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‘Modernistic Shone the Lamplight’
Arthur Symons among the Moderns

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By the time John Betjeman one evening in 1940 penned ‘On Seeing an Old Poet in the Café Royal’, Arthur Symons, once the firebrand of Decadence and its zeitgeist, was a ghostly figure left behind by the times. Confounding him with Theodore Wratislaw, the lyric portrays Symons as ‘Very old and very grand’ where ‘Modernistic shone the lamplight / There in London’s fairyland’.[1] The ‘Modernistic’ air is oddly at variance with Symons styled as a dignified Victorian sage. Betjeman’s observational approach vicariously espouses Symons’s own attitude and treatment of the Café Royal almost half a century earlier. A devoted patron, Symons returned to its glitzy premises throughout his life. In ‘East and West End Silhouettes’, Symons records details of a memorable evening in 1892 which he shared with fellow poets John Davidson and John Barlas. Each of the three ‘had written a poem about the Café Royal – something modern, modernity in poetry’.[2] Symons’s ‘modern’ take was a sonnet he entitled ‘Ambiguë’, which is about a glamorous, alluring demimondaine, a ‘Sphinx’ who seduces the speaker from a distance with a casual furtive glance. The speaker does not wish the spell broken: ‘smile thus / Forever with that air ambiguous’. The emphasis is on upholding appearances: what could lie beneath that ‘air’ in the sonnet’s closing line is ‘Her if the snake is in your paradise’ (*Memoirs* 81).

This trotted-out metaphor relating to the Original Sin is a vital clue

to the direction Symons steered his poetics in the twentieth century. He carved a rogue trail of a quasi-Romantic self-introspection and erotic mysteriousness clothed in myth, especially of the Judeo-Christian variety of Genesis. This is in juxtaposition with Ezra Pound's generation which, reflecting radical social and technological shifts, sought the angular poetics of clarity and engagement. Although Symons spearheaded modernity in the Nineties, and later was perceived as its guru, after his mental breakdown in Italy and partial recovery in 1908–1910, he became an anchorite, out of touch with the surge of innovative literary developments. He kept producing voluminously on Decadent themes, but his publications during the Interwar period did not make a dip in the literary scene. Elisa Bizzotto points out that a combination of a 'certain dementophobia', a 'modernist aversion to figures even obliquely seen as Victorian' and 'an actual decline in the quality of Symons's work first published after 1908' tarnished the reputation of his early work and was the reason for a general lack of scholarly interest in him.[3]

The relationship between Symons's late poetry and Modernist developments is subtler and more complex than it first appears. His post-War volumes, *Lesbia and Other Poems* (1920), *Love's Cruelty* (1923) and *Jezebel Mort* (1931), offer creatively distorted perspectives on Modern ism as well as insights into the course of his own vision. My chapter suggests that through Biblical mythology, tropes of mythmaking and intense states of subjectivity, Symons's late period offers a poetics which, although deviates from Modernism, curiously, shares some of its hallmarks, inverting, deflecting and rerouting them.

Symons, Modernity and Myth

Symons remained out of touch with Modernist literary developments throughout the interwar years. In his memoir of his mental collapse in Italy, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (1930), he divulges: 'I could neither read nor write. I understood nothing of what was going on in the literary world, which was my world'.[4] For practitioners of post-Victorian Decadence, according to Kristin Mahoney, keeping a distance from contemporary developments was an informed, critical stance. With writers such as Vernon Lee and Max Beerbohm in mind, Mahoney argues that 'reinvigorating a past aesthetic operated as a method for subtly communicating distaste for the methods and values of the present'.[5] This idea is appositely applicable to Symons. His self-marginalisation seems to be a conscious strategy of quietly disapproving a Modernist engagement with the world. His published poetry in the 1920s and 1930s, slanted towards sexual archetypes and myths of damnation, has an aura of escapism. It stubbornly follows a disconnected, parallel course from the Modernist preoccupation with the broken psyche and loss of meaning in the aftermath of the Great War. 'To the Dead', 'Song' and 'The Hour' in *Lesbia and Other Poems* seem to be the only instances in which Symons obliquely appears to elegise the War.

Even so, comparative parallels between Symons's generation and Modernist culture abound and were first suggested by Modernist writers themselves. In a perfunctory comment in 1925, Joyce wrote that 'there is a certain resemblance between the group of writers who collected around Pound, I mean W. L., T. S. E., H. D. etc., and the writers of the Yellow Book Row of half a century ago [*sic*] who collected around Arthur Symons'.[6] Joyce's remark reflects a wider self-awareness of Modernism in relation to 1890s culture of eclectic tastes and coteries. On the other hand, Regenia Gagnier notes that Symons demonstrates Modernism's 'worst

excesses of elitism, solipsism, and the great divide between high and low culture'.[7] The notion of the coterie forms the basis of Bizotto's examination of the continuities between Symons and Modernism. Focusing on Symons's 'Editorial Note' to his short-lived little magazine project *The Savoy* (1896), Bizotto argues that it 'exudes a radical artistic-cultural elitism that will become essential in modernist poetics, with its stress on high culture, difficulty and learned obscurity'.[8] Symons introduced 'a framework of hostile exclusiveness and close community that prefigures the "minority culture" of the ensuing decades' (33).[9]

