

the London drawing-rooms. To be sure, Wilde is thoroughly second-rate, admirable only as a wit and a craftsman, not as a creator; but the upholders of the theory of seduction first generally have a little altar built to him somewhere, so it is fair to mention him.

That many men and women who have mastered expression through some medium have been, and are, aloof in spirit and disreputable in conduct, nobody would deny. That the flame which burns in the procession must be lighted behind the scenes, is likewise undeniable. In fact, it is a truism. But that either association with one's kind, or a sense of personal responsibility to society, or even a life of belief and sacrifice, will necessarily smother the torch, is a pathetic fallacy.

Pathetic because when preached, as it so often has been preached, it is calculated to do such harm. Youth, and especially fine-fibered youth, the youth of promise, the youth which anticipates, and longs to contribute to the comprehension of this amazing mess, our world, is delicately balanced between cynicism and a mysterious belief. Innumerable forces tend to tip the balance toward cynicism. The material rewards of the artist and the thinker are very small, those of the dull executive very large. The bosh which is talked by the parties in the parlors, by "the Mr. Wilkinsons, the clergymen," is undoubtedly egregious. The instinct of sex swims safely through unplumbed seas of chatter. The desire to think and act for oneself in youth is likely to be interpreted as the necessity for acting and thinking contrary to established ideals. And above all, there is so much and such obvious concealment of the truth in daily intercourse, that youth often decides upon going around and having a look at life from the back-entrance.

So, that any of us who love this youth and its possibilities should help at all to tip the scales against real sincerity and self-control is particularly undesirable. The young artist will have need of every ounce of energy and conviction that he possesses, or over he will go in spite of himself. He sees around him painters who rub raw meat on the rabbits in their hunting-pieces, that Mrs. Van Rich's poodle may smell of them and so assure a sale at a huge price. Where does he throw the blame? Not on the painter, where it belongs, but on poor Mrs. Van Rich whose crime is only that she wishes to be surrounded by the best, that she may be healed of her ignorance. He hears that our best short-story writer went to the penitentiary, and supposes it was for some defiance of the social code. Why emphasize the penance without explaining that the poor man merely got his accounts mixed, and then ran away because he was afraid to face the music? Byron, he learns, kept countesses and cobras, and became like a spirit on the face of the waters of Europe; therefore he too will become a collector, merely substituting dachshunds and dressmaker's assistants. Sex is an impulse, but marriage is a bond; therefore he will obey that impulse, but in freedom. Why not tell him that obedience to impulse ruins the control of the artist as surely as the control of that despicable worm, the critic?

There is, in this exaltation of disreputability, a grain of truth. To interpret, the artist must feel, and his feeling is often bound to conflict with convention. But what shall it profit a man if he lose his own soul, and only form the habit of eating with his knife? To rebel against convention because it is convention, to withdraw from society because it is society, to adopt the easiest way because it is easiest, does not develop the emotions, it merely withers the mind. No man can interpret who does not understand restraint, and how can a man control his expression, in any medium, who cannot control himself? The call to the dis-

reputable is the counsel to mediocrity, the counsel to avoid, not to embrace, life. To be afraid is to be damned, for the artist and the scientist alike; to put emphasis where it does not belong is to spoil the whole tune of life; but the worst fear of all is the fear of not being understood, and the worst emphasis of all is that which is placed not upon the action but upon the shabbiness of the properties of the stage.

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From Symons to Gibson

Poems by Arthur Symons, two volumes. New York: John Lane Co. Knave of Hearts, by Arthur Symons. New York: John Lane Co. Collected Poems, by Wilfred Wilson Gibson. New York: The Macmillan Co.

ARTHUR SYMONS and Wilfred Wilson Gibson together is, confessedly, not a chemical but a mechanical combination. That each writes poetry, and that each writes poetry in English, is the one fact that makes a common denominator for the two. And yet when this has been said there remains an interest in joining the two poets whose books have come together. One represents a passing and the other a current type of English poetry. And the difference between the kind of poetry presented by Arthur Symons and the kind of poetry presented by Wilfred Wilson Gibson is the measure of a change of direction in the English poetic imagination in the past fifteen years.

As we go through the first volumes we recall the period when W. B. Yeats wrote of *The Autumn of the Body*, and when Arthur Symons, himself the most expressive critic of his generation—the most interesting and luminous critic of many generations—used the phrase "the escape from life." One might wonder why so many pages in *Poems* and *The Knave of Hearts* should be given to impressions in verse—*At Dieppe, On the Beach, At Fontainebleau. On the Heaths, Spring Twilight*, and scores and scores of such impressions. All are most efficiently rendered, and as one reads them one queries why the Imagists, if they want only to render the visible thing, should strive after a new technique. I do not know that the new verse has rendered color and movement more vividly than they are rendered here. Take the poem called *Spain* as an instance.

• Josepha, when you sing
With clapping hands the sorrows of your Spain,
And all the bright-shawled ring
Laugh and clap hands again,
I think how all the sorrows were in vain.

The footlights flicker and spire
In tongues of flame about your tiny feet,
My warm-eyed Gypsy, higher,
And in your eyes they meet
More than their light, more than their golden heat.

Or take the vividness of figure and movement in *Javanese Dancers*, where the poet lets us see:

In measure while the gnats of music whirr,
The little amber-colored dancers move,
Like painted idols seen to stir
By the idolators in a magic grove.

