



JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

1840–1893

Best known in the nineteenth century as a scholar of the Renaissance, John Addington Symonds is now most familiar for his frank writings about male homosexuality; both subjects shape his poetry. He was born in Bristol, in southwest England, in 1840. His mother died when he was only four years old. His father was a celebrated physician whose love of art and literature strongly influenced the young Symonds, who was educated at Harrow (a prestigious boys' school) and at Balliol College, Oxford. Here he distinguished himself academically, winning the Newdigate Prize for poetry and the Chancellor's Prize for an essay on the Renaissance.

In 1862, however, he left Oxford in unpleasant circumstances, having been (falsely) accused of pursuing an improper relationship with a choirboy. Deeply conflicted about his sexuality, and at the urging of his father, in 1864 he married Catherine North, with whom he had four daughters. The family lived first in London and later back in Bristol, where Symonds taught briefly at Clifton College. But he would eventually begin to spend most of his time in Davos, Switzerland and in Venice, Italy—an arrangement that benefited his delicate health and allowed him (with Catherine's consent) to have love affairs with men, including the gondolier Angelo Fusato.

Despite his lifelong struggles with illness—he would die of lung disease in 1893—Symonds was an extraordinarily prolific author. His *magnum opus* is the seven-volume

history *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–86). Other important works include biographies of figures such as Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Walt Whitman; accounts of his travels in Greece and Italy; translations of classical poetry and of the autobiography of Italian Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini; and two studies of homosexuality called *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, in fact, cites this latter work as the first to use the term “homosexual.” Symonds also published several volumes of verse, including *Many Moods* (1878), *New and Old* (1880), *Animi Figura* (1882), and *Vagabunduli Libellus* (1884). He acknowledged that “poetry and power of expression and the visionary pomp of dreams awoke in me only beneath the touch of the male genius,” yet also felt that “spontaneous passion” was often “sterilized in my work”—and indeed, much of his poetry counterbalances its sensuality with intellectual knottiness, erudite allusions, and the technical control afforded by the sonnet form. His more openly homoerotic verse circulated only privately during his lifetime.

After Symonds's death, some of his papers were destroyed. His memoirs, long repressed, were first published, though still in incomplete form, in 1984, and in their entirety in 2017. He had written these in the hope that “men innocent as I have been, yet haunted as I have been by a sense of guilt and dread of punishment ... should feel that they are not alone.”

from *Sonnets of Michelangelo*¹

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Love the Light-Giver

To Tommaso de' Cavalieri

With your fair eyes a charming light I see,
 For which my own blind eyes would peer in vain;
 Stayed° by your feet the burden I sustain

supported

5 Wingless upon your pinions° forth I fly;
 Heavenward your spirit stirreth me to strain;
 E'en as you will, I blush and blanch° again,
 Freeze in the sun, burn 'neath a frosty sky.

*wings**go pale*

Your will includes and is the lord of mine;

10 Life to my thoughts within your heart is given;
 My words begin to breathe upon your breath:

Like to the moon am I, that cannot shine
 Alone; for lo! our eyes see nought in heaven
 Save° what the living sun illumineth.

except

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Love's Lordship

To Tommaso de' Cavalieri

Why should I seek to ease intense desire
 With still more tears and windy words of grief,
 When heaven, or° late or soon, sends no relief
 To souls whom love hath robed around with fire?

whether

5 Why need my aching heart to death aspire,
 When all must die? Nay, death beyond belief
 Unto these eyes would be both sweet and brief,
 Since in my sum of woes all joys expire!

Therefore because I cannot shun the blow

10 I rather seek, say who must rule my breast,
 Gliding between her gladness and her woe?

If only chains and bands can make me blest,
 No marvel if alone and bare I go
 An arméd Knight's captive and slave confessed.

—1878

1 *Sonnets of Michelangelo* The Italian artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) wrote these sonnets for a beloved young man, Tommaso de' Cavalieri (c. 1509–87); Symonds was the first to translate them into English.

