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SYNAESTHESIA IN THE NINETIES AND BEYOND

In poetry, at least, the English Eighteen-Nineties are generally considered a self-contained period, an interlude, tragi-comic and unique. It is easy to see why. To a chronicler the decade looks insulated. The major Victorian poets die off just before or after 1890; in their place there converges upon London a generation of young men who, very strangely, either perish or vanish around 1900.

Yeats remarks on this, introducing *The Oxford Books of Modern Verse*. Of those men of the Nineties he and Kipling were practically the only survivors. A few years after its close the decade was already a legend, a colourful interruption of literary history. The Nineties' poet either fell in love with a twelve-year-old Polish girl and subsequently starved, or lolled in Dieppe and gratified strange lusts in Paris, or pondered Plato and died of drink, or perhaps sold his soul to the Devil in Greek Street¹. Besides, the fall of Wilde (in 1895, neatly halving the decade) unnerved many readers and writers; the poetry of the first years of this century is lamentably tame.

Having cleared away the legendary flim-flam, we find certain lines of experiment, begun by the men of the Nineties, taken up again after an interval and contributing a very great deal to the shape of modern poetry. To one of these lines of experiment this essay is devoted.

I

'A study in green' was Wilde's description of his prose work, *Pen, Pencil and Poison*. In it he wrote: "The conception of making a prose-poem out of paint is excellent. Much of the best modern literature

¹ See, of course, *Enoch Soames*, [in:] M. Beerbohm's *Seven Men*.

springs from the same aim. In a very ugly and sensible age the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other”².

This, of course, was Symbolist doctrine:

“Loi commune qui dirige, à cette heure, tous les efforts artistiques: l’Art remonte à ses origines et, comme au commencement il était un, voici qu’il rentre dans l’originelle voie de l’Unité, où la Musique, la Peinture et la Poésie, triple reflet de la même centrale clarté, vont accentuant leurs ressemblances...”³

But whereas the French critic sees the arts returning to their primal unity, Wilde is simply fleeing the ugly and sensible. Confusion of arts entails a confusion of senses. Synaesthesia is the name of the process whereby from a sense impression of one kind there is produced a mental image of a sense impression of another kind⁴. Édouard Roditi, in his book on Wilde, showed that it had already “haunted the whole tradition of European romanticism”⁵. In England, long before the Nineties, we had titles like John Payne’s *Intaglios* (1871), Dobson’s *Proverbs in Porcelain* (1877) and Lang’s *XXII Ballades in Blue China* (1880). “To me all the arts are one”, Payne remarked later in life⁶.

These mid-Victorian poets had eagerly read Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées* (1852), a collection including poems, such as *Symphonie en Blanc Majeur* and *Variations sur le Carnaval de Venise*, entitled as if they were musical compositions. In the *Variations* Paganini is said to have taken an old theme:

Et, brochant la gaze fanée
Que l’oripeau rougit encor
Fait sur la phrase dédaignée
Courir ses arabesque d’or.

* * *

Sur une gamme chromatique,
Le sein de perles ruisselant,
La Vénus de l’Adriatique
Sort de l’eau son corps rose et blanc.

² *Intentions*, London 1891, p. 75.

³ Ch. Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l’heure*, Paris 1889, p. 287.

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary quotes from F. W. H. Myers’ *Human Personality* (I, XI, 1903), which may be compared with Morice: “Vestiges of the primitive undifferentiated sensibility persist in the form of synaesthesiae, e.g., when the hearing of an external sound carries with it, by some arbitrary association of ideas, the seeing of some form or colour”.

⁵ Éd. Roditi, *Oscar Wilde*, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1947, p. 21.

⁶ Th. Wright, *Life of John Payne*, London 1919, p. 221.

Elsewhere in *Émaux et Camées* Gautier writes of the "blanche poésie" of fine hands and the "strophes" of successive poses of a nude model. Five years after Gautier's collection came Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* with the famous sonnet, *Correspondances*:

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

The sestet speaks of perfumes cool as children's flesh, sweet as oboes, green as meadows. Rimbaud, in an equally well-known poem, went one step farther, found that the vowels had colours, while des Esseintes, in the book *Dorian Gray* admired, heard the music of his liqueurs, sniffed the colour of his perfumes.

Whistler used musical nomenclature for his paintings, just as Gautier had done for verse. The *Little White Girl*, first shown in 1865, was also called *Symphony in White, No. 2*. There were *Nocturnes*, *Harmonies* and *Arrangements*.

