Arthur Symons, Critic Among Critic

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larmé, Pierre Louys, Ricketts and Shannon. The list is almost endless and includes almost everybody who was anybody, and some who became nobodies” (241). “Those who are looking for an expose of the decadent nineties will be disappointed in this book. All the ingredients for popular success, religion, sexual ambiguity, social scandal, conversion and subsequent respectability are all here, but dealt with in a sober and serious, if sometimes disjointed and repetitive fashion” (242).

“Karl Beckson’s biography, enriched by several newly unearthed caches of letters, is a vivid picture of the man, his era and his contribution to it” (1240). “Beckson’s central thesis is that Symons’s life falls into two contrasting halves. In 1908, when he was forty-three, Symons suffered a mental breakdown while traveling in Italy with his wife…. According to Beckson, before 1908 Symons was alert to all the trends of his day and an exemplary critic of them all, whereas after his breakdown ‘his capacity for critical discernment was damaged permanently by chronic incoherence’” (1240). “Beckson’s interpretation of Symons’s madness is … ingenious. He argues that Symons was haunted by his obsession with sin and damnation” (1240).

[The decadent poems of Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, and Lionel John- son, which have not previously received sustained critical attention, synthesize Romantic self-exploration and self-cultivation with fictive forms and language into an egotistical formalism…. Symons explores the cityscape in his poems and finds his ideal moments when he captures in words the more purely aesthetic kinds of momentary perfection he sees in the dance and in works of art. He feels acutely the predicament of the cultivated Paterian observer who sees himself as both observer and object and for whom the promise of one ecstatic moment after another is unfulfilled…. [T]hese three poets share Pater’s world view and the need, in that world, to make order and coherence for themselves. Thematically they all come to terms with change as loss, religion, and sex, and they find transcendent moments through the perfection of aesthetic form. Their egotistical formalism, in which the mind not only explores and cultivates itself but also creates fictive order for the experience through poetic form, represents one logical culmination of Romanticism.] [Annotation edited from DAI 38 (1978): 4856A.]

“The received concept of the nineties as a picturesque compacture of Wilde, Beardsley, The Yellow Book, and the minor splendours and gross miseries of the ‘tragic generation,’ is as delusively simplistic as the implied homogeneity of the period’s directional creative impulse is false. Current thinking tends to the view that it has been an interpretive fallacy of historiographic hindsight to assign too great a cohesion to the latter decades of the nineteenth century” (93). “There was, in fact, no singular, characteristic and unified movement such as the label ‘Decadent’ has been pressed into uneasy comprehensive service to designate as
the quintessential fin-de-siècle, but rather a diversification of coeval literary experiments, linked only on the plane of their temporal identity” (94). [Part one of a two-part article. The second part is “Sunflower and Green Carnation.” See Item 1268.]

A review of literature reveals that current literary fashion does not hold the achievements of the 1890s in high esteem. Surprisingly, one of the most important figures of the 1890s and in the development of literature has been wrongly neglected: AS. Scholarship is mistaken to underestimate the importance of AS’s poetry and landmark work The Symbolist Movement in Literature on the literary field. His work, for example, transformed Eliot’s artistic development. AS also published the early writings of Conrad and Joyce, propelling them into successful careers.

“No the most minute nuance, the slightest ambiguity, the tiniest cross-referring clue is permitted to escape the embracing network of [the editor’s] illuminating notes. They are zealously off in pursuit of every elucidating and enriching fragment of data” (167).

AS “went mad in 1908. He recovered sufficiently to be released from confinement in 1910, although it was said of him that, like Sherlock Holmes after his plunge over the Reichenbach Falls, he was never quite the same again. He died, aged seventy-nine, in 1945” (259).

Looking back on the 1890s, scholars are “divided as to who is to be considered the major minor poet” of the time, citing either Johnson or Dowson. Scholars tend more toward Johnson, claiming “he was a more accomplished verbal artist than Dowson” or AS, though “he lacks the warmth and fervour of Dowson.” AS’s “somewhat sensational” obituary of Dowson is the source of Dowson’s scandalous reputation, though scholars have tried to correct AS’s account. Eliot praises the works of Dowson and John Davidson, though notes his “great debt” to AS for introducing him to French literature (86).

“When in the nineties we talked of the decadent poets we did not mean exactly what the journalists of today mean when they write with shocked pens of the decadent poets of the nineties. We were speaking of a French school of poets, of whom Verlaine was the chief, in whose verse there was a certain fall, a décadence, which you will find in the best verse of Mr. Arthur Symons” (155). “The New Aesthetes [of the nineties] were really no more than an extension of the old
Aesthetes of the eighties, jettisoning, or perhaps defining more rigorously, an old belief here and there, accreting a few new notions and artistic guidelines” (156). “The example of France continued to be, as it had been for their Aesthetic predecessors, of overwhelming importance, and Arthur Symons’ translations and perceptive interpretations of the Art Poétique of Verlaine, of Rimbaud and of Mallarmé, provided them with the delicate instrument of Symbolism. In any evaluation of the New Aestheticism the centrality of Symons’ rôle must never be underestimated” (156). [This article is part two of “An Eighties View of the Nineties.” See Item 1263.]


