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Dance of the Marionettes

Arthur Symons and symbolist theatre¹

“How can we know the dancer from the dance?” In poems such as “Javanese Dancers” and in many prose texts (including fiction) Symons (1865–1945) offers a gloss on that well-known line by his friend and fellow-Celt, Yeats. This paper explores the relationship between Symons’s views on theatre and those of Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966); the two men commented on each other’s work. There is a trajectory from Symons’s response to dance (owing something to the popular native English tradition of music-hall, as well as to the more sophisticated developments of French Symbolism), towards Craig’s theory of the *Übermarionette*, which found so little favour in Edwardian England – Symons apart – but was hugely influential in mainland Europe, anticipating Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekte* and providing a strong intellectual basis for the avant-garde Polish theatre of Tadeusz Kantor. Symons is clearly a key figure in the challenge to naturalism and to other forms of naïve representationism, including crudely emotional identification with characters and ‘star’ actors. I conclude with a brief reference to the non-naturalistic (but didactic) Edinburgh ‘masques’ of the Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes (1854–1932).

Arthur Symons (1865–1945) came from a remote part of Britain – remote, that is, from the perspective of London or Paris. He was a Celt, born in Wales into a family which had originated in Cornwall. He once published an essay on Welsh poetry, and many of the protagonists of his 1905 short story collection, *Spiritual Adventures*, are Cornishmen who seek the sophistication of the wider world.

The first piece in that collection is the autobiographical “A Prelude to Life.” Here Symons recounts both his upbringing by parents who were strictly religious, and his youthful desire to obtain ‘forbidden’ works of literature. He tells us of his early conflicts: “I wanted to want to be good, but all I really wanted was to be

1. This paper was delivered at the University of Montpellier, France, in January 2002.

clever.”² In due course he left behind the milieu of provincial puritanism, moved to London, experienced Paris, translated Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, and became the leading exponent of French Symbolism in the English-speaking world.

In 1899 appeared the first version of his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. He proclaimed Symbolism’s “revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition” and championed its “endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; . . . this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible. . .”³ Such language would suggest that although Symons had rejected the religion of his parents, he had, via art, found another spiritual faith which offered a foil to the dominant culture of reductive rationalism/positivism.

For him “symbol” concerned the inner essence, as opposed to allegory, which was a matter of merely external likenesses, unsubtle, literal-minded. W.B. Yeats, the dedicatee of Symons’s book, had maintained that a symbol was “the only possible expression of some invisible essence . . . while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy, and not to imagination. . .”⁴

So the symbol did not *represent* or *refer* to anything “other”: it represented, referred only to itself. Symons found this exemplified most potently in the performing arts: in music, and in dance. Let us take the latter. Symons wrote many poems about dancers: the best is perhaps “Javanese Dancers.”

Still, with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
With lingering feet that undulate,
With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill
In measure while the gnats of music whirr,
The little amber-coloured dancers move
Like painted idols seen to stir
By the idolaters in a magic grove.⁵

2. *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons* (London: Secker, 1924), Vol. 5, p. 13. Unless stated otherwise, all references to Symons’s works are to this 9-volume edition, hereafter cited as *CWAS*.

3. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, with an introduction by Richard Ellmann (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), p. 5. Hereafter cited as *SML*.

4. W. B. Yeats, *Selected Criticism*, edited with an introduction and notes by A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 22.

5. *CWAS*, Vol. 1, p. 125.

In the late nineteenth century westerners were intrigued by the Far East and its subtle aesthetics of understatement and impersonality. In France, the American-born dancer Loïe Fuller, an admirer of Japanese dance, was a sensation at the Folies-Bergère. She could create an illusion of fire by the manner in which she swirled her veils in relation to the lighting in the theatre. There was no other décor. By these minimal means she could suggest the immolation of Wagner's Brunnhilde; for this we have the witness of the Symbolist poet Georges Rodenbach, who was an *aficionado* of her art.⁶ Fuller, as a dancer, did not so much *perform* her art; by the movement of her body she *became* her art. As Yeats famously put it in the poem "Among Schoolchildren": "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Symons was similarly impressed by the dancing of Jane Avril in Paris and even by the performers in the London music-halls.⁷ A dancer does not speak, and one of the basics of Symbolism was the power of silence. For Symons, Symbolism prefers suggestion to statement. Any words spoken on stage, he maintains, should be the words of poetry, of heightened language, not the banal language of everyday life. "Silence" might not seem compatible with music, but for Symons it is in the music dramas of Wagner – that guru of the Symbolists – that he finds an art of suggestion, of reticence.⁸