In *The Green Carnation* (1894), a book which helped to bring about Wilde's downfall, Robert Hichens makes fun of synaesthesia:

"'A brown Gregorian', Mr. Amaranth repeated. 'All combinations of sound convey a sense of colour to the mind. Gregorians are obviously a rich and sombre brown, just as a Salvation Army hymn is a violent magenta'"⁷.

In fact synaesthesia in the poetry of the Nineties is generally no more than a verbal trick, a deliberate bizarrerie⁸. There are titles like Gray's⁹ *Silverpoints* and Symonds¹⁰ *In the Key of Blue*, both published in 1893. Symonds writes of "modulations of colour", Gray of "a filigree of verse", "crystal rhyme" and even the "Hollyhock's laughter and the Sunflower's shout".

Wratislaw¹¹, in *Orchids* (1896), has a "palette of... perfumes",

⁷ Page 90 in the Argus Books edition, Chicago 1929.

⁸ They of course knew nothing of Hopkins' more purposeful (though rare) use of synaesthesia. Father Peters (*Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London 1948, p. 19) gives "the orange of the pealing of Milton bells" and "sparks that ring of God" among other examples. He associates it with "Hopkins' consciousness of instress".

⁹ John Gray (1866—1934) said to be the original of *Dorian Gray*. He became a Catholic priest at thirty-five and spent his later years in Edinburgh.

¹⁰ John Addington Symonds (1840—1893), poet, traveller, historian, translator of Michelangelo's sonnets and of goliardic poems.

¹¹ Theodore Wratislaw (1871—1933). By lineal descent a Count of Bohemia and of the Holy Roman Empire, but born in Rugby. He became a Civil Servant in 1895 and thenceforward had little time for poetry.

a "clamorous orchestra of hues", "coloured sorrows" and "perfumed sins". Dowson's¹² *Moon Maiden* calls for "white music"¹³. In his *Bretton Afternoon* there is "the rose-white angelus". Wilde, who saw Dvořák's music as "scarlet", invited Lord Alfred Douglas, in an unlucky "prose-poem", to visit Salisbury and bathe his hands in "the cool twilight of Gothic things". O'Sullivan¹⁴, in search of a really morbid theme, brought synaesthesia into a description of the confused sensations of a malaria patient (*Houses of Sin*, 1897).

All this is not simply an eccentricity which died with the Nineties. (In fact, synaesthesia is the basis of one or two idioms of contemporary speech: "cool colours", "quiet colours", etc.). But in the work of Edith Sitwell it is simply an eccentricity which has not died with the Nineties. When light squeals, curls giggle and dew whines in her early poems, this surely evokes little (save memories of the Nineties) for anyone, except the author and perhaps her friends. "When the language of sense is insufficient", she wrote in *A Poet's Notebook*, "we use that appertaining to another". But by that time (1943) she had already abandoned the practice in her poems.

The early work of Cecil Day Lewis gives us the "crystal cadenzas" of dawn, "arias of light" and "river rippling loveliest allegro"¹⁵, but these are clichés from the Nineties. Not until the Forties, with the poetry of Laurie Lee, do we come on the synaesthesia of creative vision:

The dawn's precise pronouncement waits
The breath of light indrawn,
Then forms with smoky smut-red lips
The great O of the sun.

The mouldering atoms of the dark
Blaze into morning air;
The birdlike stars droop down and die,
The starlike birds catch fire.

¹² Ernest Dowson (1867—1900), according to Professor B. Ifor Evans, "the poet symbolic of the eighteen-nineties". After Queen's College, Oxford, spent his days helping to manage his father's dry-dock, and his evenings in Soho with artists and poets. He passed his later years mostly in France, but was finally found dying and penniless in a London street (*Verses*, 1896; *Decorations*, 1899).

¹³ Dowson did not escape the Celticism of the decade, and "white" has several meanings (such as "lovely") in the Celtic tongues. This we may gather from Yeats or, in the 17th century, Henry Vaughan.

¹⁴ Vincent O'Sullivan (1872—1940), American expatriate poet, lived many years in Paris, where he died in great poverty. His poetry, published in London by Leonard Smithers, was much admired by Wilde.

¹⁵ C. Day Lewis, *Collected Poems*, 1929—33, London 1935, p. 63, 150.

The thrush's tinder throat strikes up,
 The sparrow chips hot sparks
 From flinty tongue, and all the sky
 Showers with electric larks¹⁶.

We are out of sight of Miss Sitwell's affectations: this is the world refreshed and redeemed. "I write poetry", Laurie Lee said once, "(I know it sounds conceited) because I can't find the kind of poetry I want to read, so I write it myself"¹⁷.