“Surely the most significant Man of Letters to emerge from the ranks of what is generally regarded as the lesser fin-de-siècle crowd was Arthur Symons (1865–1945), whose pioneering The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) was to prove seminal, introducing French Symbolisme to English literary culture, and, incidentally, introducing also the poetry of Laforgue to T. S. Eliot, which, he was later to confess, ‘affected the course of my life’” (109). “[AS] was to become the complete Man of Letters—poet, critic of the seven arts, editor, essayist, translator, short story and travel writer, and Herrick of the music-halls. Unlike so many of his contemporaries—Arthur O’Shaughnessy, Hubert Crackanthorpe, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson—Symons did not die young, but he suffered a life-dimming tragedy—the Man of Letters gone to madness” (110). “Like many another Man of Letters, the fret and fume of his days in literary London left far behind him, he spent his last years in the wood-smoke calm of a green corner of English countryside, and found his final bed in the cool, evening shadow of a quiet country churchyard” (110).


Just as AS’s exaggerated essay on Ernest Dowson created a questionable last-ing perception, so too does one have to wonder if Rufus Wilmot Griswold’s work on Poe has the same effect. Mr. Meyers’s careful work reevaluates past Poe criticism, expanding Poe’s place not only with the Romantics such as Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, but also Poe’s place as an important part of the Symbolist Movement.


Le Gallienne spent many evenings in the Crown with AS and his coterie. In Le Gallienne’s lecture at Merseyside in November of 1894 he selected AS’s name along with six others as the most representative of the younger poets and the one most worthy of note. (Stern)


There was room in “Heinemann’s heart … for hosts of other friends” including “fellow-enthusiasts for the arts like Mr. George Moore and” AS (297). [Brief mention of AS.]

The 1890s was an age with “a European vision … an age of sensual rather than wholly cerebral responses,” and an age with “its emphasis on art and the artificial” (20). AS’s poem from London Nights, “Behind the Scenes—Empire,” “manages to contain with it a hint of the age in its ‘quintessence,’ … ‘fixing’ a representative fragment of an era ‘fleetingly’” (21–22). “This brittle lyric conveys much which is special to the 1890s…. An obsession with the female in all her varied manifestations is one of the most dominant aspects of the 1890s” (22).


[German doctoral dissertation. Good piece of early criticism on AS. Acknowledges AS’s debt to Pater, but underestimates the importance of his relationship to the French Symbolists.] [In German.] (Stern)


[Part One discusses Walter Pater, Pre-Raphaelitism, and AS’s An Introduction to the Study of Browning. Also, discusses aspects of Modernism: Naturalism, Decadence, and Impressionism. Also looks at The Symbolist Movement in Literature in regards to William Butler Yeats, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Huysmans. With regard to Decadence, it discusses ballet, Wagner and Maeterlinck, and Aubrey Beardsley. Part Two discusses AS’s criticism of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Romanticism, and William Blake. The Romantic Movement in English Poetry is also discussed. Ph. D. diss. In German. Annotation from Table of Contents.]


[Discusses the influence of AS and Ezra Pound on Yeats.] (Stern)


AS played a considerable role in the early career of James Joyce. He introduced him to the Symbolists via his book on that movement and he located a publisher for Chamber Music. (Stern)

AS’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature introduced Joyce “to what was then the most modern and most exciting body of poetry in Europe” (187). Because his work “echoes Symons’s mannerisms,” Joyce must have read more of AS’s work (187). Joyce and AS met in London through Yeats, a mutual friend. The then twenty-year-old Joyce described AS as “a curious mixture of sinister genius and uncertain talent” (187). AS promised to help Joyce find an editor willing to print his articles and poems. Ultimately, it was AS who wrote Joyce’s first review, “a very favourable and careful review of Chamber Music” (188). By basing much of his own theory on Walter “Pater’s aesthetic creed,” AS was Pater’s most loyal disciple (188). Still, AS differed from Pater because he wrote verse throughout his entire career. The real quality of AS’s poetry lies not in his “affectation of wick-
edness,” but his “purity and precision of phrasing … as may be seen in … ‘At Dieppe: After Sunset’” (189). From all the poetry written by AS that could have influenced Joyce in Chamber Music, the most influential “were the soft song-like lyrics that Symons had translated from Paul Verlaine” (190). After encountering Verlaine through AS, Joyce, like AS, began to create texts lacking a “hard and fast and essential difference between prose and verse” (191). Additionally, AS’s work in French Symbolism introduced Joyce to “Mallarmé’s theory of an anti-naturalist, impersonal art based on suggestion and allusion with a sovereign disregard of conventional rules” (192). In an attempt to revive the exhausted state of English poetry, AS began dabbling in impressionist verse. His true contribution, however, came by pointing “to the achievement of French symbolistes” (192). Despite an already bustling movement in English prose, in The Symbolist Movement in Literature, AS identifies Huysmans as the leader in “the coming of ‘spiritual realism’” (193). By 1903 Joyce has abandoned any interest in Huysmans; nevertheless, they began in much the same way. By the time that Joyce reaches Paris, AS no longer has any significant influence over him.


