

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

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THE life, work, and philosophical position of Symonds illustrate one another as in few recorded cases. Seldom has intellect so clearly reflected character, and character material facts. I think it would be possible to trace the man's peculiar quality, style, method, influence, and choice of themes in an unbroken chain to sheer physiological necessity. Neurotic from birth, suppressed and misdirected in education, turned by early environment and by natural affinity into certain intellectual and spiritual channels, pressed into speculation by dogmatic surroundings and æsthetic study, his febrile constitution shattered by over-stimulation, by wanting vitality denied robust creation, by disease made a wanderer, by disease and wandering together aroused to a never-ending, fretful activity—the inner history of Symonds could be detailed and charted scientifically. A little imagination will serve as well to call up the human character of a development which is uncommonly fitted for psychological study.

One cannot read far in Symonds without discovering two facts: first, that the matter of ever-uppermost concern with him is religion, the emotional relation which man bears to the whole scheme of things, and secondly, that his way of conceiving this relation repeats itself constantly in similar statements and in references to a clearly defined circle of historical thought. With hardly an exception his critical volumes close upon a common note, which forms the kernel of all his poems and speculations. I cannot say how often he refers to Goethe's Proemium to *Gott und Welt* and the prayer of Cleanthes, to Marcus Aurelius and Giordano Bruno, and above all Whitman. This circle of recurring references expressed the emotional and vital elements in a point of view which found its purely intellectual basis in the evolution-theory of Darwin. A natural affinity thus predisposed him to establish his philosophy of criticism upon the wider philosophical basis empirically provided by the nineteenth century. A natural affinity, I say: because I wish to show plainly that his

acceptance of evolution was not merely intellectual and that his writings were really the outgrowth of his character and his profound emotions toward life.

From that laborious, dutiful father of his he inherited a stoical habit of mind, at variance indeed with his early tendencies, which yet in mature life became practically dominant. But in the son stoicism—the sentiment of work and duty—was wholly separated from its dogmatic applications in the father. For Symonds was a conscious sceptic long before he was a conscious stoic. His scepticism seems early to have been secretly fostered by just the dogmatic nature of his father's stoicism. His youth was like the insurrection of a Greek province against the Roman Empire. *Æsthetic* study, dialectics, neurotic activity destroyed for him the logical texture of Christianity and, combined with the scepticism of his master Jowett who questioned life without questioning God, destroyed in him the sentiment of faith: for losing faith in life he could not—as Jowett paradoxically did—retain belief in God.

By the time he left college, then, Symonds' position was reasonably clear. With a substratum of stoicism, of which he was not yet conscious, his mind was packed with miscellaneous knowledge of European culture and had a strong bias toward Greek thought. But the centre of his heart was not occupied. There was a void, a vacuum, and of this the man was desperately aware. Just here he differs from really small men, just in this fact lies whatever power of personality and achievement finally marked him out. His heart would not let him rest. His mind was unable to occupy him calmly, to allow him to exercise a soulless literary gift. He was paralyzed by the want of a central animating principle. And with all his natural talent, his facility in words, his abundant learning, he could produce nothing. It took him longer than most men to find himself because his niche in the universe was more essential to him than his niche in the world. During all the years in which he was storing up knowledge he was a man passionately in search of religion. Naturally then he found this religion, and as naturally it had to be one consonant with his peculiar physical condition and the stock of his brain. In these respects he was a

member of the post-Darwinian group at Oxford, who felt so keenly the vacuum which remained when the dogmatic elements of the old faith had been swept away. This point enables us to understand the English influence of Whitman and that vague but powerful cult first called by Henry Sidgwick the "cosmic enthusiasm."

We must grasp the idea of a natural mystic deprived of dogmatic outlet, an eclectic of culture, a man physically weak, neurotic, intellectually sophisticated, over-educated, strangely susceptible to beauty, strength, powerful influences. Such a man finds his first foothold in Goethe, because Goethe is almost the only character which, as it were, includes a man of such wide range and provides a generous margin, points out a path of cohesion. For Symonds, Goethe was an elaboration, a modern instance of the spirit which had first drawn him into Greek studies, the spirit of scientific pantheism. In Greek thought he found, first of all, a moral attitude. In their sense of a cosmic order, an all-embracing law, their sense of harmony with nature and of divinity in nature, he discovered the ground-plan of a modern creed which required only to be confirmed by experiment and animated by emotion. He found that in their submission to law they had surmounted the enervating elements of fatalism by resolutely facing and absorbing the sad things of life, including them in selected types of predominant beauty and strength. The logical apex of Greek ethics he found in Marcus Aurelius: its obedience to the common reason of the universe, its social virtue, its faith in the rightness of things we cannot see. This attitude, except for its want of compelling force, its inadequacy to men who have been indulged with a more celestial dream, appeared to him consonant with modern science as Christian theology could not be. For Christian theology made man an exile from nature, dependent for salvation upon a being external to the universe and controlling it from without. The crucial utterances of Christian theology—such, for example, as St. Paul's "For if Christ be not risen indeed, then are we of all men most miserable," or Thomas à Kempis' "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain," are contradictory to the idea of a divinity immanent in the universe of which man's consciousness forms a part.

