Arthur Symons, Critic Among Critic
Symons, Arthur

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Swinburne wrote to the editor of the *Times* on June 19, 1902, to protest that Maurice Maeterlinck’s play *Monna Vanna* was not licensed: “We, the undersigned, are of opinion that some protest should be made against a decision of the Censorship by which the representation, in French, of a play by a distinguished French writer, of the highest moral reputation, has been forbidden in England” (217). AS was one of those who signed the letter. AS also signed a letter on January 30, 1905, to the editor of *The Morning Leader* protesting Maxim Gorky’s possible hanging: “we, the undersigned men of letters, men of science, and artists, feel impelled to record at once our protest against such an unparalleled outrage upon our common humanity” (261). AS also signed a letter to the editor of the *Times* on about June 30, 1906, supporting the purchase of the house in Italy in which John Keats died: “to establish therein a permanent memorial” (276).

The aesthetics of the Symbolic-Decadent formula practiced with a brief but glorious success by AS, Pater, Yeats, Wilde and others in the nineties were a “strategic failure … for in saying that nothing mattered but artistic beauty, they had sooner or later to confront the implication that beauty did not matter either.” AS wrestled with this dilemma in his essay on Zola. (Stern)

[Examines Symons’s understanding of the Baudelairian dimension of Rodin’s sculpture and drawings in an essay he published in the literary journal *Fortnightly Review* in 1902. Symons’s theory of meaning in sculpture can be seen in the choice of works he discussed—the Gates of Hell, and Temptation of St. Anthony—which exemplified his argument that technique alone can bring form closer to an idea. His comparison between Baudelaire’s “Les Fleurs du mal” and the Gates of Hell demonstrates the significance he attached to Rodin’s practice in which he saw a continuity of purpose between the sculpture of the 1880s and his drawing practice at the turn of the century. The sexually explicit nature of the drawings, almost exclusively of the female nude, was of key significance, as was the conception of artistic creativity which located the work of Rodin in parallel with the new poetry.] [Abstract from Research Library Group’s Eureka FRANCIS (Humanities & Social Sciences).]
‘natural’ female behavior” (3). AS is quoted as saying “the deeper woman was drawn into herself, the further she drew away from man’s civilizing influence and the more dangerous she became” (4). [Passing mention of AS.]

[Moore’s impressionistic technique in writing *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885), “called the first, and possibly the only naturalistic novel in English” (345), is compared with that of Emile Zola. In a paragraph-length footnote, explaining both the Symbolists’ and Naturalists’ claim on Impressionism, AS’s “The Decadent Movement in Literature” is cited, “in an apparent contradiction to Zola” (347).]

In his play *Tristan and Iseult*, AS construes the two women as cousins—Iseult of Brittany and Iseult of Ireland. Iseult of Brittany, in AS’s rendition, prevents her cousins, Iseult of Ireland and Meriadoc, from harming Tristan; we learn he killed their uncle Mark. Finally, in the fourth act, we meet an Iseult of Brittany consumed with jealousy. She would rather see Tristan die than lose him to Iseult of Ireland. Naturally, she initially lies to Tristan about the sails, but feeling remorse immediately reveals the truth too late. While a twentieth-century audience might find AS’s Iseult of Brittany satisfying, the play “is hardly memorable” (81). Despite her deep love for Tristan, she ultimately kills her husband to spite her cousin.

746. Mix, Katherine Lyon. *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors*.  
In 1893 AS set forth the gospel of Decadence. A Rhymer, he became a contributor to the Yellow Book; later, he edited the rival journal, the Savoy, with Beardsley as its art editor. AS, in revolt against his religious upbringing and Victorian morality, wrote poems in the manner of a Verlaine and Baudelaire. He was a devoté of the music-halls, lover of things French, and a critic who won fame for his book on the Symbolist movement. [Concentrates on AS’s role in the Yellow Book and the Savoy. Chapter XXI is devoted to AS, his role on the Savoy, and his place in the decade. Many of the biographical details are inaccurate: he was not educated in France nor did he write only one book of criticism in the nineties. The notes are helpful, particularly in that they offer a list of reviews of AS’s books, focusing on the reviews in the nineties.] (Stern)

AS “described his friendship with Charles in an autobiographical story titled *A Prelude to Life*: ‘Some school composition of mine had interested him in me, and he began to lend me books [including Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*], and to encourage me in trying to express myself in writing.” AS wrote Osborne “over 100 letters, on the average of one letter a month.” Osborne “was rather passive in comparison with the enthusiasm of Symons” (13), who “learned journalistic business, as it were, serving his apprenticeship under his master Charles” (18). Osborne reviewed AS’s edition of *Venus and Adonis* and concluded that AS “is
fast winning for himself an honorable place among the literary men and poets of the day” (23). “It is a great surprise that neither Symons nor Charles left any trace of their friendship after their respective departures from local towns. Perhaps their friendship was discontinued early in the 1890s for some unknown reasons” (25–26). [Appendix includes an “Extract from the Charles Churchill Osborne’s Review of An Introduction to the Study of Browning, by Arthur Symons, London: Cassel, 1886. [in] The Salisbury and Winchester Journal, February 12, 1887, p.3, col. 4” (41).]

[Study of unpublished letters between AS and Churchill Osborne in the Princeton Library, including sections about: the image of Osborne as a man; family and marriage; Cardiff period; local journalism; and the Salisbury & Winchester Journal. Also includes a register of the letters between AS and Osborne held in the Princeton University Library. (In Japanese.)]

From 1880–1889, AS wrote Churchill Osborne 122 letters, now in the Princeton University Library. AS “quickly grew out of his apprenticeship [under Osborne] as a writer and had gone far beyond and ahead of his former teacher by the spring of 1889” (108). The letters may “prove” that AS “in his teens was not so disagreeable a boy as described in A Prelude to Life” (111). He and his mother “did understand each other intuitively because of their shared temperament, that is nervousness” (116). AS was “a young intellectual of a provincial town, who could be gay, positive, willful, and whose ‘favorite motto’ was ‘Barriers are for those who cannot fly’” (116). “I prefer to think that Symons shared much similarity with his father than suppose [sic] that he was markedly different and alienated from his father” (118). “The friendship and ‘influence’ of Osborne … necessitates further research” (127). Another friend of AS’s was Alfred Comelius Leigh, with whom he shared an interest in music. “Music and reading … were closely related with Osborne’s influence in shaping Symons’ literary taste and career as a writer” (131).

“For what Wilde said of Symons could be applied to all his contemporaries: All were ‘sad example[s] of an Egoist who had no Ego.’ This is the basis of our interest in them: The way both their lives and their art are transported into a shadowy no-man’s-land where neither life nor art can achieve substantial existence” (321). “There is something very personal in Symons’ theory of symbolism, with its formula for alienation, that purports to explain this double sense of the self. In his essay on Gérard de Nerval in the Symbolist Movement, he almost seems to anticipate his own later illness” (326). “Here he seems to grasp the tenuous balance of the artist’s ‘double life,’ yet he never really gets to the root of the predicament” (327). “In ‘A Prelude to Life’ he tells how as a child he ‘did not know quite what [he] wanted.’ The same vagueness and indecisiveness persisted throughout his life. Intellectual enough to have formulated the most comprehensive theory
of symbolism at the time, morally aware enough to have recognized ‘a world of holy terror’ in Conrad’s work, Symons nonetheless lacked a naturally strong central self and either the character or the art to synthesize one. The attack of manic-depression in 1908 which dramatically ended his writing career was inevitable” (328). [Also published London: U of London P, 1969.]


Pater’s The Renaissance influenced an entire generation of young writers including AS (148). [Passing reference to AS.]


Just as AS described Stéphane Mallarmé’s word order as “something irregular, unquiet, expressive, with sudden surprising felicities, with nervous starts and lapses, with new capacities for the exact noting of sensation,” so might you characterize “posing as narrative” (188–89).