*Vintage*¹

I found him lying neath the vines that ran
 Grape-laden o'er grey frames of oak and beech;
 A fair and jocund Faun,² whose beard began,
 Like dewy down on quince³ or blushing peach,
 5 To soften chin and cheek. He bade me reach
 My hand to his, and drew me through the screen
 Of clusters intertwined with glistening green.

Sunrise athwart^o us fell—a living fire,
 That touching turned our tendrilled roof to red;
 10 Network of shade from many a flickering spire
 And solid orb upon the youth was shed;
 With purple grapes and white his comely^o head
 Was crowned, and in his hand a bunch he pressed
 Against the golden glory of his breast.

*across**beautiful*

15 Gourds with the grapes, and hops, and serpentine
 Wreaths of blue bindweed⁴ tangling built a bower,
 Where lying we could watch 'twixt vine and vine
 Young men and maidens move, and singing shower
 On wattled crates⁵ the fruit whose hoary^o flower
 20 With dew still glistened; for the kiss of night
 Lay yet on vale and mountain misty-bright.

silvery-white

Some trod the press;^o some climbed the elms that hung
 Vine-burdened; and beneath, a beardless boy
 Tuning his melancholy lute-strings sung
 25 A wild shrill song, that spake of only joy,
 But was so sad that virgins cold and coy
 Melted, and love mid sorrow-sweetness fell
 On careless hearts that felt the powerful spell.

wine-press

—1880

1 *Vintage* The grapes or wine yielded by a vineyard.

2 *Faun* In classical mythology, a nature deity, half-man and half-goat; *jocund* Cheerful.

3 *quince* Pear-like fruit.

4 *Gourds ... hops ... bindweed* Types of climbing plant; *serpentine* Twisting like a snake.

5 *wattled crates* Boxes or baskets made of interlaced branches.

*From Friend to Friend*¹

Oh friend, I know not if such days and nights
 Of fervent comradeship as we have spent,
 Or if twin minds with equal ardour bent^o *determined*
 To search the world's unspeakable delights,
 5 Or if long hours passed on Parnassian² heights
 Together in rapt^o interminglement *entraptured*
 Of heart with heart on thought sublime intent,
 Or if the spark of heaven-born fire that lights
 Love in both breasts from boyhood, thus have wrought³
 10 Our spirits to communion; but I swear
 That neither chance nor change nor time nor aught
 That makes the future of our lives less fair,
 Shall sunder^o us who once have breathed this air *separate*
 Of soul-commingling friendship passion-fraught.
 —1880

*Personality*⁴

I

I know not what I am.—Oh dreadful thought!—
 Nor know I what my fellow-creatures are:
 Between me and the world without,^o a bar *outside*
 Impalpable of adamant⁵ is wrought.
 5 Each self, from its own self concealed, is caught
 Thus in a cage of sense, sequestered far
 From comradeship, calling as calleth star
 To star across blank intermediate nought.⁶
 His own self no man sees, and none hath seen

1 *From Friend to Friend* The subject of this poem is likely Willie Dyer, a Bristol choirboy with whom Symonds fell in love when he was 18. Symonds ended the relationship at his father's urging, but would later write in his memoirs that "I have never felt the same unreason and unreasoning emotion for any other human being."

2 *Parnassian* Of Parnassus, a mountain in Greece that, according to myth, was sacred to Apollo and to the Muses, and was therefore seen as the home of artistic inspiration.

3 *Or if the spark ... have wrought* An earlier version of this poem was privately published; in that version, these lines read "Or if the tide of turbulent appetites / That sway both breasts in harmony, have wrought."

4 *Personality* In the famous *Conclusion to his book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Walter Pater writes that "Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world."

5 *adamant* Proverbial substance that embodies extreme hardness.

6 *intermediate nought* Intervening emptiness.