This moral attitude Symonds found expressed in three utterances, to all of which he constantly recurs. The first, which he called his motto, is the maxim of Goethe, "To live resolutely in the Whole, the Good, the Beautiful." The second is the prayer of Cleanthes the Stoic, which in his own version was written over Symonds' grave:

Lead thou me God, Law, Reason, Motion, Life!
 All names alike for thee are vain and hollow.
 Lead me; for I will follow without strife;
 Or, if I strive, still must I blindly follow.

The third is Goethe's Proemium to *Gott und Welt*, Faust's confession of faith; translated thus by Symonds:

To Him who from eternity, self-stirred,
 Himself hath made by His creative word;
 To Him who, seek to name Him as we will,
 Unknown within Himself abideth still:
 To Him supreme who maketh faith to be,
 Trust, hope, love, power, and endless energy.

* * *

What were the God who sat outside to see
 The spheres beneath His finger circling free?
 God dwells within, and moves the world and moulds;
 Himself and nature in one form enfolds:
 Thus all that lives in Him and breathes and is,
 Shall ne'er His presence, ne'er His spirit miss.

The soul of man, too, is an universe;
 Whence follows it that race with race concurs
 In naming all it knows of good and true,
 God—yea, its own God—and with honor due
 Surrenders to His sway both earth and heaven,
 Fears Him, and loves, where place for love is given.

Characteristically this translation was made on the glacier at Heiligenblut, June 27, 1870. I shall have occasion presently to connect it with his feeling about the Alps.

This philosophical position, I have said, formed for him the ground plan of a modern creed which required only to be ratified by experiment and animated by emotion. The first of these

requisites he found in the evolution doctrine, the second in Whitman.

Symonds' use of the word evolution has been severely criticised on the ground that he too laxly identifies it with growth. Whatever truth may be in the charge I think is due to two causes—first, that he approaches the problem rather imaginatively than in the spirit of exact science, and secondly that his data are psychological, historical and æsthetic, rather than biological or geological. In short, the aspect of evolution he has always in mind is the evolution of the human spirit, which is not yet so accurately determinable as the primary physical aspects of life. In his application of evolution to criticism, in his effort to show that science and religion are complementary, he was a pioneer and he had, so to speak, the pioneer's axe to grind; so that what he wrote on these themes must be taken in his own spirit as personal suggestions and speculations. Intellectually the evolution theory proved to him what the Greeks and Marcus Aurelius had divined, how truly man is part of nature and how "nature everywhere, and in all her parts, must contain what corresponds to our spiritual essence."

There is, however, a long step to take from the philosophy of nature to the religion of nature,—the step from what may be called the cosmic sense to what has been called the cosmic enthusiasm. The prayer of Cleanthes is a statement of submission:

"Lead me; for I will follow without strife,
Or if I strive, still must I blindly follow."

Indeed that is what man does whether he will or no; therein he still remains in bondage to fate, because he does not yet with hearty confidence affirm, "In Thy will is our peace." Powerless as man's will is before cosmic law, he may still believe that his happiness lies in opposition to cosmic law. The submission remains negative rather than positive, the acquiescence is not yet enthusiastic. And as Symonds wrote in his *Greek Poets*: "The real way of achieving a triumph over chance and of defying fate is to turn to good account all fair and wholesome things beneath the sun, and to maintain for an ideal the beauty, strength, and splendor of the body, mind, and will of man." The way to hold

one's own in the swift-flowing stream is to swim with it, using the current for one's own progress. Under these conditions the possibility of a new religion is indicated in the following passage: "Through criticism, science sprang into being; and science, so far as it touches the idea of deity, brought once more into overwhelming prominence the Greek conception of God as Law. On the other hand, the claims of humanity upon our duty and devotion grew in importance, so that the spirit and teaching of Christ, the suffering, the self-sacrificing, the merciful, and at the same time the just, survived the decay of his divinity. In other words, the two factors of primitive Christianity are again disengaged, and demand incorporation in a religion which shall combine the conceptions of obedience to supreme Law and of devotion to humanity, both of which have been spiritualized, sublimed, and rendered positive by the action of thought and experience. What religion has to do, if it remains theistic, is to create an enthusiasm in which the cosmic emotion shall coalesce with the sense of social duty." [*The Philosophy of Evolution.*]

