Rediscovering Herbert Horne
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Frailty of body and strength of personality is the impression Horne made on many of his contemporaries. Yet such strength of personality was only evident on long acquaintance. Horne was never a ready talker and the very judiciousness of his talk tended to leave a false effect of dilettantism. Like Pater, he seems to have been a man of low vitality, though he was no celibate. Besides frail health (Horne and his sister both died in their early fifties), the family had inherited mental instability.¹

In the literary memoirs of the 1890s, Horne is prominent. On Henry Sirr, a prosaic associate of Mackmurdo’s, he made an unfavourable impression: "I met Herbert Horne once and thought he looked as if some fresh air would do him good."² The double-headed nightingale, "Michael Field," describes him as having "squeezed features, eyes that are drawn like a single thickened line repeated, spent complexion and a grin. . . . He is not a milk-sop, but a tea-sop—mild, effeminate, with an art aroma, a choiceness." The ladies, however, were more charitable: "There is defect in every inch of Horne’s face, and yet what pleasant defect—it is used by sensitiveness so well that it
becomes interesting and has a kindly appeal," though he is also found to be "sick and clayey."³

This art aroma and choice mildness equally offended John Davidson, whom Yeats records in *Autobiographies* as bursting out with "if a man must be a connoisseur, let him be a connoisseur of women." Yet that precisely Horne seems to have been. Indeed, he went one better: he was a connoisseur of both men and women.

William Rothenstein, with a painter's eye, remarked Horne's pale face, the hard red lips, and other observers sensed some contrast or tension between pallid cheeks and startlingly vivid mouth. Edgar Jepson found him "dark and Italianate with regular features and pale, with curiously red lips. . . . I have never known a man colder and more reserved and self-centred, a purist of purists," yet "in spite of his coldness Horne must on occasion have burned with considerable ardour, for he loved always the prettiest of the ladies who adorned the circle."⁴

It is not easy to comment on Horne's emotional life. The tone of his letters to Jepson in the later 1890s is scabrous, that of the disappointed ageing bachelor. But it is certain that he began to haunt the music-halls in his late teens and this led to adventures. In 1883 he seems to have been in love with one of the actresses at the Gaiety, perhaps Nellie Farren, and if so it is hardly surprising that the affair remained on a strictly platonic footing. Both Horne and Image were friendly with one of the unknown's friends, Ada Smith, with her "wonderful gold hair," and Image made a small drawing in red chalk of Ada, which he presented to Horne.

Among the Symons papers at Princeton, however, there is an account of Horne based partly on Symons's own memoirs and partly on a conversation he had recently had with Selwyn Image on 3 June 1924.⁵ This all seems rather coloured by the sick mentality of Symons's later years, but contains some acute
comments nonetheless. According to Symons, Horne was over-sexed and indifferently heterosexual and homosexual, while his father was a shady character who had a disastrous effect on his children. Symons quotes the following observation from Image:

His insanity showed itself in a most vexatious manner when, annoyed and made furious by some commission he had wanted to have and which was given to me, we had a fierce quarrel. He disappeared for two years, no one knew whither. It appeared that he had gone so as to escape from charges of the worst kind against him to some part of Italy. He never wrote me one letter, in fact I heard nothing about him until he came back. Then we returned to our former friendly relations. . . . A feminine trait in Horne was his adoration of flattery. Whenever he was flattered he literally expanded. . . . There is one point I must emphasise: that Horne was the most secretive man I have ever known, absolutely and always. And this was one of the worst qualities in his sinister nature. He avoided more than anyone I have ever known the least reference to what he did with his nights, let alone what he did with his days. I had no inkling of Horne's homosexuality. You are probably right in what you have said. So abnormal, so self-centred a man with a taint of insanity in his veins, is as often as not [not] responsive of the actions he commits. That is of course only a side issue to this sinister question.

Symons then relates his first meeting with Horne:

It was my evil genius, like Casanova's, who deluded me into entering the same house where Image lived, where I encountered Herbert Horne, whose shifting and treacherous eyes were one of the certain signs of what was inimical in the man. He was short, dark, neat, very worldly looking. His manner was cold and restrained, with a mingling of insolence and diffidence. He never mentioned the word "love" except to jest at it; and yet there could be no doubt as to his meaning. His whole attitude was one of patient waiting. Such women were set apart in his carefully arranged life from matters which absorbed him in other senses. He was one of those critics who would do any man's work but their own. When he sat down to write something dry and hard came into the words. He always chafed a little under what seemed an unnecessary devotion. On principle, he did not like clever
women. He had his own very deliberate theory of values, and one value was never allowed to interfere with another. A devoted, discreet, amateur of women, he appreciated women really for their own sex.