“Based on a short story by Arthur Symons [“Esther Kahn” from Spiritual Adventures], but also modeled loosely after Francois Truffaut’s Wild Child (1970)” (146). “Director Desplechin examines the minuscule details of Esther’s painfully growth with great sensitivity, yet refuses to explain his heroine’s inner life—or outward motivations. This method confers intricacy and suspense to an otherwise linear narrative (particularly in such sequences as Esther’s haunting childhood dream and her bravura turn—shot without sound—as Hedda Gabler). Feminists will debate the use of a male voiceover to narrate Esther’s story and the fact that a minor scoundrel is the catalyst for Esther’s collapse. Yet Desplechin’s compassionate direction, Summer Phoenix’s glowing performance, and the fastidious production values make Esther Kahn into a film worthy of association with Truffaut’s best cinematic poems” (147) [Review of director Arnaud Desplechin’s adaptation of AS’s short story. Other reviews listed: “Boxoffice. June, 2002, p. 67; The Guardian Online. November 23, 2001; Los Angeles Times Online. April 12, 2002; New York Times Online. March 1, 2002; Sight and Sound. December, 2001, p. 47; Variety. June 19, 2000, p. 34” (147). See comments under Desplechin, Arnaud.]


[Sketches AS’s role in the Rhymers’ Club and alludes to his position as representative of the poets of the ’nineties who overlapped the Victorian era.] (Stern)

Arthur Symons, Critic Among Critics

AS “truly observed that ‘with all that strange tragic material within and about him,’ Lamb ‘was unable to work directly upon that material in the imaginative way of a poet” (548). [Passing mention, 548, 557.]


Though Eliot dismissed Pater’s importance as a literary figure, Pater’s influence is extensive and diverse. While he influenced artists from Joseph Conrad to D. H. Lawrence and even Eliot, he inhabited a central position “among the literati of the fin de siècle” (1), most notably among the members of the Rhymers’ Club, including AS, Dowson, Johnson, Herbert Horne and Yeats. While realizing the power of Pater’s work, Yeats also acknowledges the role Pater’s work had in destroying the lives of those who followed him by putting them on the “tightrope of intensity” (3). AS, for example, “might find inspiration in the theatre, the dance hall, the cafe” (3). The members of the Rhymers’ Club “loved those choice moments of revelation … extracted from common events” (3). Pater’s theories compelled AS and his contemporaries to look inward, drifting ever deeper into “their private world” (3).


Moore met Yeats in AS’s rooms in the Temple. AS and Martyn were Moore’s boon companions at the time until Yeats took their place. AS was spending his time in the Alhambra and the Empire. Having written “Symbolism in Literature,” he was now “investigating symbolism in gesture.” In Yeats, the man and the style were one; with AS, the style was beautiful but seemed accidentally bestowed upon him, “so much was it at variance with his appearance and his conversation.” Lady Gregory and others of Yeats’s admirers feared AS’s influence upon him: they did not want Yeats to take his Colleen to London and give her fashionable airs. [Despite Moore’s raillery, he offers a good and quite reliable portrait of AS’s personality.] (Stern)


AS “was charming to watch, with the crossness of isolation on his brows and mouth. His colour dazzles even from a far distance” (120). Edmund Gosse’s view of AS: “the genuine love he has for literature, the taint of journalism and interviewing, of which we must cure him,” his poetry still uncertain in quality, his poet’s face. Gosse is interested in his nonconformist parentage and education, “such virginal soil” (124). On a visit with Verlaine and AS, November 22, 1893: “the obvious simile was that of a rose bush beside a blasted thorn; Symons almost supported his lame companion to the chair and then retired to the second side row” (188). [Extracts from journal of “Michael Field” (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) with passing references to AS.]


Yeats heard more about French Symbolism through AS’s Studies in Two Literatures and The Symbolist Movement in Literature. Three years after AS published
a volume of poetry called *Images of Good and Evil*, Yeats wrote a book of essays called *Ideas of Good and Evil*. (Stern)


Story of illusion and awakening is the theme of the collection of poems. AS confuses things of the spirit with things of the world; consequently, in poems like the “Dance of the Daughters of Herodias” AS’s vision is false. “For the voice of the spirit it [AS’s poetry] hears only the clamorous outcry of a man’s lower personality springing from the desires of the body and the perceptions of the body, and is in the end one with what is desired and perceived.” [Impatient with the world of revery and with the escapism depicted in the poetry of AS, More describes AS as the only true representative in English “of that widespread condition which we call decadence.”] *London Nights* in its morbidity reveals AS “hankering after food which to suit a jaded appetite must be unwholesomely spiced with appeals to what is called the soul.” Yeats and AS are both charged with decadence, but Yeats’s is at least untainted. Lionel Johnson is a more worthy poet than either of the other two. [Review of AS’s *Poems*, 2 vols. (1902). It is the work of an “anti-impressionistic” critic and typical of the kind of attacks launched against AS. To More, an American critic writing contemporaneously with AS, the Impressionists and Aesthetes were a tainted breed.] (Stern)


[Passing mention of AS’s *A Study of Walter Pater* in footnote, 59]


In 1977, A. Norman Jeffares reprinted AS’s review of W. B. Yeats’s *The Wind Among the Reeds* and a second edition of *Poems*. The review, entitled “Mr. Yeats As a Lyric Poet,” appeared in the Critical Heritage series with an unattributed review of Yeats’s *Ideas of Good and Evil*. While the “insider’s perspective” suggests that AS may have written the article, the following letter confirms the suspicion (3). In the *Athenaeum* review, the author subscribes to Yeats’s view of the rising art; this view corresponds neatly with AS’s earlier approval of Yeats’s “Symbolism of Poetry.” While Yeats may have thought of AS as a merely “sympathetic listener” (7), AS qualifies as an equal who helped shape much of Yeats’s criticism.


“Yet, prior to the release of this first full-length bibliography, Symons’s vast oeuvre, including the 1300 or so notes, articles and reviews that he placed in newspapers and periodicals such as *The Star*, *The Academy*, and *The Athenaeum*, had never been accurately catalogued” (424). “The tireless efforts of the editors of the latest bibliography have produced an important new scholarly tool which, by identifying Symons’ mostly unsigned occasional work, will undoubtedly contribute to the reevaluation of his literary reputation” (426).
“In contrast to Roger Lhombreaud’s often inaccurate first biography, Karl Beckson has here at last successfully composed, from many previously unavailable primary sources, the careful, sympathetic portrait demanded by so remarkably subtle, yet disturbingly complex, a personality as that of Arthur Symons—minor poet, gifted translator, eloquent travel writer, who was among the foremost literary journalists of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Professor Beckson has, in addition, also contributed to the ongoing upward readjustment of Symons’s reputation by presenting an extremely well-documented chronicle of his many activities” (221). “If Beckson does have any weakness (if opening up new areas for scholarly inquiry can be considered a flaw), it is that sometimes his tentativeness suggests more questions about Symons’s complex psychology than he finds room to answer” (226).

[Either Yeats selectively derived ideas and images from his friend … or else, Symons, finally overwhelmed by a more powerful personality, lost his identity in Yeats’s twilight dream. Yet now there still is no comprehensive study of the exchange between Symons and Yeats, who were exact contemporaries and who, from 1895 to 1900, laid part of the foundation for the emergence of the ‘Modern’ during the generation of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce. This present study intends to remedy that deficiency and to correct the mistaken impression that either man was merely a parasite on the other.] [Annotation edited from DAI 38 (1977): 809A.]

“What Lawrence W. Markert has accomplished … is much more crucial to our understanding of the vital role Symons performed during the Transition Era synthesizing cultural cross-currents. By conducting a systematic survey of his less familiar work as a critic of all aspects of art and culture, Markert has in fact gone a long way toward fulfilling his primary intention, which was, he explains, to rehabilitate Symons’s status in literary history where he has remained sadly neglected, ‘a curious shadowy figure’” (345). “One of Critic of the Seven Arts’s greatest virtues is evidenced in the special care Markert always takes to firmly locate Symons’s occasional criticism of contemporary culture within its late nineteenth-century context” (346). “There are flaws here to be sure. After encountering so much new material, I was impressed by Markert’s considerable erudition, yet still disappointed by the absence of a general conclusion which would have examined Symons’s ruling ideas and values” (347).

Twelve letters covering AS’s friendship with Yeats “affirm Yeats’s mature assessment that during the late 1890s, Arthur Symons was ‘my most intimate friend’ who ‘consulted me over all he did and was my counsellor’” (46). The letters provide a sense of AS’s admiration for Yeats’s work as well as a glimpse of Yeats’s
involvement in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Unfortunately, Yeats’s letters to AS are missing. [Brief summation followed by republished letters.]