In his poetry, Joyce imitated “impressionist effects like those he could find in the ‘modern’ verse of” AS (175). Both Joyce and AS sometimes fail in their poetry “to fuse what is so delicately evoked in the outer scene with the inner emotion” (177). Joyce adopted “the conscious imitation of the courtly grace, the poetic conventions and the slow measured movement of Elizabethan songs … under the influence of Arthur Symons’ experiments in Elizabethan forms” (177). Joyce’s “mature poems all bear the stamp of genuine experience. Like Arthur Symons in his day, Joyce dates his poems and indicates scene and place of origin, as if they were entries in a diary” (180). However, “Joyce surpasses his one-time model and master” AS by often avoiding the “neat, exquisite, but ultimately cold and superficial impressionism” of some of AS’s poetry (183).


[Passing mention that AS’s criticism of Titus Andronicus typifies many critics’ uncomfortableness with “Lavinia’s participation in the baiting of Tamora” (168).]

“And the Decadent fascination with exotic sexuality is revealed in section VIII (‘Remembering the 90’s’) if only to be eventually dismissed by means of a world-weary quotation from Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* … ‘Nothing, of course, not even conventional virtue / Is so provincial as conventional vice.’ The effect of these references is to show the relevance and vitality of Decadent literature and ideas to Mahon not only as a creative stimulus to his own work but also as a model of the writer’s alienation from the dominant ideologies of a utilitarian society” (115). [Passing reference to AS.]


Wildi’s work is “less critical than expository” (608). “Almost all through the greatest emphasis is laid on the debt of Symons to Pater, and several interesting verbal parallels are given. But Symons’s originality is by no means under-estimated” (608). Wildi makes “interesting comparison between Symons and Lionel Johnson as critics” (608).


Wildi’s work is a “clear and useful, if not particularly original, study of Arthur Symons.” It “traces the changing lights reflected in Mr. Symons’s critical writings from Pater, to whom he owes most, through French influences, Beardsley, Yeats, Wagner, Maeterlinck, and others … [and] recognizes the intellectual subtlety, the wide range of Mr. Symons’s gifts; but … [it] is critical also, and notes the occasional lapses, affectations, the false pitch, the growth of mannerism in place of true style” (374).

1284. Williams, Hywel. “Since Byron’s Days, the Great and the Wicked Have Chosen to Call This Place Home.” *New Statesman* 127 (1996): 4416.

Literary editor Henry Harland persuaded AS, Beerbohm, and Beardsley to contribute to the *Yellow Book*, establishing the reputation of the *Yellow Book* as decadent. [AS mentioned in passing.]


*Dramatis Personae* presents AS “in a somewhat haphazard form—an extremely badly edited volume printed in America, stuffed with irritating misprints and containing verbal repetitions … [and] some of the articles are obviously cobbled together out of ephemeral jottings” (599). And yet, enough remains to present a picture of AS’s critical abilities. Also, the very cobbled nature of the work “gives the impression of one straining in a busy and brilliant literary marketplace where two naked eyes have all they can do to take in the attractive multiplicity” (599–600). One has to recognize the eloquence of AS’s criticism even when it cannot be agreed with; it is warming as “a glass of wine” in a sidewalk cafe. “Modern critical exponents of first principles or intuitions might learn something from Mr. Symons: he at least is not dreary” (600).
Henley’s “Invictus” is from a time when he was “bedridden.” “We might shrug our shoulders at a head which was bloody but unbowed; but to think of that young man, more than three hundred miles from a friend, one leg already footless, the other not yet retrieved from amputation, his prospects for livelihood a minus quantity, and pain his persistent companion, yet able in spite of it all to fling such a challenge as this from under his blankets, is to have a seal of solemnity set upon the heart. Here we are upon sacred ground. Others abide our question: he is free. Such a song (said Arthur Symons) is the equivalent of a great deed” (35). [Williamson evokes AS to make his point about Henley’s valor.]

AS finds Wilde’s Ballad of Reading Gaol more meditation than ballad. [Passing reference to AS, 119.]

