volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Issue 1

Spring 2018

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2018

Date of Publication: 21 June 2018

Citation: Kostas Boyiopoulos, '"The Universe": An Unpublished Sonnet by Arthur Symons', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1 (2018), 89-94.

volupte.gold.ac.uk

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‘The Universe’: An Unpublished Sonnet by Arthur Symons

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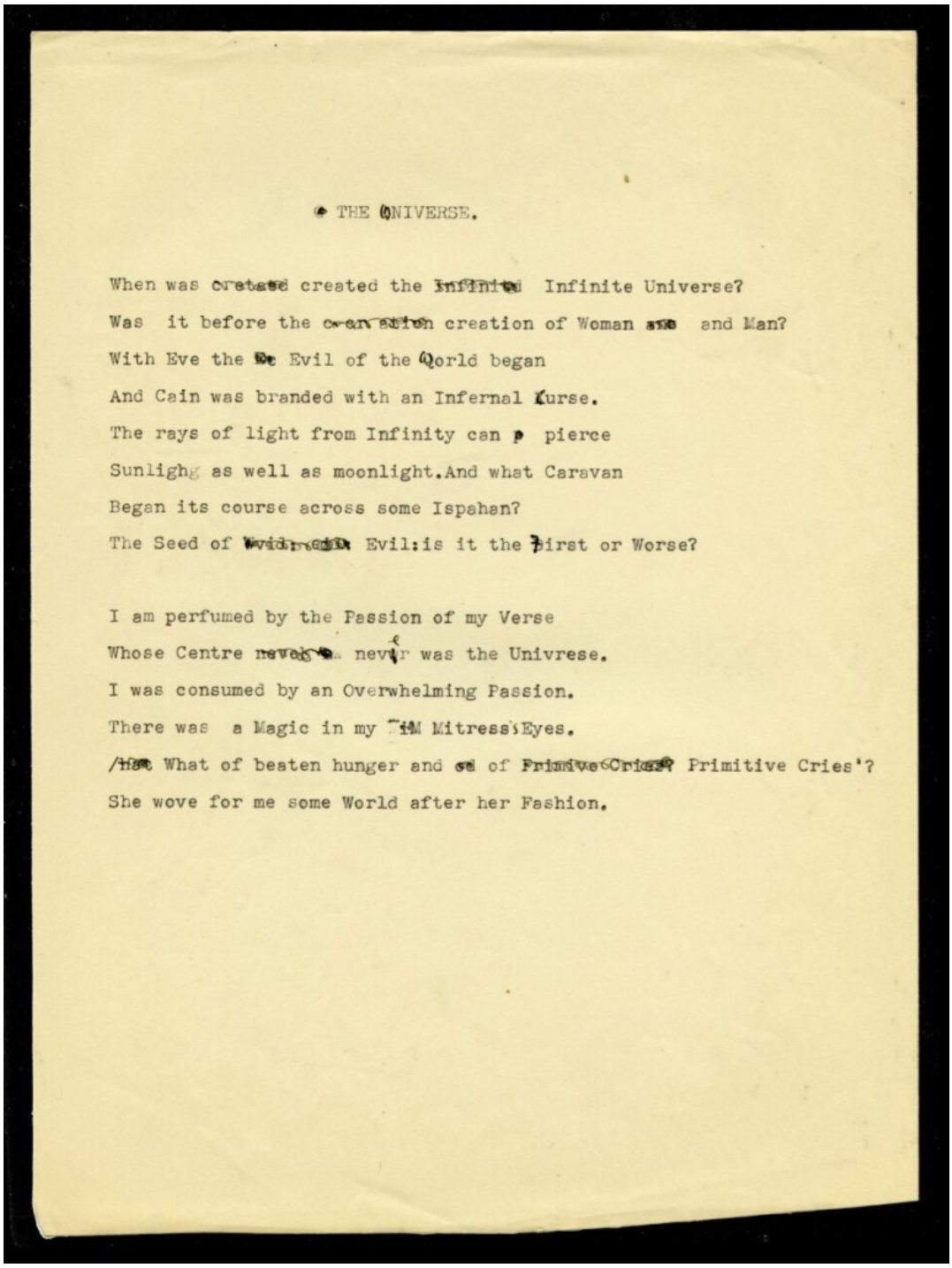

THE UNIVERSE.

When was created the Infinite Universe?
Was it before the creation of Woman and Man?
With Eve the Evil of the World began
And Cain was branded with an Infernal Curse.
The rays of light from Infinity can pierce
Sunlight as well as moonlight. And what Caravan
Began its course across some Ispahan?
The Seed of Evil: is it the First or Worse?

I am perfumed by the Passion of my Verse
Whose Centre never was the Univrese.
I was consumed by an Overwhelming Passion.
There was a Magic in my Mitress's Eyes.
What of beaten hunger and of Primive Cries? Primitive Cries'?
She wove for me some World after her Fashion.