After all, Symons's early work and credentials were instrumental in shaping literary Modernism. The unobtrusive dovetailing of his early poetics into individual influences is well documented. He was personally involved in launching the career of James Joyce, helping him break into the publishing world with the Nineties-flavoured poetry volume *Chamber Music* (1907). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899/1919) was an indispensable document for T. S. Eliot and the latter's discovery of the French Symbolists, especially Jules Laforgue.[10] Eliot's 'mythographic' sense of the 'Unreal City' was indebted to Symons's 'pompous and distressing unrealities of a great city' (*London: A Book of Aspects* [1909]) as Roger Holdsworth astutely has highlighted.[11] Symons's Impressionistic lyrics anticipate Imagism; Hugh Kenner sees especially 'Pastel: Masks and Faces' as a precursor to Pound's 'In a Station of a Metro'.[12] And in his analysis of 'Hymn to Energy' from *The Fool of the World* (1906), Tom Gibbons shows how Symons abandons the defeatist, melancholic aspect of Symbolism for a more aggressive one that predates the Futurists of Filippo Marinetti's manifestoes.[13] Even Katherine Mansfield, in her experimentation with Symbolist techniques, was under Symons's spell.[14] The continuum of scholarly interest in the many parallels and connections

between the generation of Eliot and Pound and Symons's early poetry and critical prose sidesteps neatly his post-mental breakdown output.

This sidestepping is abetted by Symons's own gradual withdrawal from literary forefronts, his eremitic and absorbed self-isolation. Still, he does not reject the spirit of modernity but tailors it to his own idiosyncrasies. In 'Some Makers of Modern Verse' (1921), Symons abhors what he calls 'bourgeois solemnity', reflected in 'respectable' verse that is produced 'now-a-days', a term for which he reserves a special interpretation that sheds light on his stance as a malingering artist in his late years:

> Only, when I use the word now-a-days, the word itself is as explicit to me at the exact moment when I am writing these lines, as it was in the days of Dowson, as it was in the days of Verlaine. The taint, the plague-spot of bad verse has always been that of the bourgeois. Only, at that time, none of us who were actually artists, were afraid of emotion, were ashamed of frivolity, were aghast at passion. Only, now, certainly, I know not how many verse makers are concerned only with the question that the sentiment as well as the rhyme must be right. (478)

It is unclear whether in his pejorative comment to verse makers Symons castigates the Georgians or other groups of the 1910s. But the over- coded term 'now-a-days', implies a perpetually updated re-enactment of a cultural conflict. The dominant taste of bourgeois orthodoxy, antagonised by tendentious, contumacious voices in the margin, is always present in every period and age. Periods and ages then, in a way, become parallel universes that succeed one another in a spiral of repetitive patterns. In an ambivalent turn of thought, Symons writes: 'who can define the meaning of

the word Modernity? Every age has its different form of modernity. Poetry is Eternal' ('Some Makers' 484). Or, as he writes in a sonnet from *Lesbia*,

> will the glass
> Of Memory, that has shown in every Age
> Faces of lovers loving, leave no trace
> Of ours, that on the Stage met face to face?[15]

Essentially, Symons offsets modernity as an idea which, on a foundational level, is constant but acquires specific characteristics when it responds to different cultural pressures. There is a string of fashions that do not wear off when they succeed one another but remain equally modern in the temporal continuum. Yet, by framing modernity in the past, Symons turns it into its antithesis: myth. And the lines quoted above are nothing short of transforming the present into a self-conscious living myth.

By conceiving poetry as a conduit to eternal, intense passion, Symons renders it a means for channelling a primeval energy which transcends the present. He writes that Robert Bridges and George Meredith (whose *Modern Love* is 'like the touch of a corroding acid') are modern but not William Morris whose medievalism, although possesses all the hallmarks of passion, lacks 'intensity' ('Some Makers' 486). Symonsian intensity is concomitant with a certain Dionysian creative madness. In *Confessions*, which Beckson refers to in relation to 'madness and sexuality – the "Dionysian" element in Modernism' (Beckson 333), Symons records his 'volcanic'[16] creative activity of his mental institution period. The excesses of his trancelike subjectivity in his late poems reflect a state of divine afflatus. Symons emphasises that 'to have drunk of the cup of dreams [like Gerard de Nerval] is to have drunk of the cup of eternal

memory' (*Confessions* 10, 88). His inward visions essentially tap into the fabric and reservoir of myth.

In his studies of myth and Modernism, Michael Bell draws on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to explain the role of myth for the Modernists. Nietzsche's legacy to the Modernist generation, Bell argues, is that whilst mimetic Realism denies the Dionysian, 'imaginative literature always retains the possibility of reawakening the Dionysian power through the means of myth'.[17] In Bell's distillation of Nietzsche's thought, the pre-Aesthetic 'unity' of being is blocked forever; but it can be substituted by Apollonian 'Aesthetic creation' on the condition that it is 'a created world inhabited with self-consciousness. The aesthetic is the modern equivalent of ancient myth' (69). Bell singles out Yeats, Thomas Mann and Joyce as the authors who best represent this concept.