“Since the letters written by Symons to the immediate members of his strict Methodist family seem to have perished (as have those to his ballet-dancer mistress ‘Lydia’), Professors Beckson and Munro were correct to include some of the more psychologically revealing examples from this candid exchange, which covers almost the entire period, from 1898 to 1936, of Arthur and Rhoda’s courtship and tragic marriage” (349). “Unfortunately, as the editors are themselves likewise the first to concede, few letters from Symons to Yeats seem to have survived either” (349). “Yeats scholars should still feel particularly indebted to Beckson and Munro for their meticulous footnotes, valuable biographical chronology and useful index of recipients, all of which help reconstruct the intellectual context of literary London during the 1880s and 1890s” (351). “Publication of this important new collection … does confirm Symons as a major literary figure, at the center of contemporary intellectual, artistic, and cultural cross-currents, whose significance extends beyond the narrow circle of the Rhymers’ Club to achieve a European dimension” (353).


Examining AS’s previously unpublished translations of French texts reveals the extent to which AS’s translations of Mallarmé were more than mere reinforcement of Yeats’s theory of art, but an integral part of Yeats’s own style and choice of subject, particularly on two of Yeats’s “most important” works (101), “The Autumn of the Body” and “The Symbolism of Poetry.” AS’s attempts to approach language analytically provided Yeats with the tools he needed to revitalize poetry by making it “a spontaneous expression of interior life” (107). Though Yeats was reluctant in several ways to follow Mallarmé completely, AS’s carefully crafted translations “did contribute significantly to his [Yeats’s] early poetic education” (113).


“The following sequence of thirteen letters spans the ten most productive years of the friendship between Arthur Symons and W. B. Yeats during which their personal and literary relations warmed and grew more candid. References to the early history of the Irish Literary Theatre lie scattered throughout this correspondence, as do allusions to the disorderly life of Yeats’s young protégée, the poet and book-designer Althea Gyles. Less familiar, but equally significant, however, are Symons’s many efforts on his friend’s behalf, his enthusiasm for *The Speckled Bird, The Shadowy Waters*, and *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and his tactful advice on the quality and arrangement of Yeats’s prose and verse; illuminating biographical details which, taken together, affirm the Irish poet’s mature assessment that from the late 1890s to the early years of the present century Arthur
Symons was ‘my most intimate friend’ who ‘consulted me over all he did and was my counsellor’ (Mem 97)” (7). [Contains notes on the letters.]


“After Verlaine’s death, “AS “turned increasingly toward Stéphane Mallarmé as the chief living representative of the intérieur school of modern French verse” (346). Three letters from Mallarmé to AS help trace the genesis of the Symbolist movement in England and the cultural exchanges from the continental Symbolists to the Symbolists in London.


W. B. Yeats not only applauded AS for producing “the most accomplished metrical translations of our time,” but he also attributed his later poetic form to AS’s translations of Mallarmé (3). Of his rhymed metrical translations from Poésies, AS only agreed to publish “Anguish,” “Sea-Wind,” “Sigh,” and “Autumn Lament.” The Firestone Library at Princeton possesses an additional twenty-three of AS’s translations from Poésies. Between his mental breakdown and a limited appreciation for Mallarmé’s “self-referential symbolism,” AS never got around to publishing his translations (4). This volume contains all of AS’s published translations along with the previously unpublished material housed at Princeton.


No real evidence exists proving AS disliked or “blamed Lady Gregory for Yeats’s deserting lyric poetry” (107). In fact, a careful review of contemporary sources reveals that “though Lady Gregory may have entertained some reservations about Symons’s influence on Yeats’s style,” Lady Gregory and AS had a “cordial” relationship before AS’s mental breakdown in 1908.


“Witnesses disagree … about the extent Symons was actually in full control of his faculties following his release from the sanatorium in 1910, down to the time of his death in 1945.” “It should come as no surprise, then, that Symons felt hesitant about attempting to make a comeback. Nevertheless, after carefully searching through his backlog, he approached the publisher Heinemann with the stack of material that eventually was to become the Knave of Hearts” (509). “Symons was still understandably cautious and decided to ask Yeats to read proof. Yeats agreed and penned his comments and corrections directly in the margins of the first proof-sheets, which arrived at the Balantine Press on 1 August 1913. A comparison of Yeats’s deletions and marginal comments on these sheets with the Knave of Hearts in its final published form shows that Symons could still be quite selective and discriminating, if, at the same time, somewhat obstinate when it came to heeding his friend’s advice” (509–10).

“‘Mr. Yeats As A Lyric Poet,’ Arthur Symons’ combined review of both Yeats’s *The Wind Among the Reeds* and Yeats’s second, revised English edition of *Poems*, appeared initially in the 6 May 1899 *Saturday Review* and was reprinted in 1977 by A. Norman Jeffares in the Critical Heritage Series. Here Jeffares also reprinted without identifying the author an extract from an equally perceptive, though unsigned, 27 June 1903 *Athenaeum* review of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, entitling it ‘Poet With A Philosophy.’ But if its professional polish and insider’s perspective still leave any doubt, a quick glance at the following letter to Yeats’s publisher, A.H. Bullen, will definitely confirm that this piece was an anonymous contribution by Arthur Symons” (120). “In a substantive section omitted by Jeffares, Symons points out that Yeats’s polemical defense of Rossetti’s practice in *The Annunciation* and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* had resulted in Yeats’s advocacy of a ‘purely external kind of symbolism.’” “A close examination of this review suggests that Symons was much more than a passive mirror reflecting aesthetic ideas supplied initially by the more intellectually dominant Yeats” (122).


The English critical reception of Symbolism compared to the American, contrary to René Taupin’s contention (*L’influence du symbolisme français sur la poesie américaine de 1910–1920* [Paris, 1929]: 20–44), is of inferior quality. Moore, AS, and Wilde write whimsically of the French writers with little or no understanding of the texts or the movement. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* contained “little more than biographical details, quotations, and impressionistic eulogies.” Not one of AS’s essays on Symbolist writers is regarded by any present-day critic as a valid presentation of the doctrines or the techniques of the poet with whom it deals. It is the American critics, Perry, Davis, Gorren, and Thompson who conceive of the Symbolist group as a school and who seek to synthesize and appraise their doctrines. (Stern)


“Yeats would have been introduced to Nietzsche’s thought at least as early as 1896 through the reviews and essays of Havelock Ellis and” AS. AS’s “‘Nietzsche and Tragedy’ provided Yeats with a sympathetic review and synoptic description of the main lines of argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*.... Even if he did not encounter Nietzsche’s work directly (which seems unlikely) and merely relied upon a second-hand knowledge of Nietzsche’s writings on classical Greek drama, Yeats’s early critical reflections on theater, tragedy, myth, ritual, and the revival of Irish culture are nonetheless deeply indebted to *The Birth of Tragedy*” (563). [AS’s essay is in *Plays, Acting, and Music*, 1903. AS’s “essay in the same volume, ‘The
New Bayreuth,’ emphasizes ‘as in Nietzsche’s interpretation,’ the ‘Dionysiac element’ in Wagner’s operatic works” (578n4.).

[7 pages. Only 5 copies printed. Taken from *WorldCat* index. Not seen.]

The “most vital manifestos of the movement and their respective editors are the *Yellow Book* and Henry Harland, and the *Savoy* and Mr. Arthur Symons.” AS, cicerone of his age, was both a child and a father of his age. It is a pity he had a penchant for perversity, but it must be conceded he is the supreme type of belles lettrist. His aesthetics provided him with an escape from Methodism and the Calvinists. [Muddiman writes under the spell of the period: his assessment of AS is too generous.] [Also published New York: Putnam, 1921.] (Stern)

In spite of obvious limitations, AS has achieved a few things of permanent importance: some of his verse which has become part of the standard repertoire of Victorian anthologies, his criticism on Browning and the Symbolists, his *Spiritual Adventures* done in the manner of Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, and his contributions to scholarship on Casanova. But more important than all of this is AS’s influence on others, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot; and it is this that has won his reputation and demonstrated that it is untenable to maintain that the nineties are a decade set apart from the mainstream of literary activity, but rather they are a part of the literary continuum binding the Victorians to the Moderns. AS’s work evolves from Victorianism, through Decadence and Aestheticism to a brand of Symbolism which prefigures the writings of Yeats and Eliot. [Treats AS in all his facets: Victorian, Decadent, Symbolist, and forerunner of the moderns. Best book up to 1963 on AS.] (Stern)

[Mistakenly lists AS’s birth date as 21 February instead of 28 February. Includes a selected bibliography of AS’s works, a photograph of AS, biographical overview, and three secondary references.]