For several years we were on rather friendly terms. I rarely called on him in his rooms in Kings' Bench Walk, not far from where George Moore lived. He had a terrible habit of calling on me in Fountain Court when I least wanted to see him. We were most friendly when he was keeping Muriel Broadbent. It was with a Latin solemnity Selwyn Image and myself signed a legal document—for the rent of the place in which she stayed—that she was an honest woman. She was frightfully nice and kind to me; one of those women who are sensual and excitable though not passionate. There was something bright and attractive about her, apart from her erotic nature... She often took refuge with me when her men made her exasperated; and when I opened the door after she had knocked on it, she burst in, flushed and feverish, then flung herself on the sofa and became hysterical. She got mixed up in an indiscriminate fashion with young lords and with younger poets, with Jews and with Gentiles, with painters and prose writers; and to such an extent that they all got mixed up and jumbled together in that queer head of hers. When finally she had to marry a man of good position, there were terrible scenes between her and her keeper. Once I was walking with him in Chelsea when Muriel waved her hand to us from a cab; his face became livid and furious; and in his surly voice he said "Let us turn down the next street and escape her."

Horne exacted more from the women he was mixed up with than any man had a natural right to exact. Outwardly, he was the animal on the prey; but in his complex character, inwardly, one divined his abnormal passion for men: he was at once a hard liver, a Sadist and Pervert.

Horne was fiendishly jealous, cold, cruel, calculating; always aware of the insidious ambushes into which he might fall, which he took an immense trouble in avoiding. Sexually endowed to an excess which was morbid, an abominable sense of his fascination when he was least so came over him. Intensely avid in following up sinister adventures by which he hoped to profit, he let me in to some of his cunning plots which so often to his disgust were abject failures. He was unpassionate; he never had any passionate adventures; whatever passion he had went in the wrong direction; he was literally incapable of inspiring either love or passion in women's hearts; and if by chance
he wakened a spark of it in any of them, that was soon extinguished. He raised in many of these women such an aversion that he became to them literally insupportable. This was his lifelong grievance.

Such a man as Horne who never marries, never could have, and who lives, as one phrases it, alone for the greater part of his life must have resources of his own, not an inner contentment, from which he imbibes as from drugs and drinks ineffable sensation. . . . In lives such as these, there is a kind of aching *Sterility*, which may or may not make them barren of success. Then the nausea of a series of disgusts, the odor of corruption; satiety, disillusion; and in these cases the absolute need of a prodigious mental activity, an aloofness from the atmosphere of the common world; in which these create an atmosphere of their own, which might be peopled with mocking and contemptuous shadows and phantom shapes. I am inclined to end this study in morbidity with a quotation from Pater, in his somewhat cynical review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. "But his story is also a vivid, though carefully considered, exposure of the corruption of a soul, with a very plain moral pushed home, to the effect that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly."

Symons had been in communication with Horne as early as 1887 and they soon became fairly closely acquainted. They toured Belgium together and in 1895 Symons passed a number of months in Italy with Horne. Both had a passion for the music hall; both were *littérature*; both had a determined interest in women, particularly ballet dancers and ladies of the night; but Horne's was the more casual and successful. The letters between the two take us to 1895 when there seems to have been a break, probably brought about by Horne and accentuated by the increasing amount of time now spent by him in Florence.

The Symons of the 1890s was naïve, energetic, not to say pushing—an egoist somewhat devoid of an ego. His letters betray the man; though they fail in mastering the witty dandiacal obliquities of malice so dear to the *fin de siècle*, they are briskly empty without acuity of phrase, catching at surfaces. Yeats praises Symons's femininity of personality, a
sympathetic mirror that reflected and crystallized the ideas of others, but the defect of these qualities can be gathered from his correspondence.

In that memorable summer of 1895 when, with Conder and Beardsley, the Savoy was planned, Symons tried hard to persuade Horne to come to Dieppe. But the invitation was ignored. Symons had little to offer him either personally or intellectually. Horne was moving away from "appreciative" criticism. His new friends were connoisseurs, dealers, art historians, art critics: men such as Roger Fry, Robert Ross, Charles Loeser and Bernard Berenson. Symons, with his provincial conscience, the endless parade of his versified sins humourlessly magnified and multiplied beyond all necessity, became a figure of fun, as Horne's letters to Edgar Jepson testify. Those furnish a sharper, less obsessive counterpart to Symons's image of Horne. By February 1896 Horne had come to see that fin de siècle London was finished. If for Beerbohm the Rhymers' favoured pub, the Crown, had always been dull (full of nameless minor poets, cocottes and unfrocked clergymen), for Horne it had fallen into "a slough of dullness."

That the poet Symons should "waste his sweetness upon the desert air of some unfrequented pub goes to my heart.... And that the shadow of respectability should stand in the way of Smithers" he naturally lamented. From another letter it appears that

Symons is expected to arrive in Rome as soon as he is quit of his engagements with Smithers. He is invited there ... by an Italian Count who holds some office about the Papal Court ... What is not yet generally known is that he is expected to be received into the Church upon his arrival there; and so presently join one of the religious orders, that in the sickroom of the monastic life, he may devote the rest of his days in expiation of the horrid vices and enormities of his past life.
And on 10 October 1898 Horne asks Jepson if he has read "the newest 'little Arthur' newly arrived from Spain, and reeking in the 'Saturday' [Review] with the blood of bull-fights." So much for Symons's impressionist travel pieces.