Just as the Modernists interpreted the post-Darwinian world through multifarious uses of the aesthetics and metaphysics of myth—Joyce's inculturated Odyssean theme, Lawrence's mystical primitivism, Yeats's Irish legend and occultism and Pound's myth syncretism—so is Symons's late poetry steeped in its own branding and appropriation of myth. Symons expatiated on an erudite set of Decadent mythologies, culling from a variety of antique and contemporary sources. The lynchpin of his late period is that of the Original Sin, the Judeo-Christian system of Good and Evil, damnation and redemption, in relation to male sexuality. Symons's poetic stock in *Lesbia*, *Love's Cruelty* and *Jezebel Mort* in large part revolves around Lilithian and Fall narratives: Satan, Hell, the forbidden fruit, the Tree of knowledge, serpents and demons. A direct offshoot or even a byproduct of Original Sin mythopoeia is the Swinburnian-Paterian figure of the *femme fatale*. The girls of Parisian night haunts that inspire Symons carry 'the seeds of Eve' (Symons, *Memoirs*

147). A litany of animalistic seductresses, Lamia, Lilith, Salome, Cleopatra, Columbine and especially Faustian Helen of Troy, parades in his verses. His narratives of famous mythical figures in those volumes are often conflated with a mythological treatment of his personal encounters with the woman of the 1890s, the 'Maenad of the Decadence' ('Nini Patte-en-L'Air') (*Lesbia* 27–8). As Regenia Gagnier aptly concludes, Symons has used woman to craft his 'personal mythos' (115).

But how is Symons's late poetic project situated in relation to Nietzschean 'mythopoeic consciousness' (Bell 68–9)? In a short, compressed lyric entitled 'Song' (1921), Symons might be commenting on pioneering Modernist techniques whilst providing his perspective on the role of myth:

> Why write in images like Donne?
> There is no Iris in the room
> To scatter roses and perfume
> In the house of John.
>
> All ye that live in Babylon
> Beware of any harlot's tomb
> The dust of the centuries consume
> Under the sway of the sun.[18]

Eliot, of course, championed John Donne in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), where he gives the difference between the 'intellectual' and the 'reflective' poet as that between Donne's School and Tennyson and Browning who 'think' but 'do not feel their thought as immediately as the

odour of a rose',[19] a phrase curiously paralleling Symons's 'roses and perfume'. Symons too had written an essay on 'John Donne' (1899), praising his poetic gift but panning his use of unconventional vocabulary and detachment, his 'frightful faculty of seeing through his own illusions'.[20] The two perspectives seem to intersect. Symons apparently disapproves of Donne's Apollonian intellectual conceits, while he is heedful of the Dionysian apocalyptic Babylon, the disruptiveness of the myth of aeonian, primeval sexuality. The poem, however, cannot make a clear-cut choice between the two: its two stanzas dramatise a tension produced when Dionysian myth is filtered through the Apollonian aesthetic.[21] The Original Sin, being the point of no return, embodies that tension, placing Symons in the company of the Moderns, yet distinctly apart.

Original Sin and Subjectivity

The numbing, purposeless violence and nihilistic voids of the First World War funnelled an existential crisis of faith lost. As Thomas Hardy profoundly laments in 'God's Funeral' (1914), we move 'toward our myth's oblivion', and are 'Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon, / Whose zion was a still abiding hope'.[22] Recuperating the individual through the mythical narrative of humanity's fundamental flaw, Original Sin, was imperative even for Eliot who believed that 'To do away with a sense of sin is to do away with civilisation'.[23] Eliot is in line with T. E. Hulme who argues for the importance of the Original Sin in reflecting the imperfection of man in a post-Enlightenment context.[24] In 1925, Symons admits the pervading presence of sin in his work as 'good and evil' has bewildered his imagination from *Days and Nights* (1889) all the way to *Lesbia* and *Love's Cruelty*, apprehending passion in 'infinite ways as well

as entanglements' (*Memoirs* 141).

Although impervious to home-grown and Continental literary developments after the 1910s, Symons's poetic variations on the Original Sin myth, nevertheless, respond to modernity when refracted through Eliot's critical assessment and juxtaposed with the latter's theory of 'depersonalisation'. In Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), the artist should not emulate the tradition of the past but, true to the pressures of his own culture, transform tradition and ensure its development by a repeated process of expunging personality.[25] Eliot deploys a famous analogy of a chemical reaction to illustrate that in depersonalisation, 'art may be said to approach the condition of science' (108). Symons's Decadent poetics conflicts with Eliot's formula of the effaced personality. Symons's poems are oppressed by the speaking voice. Highly subjective, they are like threadbare diary entries that belie his personality and experiences. In a counter-Modernist move, as it will become evident, Symons does not transform emotion, but elaborates on it by masking it in mythmaking scenarios. Curiously, his practice, too, approximates the condition of science, albeit in a different manner: even though he does not transform personal emotion alchemically, he goldbeats it into an arabesque, calling to mind his famous definition of Decadent style as 'an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement'.[26] Eliot highlights the transmutation of the poet's emotion into 'a new art emotion'; this is the opposite of a poet who seeks 'for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse' (111). Symons fits exactly that perversity here Eliot cautions against.