“The later nineteenth century was one of the great periods of translation into English … [including] the first gawky versions of Baudelaire and the Symbolists by Arthur Symons and his circle” (32).

AS visited Mallarmé’s Tuesday receptions and later he instructed Yeats in the doctrines of Mallarmé. (Stern)

In writing of the nineties movement, critics like Derek Stanford [Preface to Poets of the 'Nineties' (1965)] and others have “been unable to distinguish between a social and an aesthetic movement.” There was a “well defined social grouping of young writers in London,” but as poets the writers had little in common. What is more disturbing about the label is the implication that it describes the most significant poets of the period: whereas in fact, it leaves out Hardy, Francis Thompson, Housman, and even most of the work by Yeats. Actually, the decade of 1890–1900 is one of the “most highly individualistic periods in English literature.” Only AS and Dowson conform closely to the popular concept of the nineties. (Stern)

“This is a heavy burden for a relatively ephemeral medium like music-hall criticism—even as practiced by such ‘literary intellectuals’ as Arthur Symons, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, Max Beerbohm, and ultimately T. S. Eliot—to shoulder. It is not surprising, therefore, that the argument falters somewhat, most conspicuously in the second chapter, ‘Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music Hall, and the Defense of Theory.’ On the strength of analysis of a handful of brief articles—one of them, ‘A Spanish Music-Hall,’ devoted to Symons’s discussion of his expe-
rience of a Barcelonan hall (which has somewhat questionable application to an argument about the popular culture of late-Victorian London)—Faulk argues that Symons ‘theorized his relation to music hall entertainment’ and generated ‘a passionate defense of criticism and theory.’ As articulated here, this seems to boil down to little more than a complicating of the relationship between amateur and expert (or ‘aficionado,’ in the Spanish context), performer and observer, insider and outsider. Symons’s easily-bestowed status as an ‘aficionado’ of the Spanish music hall is granted here on the flimsiest of qualifications, not least because he freely acknowledges that he does not understand the lyrics of the songs to which he is listening” (621–22).


To AS the dance “was a kind of urban extension of a romantic, fugitive and ephemeral utopian vision, whose movement and music Symons attempted to capture” (353–54), and “is a constant theme in Symons’ work” (354). The “theme of the dancer/prostitute is common” in AS and other writers (355). “La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge” presents “an uncompromising dualistic interpretation of experience, in which reality is opposed to imagination; an ideal of purity and beauty in art is combined with spiritual decadence and even corruption, as with Dorian Gray” (356). “It is the mirror which provides the means through which this poem on a dancer impinges on the reader in a way which others do not and thus helps to explain why it is this poem which is frequently anthologised and which received Yeats’ seemingly extravagant encomium” (356–57). AS’s poem “is a perfectly constructed and successful art-lyric, uniting the two themes of the dancer/watcher and the mirror/watcher in a way that brings new meanings to the positive connotations of both” (362). “It is this tension between the smooth and mirror-like public surface texture and control and the turbulent world of potentially anarchic private movement beneath, which gives more than ephemeral value to this essentially tragic poem” (363).


“It was not until the late 1890s that anyone in Britain made a clear attempt to define Symbolism in terms of current trends. During the years 1895 to 1900 Arthur Symons, a poet and critic who had lived in Paris and had recently joined forces with Aubrey Beardsley on a magazine, the Savoy, was preparing a series of studies of recent writing under the working title of The Decadent Movement in Literature. His friend W. B. Yeats disapproved of the term ‘Decadent’ and prevailed on Symons to alter his title to The Symbolist Movement in Literature…. It was dedicated to Yeats, ‘the chief representative of the movement in our country,’ and defined Symbolism as an ‘attempt to spiritualize literature.’ Art was to be ‘a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.’… For Symons as for Moréas Symbolism was essentially a literary phenomenon” (14).

“A book coming from Mr. Arthur Symons could scarcely be other than good, but this volume excels anticipation and must certainly be ranked as among the best gifts of recent criticism” (234). AS “recognizes no necessary connection between the poet and his age, each writer is for him a detached entity, standing quite apart from the rest” (235). “The essay on Coleridge is as subtle and as interesting as that on Blake though it perhaps charms less” (236). “A great deal of Mr. Symons’ best work occurs in his studies of men who are not quite first rate” (240).