The philosophy that made the rendering of such impressions something more than trivial expression is not regarded by the younger poets of whom Wilfred Wilson Gibson is the representative we have chosen. "The escape

from life" was Arthur Symons's summing-up of that philosophy. Life was regarded as a succession of moments, most of them leaden, some of them golden. The escape from life felt as the leaden succession was through three activities that were themselves the shadows of the divine creative activity—love, art in its creation, and art in its contemplation. If you should ask why life should have its exaltations only in these specialized activities, W. B. Yeats in his essay, *The Autumn of the Body*, will tell you: Man had wooed and won the world and had fallen weary; this weariness was not for a time; it would end only with the last autumn "when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves." The tumult of life would never be shown again in the arts. Instead of attempting to reproduce "the intense dense wood of trees," poets would, in Mallarmé's phrase, seek only to render "the horror of the forest or the silent thunder of the leaves." Poetry would be of essences separated one from another in little intense poems.

Out of such a philosophy come poems that hold an impression. We are not taking part in life, we are only living specialized moments. For the rest we are content to look out of a window. Hence the many pages of impressions that are in the poems of Arthur Symons—in the poems, too, of Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson.

There were exotic influences, too. Flaubert was a powerful inspiration in the eighteen nineties. Wilde took the Sphinx out of the famous dialogue in *The Temptations of Saint Anthony*, and Arthur Symons has taken the Chimaera out of the same. The Chimaera—the demon one must guess of strange experiences and strange adorations—has ceased to haunt the younger writers. The poem in which the Chimaera figures—a poem typical of the work of the last generation—reads curiously like a relique now:

Chimaera, I have been among
The loving people who yet throng
The twilight about Tannhauser;
And I have seen the face of her
Whose sorrow, older than that grace
Which in her face is Beauty's face,
Fights in her battled soul for God.
And the earth, knowing I have trod
Ways not its ways, those ways not meet,
Sets all its stones against my feet.
Let me return, Chimaera! Still
I seek for the accursed hill,
The most fair gates of Hell. Some day,
Chimaera, I shall find the way.

The Chimaera waits, perhaps, on all who will "the escape from life." It can carry one neither to Hell nor to Heaven; it can only whisper through the prison bars of life:

O impotent voice abhorred, be dumb!
Why is it that I cannot find
Bounds to my ardours unconfined,
Why, empty of sin and void of grace,
Do I behold only my face
In the white mirror of the world,
Vainly, and without respite hurled
Like the torn winds about the void;
Why thirsting still for unenjoyed
Delights and undiscovered springs,
Desiring in all mortal things
To hear and hold and taste and see
Mortal impossibility?

This is far from being the mood of the new poetry.

If one had to define in a word the new motive that has come into English poetry one might use the word Nationalism. Arthur Symons and his contemporaries, Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson, had Europe for their background—the Europe in which all roads led to Paris. Then there was the British Empire as revealed by Rudyard Kipling. Afterwards came the discovery of the English folk—a discovery helped by the work of Yeats and Synge. The end of the cosmopolitan and the imperialistic eras had already been reached when J. M. Synge said of the poetry of the time, "It seems to me anonymous poetry lacking the stamp of time and place." John Masefield's *Everlasting Mercy* and *The Widow in the Bye-Street* are the outstanding successes among the poems that have come out of the discovery of English nationalism. In them a deliberate attempt is made to get the distinctive stamp of time and place.

Before Masefield's success, however, Wilfred Wilson Gibson had written about the English folk in his *Stonefolds*, his *Daily Bread*, his *Fires*. Wilfred Wilson Gibson is an idyllic and descriptive poet who presents himself to us as a realist and a dramatist. Half of the poems in the large volume which represents his collected work are in the form of dramatic dialogue. Nine-tenths of the poems have to do with people whose occupations suggest a realistic approach—shepherds, fishers, miners, printers, firemen, journeymen. And yet when one reads the volume with attention one perceives that the typical poem is the narrative that has to do with ancient Babylon—the early poem that is published first in the present volume, *Akra the Slave*.

This is not to say that *Akra the Slave* is Mr. Gibson's best achievement or his most adequate expression. But it is typical because it shows to the full his characteristic equipment—his descriptive power, his feeling for romantic situation, his overlooking of a definite psychology. The whole of *Akra the Slave* is idyllic. The captive sees and loves the queen, keeps the image of her wonderful beauty in his mind as the exultant thought of his captivity, and is slain in the end because he has looked upon her beauty naked in the garden. The motive of *Akra the Slave* is repeated in the more mature, more complete later poem, *Hoops*. The hero of this poem in dialogue, *Gentleman John*, is a captive too—captive to his own ugliness and his own deformity. The adoration for the beauty of the queen that *Akra the Slave* had has become an adoration for beauty generalized. *Gentleman John* is held as slave to the camel because he has once seen in the circus-tent:

I heard a rustle in the hay beside me;
And opening sleepy eyes, scarce marvelling,
I saw her, standing naked in the lamplight,
Beneath the huge tent's cavernous canopy,
Against the throng of elephants and camels
That champed unwondering in the golden dusk,
Moon-white Diana, mettled Artemis—
Her body, quick and tense as her own bow-string—
Her spirit, an arrow barbed and strung for flight—
White snow-flakes melting on her night-black hair,
And on her glistening breasts and supple thighs:
Her red lips parted, her keen eyes alive
With fierce, far-ranging hungers of the chase
Over the hills of morn.

There are deaths and disablements and partings in most of the stories that Wilfred Wilson Gibson give us in narrative form and in dramatic dialogue. But in spite of such