The catalytic role of Judeo-Christian sin in the expression of Symonsian subjectivity as an oppositional variation to Eliotic

'depersonalisation' can be inferred from Eliot's direct critique of Symons's interpretation of Baudelaire, whose preoccupation with sin bears on much of *Lesbia*, *Love's Cruelty* and *Jezebel Mort*.[27] In his review of Symons's *Baudelaire: Prose and Poetry* (1926), entitled 'Baudelaire in Our Time', originally published as 'Poet and Saint …' (1927), Eliot argues for Symons as an appropriator of the French poet. Eliot parallels different periods which he calls '*literary* generations',[28] an idea that speaks to Symons's conception of 'modernity' in 'Some Makers'. Focusing on Symons's preface, Eliot notes the 'attitude … of his epoch toward "vice"' and his 'liturgy' of 'sin' ('Baudelaire' 71–2).[29] Despite the kinship he upholds towards the Nineties, Eliot contends that Symons distorts Baudelaire's complexity of vision through a puerile, jejune enthusiasm and turns him into a contemporary of himself (see 74). He likens Symons to a 'sensitive child, who has been taken into a church, and has been entranced with the effigies, and the candles, and the incense' (72). Symons's attitude towards 'a religion of Evil, or Vice, or Sin', for Eliot, 'is no more than the game of children dressing up and playing at being grown-ups' (73).

Eliot understands that it is the appearance of religion (ritualism) and not religion itself that appeals to Symons. By aestheticising religion, Symons enters the territory of myth as a mirror for the poet's self, or an inert background whose transcendental possibilities are muted by its malleable aesthetic appeal. Symons projects his own sensibility on Baudelaire and by doing so he envelops in myth his own Fallen state. In *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (1920), Symons's comment on the poet reinforces his own aesthetic, scientific approach to sin: 'Fascinated by sin, he is never the dupe of his emotions; he sees sin as the Original Sin; he studies sin as he studies evil, with a stern logic'.[30] In a passage which he overhauls for his 1926 book on Baudelaire, and which Eliot quotes in his

subsequent review, Symons describes the French poet's devotion to passions as a 'deliberate science of sensual perversity' (38).

The pseudo-analytical manner by which Symons's personality takes charge and calibrates his verse is noticed almost consistently by the scant reviews of his volumes in the 1920s. Herbert Gorman, Joyce's first biographer, wrote a lukewarm review of *Lesbia* befittingly entitled 'A Revenant of the Nineties' in which Symons 'no longer sighs about his own moods. The approach is too cerebral now. Whether or not this is better for the future of poetry cannot be settled while we are in the midst of this new mode' (85).[31] Gorman classes Symons tentatively among contemporary modern poets, observing an artificiality of utterance that can also be discerned in Pound's seven cantos (85). Similarly, Ernest de Selincourt sees Symons's poems as occupying the space of 'hell', using 'sin' as a mere foil in order to explore 'ever more curiously the sickly rocking caverns'.[32] Dominating the verse with the poetic voice means that the deceiving appearance of objective treatment can be the cloak of a genuine serpentine scheme.

What the myth of Original Sin, then, sustains for Symons is the sexual act as a *felix culpa*, a Promethean transgression of the *subject* in the face of a meaningless, alien modernity. In an elucidating, posthumously published memoir, 'Sex and Aversion', Symons inverts the Fall by framing it as a positive force, evoking Milton's Satan who in *Paradise Lost* famously implores, 'Evil, be thou my Good' (4.110).[33] He proclaims that 'the infernal fascination of Sex' is his 'chief obsession': it is 'One's own Vitality: that is a centre of Life and Death. It is also the centre of Creation' (*Memoirs* 138). In essence, he uses inferential language to evoke the conflated Tree of Life and Tree of Good and Evil from Genesis. His approach to the trope of the Fall is non-dogmatic and so reinforces Eliot's

assessment of Symons's sinfulness as aesthetic posturing. In a key passage (again taking a cue from Baudelaire), he attests that the Christian Fall is an aesthetic background that epitomises creative afflatus as the conduit of the self. Through his 'Erotic Verses',

> a man's work and a man's existence are mixed together in an inextricable fashion; certainly not to be imaged by the knots of serpents who are literally strangling one another with terrified struggles to escape from Medusa's brain, but by the innate corruption of what is in such cases a mere parody of the Original Sin. (*Memoirs* 140)

Serpentine imagery, and by virtue of it the poet's self, imbues his creative efforts. In this adroit comparison of Classical and Biblical myths, art is not the product of a force that violently strives to escape the mind, and manifest and crystallise in fixed form in the public space. On the contrary, it is the inward and inborn projection of the mind contaminating itself in meditative introversion, bearing out the inherent nature of Original Sin. The word 'parody' accentuates the Apollonian yet postlapsarian positioning of the self through mythopoeia.

Postlapsarian Self-Contemplation

Indifferent to the developments of free verse and adhering mostly to traditional rhythms in a range of stanzaic patterns, the 1920s volumes' heavy substrate of a synergistic double mythopoeia—biblical and *fin-de-siècle*—offsets Symons's continued crisis of solving the mystery of desire and hence confronting the self. In their Fallen state, his poetic speakers

inhabit a psychological, ontological and theological conflation of Hell, responding to the fragmented world through a certain counter-Eliotic cerebral subjectivism.