Roger Lhombreaud’s detailed and full biography of AS offers a complex and sympathetic account of this often “neglected writer” (294). However, though this account of AS’s life is a fascinating read, Lhombreaud’s work has several flaws. For example, Lhombreaud neglects AS’s role as a literary figure in favor of biographical accounts and does not include in the index AS’s major literary works. In addition, Lhombreaud “includes only the most important of Symons’ published volumes” (295) in the bibliography, and his book has many typographical errors, as well as errors in the footnotes. Despite these flaws, however, Lhombreaud’s work will “remain the standard biography of Symons” (295). [Lhom-
breadaud’s work has been superseded by Karl Beckson’s *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford, 1987).]


[It is in the work of such a writer as Arthur Symons (1865–1945), that we can see most clearly how certain aspects of the nineteenth century poetic sensibility were modified to become essential elements in the twentieth century aesthetic. In his early years Symons wrote poetry in the manner of Browning and criticism in the manner of Pater, and maintained that both these writers were concerned with the same thing: the isolation of significant moments of intensity in which the essence of a character or situation becomes apparent. Later, Symons became interested in the French Symbolists, and in an article of 1893 called “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” he made clear that like Browning and Pater, they too were concerned with significant moments of intensity, which they called “impressions.” About 1895, W. B. Yeats and Symons became close friends, and soon Symons caught some of his friend’s mystical fervor. The result was that Symons was led to look anew at those writers he had previously labeled “decadent,” and found now that it would be more appropriate to call them “symbolist.” … The results of Symons’ reappraisal of contemporary French literature appeared in what is probably his best known work, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*…. Because the *Symbolist Movement* is Symons’ most important work, he is usually regarded as being foremost a literary critic. However, Symons would probably have disdained the title because his intention was to work towards what he called “the concrete expression of a theory, or system of aesthetics, of all the arts.” He worked intensely and unceasingly, and in 1908 suffered a severe mental breakdown from which he only partially recovered, and though he lived until 1945, very little that he wrote after his illness deserves serious consideration…. The quality of his work is not high, but through his attempts to arrive at the essential meaning of the arts Symons demonstrates how the literary tradition developed from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and this in itself entitles him to more serious consideration than he has hitherto received.] [Annotation edited from *Dissertation Abstracts* 24 (1963): 1619–20.]


The hedonism that brought AS to describe Verlaine as a “Decadent” in 1893 and which made him dedicate his life to the senses is replaced by a search for transcendence. Yeats taught AS this new religion. Other factors in 1895, AS’s break-up with Lydia, the Wilde scandal and the exodus of Symons from England in its wake, and AS’s trips to Ireland, also contributed to AS’s disenchantment with his life of the music-halls. [Examination of the AS–Yeats friendship during the 1890s. Focuses on 1895 and AS’s shift away from an interest in Decadence towards an interest in mysticism. Good account of the interchange of ideas between Yeats and AS, but mistaken in its assertion that AS accompanied Yeats to the performance of *Axél* in 1894.] (Stern)

In *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* AS aspired “to his definition of the decadent ideal.” Melancholy and often rather monotonous, the poems do deserve attention as pieces of biography. They reveal AS’s discipleship to Verlaine and Degas and trace his abortive love affair with Lydia, a dancer at the Empire. After 1908 and his mental breakdown, AS’s poetry collapses. Like others of the “tragic generation,” AS suffered from a divided personality. [Discussion of poetic theory is slight; biographical details were new at the time the article was written.] (Stern)


AS jotted down his impressions suggested by a visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1892 and revealed both his fascination with snakes and his attempt “to impose a symphonic structure upon his impressions.” The date of these notes suggests that contrary to current critical opinions AS was vaguely aware of Symbolist approaches before he met Yeats. [Notes are reproduced from the Princeton University Collection. See *ELT* 7:4 (1964): 228–29 (Item 55) for Edward Baugh’s response to Munro’s article. Munro’s rejoinder follows in the same issue on pp. 229–30 (Item 792.) (Stern)


Lhombreaud’s conjecture that AS did not recognize his own wife when he collapsed mentally in Italy in 1908 is disproved by a letter from AS to Edward Hutton written at the time and place of the breakdown. AS complains about his wretched quarrels with Rhoda during the trip and expresses his relief that she plans to leave for London. (Stern)


AS was a follower of Verlaine and his “‘Music and Memory,’ from *Silhouettes* (1892), is one of the most typical ‘impressionist’ poems of the period” (54). AS “handles synesthetic techniques with some assurance” (60). For the Decadents, “It was Verlaine rather than Mallarmé they chose as their model.” Mallarmé “was never very popular among the English Decadents, it being left to the generation of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound to explore more fully the possibilities of the Mallarméan aesthetic” (61). AS’s “‘Japanese Dancers’ and Dowson’s ‘Cynara’ have been consistently anthologized, and rightly so, but their merits are mainly technical. Nevertheless, Decadent poetry does have an important place in the history of the development of the English poetical tradition” (71). “It is true that apart from Frank Kermode and Ruth Temple, modern scholars have not treated Symons’ efforts too kindly, and it cannot be denied that he oversimplifies the main issues. Yet, in the closing paragraph of his Introduction, [to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*] he does adequately sum up the significance of this new literature, and point to those elements which have importance in the development of twentieth-century poetry” (73).

AS’s “verse underwent a series of changes. His first volume, *Days and Nights* (1889), was typically Victorian, but *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895) were typically Decadent. The bulk of what he published afterward belongs to no discernible tradition but is noted for its confessional quality, which at times becomes embarrassing. Symons was a great admirer of the French poet Verlaine, and much of the verse he wrote during the nineties reflects his adulation of him.” (373).


Letters exchanged between Sarojini Naidu and AS starting in 1896 are interesting for their critique of AS’s poetry, for the light they throw on his biography, for their contemporary allusions, and finally, for the way they reveal “Naidu’s sensitivity and honesty, qualities which became more widely appreciated later on, when she became the humane and dignified champion of Indian independence.” Early letters reveal AS’s intense infatuation with Lydia, a dancer at the Empire. [Includes text of five letters and one postcard from Naidu to AS.] (Stern)


On the basis of Dowson’s letter to AS of July 1886 one cannot accept the popular opinion that Dowson was a broken man at the time. [Letter is reproduced. Alludes to AS’s mistaken notions about Dowson.] (Stern)


Although grateful to Baugh for bringing AS’s “The Andante of Snakes” to his attention, Munro still holds, despite Baugh’s objections, that although AS and Yeats had met in the days of the Rhymers’ Club, their friendship did not properly begin until 1893. (Stern)


AS’s claim in a letter dated 15 July 1913 that he owned the only extant copy of Moore’s *Flowers of Passion* is untrue. Ten other copies are held in various libraries and it seems likely that there are others not yet known also in private hands. (Stern)


AS, an admirer of Hardy and the author of a “sympathetic but admittedly superficial study of him,” was never a close friend of his. They probably met twice, first in August of 1900, second in 1905 when Hardy received an honorary degree at Aberdeen University. They were only desultory correspondents. [Quoting from hitherto unpublished letters found in the Featherstone Collection, Munro sketches the AS–Hardy relationship and reproduces the letter written by Hardy to Rhoda offering condolences upon learning of AS’s mental collapse.] (Stern)
795. Deleted.


   In 1889 AS sounded a “revolutionary note” with his first book of verse, *Days and Nights*. In the ’90s the avant-garde artists joined the Rhymers’ Club and later united in the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*. AS wrote in natural terms of the ballet and the stage-door. He was a delicate essayist who wrote impressionist studies of cities and art. In poetry, he wrote under the spell of Verlaine; in prose, Pater was his mentor. [Murdoch’s judgments are not to be trusted. Stylistically he tries to imitate the worst features of the style of the writers he most admires. He cannot find his own voice.] (Stern)


   AS has not won the recognition from his countrymen that has long been due him. AS is not only a “true poet, but a great scholar.” His volumes of poetry represent a development: “the expression of himself, phase by phase, through divers transformations.” His technique is flawless. [Murdoch, a self-confessed ardent admirer of AS, is hyperbolic in his praise of AS’s poetic and scholarly talents. He reviews all his prose and poetry to the date of the volume, but the reviews lack critical balance and sophistication.] (Stern)


   Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* challenges conventional nineteenth-century perceptions of gender through irregularities in narrative construction. Schreiner’s characters escape the linearity of traditional narrative through allegory to occupy a more imaginative realm (90). AS notes in *The Athenaeum* the power and depth of Schreiner’s allegory; in writing “these allegories, Miss Schreiner seems to have put the soul of her soul; they express, in the only form possible, that passion for abstract ideas which in her lies deeper than any other” (98n8).