A steady trickle of sonnets permeates Arthur Symons's poetical oeuvre. Some of the most iconic pieces from his early volumes are sonnets; examples include 'The Opium-Smoker', 'The Absinthe Drinker', 'Nerves', and 'Idealism'. In the Arthur Symons Papers held in Firestone Library at Princeton University is an unknown and previously unpublished sonnet entitled 'The Universe'. The typescript, found among miscellaneous poems, is undated and spattered with blotches (strikethroughs) and a couple of typographic errors. It bears a thematic affinity with some post-Nineties volumes by Symons, comporting with his fixation with evil, sin, and damnation. From these clues we can hazard that Symons penned 'The Universe' after his mental breakdown period, possibly in the twenties or the thirties, although the sonnet's central concept could have originated much earlier. 'The Universe' expands and transforms the theme of urban sensuality of Symons's early work, plotting it on a more abstract plane. It is built around ideas of world-making and Judeo-Christian cosmogony. This is not a slapdash effort; it is an intriguing, puzzling piece, to say the least, and one that realizes the full potential of the sonnet form. Here it goes:

> When was created the Infinite Universe?
> Was it before the creation of Woman and Man?
> With Eve the Evil of the World began
> And Cain was branded with an Infernal Curse.
> The rays of light from Infinity can pierce
> Sunlight as well as moonlight. And what Caravan
> Began its course across some Ispahan?
> The Seed of Evil: is it the First or Worse?
>
> I am perfumed by the Passion of my Verse
> Whose Centre never was the Universe.
> I was consumed by an Overwhelming Passion.
> There was a Magic in my Mistress's Eyes.
> What of beaten hunger and of Primitive Cries?
> She wove for me some World after her Fashion.[1]

In its Petrarchan construction the octave sets up a centripetal design, spiralling towards the 'Centre' of the sestet. The two parts present a dramatic juxtaposition between the cosmic and the particular, total and narrow scope, perpetuity and ephemerality. The first quatrain re-examines the creation myth of Genesis, positioning the postlapsarian 'World' of the Fall in relation to an equally created

'Infinite Universe' that precedes and contains it. Cain's transgression designates an amplificatory process of evil that is triggered with Eve; Symons's alliterative pun on 'Eve' and 'evil' is quite telling. The idea that Eve is the harbinger of sin and evil is advocated by Jesus Ben Sira in the apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus: 'Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die' (Ecc 25:24).[2] Eve, we might conjecture, joins (or spawns) the progeny of sinful, mythical *femmes fatales* that parade in Symons's work.

In the second, elliptical and enigmatic quatrain, with the 'rays of light from Infinity' that can pierce 'sunlight' and 'moonlight' Symons plays on Genesis 1:3-5, where God creates light and then, in a bizarre logic, separates it into light and darkness. Similarly, the 'light' of 'Infinity' in 'The Universe' is of a different order from the 'sunlight' of the visible cosmos. The speaker might be hinting at some intrusion or incursion of the plane of the 'Infinite Universe' in the finite 'World'. This intrusion of infinity turns into the peripatetic, oriental image of the 'Caravan' in 'Ispahan', a Persian city famous for its architecture and splendiferous gardens. Symons here possibly alludes to Oscar Wilde's imperialist posturing in 'Ave Imperatrix', where from 'Ispahan | The gilded garden of the sun', 'the long dusty caravan | Brings cedar wood and vermilion'.[3]

The volta marks a shift from the universal to the personal, conjuring the familiar atmosphere of Nineties Decadence, as with the rhyme words 'Passion'/'Fashion' that obviously nod to the refrains of Ernest Dowson's 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae'. This is not the first time Symons rhymes passion with fashion; he does so numerous times, for example, in *Love's Cruelty* (1923) with 'For Des Esseintes: II. Eyes' and 'Mad Song', and in a 1921 'Sonnet' printed in *Jezebel Mort and Other Poems* (1931). The sestet presents a poet-Pygmalion who is seduced and 'consumed' by his own 'Verse' and his 'Mistress's Eyes'. Is his mistress one that is written into the verse, or is *she* essentially the 'Verse'? In his eremite existence in Island Cottage Symons was ever more haunted by the memories of his glory days, especially by the memory of Lydia, the deified Bianca of his *London Nights*. In his biography of Symons, Karl Beckson prints from a poem entitled 'Lydia', dated 1940, which recycles some of the language of 'The Universe': 'Passion was secret to

the Universe | […] we both lived in' and 'What Prime Evil curse | Had been thrown upon us?'[4] It seems that Lydia is metonymically transferred into the 'Passion of [Symons's] Verse'.