Many of the poems in *Lesbia*, which the American poet Babette Deutsch described as 'a little odd and unreal clothed in the Satanic flame and scented hair of 1890',[34] have a strong Lilithian element. Lilith was Adam's first wife, created simultaneously. She rebelled and fled to the desert, becoming a succubus, haunting men's dreams and inducing nocturnal emissions. Lilith's dangerous femininity anchors Symonsian self-analysis firmly to a seething Dionysian life force. In the sonnet-like sequence of 'Helen and Faustus', a rich psychological study of 'The Architecture of his Lust' (54), the Faustian narrative fits seamlessly the subject's state of damnation and spectral inaccessibility of the object of desire. Helen is a Lilithian figure representing a primordial transgression: 'that painted Sin / After the old inevitable fashion / When Lilith gave the snake her passion' (52). This poem forms a cluster with 'Helen', bridging the mythological with personal experience, and 'A Song for Helen' and 'Song' (62), slight lyrics that hint at the disaffection of modernity by positing a Nietzschean death-of-God variation in which an eternal mythical icon is subjected to ephemerality and mortality: 'Nothing but love and lust / Left, and our thought' (61).

'The Vampire', the proemic sonnet to *Lesbia*, addresses in a tumescent tone the Lilith-like 'Intolerable woman' who hovers 'over dead men's tombs' and drains their lifeblood until the 'man swoons ecstatically on death' (1). The verse invites the fanciful suggestion that Symons unwittingly co-opts the post-apocalyptic setting of the First World War to Gothic erotic horror and to the shattering force of dark femininity. But despite the devastation induced by the feminine other, the speaker is self-

feminised, articulating obliquely an erotic fantasy of helplessness. The overarching irony of *Lesbia* and the subsequent volumes of verse is that the tyranny of the mythic soul-destroying woman turns into a thin disguise for the tyranny of the poet's personality.

In a short lyric entitled 'Lamia', the speaker proffers: 'She is the very Lamia of my soul' (*Lesbia* 22). Such ambiguous syntax teeters between the mythical demoness as an external agent and a metaphor for self- projection and self-analysis. Lamia is associated with Lilith and midway through the lyric the speaker reveals its figurative use, referring presumably to a lingering lost love:

> And she as Lamia veritably trod,
> With snake's feet and snake's wings, the ground when God
> Planted the Tree of Evil and of Good.
> Is she not in the blood that feeds my blood?

Prior to the Fall, the Serpent possessed limbs, as it is evident in the inference of Genesis 3:14. Symons seems to draw from the Zohar according to which Lilith is the female part of another serpent, Leviathan, and who causes the Fall by tempting Eve to eat the fruit of forbidden knowledge and coax her to seduce Adam.[35] Symons retrocedes prelapsarianism to a prior phase of the Genesis myth, or pollutes the innocence of Paradise with Lilith's undercurrent evil (knowing), an idea he schematises also in 'The Adder' (78). In tagging this element of myth to the object of his desire, the speaker of 'Lamia' emphasises the primordial and animistic power of the myth and not just its aetiological aspect. The ever-unsatisfied sexual impulse is inherent in human nature and is not merely the result of the Serpent's deception. The speaker's question is further suggestive of

entangled subjectivity: the repetition of the word 'blood' (also a possible parodic allusion to the Sacrament of Holy Communion) collapses the mythological schema into a self-mirroring of the circularity of pure urge. This self-mirroring is staged in a Pre-Raphaelite triptych entitled 'Stella Maligna' through an apparatus of biblical Creation similitudes. In the first part, 'Stellae Figura', the speaker offers an ekphrastic portrait of a 'serpentine' (36) *femme fatale* in an almost ceremonial accrual of attributes of dangerous femininity. In the second part, 'Laus Stellae', he switches from the third person to the intimacy of the second person, as he compares the unnamed woman's beauty to 'a garden planted / With tropic flowers of poisonous breath'. This is not an innocent, Edenic garden of plenitude, but a mock-biblical inversion of it, not of 'blossoms but the flowers of Death', populated by men's ensnared souls. In this inversion, the Forbidden Fruit's dooming allure is here suffused and amplified in the whole of the garden (female body). In addition, the addressed woman is exalted to a supreme fabulous status as her 'subtle poison mocks' the '[p]ale witchcraft of the earlier world', the lunar activities of Thessalian sorceresses. Her 'subtle poison', itself a perverted variation of the Forbidden Fruit, is served in a '[s]parkling' and 'impearled' cup which, in Symons's characteristic syntactic doubling, 'Once drained, shall drain all reason up' (38). In this re-imagined Fall, with Temptation directed at the male speaker, the purging of the faculty of reason is analogous to the Original Sin's transformational effect.

