude to Life', recounts the childhood of a cosmopolitan aesthete who, like Symons, grows up in subtle revolt against his hard-working, pious parents. Though less transparent than 'Prelude', 'An Autumn City' echoes Symons's own affection for the French city of Arles, where the 'dripping trees and soaked paths' (p. 209) serve as the dreary backdrop to a failing marriage (which is itself a fictionalized representation of the author's turbulent affair with a ballet dancer). The eponymous protagonists of 'Christian Trevalga', 'Seaward Lackland', and 'Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan' similarly reflect and refract Symons's peculiarities: his affinity for the Cornish seascapes of his childhood, his passion for Chopin, his intellectual engagement

with his father's strict Methodism, and his thorny relationships with women. Several stories, including most notably the aforementioned 'Christian Trevalga', 'Esther Kahn', and 'The Death of Peter Waydelin', pick up on Symons's ongoing critical fascination with the maligned and misunderstood artist. Of the collection, 'The Childhood of Lucy Newcome' – the first in his Lucy series – strays the furthest from Symons's own experiences. Helpfully, Freeman prefaces each story with a headnote that summarizes its publication history and locates it within both Symons's career and the work of other authors. Freeman's extensive footnotes explain obscure references and offer further biographical context as required.

While *Spiritual Adventures* has many attractions for scholars of decadence, its most obvious value, given Freeman's framing, lies in its intimate portrayal of the critic's life and times. Characters such as Philip Haygarth, the Svengaliesque theatre critic of 'Esther Kahn', and the painter Mr Winter, who courts a music-hall dancer in 'The Extra Lady', speak not only to Symons's theories of acting, but also his exploits as a 'stage-door Don Juan' (p. 5). There are snatches of Symons's friendship with the socialite and painter Mathilde Ruinard de Brimond in the tortured affection that Henry Luxulyan – whom Freeman identifies as a 'problematic authorial double' – bears for his patroness, the brilliant but disfigured Baroness von Eckenstein (p. 231). In the pianist Christian Trevalga's descent into madness, fuelled in part by his determination to 'turn up music as it is before it is tamed to the scale', we can detect Symons's own difficulties in finding a critical language in which to articulate the aesthetics of music (p. 172). Along these lines, the stories of *Spiritual Adventures* also enrich our understanding of Symons's avant-garde milieu. The character of Lucy Newcome, for instance, was inspired by his close friend and occasional lover Muriel Broadbent, whose popularity as a sex worker made her a fixture of London's West End entertainment scene in the 1890s; the Newcome stories, especially 'The Life and Adventures', thus grant us candid glimpses into the theatres, music-halls, clubs, and game-rooms that constituted the epicentre of British decadence. Likewise, 'The Death of Peter Waydelin', which chronicles the final days of a

provocative young painter as he wastes away, unappreciated, in an East-End tenement, is a thinly veiled depiction of decadent *enfant terrible* and frequent Symons collaborator Aubrey Beardsley.

Beyond its usefulness as a record of Symons's decadent circle, *Spiritual Adventures* is remarkable for how it continues to perpetuate the unorthodox methods of Walter Pater, over a decade after the aesthetic philosopher's death. Freeman begins his introduction by quoting Symons's glowing review of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), which the then twenty-two-year-old saw as a welcome rebuttal to the basic conventions of realist storytelling. Young Symons breathlessly enthused over the older writer's refusal to 'endow [his subjects] with flesh and blood, with the breath of life'; Pater's characters serve instead to 'give a concrete form to abstract ideas', or to vocalize particular states of consciousness that Pater himself had undergone (p. 1). The stories of *Spiritual Adventures*, reflecting Symons's early admiration of Pater, plainly owe their impressionism to *Imaginary Portraits*. Like Pater, Symons devotes most of his narration to tracking the subjectivity of his protagonists as they grapple with the artistic or religious questions that vex them the most: the actress Esther Kahn's quest for the perfect 'power of expression', for instance, or Seaward Lackland's perplexity over the justice of divine mercy (p. 152). The amorality of Symons's narratives, even in those stories that are preoccupied with religion, is no doubt indebted to Pater's own rejection of didacticism.

But *Spiritual Adventures* is not merely a belated imitation of *Imaginary Portraits*. Most apparently, Symons's prose lacks the finely wrought ornateness and beautiful abstruseness so characteristic of Pater's writing; the simpler, more staccato syntax of *Spiritual Adventures* is a testament to both its author's journalistic background and the shifting stylistic expectations of the early twentieth century. Additionally, Freeman draws our attention to the proto-Modernist formal play of Symons's stories, which 'navigate between observation, invention, reminiscence, and reflection' with an unapologetic aplomb (p. 18). We can thus situate *Spiritual Adventures* with respect to the genre-bending autobiographical experiments of writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy

Richardson, whose stories eschew plot and dialogue in favour of the moment-to-moment experience of an exquisitely responsive consciousness.

That Symons draws his subject matter from his own life also marks an important departure from Pater. Pater was, after all, a Renaissance historian at heart, and his protagonists often hail from centuries past (with the notable exception of Florian, the central character of Pater's 1878 self-portrait "The Child in the House"). Where Pater's fictions take their cue from his historiography, Symons's 'adventures' are deeply rooted in the contemporary moment. His disaffected characters are patently creatures of the *fin de siècle*, writhing under the 'suffocating nausea' (p. 213) and 'absurd sensitiveness' (p. 239) of modern, and especially urban, life. This goes some way to explaining the tonal bleakness of *Spiritual Adventures*: the way it relinquishes Pater's classically inflected (and, to some extent, typically Victorian) humanism in the face of what Symons represents as an insurmountable ennui. Each of Symons's heroes and heroines find themselves estranged from friends and lovers, alienated from traditional sources of spiritual comfort, or frustrated by the discordance between artistic vision and material reality; they cut ties with their fellows, they give up their art, they go mad, they die. And it is this innovation on the Paterian formula, I would suggest, that makes the collection worth reading. Just as 'The Decadent Movement' had put its finger on the 'most representative literature of the day', in *Spiritual Adventures* Symons marries the contemplative interiority of the Paterian portrait to an emergent twentieth-century sensibility, and in doing so seems to presage the spirit of Modernism itself.²

¹ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87.522 (1893), 858–68 (p. 858).

² *Ibid.*