The poet-speaker endeavours to evade the 'Infernal Curse' and transform the memory of the unnamed mistress (possibly Lydia) by playing God. He imitates the act of divine creation *ex nihilo* while shutting out the cursed, immutable world of reality. In a defiant gesture he sidelines and dismisses wholesale the created 'Infinite Universe', carving out his own universe in the form of his poetic world ('the Passion of my Verse | Whose Centre never was the Universe'). From his sovereign point of view the speaker (and so Symons himself) replaces the divine creator.[5] This idea is reinforced by Symons's comments in his 1920 book on Baudelaire: in his state of intoxication, the French poet in his self-aggrandisement 'becomes the centre of the universe', declaring, '*Je suis un Dieu!*' [I am a God!].[6] The god-poet who is erotically consumed by his own creative efforts is an idea that for Symons is reflected in the poet-God who, by an act of *logos*, creates the world out of lust. In *Images of Good and Evil* (1899) Symons writes through his allegorical mouthpiece, 'Lust':

> It was the lust of God, fulfilled
> With joys enjoyed, that bade him build
> The wanton palace of the earth.[7]

With nonchalant self-indulgence the speaker of 'The Universe' seems to muffle the 'beaten hunger' and 'Primitive Cries'; the consequences of Cain's curse. In contrast with the monumentality of the octet's Judeo-Christian cosmogony, his 'Verse'-mistress 'wove' for him 'some World after her Fashion'; that is, on capricious whim. Crucially, the weaving is not performed by the poet but by the mistress. The poet is not in control. The wording of that final line, in conjunction with the way Symons juxtaposes created existence by an implied divine being with the mortal artist's creations, is clearly articulated in *The Loom of Dreams*, and the prologue-poem of the same title (1900). While the world 'goes by' and 'Crowns are bartered and blood is shed', the speaker of this lyric 'sit[s] and broider[s] [his] dreams instead'.[8] The last of the three stanzas of 'The Loom of Dreams' is quite revealing, shedding light on 'The Universe':

And the only world is the world of my dreams,
And my weaving the only happiness;
For what is the world but what it seems?
And who knows but that God, beyond our guess,
Sits weaving worlds out of loneliness?[9]

There are complex theological and psychological ramifications from this subtle comparison that cannot be explored in the present article. But what is fascinating in 'The Loom of Dreams' and, therefore, also, in 'The Universe', is their fractal projection. In this light, 'Infinity' acquires a double sense. The pattern in 'The Universe' follows on from the 'Infinite Universe', to the world of 'Woman and Man', to that of the speaker's 'Verse'. These poems generate or 'weave' recursive, never-ending worlds, or create what is called a 'Droste effect' (a form of *mise en abyme* in which an image recurs within itself) to borrow a modern term.

The tragedy of the Symonsian speaker is that his Pygmalionic, virtual 'World' of pleasure in which he cocoons himself cannot be detached from the great scheme of things. It is part of the 'Infinite Universe'. As such, it inherits the infernal curse of Eve and Cain. The speaker's disconnected point of view is, in essence, polluted by his awareness of the total perspective with regard to encroaching reality. In the perplexing eighth line, with its emphatic caesura, the scriptural 'Seed of Evil' can be 'Worse'. A possible allusion to the poet's own evil seed is found in Dante's *Purgatorio*, where Beatrice reproves Dante for his sinful transgressions, his 'images of failing good' bred of his 'evil seed' (Canto 30, ll. 131, 119).[10] Additionally, one of Symons's cat lyrics dated 1928, entitled 'Lines', resembling 'The Universe', offers clues to the idea that sensuality is a curse and a contaminant that seeps through different planes of existence. Evoking a chain of being, cats are sensual creatures that possess their own 'Universe' which

[…] is forever hurled
Onwards like ours by the same Curse
That made the madness of the World.[11]

One wonders why Symons did not publish 'The Universe'; perhaps he nursed it pondering how he might give clarity to some of its vague features. Nevertheless, this sonnet is not a mere literary curiosity, but one whose 'scanty plot of ground',[12] as Wordsworth has it, contains

everything: the infinity of the cosmos, both in the dimension of reality and that of fantasy. It provides a key to better comprehend Symons's psychology and perennial interests, and track the evolution of his particular mind-set. It is a cross-section of motifs which provides insight into Symons's egocentricity, his peculiar creation theology, his obsession with sin, and the idea of memory and art as substitutes for erotic experience.

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[1] Arthur Symons, 'The Universe' (TS), Box 15, in Arthur Symons Papers (C0182); Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. The poem is slightly formatted and typographic errors silently corrected.
[2] *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, intro. and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (1997; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Apocrypha, p. 136.
[3] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, Essays*, intro. by Vyvyan Holland (1966; London: Collins, 1986), p. 711.
[4] Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 103.
[5] In a further explorative reading, the word 'Passion', twice deployed, conjures and subverts the image of the Christ: the 'Seed of Evil' leads to the 'Passion' of the poet and not of the Crucifixion.
[6] Arthur Symons, *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1920), pp. 72-73. Italics in original.
[7] Arthur Symons, 'Lust', in *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons*, 9 vols [incomplete set] (London: Martin Secker, 1924), II, p. 6. Also in line with the affinity of the creative act and eroticism, the 'Centre' for Symons could specifically be 'sex', the 'centre of Creation'. See Arthur Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. by Karl Beckson (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 138.
[8] Symons, 'The Loom of Dreams', in *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons*, II, p. 123.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 302.
[11] Arthur Symons, 'Lines', in *Jezebel Mort and Other Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 136.
[12] William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 150.