He goes on to commend *Parsifal* in performance: here all the arts flow into one another. Rhythm is everything. Every movement, every gesture is deliberate; even the music is subordinated to the visual dimension. The figures move across stage slowly but significantly: they can express much even when they are not moving, when they are not even singing, when only the orchestra is providing the sound. To Symons, this is the opposite of the sheer bustle of most theatre in the latter part of the nineteenth century: he objects to the hyperactivity of realism, which, as he puts it, "tears" the picture "out of the frame."⁹ Symons finds Wagner's deployment of leitmotifs to be suggestive of psychological nuances that are absent in the wordy plays of Ibsen and Shaw. He considers these two to be obsessed with quotidian externals, topics of the day; in their plays there is too

6. Georges Rodenbach, *La Jeunesse Blanche* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1913 impression), pp. 203–206.

7. His fellow poet of the 90s, John Davidson, had a more joyless experience of the dingy music-halls of Glasgow.

8. For most of us, I suspect, that last word does not immediately relate to Wagner.

9. Symons, "Ballet, Pantomime, and Poetic Drama," *The Dome* 1 (October–December 1898), p. 70 *et passim*.

much business, with supposedly “realistic” scenery cluttering up the stage – such points are made *passim* in Symons’s writings on the arts. He remarks that Grieg’s incidental music for *Peer Gynt* supplies all the poetry that Ibsen has left out of the play.¹⁰

Symons the poet is not downplaying words as such, and it is *writers* for the theatre – such as Villiers de l’Isle, Adam and Maeterlinck – to whom he devotes many pages of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, and whom he considers great progenitors of the Symbolist stage. Maeterlinck, for Symons, extends Symbolism into mysticism: again, Symons cannot altogether abandon his religious upbringing.

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One of the great *impresarios* of Symbolist theatre, as distinct from *writers*, was Aurélien Lugné-Poe, whose production of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* was reviewed by Symons. This piece takes place in Poland, which is called “the land of Nowhere.” Symons is interested in the way that the actors play marionettes – or, as he expresses it, “living people pretending to be those wooden images of life which pretend to be living people.” *Ubu*, though, does not attain the dignity of a marionette – Symons remarks that “he remains a monkey on a stick.” The thrust of Symons’s review is that *Ubu Roi* is somewhat callow, gimmicky, but it is a step in the right direction. The artificiality of marionettes suggests primitive theatre, primitive emotions. We are witnessing, as it were, the beginning of the twentieth-century theatre of cruelty; Symons refers to the “painted, menacing puppets” in Lugné-Poe’s production.¹¹

A Symbolist theatre opposed to naturalistic representation is going to be predisposed to the deployment of masks and marionettes. The oriental influence recurs in Yeats, with his study of the Noh plays of Japan, whose actors are mask-wearing marionettes. Yeats distinguishes the poet who is a real man, living his everyday life, from the *masks*, the *personae* which he takes on when voicing his poetry. As for Symons, his enthusiasm for the marionettes of Maeterlinck and Jarry is reinforced by his mutually enriching professional friendship with Ed-

10. Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* (London: Cape, The Traveller’s Library edition, 1928), p. 144. Hereafter cited as *PAM*. As for Shaw’s interpretation of Wagner’s *Ring* as a vast tract against capitalism, nothing could be further from Symons’s response to *Parsifal*.

11. *CWAS*, Vol. 9, pp. 236–240. The review dates from 1898.

ward Gordon Craig (1872–1966). Craig was that quintessential artist of the theatre who did more than anyone else to champion the marionette – or, rather, to use his quasi-Nietzschean term – the Über-marionette.

The marionette can suggest the inner essence better than the all-too-obviously-human actor. The marionette suggests emotions that are generalised, and therefore universalised, more effectively than can a consciously unique individual, an evidently fleshly person in all his or her limited specificity. It is the doctrine of impersonality, familiar to Craig from the utterances of Flaubert, but here applied to the twentieth century stage. Craig summed up the Über-marionette as “the actor plus fire, minus egoism: the fire of the gods and demons, without the smoke and steam of mortality.”¹²

Minus egoism: that is, the actor not paraded to us as a star, as a celebrity. Similarly, Symons maintained that “a play is acted, not for the exhibition of the actor, but for the realization of the play,”¹³ and he disliked charismatic musicians who were prone to show off their virtuosity at the expense of respect for the actual music; he preferred those who, humbly and impersonally, conveyed the intentions of the composer. In contrast to the prevailing egoism, Symons in his short stories portrays creative and performing artists who lose their personal identities in their art. He quoted approvingly the declaration by the actress Eleonora Duse that the theatre must be destroyed in order to save it, “the actors and actresses must all die of the plague . . . It is not drama that they play, but pieces for the theatre.”¹⁴ She also remarks that the theatre should be something more than a good night out for the bourgeoisie.