*Savoy* surpassed the *Yellow Book* as the exponent of the fin de siècle. AS was a critic with genius; he culled for the *Savoy* the finest works of the period. [Not very helpful. Brief sketch of AS and the *Savoy.*] (Stern)


Frank Kermode [*The Romantic Image* (1957)], A. Jeffares [*W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (1949)], and Joseph Hone [*W. B. Yeats* (1943)] have all discussed the AS–Yeats relationship, focusing on their effects on one another during the period from 1891–1900. The indirect, less conscious, and very different debt owed AS by Yeats in his poetry after 1900 ought to be considered. AS’s lone dancer (“La Melinité: Moulin Rouge”) lies behind Yeats’s more elaborately symbolic handling of dance in “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” and “Among School Children.” AS’s “The Lover of the Queen of Sheba” (1899) is curiously alike in situation to Yeats’s “Soloman and the Witch.” Finally, “After Long Silence” (Yeats, 1929) recalls a scene described in Verlaine’s “La Bonne Chanson, II” which AS translated. (Stern)


New conventions in Japanese poetry in the period from 1900–1920 owed a great deal to the European symbolists whose works were sensitively translated by Veda Ben, Nagai Kafú, and Horiguchi Daigaku. 1913 saw the translation of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* into Japanese. [Ariake] Kambara, a pioneer of Japanese symbolist poetry, developed an enriched poetic vocabulary and new metaphorical images from his close study of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Blake, Verlaine, and AS. (Stern)


Decadent poet, magazine editor, critical essayist, AS “helped notably to bridge the transition from the writing of the Victorian age to that of the modern era; this was perhaps his most important role” (133). “The *Savoy*, whose first number appeared in January 1896, was one of the best magazines of its day, uncompromisingly modern even if its contributors were not all drawn from among the Decadents” (136). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was AS’s most influential, most important book. “The earliest of the poems by which we now remember Eliot … could hardly have been written if he had not encountered Laforgue through the mediation of Symons. Edith Sitwell read *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1912 … and, like Eliot, she found that the book opened to her
a whole new world of poetic experience and example” (137). AS was also critically interested in music, fine art, drama, and ballet. After his mental breakdown, his writing lacked coherence, “partly because the literary world in which he had been such an active participant had changed so radically that there was no longer a place for him” (140). “Despite Symons’s pretensions, it is hard to find a coherent and original theory of aesthetics emerging from his writing. One is aware of an attitude rather than a theory” (140).


AS’s assessment of Wilde as a raconteur disagrees with Frank Harris’s. AS rightly stresses the dramatic quality of Wilde’s conversation and the element of acting it contained. He finds his personality “more interesting than any of his work.” [Both Woodcock and AS underestimate Wilde’s achievement as a dramatist.] (Stern)


“The power of sex and his attraction to women were, throughout his life, to be D’Annunzio’s main spur and inspiration for creative writing (24). D’Annunzio’s Anglophone critics have not taken that fact seriously and have reacted puritanically or ironically to his philandering. (The exception which proves the rule was poor, supportive, appreciative Arthur Symons, so proud to be able familiarly to refer to the poet by his first name)” (25). “For forty years in reviews, articles, and translations, Symons consistently supported D’Annunzio’s work” (25n).


Like many artists in the 1890s AS was concerned with the conversion of nature into art. AS, like Swinburne, acknowledges Baudelaire’s influence in this area, especially Baudelaire’s influence on the Art Nouveau. Also, like Baudelaire, AS was interested in things of the occult, and in his *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, AS refers to the occult in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s Axél. Later, AS praised Gordan Craig’s ability to take the audience “beyond reality” with not “the pattern of the thing,” but the pattern itself, though it would appear even poor paintings by the Symbolists were better than any realistic work (246). AS also looked to the artificiality of dance to gain a new approach to life. Exploring Flaubert’s claim that the artist is “outside of nature” and a “monstrosity,” AS says the artist has indeed “no more part in society than a monk in domestic life,” and therefore the artist is above social rules and conventions (248–49).


AS’s passion for beauty is so great that he is a little hard on works which have other qualities, perhaps more valuable, than beauty. [Review of *Figures of Several Centuries*.] (Stern)

AS “is a very distinguished poet; as, indeed, we could have guessed from the character of his criticism.” His writing is done “without display of knowledge or chain of argument, but directly, simply, and, in spite of the narrow bounds of
the essay, fully. He has so fine an instinct for the aim and quality of each writer that the result seems effortless and brimming with truth … [and] we must consistently pay homage to the spirit in which he approaches these different writers. It is the spirit of a man to whom art is as undoubtedly a part of life as bread, or air; but who, though his days are spent in the presence of it, never loses his sense of its divinity…. ‘Profound religious gravity’ expresses exactly the spirit of Mr. Symons’s essays; but there goes along with it a sense, most rare and refreshing, that to care for art is the most natural thing in the world.” AS “treats literature with a kind of natural seriousness which should make even the least lettered aware that to write is the most normal occupation for man, or woman either; and we may study and love writing without being in the least queer ourselves.” In this book “there is an evident glory in the beauty of poetry, an exaltation of poetry as the most inspired form which literature can take.” “Whatever” AS’s “own prejudices may be, he invariably brings all his imagination and all his skill to the understanding of the work before him.” [Originally appeared in TLS as an unsigned review; TLS Online now adds the contributor’s name. Reprinted in The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume II, 1912–1918. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: Hogarth P, 1987.]