II

We have seen that the Nineties experimented not only with a confusion of senses but with a confusion of arts. Henley¹⁸ called one of his best-known works *London Voluntaries*, marking the sections *Andante con moto*, *Scherzando*, *Largo e Mesto*, *Allegro maestoso*. Half a century later Eliot said:

"I think that a poet may gain much from the study of music: ...The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter"¹⁹.

In 1944 he published *Four Quartets*. The "instruments" are different levels of tone and intensity, and Eliot is said to have modelled his work on Beethoven's late quartets. Herbert Howarth draws analogies between the *Quartet in A Minor, Opus 132*, and *Burnt Norton*:

"Beethoven's movements are:

- 1) allegro;
- 2) a scherzo and contrasting trio;
- 3) a slow movement: which begins in somber depths; then changes, 'neue Kraft fühlend';
- 4) a very short *alla marcia*;
- 5) *allegro appassionato* — in rondo form, with an extended *coda*.

Burnt Norton is divided into:

- 1) a rapid first movement;

¹⁶ From *The Edge of Day*. L. Lee, *My Many-Coated Man*, London 1955, p. 5.

¹⁷ Interview reported in "Link" (Cheltenham), May, 1964, p. 20.

¹⁸ W. E. Henley (1849—1903) crippled and militant editor of "The National Observer". Friend and admirer of Kipling and Stevenson.

¹⁹ *The Music of Poetry*, "W.P. Ker Lecture at Glasgow", 24th February, 1942 (*Selected Prose*, London 1953, p. 66, 67). Aldous Huxley had already applied musical structure to fiction in *Point Counter Point* (1928).

2) a scherzo in short, rhyming lines, excited, 'trilling'; followed by a contrasting section in long, reflective lines;

3) a slow somber movement; if there can be said to be a contrasting section, it is yet slower and more somber;

4) a very short rhyming lyric;

5) a movement of statements or 'answers': first passionate, even agitated; then more serene with sudden clearings and visions"²⁰.

The interval of half a century between *London Voluntaries* and *Four Quartets* is explained by Eliot's remark, in that same lecture on *The Music of Poetry*²¹, that the poet has in some periods to explore the musical possibilities of the language, in others to catch up with contemporary speech. Eliot's attitude to the Eighteen-Nineties seems not to have been consistent. In an interview of 1959²² they are contemptuously dismissed, yet on other occasions he gladly acknowledges debts to such men as Dowson and Davidson²³.

John Redwood Anderson's *Paris Symphony* (London 1947) was evidently inspired by Eliot's work.

Both Symons²⁴ and Wilde tried to produce paintings in verse. They had a model in the *Eaux-Fortes* of Verlaine's *Poèmes Saturniens*. There are ten of these efforts among Wilde's poems. When we read that

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in grey: [...]

we can hardly miss the debt to Whistler who (with Gautier) has evidently inspired *Symphony in Yellow*:

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly
And here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.
Big barges, full of yellow hay,
Are moved against the shadowy wharf
And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

²⁰ H. Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot*, London 1965, p. 279. See also Gr. Smith Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, Chicago 1956, pp. 248—250.

²¹ *Selected Prose*, p. 63.

²² "The Paris Review" 21, Spring—Summer, 1959, p. 50.

²³ See his letter to "The Times Literary Supplement" (10th January, 1935), reprinted by Geoffrey Tillotson in his *Essays in Criticism and Research*, Cambridge 1942, p. 156, and his introduction to *John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems*, ed. by M. Lindsay, London 1961.

²⁴ Arthur Symons (1865—1945). As poet and critic his important work dates from before his complete mental breakdown in Italy in 1908.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
 And flutter from the Temple elms,
 And at my feet the pale green Thames
 Lies like a rod of rippled jade ²⁵.

The "restless midge" of the first stanza evidently derives from the "fretful midge" of *The Blessed Damozel*, significantly the work of a poet-painter. Wilde was a great borrower. The similes effect a bizarre confusion of sense-impressions, the fog assuming the smoothness and definiteness of a silken scarf, the Thames, the frozen hardness, the straightness perhaps, of a rod of jade. Symons, in *London Nights* (1895), has some "colour studies" generally in quieter colours than Wilde's. *At Dieppe* is dedicated to Walter Sickert:

The grey-green stretch of sandy grass,
 Indefinitely desolate;
 A sea of lead, a sky of slate;
 Already autumn in the air, alas!

One stark monotony of stone,
 The long hotel, acutely white,
 Against an after-sunset light
 Withers grey-green, and takes the grass's tone.