   “All the natives, men and women, fell in love with Arthur Symons—he is so quiet and unassuming. Lucy came down every day. She said, when Willie [W. B. Yeats] and Symons were gone—‘The house is melancholy without the two poets.’” “Evidently Willie and Arthur Symons coalesced nicely with everybody” (35–36). [Passing references to AS.]


   “The strength and durability of Mr. Symons’s work lie in its attractiveness in the absence of the besetting sin of intellectualistic critics, dogmatism” (25). [Originally appeared in TLS as an unsigned review; TLS Online now adds the contributor’s name.]

Beckson’s work, the first such text since Lhombreaud’s biography of 1963, draws heavily on “previously unpublished manuscripts, especially letters” (152). Drawing so much from letters, Beckson provides us with a “muted” image of AS. Nevertheless, this is more a commentary on AS’s life and less a critique on Beckson’s “expert and scholarly use of sources” (152). Because most people never really knew AS, they described him much like Arnold Bennett: “in every way a “little” man, but with real taste and refinement?” (152). The real AS struggled to juggle a longing for extravagance and his moral sense. Beckson successfully demonstrates the relationship between AS’s previous and later work. His work truthfully depicts the critic, but leaves us unfulfilled. Now that Beckson has clarified AS, all that remains is to create “a working canon of his best work” (152). Fittingly enough, only Beckson is capable of such a task.


“This is a rather bewildering book. It opens admirably with a fine (though surely not recent) appreciation of Joseph Conrad.... Nor is the sharpened appetite of the reader disappointed by the next essay, a sane, sober, and sympathetic estimate of Maeterlinck, written, we suppose, about twenty-five years ago.... After that a troubling in consequence takes hold of the book. An essay with the promising title ‘English and French Fiction’ turns out to be a disordered series of notes on various French and English novelists, printed as though they were a consecutive narrative.... It seems that the only way to account for all this is that Mr. Symons has thrown together essays on Mr. Moore written at different times without reading them over again.” [Originally appeared in *TLS* as an unsigned review; *TLS Online* now adds the contributor’s name.]


“Mr. Symons’s poetry, which forms the first three volumes of this edition of his collected works, has not worn well. It comes to us now curiously dated, haunted by odours which have lost their power to please; it is the poetry of the nineties, of *The Yellow Books* [sic] and *The Savoy* (which Mr. Symons edited); it seems to move wholly within the confines of a momentary mode, and the mode itself seems trivial.... It may be useful, once in a way, to *épater les bourgeois* in order to liberate oneself from a secret fear; but once is enough. More is a waste of time and energy, a monotonous marking time when the artist should be pressing forward.” “To reject Mr. Symons altogether is ridiculous. For Mr. Symons is a very fine critic, and his criticism will be remembered, because it is a thing of permanent validity and value.... Here in his critical essays, and not in his poetry, which is shallow, or his stories, which are derivative, may be found, and will be found, Mr. Symons’s real creativeness.” “The essay on Beethoven in ‘Studies in Seven Arts’ is the finest essay that has been written in English on that theme.” “We will not attempt to place Mr. Symons in the critical hierarchy. It is sufficient that he is a true critic, and that true critics are rare” (475). [Originally appeared in *TLS* as an unsigned review; *TLS Online* now adds the contributor’s name.]

Welby’s study is “brief, but well-written” and documents a “desired revival of interest in one who holds a definite place in English criticism.” AS “did a great service to the general life of English criticism when he assumed the twofold task of trying to work out in the current practice of criticism the aesthetic theories he believed to be implicit in Pater’s work, and of making himself the vehicle by which the ferment of aesthetic ideas in France of the eighties and nineties should be brought to work on the reluctant dough of English literature.” His “most important work was ‘The Symbolist Movement in Literature.’” Although The Romantic Movement in English Poetry was well written, it was “superficial” and “dogged by a fundamental irrelevance” because AS saw “the English Romantics merely as the precursors of the Symbolists and Decadents.” AS’s “translations of Verlaine are as good, the translations of Baudelaire as bad, as they can be.” His “complete understanding of Verlaine and his complete misunderstanding of Baudelaire” show his “limitations as a critic.” AS’s critical “work is more often of historical than permanent significance … because it stands aloof from the main point.” [Originally appeared in TLS as an unsigned review; TLS Online now adds the contributor’s name. Stern review remains under “Unsigned.”]


“While Craig’s work in scenery and lighting had provoked protest from less erudite critics, he had men on his side such as Arthur Symons, William Butler Yeats, James Huneker, and Haldane Macfall” (80). [Norman Myers is noting this observation of Gertrude Norman’s in Theatre (June 1905).]


In analyzing influences upon the work of Harold Frederic, the significant impact of British writers in the 1890s must be taken into account. [Passing citation of AS’s praise of W. E. Henley.]


The first Japanese translator of Henry James was Tenjin (Shin) Katagami, who had also written “‘Criticism of Art and Criticism of Life’ and compared essays on Guy de Maupassant with those by James, Arthur Symons, and Leo Tolstoy” (251).


Pound, in “The Decadence” and “Purveyors General,” borrows metaphors from AS’s prologue to Days and Nights where AS exposes the aesthetics of Impression-
ism. There are obvious resemblances between Pound’s “Piccadilly” and the typical Decadent-Impressionist poem of AS (“Renée”), but in Pound’s verse there is a note of compassion and sincerity lacking in AS’s poems. In “The Flame” Pound explicitly rejects the poetics of Impressionism that AS has articulated. [Close textual analysis of Pound’s pre-Imagist poetry and the two traditions, late-nineteenth-century poetry and the world of Provence and Tuscany, from which it descended. Comparison of Pound’s verse to that of AS is invaluable.] (Stern)


“The seeds of Decadence were sown in the transitional period in Western literature from 1870 to 1900. To associate the word simply with the Aesthetes of the 1890s is reductive because Decadence was not Aestheticism but an aesthetic of transition expressing a crisis in values and language in the Western world” (1). AS “notably attempted to turn the word into a descriptive term to designate the emergence of a new modern style” (9). He used Decadence “as a broad rubric to encompass both Symbolism and Impressionism” (10). “The fate of the two major English decadent journals also contributed to Symons’s ultimate rejection of the term. The Yellow Book and The Savoy underwent increasing attack and were short-lived as ‘decadence’ became specifically associated by the public with the immoral and scandalous conduct of its contributors” (10).


“Salomé is a symbol of the human soul, and she regards evil not only as a reality but as a feast. She fully represents one aspect of Decadent art. The heated, hungry sensuality of many of Symons’s poems illustrates this aspect. In ‘Javanese Dancers,’ for instance, the dancers are attractive because they evoke an evil beauty” (xxx). AS’s “life and literature constitute a pagan rebellion against Victorian Puritanism.” He is “a major Decadent poet and the chief spokesman of the movement.” “Silhouettes (1896) and London Nights (1897) are his best volumes of poetry” (223). [Includes selected prose and poetry of AS.]


AS numbers as one of John Lane’s early finds. His volume, Silhouettes, is a “signal example of the impact of French poetry on the literary milieu of the early nineties.” “Javanese Dancers” is AS’s most potent evocation of an evil beauty comparable to something perhaps only Beardsley could create. A few reviewers of the time caught the freshness of AS’s verse and praised it, but few recognized the book’s French orientation and the influence of Whistler and Verlaine upon it. [Good, reliable account of the literary milieu during the seven years, 1887–1894, when the Bodley Head was thriving. Gives a greater sense of the diversity of this period than is generally found in earlier works.] (Stern)

“Joyce’s initiator into the realm of poetry publishing was the critic and poet, Arthur Symons” (9). AS used his influence with Elkin Mathews to publish Joyce’s Chamber Music. [Passing reference to AS.]


“The most interesting poets of the nineties are a part of an aesthetic tradition which extends from the Romantics” (223). Romantic and Nineties poetry shared themes of intense passion, and the seductive but sinister femme fatale. From Pater, the poetry of the Nineties also sanctioned “a life of detachment, a life lived within a hieratic circle of objets d’art, books, paintings, etc.,” a consecrated life devoted to “impassioned contemplation” (229). [Passing reference to AS.]