“To achieve a union of vision that is structured around entirety, unity, and expansion rather than dichotomy, Joyce and Belyji employ aesthetic principles and literary devices inherited from French Symbolist poetry” (1). “A major influence, that opened up new ideas for Joyce, was The Symbolist Movement in Literature by Arthur Symons. The book appeared in 1899 and was widely read by university students in Dublin” (7). “The importance of Symons’s book is that it was the first English introduction to the Symbolist school” (7). “The main characteristics of the French school that Symons describes in his work, such as hermetic vision, decadence, spiritualized naturalism, verbal magic, and the labyrinthine pattern of their works, are all components of Ulysses” (7).


At the same time that Symbolist literature came on the scene towards the end of the nineteenth century, theatre also underwent a new movement whose goal was to create “‘a synthesis of all the arts’” (161). AS explained that this group of playwrights were moving away from “‘the bondage of rhetoric and the bondage of exteriority’” (161). Maeterlinck’s “Pelléas and Mélisande” was “the first complete realisation of the Symbolist’s dream” and according to AS, “had come nearer than any other art to being the voice of silence” (162). Both Wilde and Yeats spent time in Paris “under the guidance of Arthur Symons” (167).


“This book offers a European perspective on the Irish drama, bringing Yeats, Synge and Beckett, Wilde and O’Casey under the same light with Maeterlinck and, above all, showing how Yeats’s evolution of a modern technique of total the-
atre and his use of it to construct a ‘drama of the interior’ makes him one of the great masters of twentieth-century theatre” (1). AS was an “important catalyst” for Yeats who introduced “him to Mallarmé and other symbolists and to theatrical experiments like Axël and Ubu Roi” (6). AS and Maeterlinck are “crucial figures” for Yeats: AS “as the most perceptive of guides to the European movement in the arts, Maeterlinck as a pioneer who offered Yeats suggestive models for an interior drama” (8). “Wagner was very much in Yeats’s mind during the re-writing of The Shadowy Waters, certainly in 1903, when he was working out the stage scene for a new production” (20). AS’s “essay on Wagner had drawn attention to the antiquity of music drama” (21). AS “was the John the Baptist of the modernist theatre, a voice crying sixty years ahead of his time for a technique of total theatre which would put the arts of dance, mime, scene on an equal footing with words” (32). AS was “the guide” that Yeats “needed” (32). Before Ezra Pound did so, AS drew “attention to the ritualistic strangeness of the Japanese drama and the remarkable power of the Japanese actors to represent ‘moments’ of spiritual intensity” (35). Sean O’Casey “was at home with popular forms—ballad singing, folk dance, melodrama, music hall—and was as clear as Yeats or Arthur Symons that the theatrical vocabulary of the future should be based on them: indeed he continually reaffirmed Symons’ doctrine of the popular arts in his own more vehement style” (226).


In his “dance plays,” Yeats gave his actors masks and “marionette-like movements” (94). In “An Apology for Puppets” [Plays, Acting and Music], AS “clarified the relationship between actors and marionettes.” AS “admires marionettes because their actions seem not to interfere with the authorial text’s predetermined ‘meaning.’ … What attracts Symons to marionettes is their ‘complication of view,’ the evident difference between the drama and its presentation engraved in their performance” (94–95). “Perhaps because of what Symons called ‘the particular elegance of the dance,’ the ‘intellectual as well as sensuous appeal of a living symbol …,’ [From “The World as Ballet,” Studies in Seven Arts.] it’s difficult not to think of the dance alone as the culminating event of the play” (97).


In Dowson’s poetry “we find the quintessence of that mode and manner in things literary and artistic which has become inseparably associated with the nineties as it is Dowson the man who has come to be regarded (with Beardsley) as the decadent par excellence, not perhaps without the adventitious aid of Arthur Symons’ memoir and Rothenstein’s portrait” (87). Notes that “the fin de siècle poets have been entirely unrepresented in the Department of Manuscripts” and therefore, the donation “of the autograph manuscripts of eight of Dowson’s poems is therefore a very welcome one” (88).
Arthur Symons, Critic Among Critics