Listless and endless it outlies;
 And means, to you and me, no more
 Than any pebble on the shore,
 Or this indifferent moment as it dies.

There is a little more subtlety here. In the second stanza a light effect is carefully observed. The poem depends upon contrasts of bluntness and dullness ("slate", "lead", etc.) and sharpness and whiteness ("acutely white"). Both merge into grey-green. Though the comment at the end weakens its impact, this is the best of a rather barren genre ²⁶.

However, half a century later, with the same stanza form, this sort of thing is much better done in the *Sunken Evening* of Laurie Lee:

The green light floods the city square —
 A sea of fowl and feathered fish,
 Where squalls of rainbirds dive and splash
 And gusty sparrows chop the air.

²⁵ *Poems*, London 1908, p. 233.

²⁶ Of the Imagists, whose aims are foreshadowed here, one at least wrote "colour symphonies". The American John Gould Fletcher (1886—1951) published eleven of them in *Goblins and Pagodas* (1916). None of these poems has much impact. They resemble Wilde's in everything, except the use of free verse.

Submerged the prawn-blue pigeons feed
 In sandy grottoes round the Mall,
 And crusted lobster-buses crawl
 Among the fountains' silver weed.

There, like a wreck with mast and bell,
 The torn church settles by the bow,
 While phosphorescent starlings stow
 Their mussel shells along the hull ²⁷.

I wrote to ask Mr. Lee if he had ever studied the Nineties, and he replied: "I didn't know (the "colour studies" of Wilde and Symons), but I agree they are extraordinarily like my *Sunken Evening*, even to rhyme scheme and metre — most disquieting". He continued: "I have never had any conscious interest in the 'Nineties' as such, but perhaps I was born with a 'Nineties Mind'.

III

In the Nineties there was a quest related to synaesthesia, the search for a new art, or the supreme art, in the union of two arts or more. I quote a Rhymer ²⁸, T. W. Rolleston:

"The conclusion drawn by Wagner, that the supreme art must be sought in a combination of Music and Drama, is a tempting one, but I doubt its validity. The question arises whether in this combination one or another of the united arts does not surrender much of its own special power" ²⁹.

Wagner seems usually to have been at the centre of such discussions, but Symons has an interesting analysis of the art of Georgette Leblanc, in which, he says, "it was impossible to think more of the words than of the music or of the music than the words". Mallarmé "seemed to see in her [...] a new art, made up of a new mixing of the arts [...]" ³⁰.

This looks forward not to the Twenties, Thirties or Forties of this century, but to our own decade. "Today", explained the catalogue of the 1965 exhibition *Between Poetry and Painting* ³¹, "more than ever before, the realm of art, poetry and typography are merging..." This concrete movement is international and its influence is spreading. In Britain,

²⁷ *My Marry-Coated Man*, p. 13.

²⁸ Yeats and a dozen other poets, mostly decadents, formed the Rhymers' Club in the early Nineties. The members read their poems in an upper room of the Cheshire Cheese, off Fleet Street.

²⁹ T. W. Rolleston, *Parallel Paths*, London 1908, pp. 272, 273.

³⁰ *The Dramatisation of Song, [in:] Plays, Acting and Music*, London 1903, p. 21.

³¹ Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 22nd October — 27th November 1965.

as elsewhere in the world, "jazzetry" — a name coined by Lindsay Anderson for the poetry and jazz movement — has been for fifteen years the chief field of experiment for those anxious to unite words and music. "Mixed-media shows" are being staged in pubs and little theatres. And Bruce Lacey has delighted audiences, up and down England, with his poetry-speaking automata.

Synaesthesia began in mysticism and seems to be ending there. In his *Spiritual Adventures* (1905) Symons tells the story of a musician, Christian Trevalga, who at the approach of madness finds that his music has "become almost externally visible... like grey smoke". This is Trevalga's last statement:

"There is but one art, but many languages through which men speak it. When the angels talk, their speech is art; for they do not talk as men do, to discuss matters or relate facts, but to express either love or wisdom" ³².

For Symons synaesthesia is always bound up with the transcendentalism of the Nineties. He writes, in his essay on Rodin, of "that doctrine of 'correspondances' which lies at the root of most of the mystical teaching" ³³. "The madness of Gérard de Nerval" he tells us in a much later work, "lit, as if by lightning, the hidden links of distant and diverging things". In Verlaine there was "a realisable process of vision continually going on, in which all the loose ends of the visible world were being caught up into a new mental fabric" ³⁴. And Yeats, Symons' friend, had declared in an early poem:

The wandering earth herself may be
Only a sudden flaming word, [...] ³⁵

"Longitudinal", synaesthetic correspondences balanced, in Symbolist theory, "perpendicular", hermetic correspondences, for "Things below are as things above", the Great Smaragdine Tablet had said.