Here then the fire was laid, ready to be lighted. Whitman touched the match. It was in 1865 that Symonds discovered Whitman. Years afterward he wrote: "*Leaves of Grass*, which I first read at the age of twenty-five, influenced me more perhaps than any other book has done, except the Bible; more than Plato, more than Goethe. It is impossible for me to speak critically of what has so deeply entered into the fibre and marrow of my being." In Whitman all these smouldering theories, these gently, passively emotional thoughts sprang up as a flame warming and lighting all the implications of the cosmic idea: the universe, the individual, sex, friendship, democracy. Whitman's passionate belief in life, stout subordination of the world's experience to the forthright soul, superb emotional grasp of the principle of development, glory in health, strength, beauty, disregard of cerebration, innocence of the sinister power of creeds, customs, human laws to swamp the cosmic energy in man—all this, on a dozen scores, was calculated to electrify a man like Symonds. He accepted the whole of Whitman as he had never accepted the whole of anything before. And with Whitman he came to accept the whole of life.

Was there something a little hectic about all this? The sheer physical health which underlay Whitman's exultation was just what Symonds did not possess. And Symonds, like other brilliant intelligences, frequently saw what he could not feel. The question arises, Can the cosmic enthusiasm, which is really the joy of living, exist healthily in those who are not healthy? And if the joy of living is to be identified with religion can any but healthy people be truly religious? It is open to serious question whether any man can love the universe whose digestion is faulty. The question is perhaps insoluble, yet in it lies the nature of Symonds' inherent sincerity, taking that word in its absolute sense. From his acceptance of Whitman sprang the animated point of view which controlled his later life and underlay his writings. That alone is an earnest of sincerity! and yet I accept it with misgivings, because he never eradicated his even more fundamental scepticism, he never ceased interrogating the sphinx even in the midst of his adoration. Or perhaps I should say the cosmic law remained for him a sphinx—the projection of his own sphinxliness (I think Plato would forgive this word) instead of the more obvious, blunt, vital force Whitman felt it to be: which means merely that both men created the cosmos in their own image, that their personalities were not identical. I mention it because it qualifies our notion of this discipleship. It enables us to see that for Symonds the cosmic enthusiasm could really be only a working-plan, a literary and intellectual synthesis and a social platform, while the quintessence of the man remained as volatile, as evanescent, as unremoved and unexpressed as ever. The real Symonds—the “Opalstein” of Stevenson—could never flash itself into the rough colors of critical prose and common life. Behind the calm sweep of a more and more fruitful actuality, the mystery of life, dim, inscrutable, hidden away, seemed continually surging to the surface, questioning, warning, troubling, like a soul seeking a body and always baffled. But for us, who can be students only of the *fait accompli*, the working-plan is there and must suffice.

That the cosmic enthusiasm did not altogether absorb or satisfy him is proved by certain notes and miscellaneous papers he published on the question of God. He was plainly not con-

tented with the impersonality of Cosmic Law. He described himself as an agnostic leaning toward theism, which may be taken as a precise way of shadowing forth his need of a devotional object. Of the definition of deity he says well: "What must of necessity remain at present blank and abstract in our idea of God may possibly again be filled up and rendered concrete when the human mind is prepared for a new synthesis of faith and science." [*Notes on Theism.*] To me it seems that the words agnostic and Whitman can hardly be uttered in the same breath: for the whole hopeless tangle of cold metaphysical processes implied in words like agnostic withers away before one luminous heart-felt glimpse into the infinite. This illustrates the dualism in Symonds, his incapacity to accept a soul-stirring intuition without submitting it immediately to analysis. It illustrates the lifelong struggle in him of the poet and the critic. A man who could write, near the close of his life: "If there is a God, we shall not cry in vain. If there is none, the struggle of life shall not last through all eternity. Self, agonized and tortured as it is, must now repose on this alternative"—a man who could write this could not have possessed quintessentially the spirit of the cosmic enthusiasm. He could not have been so troubled with definitions, he could not have wavered so in faith.