Y


Friendship with AS dates back to the days of the Rhymers’ Club when AS shared Paris, his infatuation with Pater and Impressionism and his love of the music-halls with his fellow Rhymers. “Arthur Symons, more than any man I have ever known, could slip as it were into the mind of another, and my thoughts gained in richness and in clearness from his sympathy, nor shall I ever know how much my practice and my theory owe to the passages that he read me from Catullus and from Verlaine and Mallarmé” (319–20). AS’s verse translations were among the most “accomplished metrical translations of our time.” Their form and other ideas of AS’s figure in the poetry of *The Wind Among the Reeds, The Shadowy Waters*, and *Rosa Alchemica*. In 1895–96 Yeats and AS lived together, worked together on the *Savoy*, journeyed to Ireland and Paris, and freely exchanged ideas. AS introduced Moore to Yeats. [Yeats’s “Puritanism” and his sense that AS’s life in the 1890s lacked the dramatic crisis necessary to portray him as one of the “tragic generation” combine to make Yeats’s account of him only partial. He credits AS for being a transmitter of ideas and an important translator of French poetry, but he begrudges him respect as either a complete person or a full poet in his own right.] (Stern)


A new poetry has grown up under the shadow of the old. It began with Rossetti and has led to AS; some call it Decadent, I prefer to describe it as “the autumn of the body.” Art seeks the essence of things, not the thing itself. AS discusses this method in his article on Mallarmé. (Stern)

[An episode involving “a memory of the race, as distinct from individual memory,” became a new opening to chapter six of the last section of “The Trembling of the Veil” (13). Advised by a spiritual medium, “a certain symbolic personality” named Megarithma, Yeats practices worship of the moon and the cabalistic tree of life (13–14). Yeats and AS (along with others Yeats subsequently encounters) experience similar dreams involving the myths of the centaur and the beautiful female archer.]


AS “was gradually losing too the faculty of experience, and in his prose and verse repeated the old ideas and emotions, but faintly as though with fading interest. I am certain that he prayed much” (283). However, AS “more than any man I have ever known, could slip as it were into the mind of another, and my thoughts gained in richness and in clearness from his sympathy, nor shall I ever know

AS’s poetry, in reaction against Victorian practices, restricts its limits and deals not with science, philosophy, and morality, but with pure personal emotion. The “decadent school” grew from its beginnings in the poetry of Lang and Dobson to its flowering in the poetry of Bridges, Thompson, Henley, Johnson, Davidson, Le Gallienne, and Watson. In earlier verse AS wrote under the impulse of exquisite memory, in the latest volume of love lyrics passion informs the volume and the shadowy quality of London Nights is replaced with “supreme emotion expressed supremely.” [Passionately defends the group of “decadents” from the charges of “immorality” and “insincerity.” Review of Amoris Victima.] (Stern)


[Yeats urges Synge to go to the Aran Islands, saying, “Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature.”] (Stern)


The poets of the Rhymers’ Club share but one thing: “they all believe that the deluge of triolets and rondeaus has passed away, and that we must look once more upon the world with serious eyes and set to music—each according to his lights—the deep soul of humanity.” In AS and Davidson we find a search for new subjects: AS finds them in the music-halls of London and Paris; Davidson in the Scottish music-hall. The typical poet of the Rhymers’ Club is “an aesthete with a surfeit, searching sadly for his lost Philistinism, his heart full of an unsatisfied hunger for the commonplace.” [Reynolds’s introduction refers to AS on 7, 8, 31, and 34 but it is largely descriptive and has little to offer.] (Stern)


The Symbolist Movement in Literature is a “subtle book, which I cannot praise as I would, because it has been dedicated to me. In it, he [AS] goes on to show how many profound writers have in the last few years sought for a philosophy of poetry in the doctrines of Symbolism....” [It is the element of evocation, of suggestion, that Yeats calls Symbolism. Drawing on his own examples together with
some suggested by AS’s book, Yeats delineates two types of symbols, emotional and intellectual.] (Stern)

AS’s “muses have not enough of passions, or his rhythms enough of impulse, to fuse into artistic unity the inartistic details which make so great a part of drama; he is at his best when simply contemplative, when expounding not passions, but passion’s evanescent beauty, when celebrating not the joys and sorrows of his dancers and light o’ loves, but the pathos of their restless days.” Praises “Rosa Mundi” and “La Melinité: Moulin Rouge.” AS is honest and sincere, not to be condemned because his subjects are chosen from immoral life. [Review of London Nights.] (Stern)

Yeats recorded that he met George Moore in AS’s “flat in the Temple. He threw himself into a chair with the remark: ‘I wish that woman would wash.’ He had just returned from an assignation with his mistress, a woman known to Symons personally, to me by repute, an accomplished, witty, somewhat fashionable woman” (37). “He had gone to Paris straight from his father’s racing stables, from a house where there was no culture, as Symons and I understood that word, acquired copious inaccurate French, sat among art students, young writers about to become famous, in some café; a man carved out of a turnip, looking out of astonished eyes” (38).

“Arthur Symons, whose book on symbolism created a bridge between French poetry and Eliotic modernism, also wrote A Study of Thomas Hardy (1927). In it, he isolates Hardy’s technical control and abiding melancholy” (21).