'Stellae Anima Clamat', the third part of the sequence, casts a light of cerebral subjectivity on the preceding parts as it cleverly imagines occupying the object of desire's self. In reverberant heroic quatrains, Symons gives voice to the unnamed woman and compares her to Lilith who incapacitates her male victims with her 'golden hair' and cogitates

recursively, while gazing at herself: 'She sat before her mirror, and she gazed / Deep into eyes that gazed at her again' (39). Symons revisits the Victorian age-old motif of the self-gazing *femme fatale* as he nods to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lilith in the sonnet 'Body's Beauty' in which 'Adam's first wife' destroys men with 'her enchanted hair' and is 'subtly of herself contemplative'.[36] Even more so, he alludes to his own *London Nights* (1895), to the mirror-gazing dancer from 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' and the mistress from 'White Heliotrope' ('The mirror that has sucked your face / Into its secret deep of deeps').[37]

Self-referential probing raises memories of a throng of ruined male lovers' ghosts: 'She saw her slain revive, the tombless dead'. Although she had been to men a poisonous '*Rosa mystica*', her *own* ruin is in the lack of mystique in her inability to taste 'love'. In this sense, she literally mirrors her victims but differs from them in that the cause of her undoing is her very nature. She complains to her mirror:

> […] I have been, yet never plucked, the rose;
> And I have quenched, yet never felt, that thirst
>
> 'Whereby we put on immortality.
> Is it too late I find it? must the sod
> Press down this body that is all of me,
> And shall not Love survive it, who is God?

This manner of reimagining the other does not conform to Eliot's 'depersonalisation', though it nods to Keats's negative capability which Symons prized.[38] Symons here achieves something much more radical, yet tangled. In a double gender switch identity, the male poetic voice inhabits the

mind and body of the haughty woman of his desire, who, in turn, fantasises herself exhibiting the force of desire that defines the male psyche. Pining for 'thirst', however, is itself a backslid thirsting, placing the Lilith-like woman in the same category of suffering as her male victims. In this double recursion, the poet may appear to but eventually does not escape the confines of the self. Inhabiting the object of desire and empowering her with language that critiques patriarchy ('must the sod / Press down this body'), calling to mind the Jungian *anima*, leads to re-personalisation. Poetry turns the deified feminine into an echo chamber of male selfhood. In a kind of psychological mithridatism, Symons administers analgesic doses of the 'subtle poison' of the enigma of human sexuality through his cerebral poetic memories in order to temper its Dionysian force.

Love's Cruelty continues to intone the Satanic theme in reminiscing moods that range from despondence to melancholia, and from wistful- ness to lament. The speaker of this volume's preamble, also titled 'Love's Cruelty', is under the spell of his erotic memory cerebrally, 'heart and brain' (*Love's* 9). Symons's keynote is the lover's 'Infinite enigma of [her] eyes'. Whilst one of the characteristics of myth is its power of exegesis, meaning and interpretation, its flipside is religious mystery, the obfuscation of meaning. For Symons, erotic mysteriousness and self-analysis are two sides of the same coin. The acknowledgement of mystery implies the search for meaning. The active search for meaning is, of course, a hallmark of the enigmatic arrangement of cultural artefacts and images in Eliot's and Pound's poetry. For Symons, however, it is approached through introspection.

Symons explores this epistemology of the self in 'The Impenetrable', a sonnet bookended and so closed off by the line, 'I am of all men the most Impenetrable'. He ruminates: 'Some say that I am cold

as any stone', and 'with mine own Self alone / I go at the wind's wild will where none can tell / The secret of my Soul' (*Love's* 47). These lines, arguably, could be read in the context of Symons's place in the artistic and intellectual world of the 1910s. His seclusion from the radical literary experiments mushrooming in Britain and Europe, as well as from the mainstream literature of the time, owes to the fact that his contemporaries could not appreciate or *penetrate* his personal psychodrama of desire unfolding within the poetic self. His post-Nineties poetic vision, although not radical, follows an unpredictable and so equally cryptic 'wind's wild will'. Christian sinfulness and redemption come into play and although the speaker 'adore[s]' the miracle of Jesus before 'God's throne', in the volta and the sestet,

> Backward the gates are thrown
> Of Hell where Satan in His supreme pride
> Gazes into the mirror of mine eyes,
> The clouded mirror of my Destinies,
> In whose deep depths the untroubled ghosts abide.
> Some say that I have fathomed mine own Hell.
> I am of all men the most Impenetrable.

Similarly, in 'The Wanderer's Lament', exemplifying a postlapsarian waste land, Symons asserts the impenetrability of selfhood while deconstructing the myth of love in its paradoxical 'eternal change': 'I follow after changeless love, and find / Nothing but change' (49). The futility of love and even its Prufrockian, ritualistic monotony is the result of a hypertrophied, opaque self-awareness that blunts connection with the other. The world is consumed by the self, governed by a lack of

reciprocity: she 'shows me mine own image in her eyes, / And in mine own eyes […] her own desire beholding her', asseverating about the tyranny of the self, 'I am mine own rival' (50).