So far as he possessed it he found it imaged in the Alps. His feeling for the Alps once more illustrates the physical basis of religious emotion. It was the longing of stifled lungs for oxygen, literally as well as figuratively. So far back as 1858 we find him speaking of grand scenery as an elevating influence which depreciates one's estimate of self. Visiting Switzerland for the first time at twenty-one he fills his mind with haunting pictures and memorable sounds—the murmurous air of waterfalls and winds, wild flowers that call to him more and more compellingly through days and years of illness and heated study in England. "I love Switzerland as a second home," he writes already in 1866, "hoping to return to it, certain that I am happier, purer in mind, healthier in body there than anywhere else in the world. I would not take Rome, Florence, and Naples in exchange for the châteaux of Mürren." A year later in London, in the roaring, dazzling summer streets, he dreams of sunrise over the snow-

fields, the church-bells ringing in the valleys, the dew upon the flowers: and without forgetting their pitiless indifference to man, he says, "I love the mountains as I love the majesty of justice. I adore God through them, and feel near to Him among them." At Mürren in 1863 he first read Goethe's *Proemium*; on the Pasteuze Glacier seven years later he translated it. In 1869 he describes the Alps as his "only unexploded illusion." The slopes of the cemetery where his father was laid to rest in 1871 remind him of an upland Alpine meadow. Gradually the Alpine sentiment becomes central in him. He connects it with all his major impressions—with Prometheus on Caucasus, with Beethoven and Handel, Cleanthes and Plato, Bruno and Whitman, Michael Angelo and Goethe, Moses and Christ. In 1867 he writes, "The only thing I know which will restore my physical tone and give me health is living in the Alps. The only prospect of obtaining spiritual tone and health seems to be the discovery of some immaterial altitudes, some mountains and temples of God. As I am prostrated and rendered vacant by scepticism, the Alps are my religion. I can rest there and feel, if not God, at least greatness—greatness prior and posterior to man in time, beyond his thoughts, not of his creation, independent, palpable, immovable, proved."

Here then is indicated the relation between his physical condition, his religious attitude, and his theory of criticism. The Alps which could give him health could give him also, and for the same reason, faith. And they gave him that sense of "greatness," the importance of which in his own work is indicated in a passage of one of his Greek studies: "No one should delude us into thinking that true culture does not come from the impassioned study of everything, however eccentric and at variance with our own mode of life, that is truly great." There we have the logical basis for his literary, as well as his religious, enthusiasm for Whitman. In the Alps he not only found, as Obermann had found, an outlet for his mystical pantheism, but he found, as Tyndall found, the laboratory for placing some such pantheism on a scientific basis. He found moreover practical democracy among the peasants, he found his ideal of the human body, which drew him to Michael Angelo; and he came to feel

that "elevating influence which depreciates one's estimate of self"—which troubled him at eighteen—as a blissful relief. Years of introspection had given him too much of himself, and he was glad enough to be "sweetly shipwrecked on that sea."

It is not surprising then that Symonds came to look in literature for everything that has tonic value. Health, moral and intellectual, and all that nourishes a high normality in man, was the object of his quest in art, history, and literature; not sensations that console the pessimist, nor distinction that implies a dead level to throw it into relief, nor the restoration of past ages lovelier than ours in specific points at the cost of true democracy. His vision was wide and sane: power and clairvoyance might have made it prophetic. For the underlying principle of his critical theory—that life is deeper than thought—is only in our day, after centuries of philosophical delusion, becoming recognized once more. It was a principle far more "modern" than that of a greater than Symonds, Matthew Arnold. *Prose of the centre* was Arnold's criterion, meaning prose of the social centre. But the criterion of Symonds held forth with however much defect of power, was a more fundamental centre than that of taste: one in which even taste, even the social centre, becomes provincial and which admits Rabelais, Burns, Thoreau, Whitman and a hundred others who have no other centre at all than native humanity. "Life is deeper than thought"—a contemporary platitude which with Symonds was notable for two reasons. In the first place, it was with him a true discovery of experience, and that always glorifies a platitude. Secondly, it stands almost unique in an age of culture and in a man who contributed so much to culture in its popular aspects. "I am nothing if not cultivated," wrote Symonds once, "or, at least, the world only expects culture from me. But in my heart of hearts I do not believe in culture, except as an adjunct to life. . . . Passion, nerve and sinew, eating and drinking, even money-getting, come, in my reckoning, before culture." In his day perhaps only a man deprived of life and submerged in literature could have proclaimed that. Robust minds like Arnold or Browning could not feel so keenly the tonic element in thought. Life in its own abundance was tonic enough. To them it was a commonplace

from the outset that life is deeper than thought—they could not feel it as a revelation. It was from excess of vitality that they were able, without losing their personal equilibrium, to emphasize the purely intellectual. In everything written by these men health and strength were implicit, and for this reason they were seldom explicit. Browning could afford to occupy himself with intricate psychological cases, and Arnold with writers of exquisite and correct prose: but Symonds required vital forces like Michael Angelo and Whitman.