The most insistent topic, though, was the distance between Symons's erotic ambitions and his bodily accoutrement. In a letter of 26 February 1897, Horne congratulates Jepson on some delicately obscene verses satirising Symons and suggests that the climax of his correspondent's career as a lubricous poet will consist in composing

a whole Priapeia on the subject of our little Arthur's tool. When little Arthur's epic appears, you will, I trust, show how far in the arts of the smelling sentimental, the singer of drawers surpasses the singer of petticoats—joking apart, your discourse on the hearth-rug bard was severely admirable.

An earlier letter juxtaposes Horne's present interests with Symons as representative of a tepid past:

As I have abandoned all other pursuits, except that of mounting my drawings in bistre and gold, an equable occupation which I only occasionally break by writing in the Saturday Review, I have been unable to write to you from the want of those experiences which alone could enable me to surpass your own wit in your own way. However, I chanced to wander this evening down that rural lane, Piccadilly, looking like the darned Gerard of old, for wayside flowers; when I chanced upon a very irregular specimen. I had met with it before—years ago in my wanderings; and the conversation which passed between is not so unpleasing, that I should not send you a notable passage or so.

The Flower: 'Ow's your friend?
Myself: What friend?
The Flower: You know—'im as lent me a book.
Myself: What do you mean?
The Flower: What lives in the Temple—by that fountain sort of place.
Myself: Oh! I know. Don't know. Haven't seen him lately (pause). What the devil are you grinning like that for?
The Flower: Oh, 'e never come home wif me!
Myself: Didn't he!
The Flower: But he tried to 'ave Minnie tho'.
Myself: Did he!
The Flower: Little winkle of a thing! He couldn't do nuffing wif it!

Now, my dear Jepson, supply the plot or the incident, or what not; and add the necessary inflection: and a short story is made to your hand, which should not be unworthy of the higher magazines, such as the Yellow Book, or—the Savoy.

Neither the Yellow Book nor Symons's Savoy much appealed to Horne. Finding (and filching) a copy of the Savoy at Fiesole he wrote to Jepson on 9 March 1896: "Symons at Dieppe might honestly be taken for one of Harrod's young men . . . out for his summer trip. For silliness and middle-class bad taste it would be impossible to surpass it. As a piece of writing it is certainly very clever." Nor was Beardsley's Under the Hill approved:

For an honest lusus ineptus written with knowledge and zest I have nothing but admiration; if kept like all the higher aspirations of the human mind, it should be within the proper privacy of the closet. But the concluding sentence of Beardsley's novel appears to me worthy only of a schoolboy: the [illegible] in the asparagus and the satyrs could occur only to a 6th form boy who is still virginal of the other sex. But you see what a Philistine I have become.

Horne's displeasure may well have been accentuated by his recognition that two brief stories which Symons contributed to the Savoy, "The Childhood of Lucy Newcome" and "Pages from the Life of Lucy Newcome," were écrites à clef founded on the biography of Muriel Broadbent. This second story has as its climax the moment Lucy begins her career of gallantry as a consequence of being abandoned by a lover and
left with a baby which she has to support by drudging in a laundry. The baby dies and Lucy decides that she might as well become the mistress of an elderly man who has already begun delicate advances. Manuscripts in the Princeton Collection and at Arizona State University make it clear that Symons intended a novel à la Goncourt, based not on continuous narrative but on recording significant sensations. Some parts of this novel were written and in it both Symons and Horne appear, though the presentation of both is curiously colourless.9

But Horne makes a far from colourless appearance in Beardsley's romance. Besides its pornographic travesty, involving self-parody and at a deeper level the irreducible dilemmas of the avant garde of the Nineties, Under the Hill (and more elaborately its fuller version The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser) involves much recognisable local satire. The contained tensions of Horne's character are presented through the wild incompatibilities of that learned libertine and corrupter of innocence, Sporion: "a tall, slim, depraved young man with a slight stoop, a troubled walk, an oval impassible face with its olive skin drawn lightly over the bone, strong, scarlet lips, long Japanese eyes, and a great gilt toupee."10 The physical reminiscence, minus the toupee of course, is clear. Pursuing his "Bacchanals," Sporion with his brilliant followers enter an Arcadian valley peopled by innocent nymphaids and shepherds "hoping to experience a new frisson in the destruction of some shepherd's or some satyr's naïveté, and the infusion of their venom among the dwellers of the woods." Sporion abundantly succeeds in his intention and so represents the peculiarly Decadent fascination with barbarism: those underlying affinities between beau and brute, Pastoralism and the dance, Herrick and, as we shall see, the dancers of the Alhambra and the Empire music halls. Beardsley know-
ingly associates Horne and Sporion; the names are obviously connected homophonically and historically.

Ernest Dowson too expresses his own sense of the incongruities of Horne’s character, admirer of ancient music and haunter of the stage door at midnight. Meeting Horne and Image together in this role, Dowson observed: "There was something eminently grotesque in the juxtaposition. Horne very erect & slim & aesthetic—and Image the most dignified man in London, a sort of cross in appearance between a secular abbe & Baudelaire, with a manner du 18me siecle—waiting in a back passage to be escort to ballet girls whom they don’t even —— !!!" Dowson may possibly have been wrong about that.