Symons's mythmaking of his past and his subsequent obsession with the contours of the self persist in ever-expanding angles and variations in *Jezebel Mort*. Jezebel is a Baalite witch and royal consort who perishes in a disgraceful death (1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 9:35–36). In the context of an aged Symons's work, she is suggestive of the tension between myth and the thinning of its aura. Symons's last volume of verse, published when he was sixty-six years old, at over two hundred pages long, is a loose mishmash of sonnets, ballads addressing female figures in intimate settings, dialogues, city vignettes and nature sketches. This is a volume of uneven quality, dishing out poems kept in the drawer alongside new compositions. According to Beckson, in *Jezebel Mort*, Symons's 'capacity for poetic expression is greatly impaired' (321). Symons, however, thought very highly of the volume and in 1932, he wrote to Joyce to enquire news about the publication of *The Joyce Book* to which he supplied an 'Epilogue', informing him of *Jezebel Mort* that it contains some of his 'best and most abnormal and passionate poems. And there are certain traces of Baudelaire'.[39]

The volume's dominant mood is that of religious iconoclasm, demonic and Fallen sexuality, as in suggestively titled pieces such as 'Incantation', 'Lilith', 'Satan' and 'Baudelaire in Hell' (1920). Narratives of and imaginative speculations on the Fall proliferate: 'The Pit of Hell' (1921), a long poem in quintains is a tortuous exploration on the existential drama of the self at the mercy of the infernal Woman. 'Visions and Vanities' (1919) is a Flaubertian bestiary of Chimera, the Sphinx, the Queen of Sheba and Ammonaria, forming an imposing creation narrative

to account for the sterile force of 'Desire' (100). 'A Vision' (1927), resembling a stream of consciousness with its scant punctuation, meditates extravagantly on the Original Sin: 'to have lost Immortality in a Kiss / Is to have fallen into utmost Hell'.[40] 'Satan and the Serpent' (1927) is a proper retelling of Eve's Fall from Genesis, but one that narrows down the meaning of Original Sin to the cerebral awareness of sensuality: in the Serpent's argument, the biting of the fruit means that Eve will acquire an Apollonian self-awareness and 'shall see / All that lacks for the lure of [her] Love' (231). The poem invites comparison with but is set apart from Paul Valéry's 'Ébauche d'un serpent' (1941) in which, in Eliot's words, 'personal emotion, personal experience, is extended and completed in something impersonal'.[41]

Elsewhere, in Symons's tactics of introspection, myth is circumscribed as the intrusion of a transfiguring ancientness in the abject present. In 'A Vision of Serpents' (1923), 'in the scented darkness' of the speaker's room, his 'mirror', 'Like sacred incense from some ancient tomb / Flung Images of wonderful delight' (188). Those images from myth bestirred to life are not exactly Yeats's 'masterful images'[42] that reflect the creative struggles of the self-conscious mind. Their potency lies in their spec- tral, tentative nature. Once the speaker attempts to snatch a tress of the conjured female figure, a naked 'strange vision of unseen loveliness', he is sabotaged by 'the Serpents of the Night' who are momentarily 'freed from their eternal weariness' (188). This formulation mirrors the speaker's own happy disruption of his weary life, a mirroring corroborated by a line in 'Le Strige' in which the Notre Dame gargoyle-demon's 'Infinite Weariness' is 'as infinite as our Sin' (34). 'A Vision of Serpents' can be twinned with 'The Harlot' (1926) where, in an equally private setting, the harlot's 'mirror wakens from an ancient Tomb' (201) transfiguring the

lowly surroundings and exalting her to a cosmic, living myth 'That even Corruption covets on her Bed'. In 'Hallucination' (1929), the prostitute of a dingy brothel is transfigured to 'a Flower of Evil' and is compared to 'Pagan Heathens in their Period / Who gave themselves abnormally to the Devil' (212). Eliot's accusation of Symons's misconstruing of Baudelaire's sinfulness is blatant in these lines.

A third of *Jezebel Mort* is a section entitled 'Setebos', comprising poems mostly written in the 1920s, inspired by his cats, Setebos and Zambo. These cats do not possess the anthropomorphic playfulness of Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939).[43] Similar to Symons's animalistic *femmes fatales*, and especially the sinuous snake, the cat is the 'Eternal Sphinx' (124), amalgamating divine mystique with primeval energy. In many of these poems, Symons describes the mundane routine of his cats in an elevated context of Judeo-Christian sinfulness, damnation and redemption, casting them as both serpentine and Christlike. These cats are perpetuators of the Original Sin narrative, for 'The SERPENT must have taught them the love of SINNING' (133). The 'Setebos' section rivals Modernist attitudes as a more exaggerated variation of ancient, primitive myth intruding in the drab present. Yet, contrasting Eliot's and Hulme's advocacy of Original Sin in an age of progress, Symons neutralises Sin as an acknowledgement of human imperfection by defiantly twisting it into a celebration of vice, proclaiming the 'infallibility' of his 'Impenitence' (*Jezebel* 178). Perhaps, through a rebellious disposition towards his Methodist upbringing, Symons expresses a kind of sincerity born out of his aesthetic treatment of the Original Sin myth.