Leonard Smithers and AS share a common interest in “all things French” (75). Smithers preferred Robert Ross’s eulogy of Aubrey Beardsley “to Symons’s Aubrey Beardsley” (166). “There is reason to believe that” AS advised Smithers to include Beardsley’s earlier work in A Second Book of Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley. After reading AS’s negative review of his Verses, Dowson “confided to Symons: ‘I foresee that I am to dispute the honour with you of being the most abused versifier in England’” (240). In the same letter, Dowson also confirmed AS’s belief that he, Dowson, was completely indifferent “as to what things might be said of [him] over yonder [in England]” (240). AS’s review of Verses largely focused on Dowson’s “character and lifestyle” (241). He characterized Dowson as “a demoralized Keats who … was habitually dirty and drunk” (241). Because he was “one of Smithers’s major authors,” AS’s low sales confirm that Smithers’s books sold poorly (258). The “anti-decadent Post-Wildean” critics contributed to the “poor sales of Symons’s books” (260).


AS “puts Henley in the row of artists whom he considers to be ‘modern’” (25). In his first book of poetry (Days and Nights, 1889), AS “has an eye for the unjustices of Victorian society where people are left to care of themselves and often left to die without anyone interfering” (35). In AS’s Silhouettes (1892), “one can observe an obvious change from the first collection” (39). “As a poet he is changed. Many motives are more artistically worked on than in the first collection, where artlessness sometimes seemed to be intentional” (39). “On the whole it is characteristic that Symons from this very collection almost always lets a woman appear in the poems.” AS “is the leading poet” of the 1890s. In London Nights [1895] we meet the constant observer” (45). In this volume of poetry, “there are several correspondences to Degas’s art but perhaps not to Toulouse-Lautrec’s somewhat more garish word” (44). AS compares Oscar Wilde’s The
Ballad of Reading Gaol to Hood’s “The Dream of Eugene Aram.” The same ballad stanza of six lines is used by both authors and they deal with murderers. Symons thinks that comparisons are interesting only because they are contrasting. He finds that “Eugene Aram” is a purely romantic poem but The Ballad aims at being a realistic poem. He thinks that it is more proper to compare The Ballad to Henley’s “In Hospital” (101).


The dancer “as essentially female” comes originally not from AS, but from Mallarmé. AS saw the ballet as “an escape from reality into this artificial world of light, seemingly easy and effortless movements, where verbal communication ceases and gestures acquire communicative value” (148). “Apart from ballet, there was a plethora of dancers who introduced different principles in dancing” and AS “dedicated several poems to them, and these poems indicate the variety of the performers” (149). AS “found inspiration in the Javanese, Indian and Armenian dancers” (149). AS’s “To a Gitana Dancing” (1899) “stresses the elimination of time while the dance lasts, the spell that the dancer casts upon her audience, and the dream-like state they experience during her performance” (149). His “The Armenian Dancer” (1906) contains “expressions of ideas of describing the dancer’s movements, that could be encountered in the plays and poems of Yeats and some of the early works of Joyce” (150). In AS’s “The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias” (1897) Salome is “the symbol of the fatal woman” and unlike previous interpretations of this figure “it is her own delight that inspires her into dance” (153). “The fatal effects of her dance anticipate the dance of the Hawk-Woman in Yeats’s play At the Hawk’s Well (1916)” and influenced other works of Yeats (153). James Joyce “was also familiar with Symons’s poem, the title of which he quoted in one of his epiphanies, as well as with Wilde’s Salomé” (161).


“There are characters in Dickens that clearly predict the condition of fin-de-siècle decadence” (64). AS, “one of its leading lights, termed the phenomenon an ‘interesting disease’ typical of an over-luxurious civilization” (64). “These qualities or these defects—the ambivalence of ‘decadence’ makes it impossible to say which—are all, up to a point and at some stage, manifest in Dickens’s conceptions. Above all, we are aware of a ‘perversity’ that is at once inward and active in the fields of conduct and relationships” (64).


“All uses of epiphany in the twentieth century can be related to Arthur Symons’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature” (181). It influenced Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce. “It emphasized the perceptual immediacy of experience and momentary states of mind.” “In 1899, Symons employed terms remarkably similar to those that Joyce would appropriate five years later in his definition of ‘epiphany.’” AS’s book had a “revolutionary tone of liberation” and was seen “as a manifesto; symbols could transform experience.” “Symons’s ideas also underlie Ezra Pound’s dictum, in ‘A Retrospect,’ that ‘Only Emotion Endures’” (182).
   In 1893 Verlaine lectured in London and stayed with AS. [Sheds little light on the relationship between AS and his mentor.] (Stern)

   In a letter to V. Sackville-West, dated June 1924, Woolf wrote, “We think you’re first rate on Mr Symons” (116), referring to “Vita’s review in the *Nation* of Arthur Symons’s *Collected Works* (28 June 1924)” (116n1).

   Moore was the middleman between England and France before AS. AS reviewed Moore’s *Impressions and Opinions* and compared Moore favorably with his mentor, Pater. [Most disappointing. Almost completely ignores the Moore–AS relationship. In French.] (Stern)

   [Examines Decadence and the treatment of doctors in turn-of-the-century European literature. Briefly refers to Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s essay on Gabriele d’Annunzio and the similarities between it and AS’s tendency toward simultaneity of sensation and reflection in his poem “Nerves.” In German.] (Stern)

   AS’s face is one of a man “who has climbed his Calvary.” He has mastered the art of the stage as “thoroughly as an Ibsen or Pinero.” [Interesting personal account of both AS and his wife. Thumbnail sketch of AS’s career and preview of his play, about to be produced.] (Stern)

   “No such staging had ever been seen before, and many violent discussions ensued. He was, of course, immediately assailed with a chorus of abuse for daring to upset the existing standards which the stage had so long been living down to. It was a foregone conclusion that he would be condemned, for are not ‘reformers most unpopular where most needed?’ But he had the elect forces on his side, and we recall words of enthusiastic praise from such men as Arthur Symons, W. B. Yeats … and many others” (148).

   “British critical interest in literary decadence has usually been seen as having started with Pater in the 1870s and become more widespread only in the 1880s and 1890s, with the emergence of a self-consciously decadent movement in literature and the arts” (81). “The French example, whether in theory or practice, remained a central influence on definitions of decadence in critical essays by Lionel Johnson, Richard Le Gallienne, Arthur Symons and others in the 1890s”
(84). Furthermore, “even once the ‘spectre’ of decadence was made flesh in the
work of Baudelaire, Gautier, Huysmans, Symons, Wilde and others, anxieties
remained, so much so that having trumpeted a decadent avant garde, both
Baudelaire and Symons decisively rejected the term” (94).


“Sculpture is so common a metaphor in Yeat’s work precisely because of its
ambiguous nature, because it is the art of public memorials and at the same
time the one whose subject matter is almost entirely composed of isolated, musing
individuals” (379). “The figure of Salome is the type of the predatory woman,
and she is in all depictions influenced by Moreau ‘heavy as lead, the image of an
idol,’ to use Arthur Symons’ description. Symons in fact calls Moreau’s Helen
‘an image of stone’ in his article on Moreau (published in 1905, long before *Emer-
or King of the Great Clock Tower*), but the practice of seeing the Fatal Woman as a
statue is so pervasive that a direct line to Yeats need not be drawn” (384).


Yeat’s early poetry adhered to Mallarmé’s ideas of obscurity, to which he was
introduced by AS. [Brief mention, 5, 10.]


AS’s high praise of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Contes cruels* [see *Athenaeum* 3229
(14 September 1889): 354–55] is justified. [One of a group of letters exchanged
about Villiers de l’Isle-Adam.] (Stern)

827. O’Brien, Kevin. “Matthew Arnold and the Hellenists of the 1890’s.” *Antigon-

AS, like his contemporary decadent writers, failed in his efforts to make English
society more Hellenistic. AS’s pursuit of decadent style in his life and writing was
the cause of his need for psychiatric care. AS exemplified the decadent juvenile
lack of originality.

827.1. O’Donoghue, Bernard, Marjorie Howes, and John Kelly, eds. “Yeats and the
101–14.

“Yeats’s dramatic world belongs formally to the Symbolist tradition of Maeter-
linck as mediated through Symons, a heritage that had been noted periodically
since Edmund Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle* in 1931”(103).