These assaults on emotionally indulgent identification with supposed “realism,” together with the advocacy of ancient contrivances which never pretended to such realism, all anticipate the “alienation,” “estrangement” or *Verfremdungseffekte* of Brechtian theatre. “I like to see my illusions clearly,” wrote Symons, “recognising them as illusions, and so heightening their charm.”¹⁵

In his book *Studies in Seven Arts* Symons quotes Craig’s definition of the “art of the theatre” as “neither acting nor the play. It is not scene nor dance, but

12. Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), pp. ix–x.

13. *PAM*, p. 53.

14. *CWAS*, Vol. 9, pp. 217ff.

15. Symons, *Cities and Sea Coasts and Islands* (London: Collins, Kings’ Way Classics edition, n.d.), p. 169. From the text “London: a Book of Aspects,” originally published in 1908. One would not quite associate the Berliner Ensemble with “charm.”

it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.”¹⁶ What is particularly “Symbolist” about that? Well, Symons interprets Craig’s art of the theatre as addressed in the first place to the eyes – remember his insistence that the *music* of *Parsifal* is subordinated to the total *visual* experience on stage. Craig believes that the scene should have a single dominating image on stage, an image that will sum up, suggest, *symbolise* the total meaning of that scene. The stage is cleared of the distracting clutter of nineteenth century theatre; everything that happens in terms of action, voice and scene cannot be other than constantly referred to that commanding symbol. An example would be a design by Craig for a key scene in *Peer Gynt*. A mysterious, gigantic, and apparently seated figure (as if on a throne) is seen in profile and in silhouette. We can take it that this is the Great Bøjg: based on Norwegian folklore, this giant troll obstructs the progress of that impatient go-getter, Peer Gynt. Indeed he symbolises that something indefinable that frustrates the aspirations of us all. (And Symons accused Ibsen of leaving out the poetry!)

If that is not Symbolist theatre, I do not know what is. Craig’s Great Bøjg image is suggestive, atmospheric, haunting, ultimately explicable only by itself – in spite of my presumptuous attempt to explicate it.¹⁷

How might Symons’s insights resonate well into the twentieth century and beyond? We read of his association with fin-de-siècle decadence, aestheticism, and the anti-discursive nature of Symbolism. But his essential seriousness and spiritual commitment are evident in his need to look beyond Symbolism as a mere aesthetic and into its capacity to make us apprehend the relationship between life and death. Apprehend it, that is, not explain it – it remains a mystery, this “darkness out of which we have but just stepped, and the darkness into which we are about to pass.”¹⁸

Cue Poland, the “land of Nowhere” in Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. The “theatre of death” of the director Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) owes much to Craig’s teaching. The horror of Poland’s history, especially during the Second World War, informs the work which emanated from Kantor’s base in Kraków. Craig’s “Über-

16. *CWAS*, Vol. 9, p. 231.

17. The image is reproduced in Denis Bablet, “Edward Gordon Craig & Scenography,” *Theatre Research / Recherches Théâtrales* 11/1 (1971) 7–22, facing p. 12.

18. *SML*, p. 87.

marionettes” become Kantor’s “bio-objects”: not only human actors playing marionettes, but often physically attached to mannequin-like figures and moving with them on stage. The meeting point of the tragic and the comic, in Kantor’s theatre of death, is the grotesque. In a dehumanised, reified Europe, things and people change places, or – more unsettlingly – they merge. It is arguable if this is an unexpected development of the trajectory given out by Symons and Craig.

It is certainly something more than the self-indulgence of the complacent bourgeois or the fastidious aesthete. The Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes – botanist, designer of cities, arts and theatre impresario and eccentric genius – arrived in Montpellier, an ancient university city in the south of France, during the 1920s: his mission there was to create a more-than-university environment for the all-round, holistic development of individuals and communities. Back in Edinburgh, he had devised non-naturalistic, symbolic (if not quite Symbolist) theatre-pieces, and was ambitious for these to develop into a pan-Celtic festival involving Scotland, Wales and Brittany. In 1912 he wrote of his ideal of a “three-fold convergence of city, theatre and school.”¹⁹ I am forced to doubt if this very didactic – very Scottishly didactic – ideal would have been shared by that much more “reticent” Celt, Arthur Symons.

19. Patrick Geddes, *The Masque of Ancient Learning, and of its Many Meanings: A Pageant of Education from Primitive to Celtic Times, Devised and Presented by Patrick Geddes* (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 89.