Symonds again was one of the first English men of letters to grasp what may be called the optimism of science. To Tennyson, Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, Clough, science appeared in one way or another as an enemy, a negative agent, a cause of melancholy, pessimism, or resignation, subverting God, revelation, personal immortality. To them it brought with it an overwhelming sense of loss. Arnold and Clough consoled themselves with duty and work, Carlyle and Ruskin passionately recalled the past, Tennyson credulously snatched at the hope that it might after all be theology in another form, Browning proclaimed a totally unreasonable optimism. The positive aspects of science meanwhile remained hidden, unpopularized, uncompromisingly "scientific." Such an aspect as eugenics, for example, has only in the last few years, and chiefly through Continental influence, begun to take its place in our literature. Science, not as a destroyer but as a builder, Symonds divined, and his training enabled him to link that modern view with the thought of the past. He would have gladly recognized the truth that doubt and faith are attitudes toward life itself, not toward figments of the brain, that states of mind like scepticism and pessimism are to be explained rather by experiments in circulation and digestion than by abstract metaphysical questions of immortality and God. And he would have recognized that this, instead of debasing our view of the human soul, glorifies our view of the human body.

These, I say, are aspects of science that Symonds divined, largely because the problem of his own life and consequently the nature of his experience was, unlike that of his greater contemporaries, more physical than intellectual. There was only a defect of power in the man to make it memorable, in the sense

in which the teachings of Carlyle, or Ruskin, or Arnold are memorable.

A defect of power: and also a defect of coherence. The writings of Symonds do not stand together as do those of Arnold or Ruskin. There has never been a collected edition of his works, and the idea of such a thing is inconceivable. With all their community of tone and subject, their marked evolution of style, their consistently delivered message, they lack that highest unifying bond of personality. Some of them are isolated popular handbooks, others are esoteric and for the few, others again are merely mediocre and have been forgotten. Individually they appeal to many different types of mind. Taken together they do not supply any composite human demand, nor are they powerful enough to create any such demand. They are indeed rather the product of energy than of power.

The conclusions of Symonds reduce themselves, upon analysis, to sanity and common sense: and it appears certain that nothing is more perilous to long life in literature than sanity and common sense when they are not founded upon clairvoyance. Only the supreme geniuses—Tolstoy and Goethe—have been able to carry off the palm with platitude. That is because they not only see and experience the truth in platitude, but feel it, with a dynamic and world-shaking passion. Symonds, in specific traits the equal of Arnold, or Ruskin, or Carlyle, falls short of their finality partly because more than any of them he saw life steadily and saw it whole. He saw life neither through the spectacles of the *Zeit-geist* nor of the Hero. To him England was not accurately divided into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace, nor was the world wholly a world of Plausibilities. And he was obviously more sensible in his hard-won faith in human evolution than that nobler prophet who strove so tragically to restore the Middle Ages. But common sense unhappily is the virtue of equilibrium: and equilibrium is a state of the mind which has no counterpart in life or in men who in the profound sense, in the *normal sense*, grasp life—that is to say, the prophets.

ST. JOHN AND THE FAUN

G. E. WOODBERRY

I

O BLEST Imagination!
Bright power beneath man's lid,
That in apparent beauty
Unveils the beauty hid!
In the gleaming of the instant
Abides the immortal thing;
Our souls that voyage unspeaking
Press forward, wing and wing;
From every passing object
A brighter radiance pours;
The Lethe of our daily lives
Sweeps by eternal shores.

II

On the deep below Amalfi,
Where the long roll of the wave
Slowly breathed, and slipped beneath me
To gray cliff and sounding cave,
Came a boat-load of dark fishers,
Passed, and on the bright sea shone;
There, the vision of a moment,
I beheld the young St. John.

At the stern the boy stood bending
Full his dreaming gaze on me;
Inexorably spread between us
Flashed the blue strait of the sea;
Slow receding,—distant,—distant,—
While my bosom scarce drew breath,—
Dreaming eyes on my eyes dreaming
Holy beauty without death.