828. O’Gorman, Francis. Rev. of *The Critical Response to Thomas Carlyle’s Major
378–79.

“It is especially useful to have the 1843 *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* review of *Past
and Present*: like Arthur Symons’s penetrating review of Browning’s *Asolando* in
The Academy in January 1890, this is a piece which stands aloft from the broader field as particularly insightful and discriminating, and it can be very usefully pointed out to undergraduates” (379).


“A Blast dinner was held at the Dieudonne Restaurant, Ryder Street, in the West End of London, on Wednesday 15 July [1914] … Kate Lechmere sat between Arthur Symons and Gaudier-Brzeska. The sculptor arrived late, after everyone else was seated, depositing a small marble fawn on Pound’s plate in lieu of payment for his meal” (159). [Brief mention of AS.]


“English Decadent poets variously devised linguistic strategies analogous to features of visual art. Arthur Symons presentationally arranges noun-images in linear sequence with few grammatical markers of cohesion, thus contents of his scene being spatially independent appear temporally free. Ernest Dowson’s representational mode of parallel grammatical features establishes contrasts using the third dimension to envision the subject with a diachronic sequence of events from a limited historically determined point of view.” [Abstract by T. O’B. J., Abstracts of English Studies 30 (1987): 176.]


“Within the framework of structural linguistics, the syntactic style of three English Decadent poets—Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson—[is] described in order to assess the relationship between form and content in their major ‘Decadent’ volumes” (ii). The Decadent movement had been difficult to define, and critically overlooked: the “aura of sin and attenuated pleasure has made the word ‘decadence’ as much a term of opprobrium as of literary history” (4). “One of the few contemporary accounts that seriously attempts to define the movement’s aims and methods is Arthur Symons’ ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’” (2). AS can be considered the most modern of the three poets [Symons, Dowson, and Johnson] because he “rejects intellectual concerns and strives to embody a more fundamental psychic reality in language” (42). “Stylistic examination generally bears out the claims that Symons’ verse is governed by simplicity and a conversational idiom” (43). The poems in Silhouettes demonstrate this “primal,” “primitive” quality of AS’s poetry. Towards this primitive consciousness, AS was influenced by Pater and his nurturing of the Romantic tradition “that emphasized the creative bond between a perceiving consciousness and a perceived object” (46). “In general, the movement in Symons’ poetry represents his attempt to confront and resolve the tensions that lie within the self and the external world, and the dichotomy of life and death” (64). [Chapter 3: “Arthur Symons and the Primitive Consciousness,” 42–75.] [Annotated from the dissertation. See also DAI 39 (1978): 854A.]

“Although Symons’s poetry exhibits a considerable amount of stylistic variety, we can discern two unifying traits, both manifested in syntax. One is that the poetry attempts to capture the ebb and flow of cognitive processes, and to capture them in a style that reflects the mental state that coincided with the poetic inspiration; the other trait is modularity, a use of intrasentence stylistic shifts that project the poet’s cathartic effort to confront dilemmas with the self, the external world, and the flux of time.” [Abstract by S. K. A., Abstracts of English Studies 31 (1988): 290.]


[Passing references to AS.] (Stern)


AS knew more about everything than did Moore. Moore and AS’s friendship ended in what Moore described as a quarrel occasioned by AS’s wrongheadedness and obstinacy. [O’Sullivan makes passing references to AS in his chapter on “The Eighteen-Nineties” and in the one on “John Oliver Hobbes.” The former is largely a review of Albert J. Farmer’s Le mouvement esthétique et décadent en Angleterre (1873–1900).] (Stern)

835. Deleted.


AS’s translation of Baudelaire’s poem “La Cloche Fêlée” (“The Cracked Bell”) follows precisely the original rhyme scheme, but fails to convey the message of the poem, misinterpreting or omitting important contrasts and juxtapositions. And AS’s inclusions are “innovations of the translator, for nowhere do we observe these ideas in the original…. We can only surmise that the rhyme scheme was the primary factor to be considered” (10). “Furthermore, despite the translator’s obsession with rhyme, the translation is utterly lacking in grace” (11). Patricia Terry’s translation is much better: adhering to the ideas, and not allowing form to dictate word choice. Robert Lowell’s translation (he calls it an “imitation”) of this poem, while not as skilled as Terry’s, goes further than AS’s in conveying the basic metaphor.


[Not seen.]


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AS “served as a conduit between English and French cultures” (58). He introduced Yeats to Symbolism and the Decadents, which “provided for Yeats the crucial insight that English verse, no less than French, could be written without rhetoric” (58). Symons also shared with Yeats a yearning for the ineffable, a “distrust of the variable and too clinging appearances of things,” spiritualism, and the belief that only the infinite was worth attaining (58). AS’s lifelong sexual tragedy, his thin poetic talent, his estrangement from Yeats, and his eventual mental collapse were also elements in his relationship with Yeats.


AS contributed to Yeats’s awareness that Victorian poetry had grown sterile and led him to the practices of the Symbolists. The relationship of AS and Yeats was an important one in the evolution of each man’s style. “The sexual tragedy of Symons’s life, the thin poetic talent which never amounted to as much as his friends hoped for him, his estrangement from Yeats, his mental collapse” were all elements which figured in this relationship. [Traces the skeleton of the AS–Yeats relationship in the nineties.] (Stern)


“Nineteenth-century literature richly documents the cultural inclination to use art to dream the deaths of beautiful women.” AS “participates in this tradition” (20–21).


AS in his essay on Verlaine in The Symbolist Movement in Literature “describes a movement away from the world and into the unconscious…. Similarly, Yeats’s desire for ‘the buried reality’ is a pursuit of perfection at the cost of the world” (27). T. S. Eliot “discovered” AS’s book in 1908, and AS’s references in it to Laforgue’s “jangling wit,” “expectorating gutturals,” and “elaborate conceit[s]” would have resonated with Eliot’s interest in the metaphysical poets, especially Donne” (45). Although AS thought that Laforgue would “not permit himself, at any moment, the luxury of dropping the mask,… Eliot noticed exceptions that gave the French poet a heart-wrenching pathos” (47).


“Hulme’s concern with the poetic image as a non-discursive representation of intuited reality also owed a great deal to French Symbolism, and both vitalism and Symbolism had direct relevance for fin-de-siècle occultism—particularly magic, with its Kabbalistic references to the conjoined power of words and images. AS’s ‘important book The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) … slightly pre-dated the Bergsonian craze in Britain, but recognized the relationship between what Symons called Mysticism and major Symbolist assumptions about the power of poetic image” (84).

AS submitted a play to the Little Review and would prefer it appeared there for no pay than to have it sent to Drama. (Stern)

“Mais ‘voui’: l’idée de l’image doit ‘quelque chose’ aux symbolistes français via T. E. Hulme, via Yeats<Symons<Mallarmé. Come le pain doit quelque chose au vanneur de blé, etc. Tant d’operations intermédiaires” letter to René Taupin, May 1928 (218). [“But ‘yes’: the idea of the image owes something to the French symbolists by way of T. E. Hulme via Yeats<Symons<Mallarmé. As bread owes something to the winnower of wheat, etc. So many intermediary operations.” Pound’s idiosyncratic French. “Yeats” is W. B. Yeats. AS mentioned in 3 letters.]


The Savoy “was largely planned in Dieppe” where AS “wrote ‘the slightly pettish and defiant “Editorial Note” which made so many enemies for the first number’” (149). AS and Aubrey Beardsley spent a day and night at the Chateau d’Arques, where “they drifted into a mood, under the stars, which produced the only serious conversation they ever had together” (151–2). “During the nineties this London weekly [The Citizen] gave a surprisingly detailed account of the distinguished visitors to Dieppe” (153).


In AS’s “well-crafted” story “Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan” a female character’s face is “slashed from top to bottom” yet still appears “bloodless.” The male character’s “repulsion” in touching her skin “is directly tied to the repulsion to blood and the fear of the woman.... Everything happens as if la Décadence were developing in Freudian terms, ‘a protest as much against the fear of bleeding as its opposite, that of not bleeding’” (117). [In French.]


There are many fears and obsessions associated with Decadence. AS’s Journal of Henry Luxulyan (“Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan”) and the descriptions of scars are directly linked to Decadent obsession/fear of blood and women (219). [In French. Brief mention of AS.]