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Reflecting on his evening in Café Royal in 1892 with Barlas and Davidson, which resulted in the composition of 'something modern' (the sonnet 'Ambiguë'), alluded to in the introduction to this essay, Symons writes 'Ballad of the Café Royal' (1921). Here, he enumerates the animalistic 'Goddesses' who 'ply their Trade', concluding that 'No Priest shall serve these Pagan Deities' and their 'obscene meaning' (*Jezebel* 209–10). Although their brazen sexuality strips them of their mythic aura, they are already immortalised and clad in the mystical world of Symons's memory and art. The processes by which this paradox is manifested in a sense encapsulate Symons's eccentric modernity. Symons's late work expresses his own way of espying the Dionysian: by appropriating a postlapsarian standpoint. His mythologisation of sensuality becomes a parable of the post-Romantic inward gaze, of the Decadent introspective self crashing on a new war-ridden reality in which the fragmented psyche cannot be mended. The reason for this development is Symons's 1890s Decadent worldview as a template that pre-empts the future. As he says of one of his mysterious sensual cats,

> His feverish activity
> Keeps me in safe captivity
> And in his eyes Futurity
> Flames like some Sunset on the Sea. ('Lines', *Jezebel* 147)

Just as the Dionysian intrudes and is filtered in the present, the period of the Decadent Nineties tears its way through Modernism by circumscribing and encoding its own defiant persistence and isolationism in the first half of the twentieth century. 'Futurity' does not bring about Eliotic alchemical transformation; instead, Symons's poetics of Decadent subjectivity in its

temporal protraction is a further growth, elaboration and decay, 'like some Sunset on the Sea'. Therein lies its peculiar modernity.

Notes

[1] John Betjeman, *John Betjeman's Early Poems*, compiled by the Earl of Birkenhead, 1958 (Oxford and New York: Clio P, 1986), p. 58.

[2] Arthur Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. Karl Beckson (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977), p. 81.

[3] Elisa Bizzotto, 'Re-Editing Arthur Symons, Decadent-Modernist Literary Ghost', in *Reconnecting Aesthetics and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, eds. Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer, and Christine Reynier (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 31–44, p. 31.

[4] Arthur Symons, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (New York: Foundation P, 1930), p. 32.

[5] Kristin Mahoney, *The Literature and Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), p. 3.

[6] James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 226.

[7] Regenia Gagnier, 'Art, Elitism, and Gender: The Last of the Aesthetes', *Re-view* 12 (1990): 107–17, p. 115.

[8] Elisa Bizzotto, 'Re-Editing Arthur Symons, Decadent-Modernist Literary Ghost', in *Reconnecting Aesthetics and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, eds. Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer, and Christine Reynier (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 31–44, p. 33.

[9] See also Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987), p. 195.

[10] See Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 395–6.

[11] Roger Holdsworth, 'Introduction', in Arthur Symons, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. Holdsworth, 1974 (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 13. See also Beckson, p. 242.

[12] See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971), pp. 183–4.

[13] See Tom Gibbons, 'The Shape of Things to Come: Arthur Symons and the Futurists',

Journal of Modern Literature 5.3 (1976): 515–21.

[14] See Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), pp. 48, 62, 64.

[15] Arthur Symons, *Lesbia and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 21.

[16] Arthur Symons, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (New York: Foundation P, 1930), p. 47.

[17] Michael Bell, 'An Analytic Note on Myth in Modernism: The Case of T. S. Eliot', in *Religion and Myth in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*, eds. Scott Freer and Michael Bell (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), pp. 65–76, 68.

[18] Arthur Symons, *Love's Cruelty* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), p. 73.

[19] Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), p. 380.

[20] Arthur Symons, *Figures of Several Centuries* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1916), p. 101.

[21] The John and Iris of the poem also allude to painter Augustus John, friend of Symons, and to popular model and poetess Iris Tree, to whom Symons might have been attracted in the 1920s.

[22] Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. and intro. Michael Irwin (2002; Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2006), p. 298.

[23] Eliot's letter to Eleanor Hinkley (13 September 1939), qtd by Nevill Coghill, in his introduction to *The Family Reunion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 44.

[24] See Thomas Ernest Hulme, *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1936), pp. 46–82.

[25] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Perfect Critic*, p. 108.

[26] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (1893): 858–67, p. 858.

[27] See also Lhombreaud, pp. 280, 293–4.

[28] Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Baudelaire in Our Time', *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Volume 3: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*, eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015), p. 71.

[29] In addition, Virginia Woolf protests that Symons's prose reflects a '[p]rofound religious gravity' ('Mr Symons's Essays' 623).

[30] Arthur Symons, *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1920), p. 31.

[31] Herbert S. Gorman, *The Procession of Masks* (Boston, MA: B. J. Brimmer, 1923), p. 82.

[32] Ernest de Selincourt, 'A Poet for Our Sins', *The Times Literary Supplement* 1137 (1 November 1923): 722.

[33] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 81.

[34] Babette Deutsch, 'Poets and Prefaces', *The Dial* 70 (January 1921): 92.

[35] See Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopaedia of Demons and Demonology* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), p. 147.

[36] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2003), p. 161.

[37] Arthur Symons, *London Nights* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1895), pp. 24, 49.

[38] See Symons, *Memoirs*, p. 143.

[39] Qtd in Karl Beckson and John M. Munro, 'Letters from Arthur Symons to James Joyce: 1904–1932', *James Joyce Quarterly* 4.2 (Winter 1967): 91–101, p. 100.

[40] Arthur Symons, *Jezebel Mort and Other Poems* (London: William Heinemann, 1931), p. 126.

[41] Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry', in Paul Valéry, *Le Serpent*, trans. Mark Wardle (London: The Criterion, 1924), pp. 7–15, p. 14.

[42] 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems*, ed. and intro. Timothy Webb (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 224.

[43] See also Beckson, p. 321.