[As part of a larger study on Japanese authors, passing mentions of AS, Wilde, Baudelaire, Goethe, Symbolism, the generation of the 1890s, and neo-Romanticism (14). In Japanese.]

AS “has grown limp or soft at times … and sometimes, now and then, the whole affair becomes a business, a sort of delicious hack-writing” (297). “In the English country, Mr. Symons’ work is interestingly less good. It is as if his mind fell back less easily on green lawns and cloud and rain in quiet key, less easily than on the light and stone, the strong romance and blood of Spain, or the nights in London” (297).

“The Image … is also—and here Pound submits an idea which has been credited with fathering Eliot’s Objective Correlative—an ‘equation’ for an emotion. The image-equation inheres in a relation between things, and is not the verbal snapshot of a thing. Pound may have read Mallarmé, in the original or in Arthur Symons’s quotation: ‘Instituer une relation entre les images exacte, et que s’en détache un tiers aspect fusible et clair…’ (“To establish a precise relationship between images so that a third aspect emerges therefrom which is integrated and clear”)” (234–35).


Beardsley’s dynamic and, as AS notes, “contradictory” personality evoked a wide spectrum of responses from critics (114). While AS remembered Beardsley as “gentle” and one who “had scarcely a friend in the fullest sense of the word,” others described him as “full of fun” and “a very loyal friend” (114). Instead of relying on mere speculation to resolve these contradictions, examining Beardsley’s strikingly original and provocative work should reveal his philosophy of art (114).


Snodgrass argues that Beardsley, though financially well off, acted “as if he were in serious financial trouble” because Beardsley was obsessed with control (484). However, perhaps Beardsley was so attentive to money in order to leave his sister, the only person to whom he was close, according to AS, financially secure. Snodgrass also repeatedly links Beardsley with Victorian Decadence, a label which, AS plainly states, Beardsley hated.


“Beardsley’s acquaintance with specific works of pornography can be established from his reading and from his friendships” (150). AS was one of those “educated writers and artists” who “may have introduced Beardsley to French pornography” (150–51).


AS’s poem “The Opium Smoker” (Days and Nights, 1889), “develops one of the typical, fashionable decadent themes, inspired perhaps by Baudelaire…. The first part tries to express the sensations an opium dream provokes, the second part contrasts this by an enumeration of items of which the poet’s or dreamer’s somewhat shabby and worn-out reality consists…. In this sense, the opium dream
invites the subject to reflect the most essential aspects of its identity and helps to define it in terms of *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of the self as an ungraspable, fluid and protean entity” (19). “The dream ... seems to work as a means of achieving aesthetic goals as well: the point is not only in experiencing the infirm elastic nature of one's self, ... it is in enabling to avoid the discoursive character of aesthetic representation and to express reality in the form of image (or Image, as Frank Kermode prefers to spell it)” (20).


[Fate, chance and free will are extricably bound with the Tristram and Iseult legend. Five Victorian poets—Tennyson, Arnold, Hardy, Swinburne, and Symons—treat these concepts in accordance with their interpretation of the characters involved and of the magic potion, which the two lovers unwittingly drink.... Arnold, in “Tristram and Iseult,” and Symons in “Tristan and Iseult” seem to present the potion as symbolic of passion. Blind passion leads Arnold’s Tristram to abdicate his responsibility as a knight and hunter and Iseult to live selfishly. Symons’ Tristan also fails in his duty to King Mark, his uncle, but suffers great remorse for his disloyalty; Iseult, on the other hand, abandons herself wholly and irrationally to love.... In each version, the minor characters vary in personality and importance. Iseult of Brittany is the ideal wife in Tennyson and Arnold and a hypocrite in Swinburne; Mark is a model king in Symons but a villain in Tennyson and Hardy. Generally, the view of fate, chance, and free will reflects the author’s conformity or aversion to Victorian didacticism.][Annotation edited from Dissertation Abstracts International 32 (1972): 2659A.]
Listed first are books and periodicals dated only by year. These are in alphabetical order by author within the year. Listed next are periodicals dated by month or season in addition to year.

1880s


1890–1899


Gosse, Edmund. “The *Academy’s* Awards to Authors.” *Academy* (8 January 1898): 34.


**1900–1909**


Unsigned. Rev. of _Cities of Italy_, by Arthur Symons. _Athenaeum_ 4190 (1908): 185.

1910–1919

Hammerton, J. A. _George Meredith_. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1911.


1920–1929


323


Arthur Symons, Critic Among Critics


1930–1939


1940–1949


**1950–1959**


Riewald, J. G. *Sir Max Beerbohm: Man and Writer*. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1953. 11, 12, 15, 39, 126, 130, 175, 228, 269, 284, 300.