AS’s impressionistic sketches on the artists of the era are of value as indicating what was sought for in art by the Decadents of the fin de siècle. They are in error in their over-zealousness to impute impurity to the artists and their works where it was neither real nor intended. Toulouse-Lautrec was not “wholly wicked,”
nor was La Goulue “wholly bad” as AS melodramatically declared. AS’s book is interesting but lacks a sense of fun. (Stern)


“Yeats was a modern poet but not a modernist. If he had died in 1900, he would probably be remembered as the Celtic Pre-Raphaelite poet who through his studies in heterodox mysticism … has developed the most extensive and elaborate theories of literary Symbolism that the British Isles produced” (60). AS and Pound recognized Yeats’s character in their writings.


[Passing references to Symbolist Movement in Literature and Eliot’s observations on AS’s brand of impressionistic criticism.] (Stern)


“The delicate talent of Ernest Dowson is appraised with intelligence, and the subtle sympathy which it so peculiarly needs, in the introductory essay by Mr. Arthur Symons which accompanies the final edition of Dowson’s ‘Poems.’ As Mr. Symons says, Dowson’s work means little to the world at large, but a ‘great deal to the few people who care passionately for poetry’” (272). [Review of The Poems of Ernest Dowson with a Memoir by Arthur Symons. New York: John Lane, 1905.]


This selection, gathered by the loving hands of AS, preserves the best-remembered work of this good-hearted woman—not a poet in the high sense, but a writer of sincere, touching verse.

[Brief mention of AS’s dramatization of Harris’s “A Modern Idyll” (The Minister’s Call) (48).] “There was even a dramatization of it, the work of Arthur Symons and George Moore” (48).

AS wrote the most favorable review of Ballad of Reading Gaol causing Wilde to reconsider the value of AS’s works. (Stern)

Even though AS is considered a minor poet, “there is perhaps no poem of the 1890s that is not minor” although most display a high level of craftsmanship (8). Aestheticism and Decadence were shaping factors, as was Symbolism which was championed most notably by AS and Yeats. “Impressionist poetry belongs to the same tradition” (11). Mysticism and the “Celtic Twilight” influenced Yeats, who then led AS “from London gaslight to twilight and from the demimonde to the wee people” (23). Much of the poetic talent of the time came together in a loose-knit confederation called the Rhymers’ Club. AS’s poem “Javanese Dancers” brings together many themes of Decadent poetry: the femme fatale “with suggestions of cruelty and fascination” (48); “painted idols” (48); and the exotic sounds and eroticism of the dance itself. The only two real interpreters of French Symbolism, and Symbolism of the 1890s were AS in The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) and Yeats with Ideas of Good and Evil (1903). “Though in literary history Symons’ book had the greater impact, Yeats had a better understanding of symbolism” (48). “Though Symons is hardly the best poet of the avant-garde in the 1890s, he is the most representative” (52).

“The American Modernists created their poetry out of sources they assembled themselves. (Not, of course, at random, for they had preceptors, such as Arthur Symons on the Symbolist movement or Rossetti on Tuscan poets before Dante)” (35). [Passing reference to AS.]

“In 1918, the Little Review published Pound’s Study in French Poets, a 60-page essay which provided the Anglo-American reader with an extensive, if rather biased, anthology of modern French poetry, interspersed with Pound’s critical commentary…. In his brief introduction, Pound says: ‘I do not aim at “completeness.” I believe that the American-English reader has heard in a general way of Baudelaire and Verlaine and Mallarmé; that Mallarmé, perhaps unread, is apt to be slightly overestimated.’… This remark provides us with an important clue to Pound’s thinking. We must remember that for most Anglo-American poets from Arthur Symons to Wallace Stevens, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé constituted a kind of Holy Trinity, although individual predilections naturally varied” (96).

[Passing note of AS’s commentary on John Donne’s “The Apparition.”]


“If Hardy is to be the mentor of the Georgians, giving them a link to the Victorian past, he cannot be open to French influence, not Symons, not Pound, not Hulme, not Eliot. To develop along those lines puts the English tradition in danger” (84). “Symons’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) famously fueled the development of Yeats in Wind Among the Reeds (1899), but Symons’s poetry, published earlier in the decade, had already brought ideas of the French symbolistes across the Channel. The debt to Kipling in Hardy’s first book, in the narrative poems about soldiers, is obvious, but what he learned from Symons less so” (85). “Hardy and Symons were friends, sharing poems and tastes. The Symonses visited Hardy on several occasions, including a weekend with A. E. Housman at Max Gate in the summer of 1900. When Symons’s poetry fell out of favor in the new century, Hardy wrote him commiseratingly that there was no longer anybody ‘to address, no public that knows’” (86).


AS “is most responsible for bringing French Symbolism and Impressionism across the channel to England” (8). His “Impressionism would issue in the early poems of T. S. Eliot … and lead Ezra Pound…, who once said he regarded Symons as a personal god, to Imagism” (9).


Despite meticulous care lavished on his subject, “Lhombreaud is not a first-rate biographer. Rather he is a skillful assembler of details” (422). Lhombreaud is not daring enough in his study of AS: he chronicles AS’s mental breakdown, but does not delve into the reasons behind it; he does not investigate AS’s latent homosexuality, or discuss AS’s self-plagiarism. Although Lhombreaud does well on parts of AS’s life: Decadence, Rhymers’ Club, influence of Pater, and enthusiasm for Blake, for example, the work is disappointing because it might have been so much better. “On the whole … this is a boring work” (422), generally graceless, “presenting a smorgasbord of facts” (423).


“Studies in Strange Sins: After the Designs of Aubrey Beardsley” derives from AS’s highly personal response to Beardsley, Moreau, Wilde and Huysmans; in particular, it was occasioned by AS’s reactions to eight of the sixteen Beardsley drawings in Wilde’s Salomé. AS overlooks the vitality and the sardonic elements in Beardsley’s drawings and overemphasizes the “decadent strain.” The sequence of poems has no more narrative unity than the disjointed series of designs and it has even less structural unity. Compared to either Meredith’s Modern Love or Tennyson’s In Memoriam in this respect it fares poorly. “Danse du Ventre,” one of the key poems in the collection, epitomizes AS’s interest in the painters of dance...
and in dance itself. AS’s “metrical ability is often competent,” his verse movement often captures the rhythms of dance, but he is “seldom able to give his language the accents of inevitability and truth.” (Stern)

Ryals's essays on Decadence [“Toward a Definition of Decadent as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century,” JAAC 17 (September 1958): 85–92] can be faulted on four counts: imperfect scholarship; fuzzy distinction between Romanticism and Decadence; reduction of the diversity of poetic techniques practiced in the nineties; and an awkward conclusion that fails to “review properly the scattered characteristics of decadent which he manages to isolate.” Ryals also fails to recognize the versatility of AS: while many poems reflect the “decadent” strain of “perversity, artificiality, and egoism,” many do not; his prose, remarkable in its variety, is utterly ignored by Ryals. [Devastating attack on Ryals's essay.] (Stern)

Wilde, AS, and Henley were concerned with the problem of drawing upon the technique and subject matter of another art, that of painting, and they turned to Whistler for example since he, too, was an artist who sought material in an art form not his own. These poets experimented with color in a way that showed their debt to Whistler. Wilde, in “Symphony in Yellow” and in “Impressions du Matin,” evoked direct, primary colors; AS, in Silhouettes and London Nights, used Whistlerian subjects and employed subtle blendings of color. “Mauve, Black and Rose” is “a nervous handling of soft tones seen against dark.” [Interesting study that examined closely the interrelationships between the sister arts as practiced by Whistler and the poets of the 90s.] (Stern)

[“From the Pre-Raphaelites [AS] learned to observe the almost microscopic details of flowers, rocks, and plants.... From Rossetti, the best remembered of the Pre-Raphaelites, Yeats, Symons, Wilde, and Johnson developed a special theme symbolized by a pale, heavy-haired, sometimes sinister femme fatale” (442). AS was “influenced by Aubrey Beardsley” (442). “The influence of Whistler permeated, with varying success, verbal studies of dawn, mist, and night. Symons wrote nocturnes and silhouettes of slight mood and emotion ...” (442). “Interest in the dance was centered in Symons, whose imitations of Degas and of exotic dances, when they rhythmically recreate the actual motions of the dance, make a genuine contribution to the metrics of English verse. Symons’ poems of maquillage and Montmartre depict a Bohemian world of flesh, evil, and gaslight, based on the paintings of Lautrec, Rops, Guys, and Degas” (443).] [Annotated from Summaries of Doctoral Dissertations, Univ. of Wisconsin 14 (1954): 442–43.]