10 His brother's self. Nay, lovers, though they sigh
 "There is no room for ought° to come between
 Our blended souls in this felicity,"°
 Starting° from sleep, shall find a double screen
 Built 'twixt two sundered° selves—and both must die.

anything
happiness
waking
separated

2

15 Yea, both shall carry with them to the void
 Without, the void more terrible° within,
 Tormented haply° by the smart° of sin,
 And cursing what their wilful sense enjoyed.
 Yet were they free to take or to avoid?
 20 Who knows!—Amid the dull chaotic din
 Of wrangling schools¹ which argument can win
 Conviction, when blind faith hath been destroyed?
 Freedom or servitude?—So fooled is man
 By blind self-ignorance, he cannot say
 25 If will alone beneath heaven's azure span
 Its self-determined impulses obey;
 Or if each impulse, wild as wind at play,
 Be but a cog-wheel² in the cosmic plan.
 —1880

terrifying
perhaps / pain

*The Passing Stranger*³

Of all the mysteries wherethrough we move,
 This is the most mysterious—that a face,
 Seen peradventure° in some distant place,
 Whither we can return no more to prove°
 5 The world-old sanctities of human love,
 Shall haunt our waking thoughts, and gathering grace
 Incorporate itself with every phase
 Whereby the soul aspires to God above.
 Thus are we wedded through that face to her
 10 Or him who bears it; nay, one fleeting glance,
 Fraught with a tale too deep for utterance,
 Even as a pebble cast into the sea,
 Will on the deep waves of our spirit stir
 Ripples that run through all eternity.
 —1880

by chance
test

1 *wrangling schools* Disagreeing viewpoints or schools of thought.

2 *cog-wheel* Tiny piece of machinery.

3 *The Passing Stranger* This sonnet is the first of two published together under this title.

*The Innovators*¹

Woe unto those who, swerving from the ways
 Of kindly° custom, set their soul's desire
 On rapt° imagination's wavering fire; natural
 Uncertain whether the light that lures their gaze enraptured
 5 Be dawn's star orient² in the heavens of praise,
 Or phosphorous exhalation from earth's mire,³
 Where husks of creeds, lost lives, foiled° hopes expire: frustrated
 Outcasts from home, faith's Pariahs,° in the maze exiles
 Of doubt and fear they journey 'neath dark skies,
 10 Lone and despair-bewildered; like a child,
 Who wandering lost at eve in forest wild,
 Sees through grey latticed° boughs a smouldering glare, intervoven
 And knows not whether it be the swart° moon-rise, dark
 Or bale-fires° beaconing from a demon's lair. bonfires
 —1882

*Chimaera*⁴ἔρᾱν ἀδυνάτων νόσος τῆς φυγῆς⁵

Childhood brings flowers to pluck, and butterflies;
 Boyhood hath bat and ball, shy dubious dreams,
 Foreshadowed love, friendship, prophetic gleams;
 Youth takes free pastime under laughing skies;
 5 Ripe manhood weds, made early strong and wise;
 Clasp the real, scorning what only seems,
 He tracks love's fountain to its furthest streams,
 Kneels by the cradle where his firstborn lies.
 Then for the soul athirst, life's circle run,
 10 Yet nought accomplished and the world unknown,

1 *The Innovators* This is the first in a sequence of five sonnets published together under this title.

2 *orient* Rising; *dawn's star* Either the morning star, also known as Phosphor (actually the planet Venus, which appears just before sunrise), or the rising sun itself.

3 *phosphorous ... mire* A will o' the wisp, or mysterious light appearing over swampy ground (mire), possibly caused by marsh gases; these lights were thought to lead travelers astray.

4 *Chimaera* A hybrid monster in Greek mythology, or by extension an impossible illusion. It was one of Symonds's terms for homosexual passion; in his memoirs, he writes "I kept wrestling with the anguish of unutterable things, in the deep darkness of the valley of vain desire [...] I writhed in the clutches of chimaera." This is the third sonnet in a sequence of fourteen entitled "L'Amour de l'Impossible," French for "Love of the Impossible."

5 *ἔρᾱν ... φυγῆς* Love of the impossible is a sickness of the soul (Greek). Symonds quotes this phrase, which gives his sonnet sequence its name, elsewhere in his writings, calling it a "Greek proverb"; it derives from the ancient Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, where it is attributed to Bias of Priene.

Rises Chimaera. Far beyond the sun
Her bat's wings bear us. The empyreal^o zone
Shrinks into void. We pant. Thought, sense rebel,
And swoon desiring things impossible.

—1882

heavenly