Today in the United States a new mysticism has developed, based on the drug LSD and on "psychedelic" art. Every reader of popular magazines has heard of Dr. Timothy Leary. Artists using LSD are said to "hear colours" and "see smells", as Symons' Christian Trevalga saw his music. "Now it is precisely this overflow of the brain areas", writes William Burroughs, "hearing colours, seeing sounds and even odors that is a categorical characteristic of the consciousness-expanding drugs". He concludes: "It would seem to me that cannabis and the

³² Pp. 104, 105, 110.

³³ *Studies in Seven Arts*, London 1906, p. 4.

³⁴ *Confessions: A Study in Pathology*, New York 1930, p. 3.

³⁵ *The Song of the Happy Shepherd* (1889).

other hallucinogens provide a key to the creative process, and that a systematic study of these drugs would open the way to nonchemical methods of expanding consciousness”³⁶.

That such lines of experiment begin in the Nineties is only just beginning to be realized. But Yeats saw this clearly. “I don’t like disparagement of the ‘Nineties’”, he wrote in 1934 to Maurice Bowra³⁷, “People have built up an impression of a decadent period by remembering only, when they speak of the ‘Nineties’ a few writers who had tragic careers [...]. The ‘Nineties’ was in reality a period of very great vigour, thought and passion were breaking free from tradition”.

SYNESTEZJA W POEZJI ANGIELSKIEJ LAT DZIEWIĘCDZIESIĄTYCH I PÓŹNIEJSZEJ

STRESZCZENIE

W historii poezji lata dziewięćdziesiąte zeszłego stulecia w Anglii uważa się zwykle za ślepią uliczkę — okres, który traktuje się jedynie jako intermezzo z występującymi w nim malowniczymi postaciami. W rzeczywistości lata te zapoczątkowały pewne kierunki eksperymentalne, które wniosły poważny wkład do rozwoju form poezji współczesnej. Artykuł niniejszy poświęcono jednemu z tych eksperymentalnych kierunków.

Synestezja jest pomieszaniem różnych wrażeń zmysłowych i „pomieszaniem sztuk”. Wykorzystanie tego przez Gautiera i Symbolistów wcześniej już pociągało niektórych poetów okresu średniowiktoriańskiego. Whistler nadał swoim obrazom nazwy utworów muzycznych. Synestezja w języku poetów lat dziewięćdziesiątych jest przeważnie niczym więcej jak afektacją; to samo można powiedzieć o synestezji u Edyty Sitwell, a niekiedy także u Cecila Day Lewisa. Twórcze jej wykorzystanie znajdujemy dopiero w utworach Laurie Lee. Ciekawe jest zastosowanie synestezji u Hopkinsa.

Henley użył formy muzycznej w poemacie *London Voluntaries* (1893). Pół wieku później Eliot wydał *Four Quartets*, wygłosiwszy uprzednio wykład o użyteczności studiów muzycznych dla poetów. Symons i Wilde (w pewnym stopniu zapowiadający Imażystów) próbowali „malować wierszem”. Za ich przykładem poszedł Laurie Lee, osiągając znacznie lepszy efekt artystyczny.

W latach dziewięćdziesiątych pewien związek z synestezją miało poszukiwanie nowej sztuki — lub najwyższej sztuki — przez połączenie w jedno, dwóch lub więcej, odrębnych sztuk. Poszukiwanie to zostało wznowione w dzisiejszej Anglii. Ponadto synestezja jest w chwili obecnej przedmiotem pewnych bardzo kontrolowanych badań. Bohater Symonsa, Krystian Trevalga, widział muzykę, którą skomponował. Dzięki eksperymentom ze stosowaniem narkotyków rozszerzających zakres świadomości dzisiejsi artyści widzą dźwięki i słyszą zapachy. Przypuszcza się, że takie eksperymenty pozwolą wniknąć w istotę procesu twórczego i umożliwią ekspansję świadomości już bez stosowania środków narkotycznych.

Przełożyła Halina Biedrzycka

³⁶ W. S. Burroughs, *Points of Distinction Between Sedative and Consciousness-Expanding Drugs*, “Evergreen Review”, December, 1964, pp. 73, 74.

³⁷ C. M. Bowra, *Memories 1898—1967*, London 1967, p. 241.