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Arthur Symons, Laurence Binyon, and Paterian Aestheticism: Dancers and Dragons

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The aesthetic criticism of Oxford-based essayist Walter Pater (1839-1894) was interpreted in a variety of ways in *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian Britain. Perhaps most famously, Pater's example was used to justify the sensualist interpretation of Aestheticism in the work of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900).¹ By contrast, the more subdued influence of Pater's writings could also be felt in the *Addresses* delivered by the painter and sculptor Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) in his eminently respectable capacity as President of the Royal Academy, to which he was appointed in 1878.² By the 1910s, the latent modernism of Pater's essay 'The School of Giorgione' had been seized on by Ezra Pound in the first issue of the abrasive avant-garde journal *Blast*.³ Yet there was also an intermediary Edwardian context for the literary reception of Pater's work that was neither Wildean nor iconoclastic – occupying instead the conceptual space in between these more extreme interpretations – and this will be the focus of the current article. The critic and poet Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and the art writer, poet, and British Museum curator Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) are the two key figures in this regard, occupying the same milieu and yet elaborating subtly contrasting understandings of Pater's ideas.

Binyon drew on his role at the British Museum to emphasize the previously overlooked public-facing aspects of Pater's aesthetics and their potential relevance to the British reception of East Asian art; Symons emphasized instead the more personal and impressionistic undertones of Pater's writings. Despite these differences, Binyon's and Symons's ideas overlap at revealing junctures, especially in relation to their shared emphasis on the essay as an open-ended literary form and their shared interest in the theme of dancing, which was central to both their aesthetics. While the inheritance of Aestheticism in Binyon's work has been neglected, Pater's influence on Symons is now well documented in the secondary literature.⁴ However, these

revealing points of similarity and contrast between the two writers' interpretations of Pater have not previously been explored. Considered intertextually, they provide significant insight into the status of aesthetic criticism in the *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian periods by showing how Pater's influence could meaningfully be interpreted in two discrete yet complementary settings.

In contrast to the other examples I have mentioned, Symons's interpretation of Pater is notable for emphasising the subtly contradictory qualities of the latter's writings. In his essays on the elder writer, Symons emphasized the more sensual and empirical qualities of Pater's work, but nevertheless also stressed the equally prominent strand of asceticism by which this sensuousness was always accompanied and complicated.⁵ Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick have recently observed how, by 1885 'Symons had identified Pater as the critic he most wanted to emulate', and that Symons's criticism more generally is characterized to a significant extent by Pater's influence.⁶ These observations are borne out in the primary evidence, as Symons wrote several insightful essays in which he describes both the aesthetic nature of Pater's writings and his own conversations with the older writer, whom he got to know relatively well in the latter's final years.⁷ Symons's own essays, especially the 1907 collection, *Studies in Seven Arts*, also clearly demonstrate Pater's influence on a stylistic level. Symons implicitly admits this in the preface to the same volume, as here he quotes in full 'the first two sentences' of Pater's 'School of Giorgione', which he claims are intended as the 'motto' of the book.⁸

Like Symons, Binyon was distinctive in emphasising the nuanced middle-ground between the empirical and the spiritual in his interpretation of Pater, but his role as Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum gave his writings an educational emphasis that was clearly distinct from Symons's concerns. One of the main reasons why the more educational tenor of Pater's influence is often overlooked in this *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian context is that Symons and Binyon occupied much the same central-London artistic-literary milieu in the 1890s, making it easy to overlook the sense in which Binyon may have developed an understanding of Pater's work that was subtly distinct from that of his contemporaries Symons and W. B. Yeats.⁹

This is further complicated by Binyon's acquaintanceship with Pound in the early 1900s. Binyon's subsequent influence on the radical Vorticist aesthetics promoted by Pound and Wyndham Lewis's short-lived journal, *Blast*, has led to a tacit scholarly categorisation of Binyon as an early Modernist and to an accompanying oversight of the prominent Aesthetic Movement influence in his work.¹⁰ This is in stark contrast to the academic reception of Symons, who is generally most well-known for *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) and on this basis is easily accommodated by secondary accounts of the Decadent, cosmopolitan *fin-de-siècle* reception of Pater's work and Aestheticism more generally.¹¹ This is a context that, by virtue of its chronologically narrow and necessarily Anglo-French 1890s focus, includes figures such as Wilde and Stéphane Mallarmé who are also known to have been significantly influenced by Pater.¹² Symons's early discussion of writers such as Mallarmé and Joris-Karl Huysmans in *The Symbolist Movement*, as well as the clear influence of Paul Verlaine in his poetry from this period, ensures that his work is easily assimilated into this context.¹³ Furthermore, on the basis of the widespread influence of *The Symbolist Movement* in the 1900s and of Decadence in the 1890s (especially, in the case of the latter, as it was formulated in Symons's own journal, *The Savoy*), there is a strong case to be made for the sense in which Symons contributed substantially to the conceptual definition of the two overlapping movements with which he is most frequently associated – Symbolism and Decadence.¹⁴

Pater's influence on Binyon is most apparent in the latter's 1913 book, *The Art of Botticelli: A Study in Pictorial Criticism* – a study of the Florentine artist that was intended as a critical supplement to Herbert Horne's more factual volume published in 1908.¹⁵ In the earlier sections of this book, Binyon devotes considerable space to situating his ideas in relation to those Pater articulated in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).¹⁶ In a sense, Binyon is critical of Pater, particularly of Pater's derision in the 'School of Giorgione' of paintings 'in which appeal is made to the mere intelligence', which Binyon believes suggests 'a wholly false antithesis' between literary 'mere intelligence' and the supposedly more formal and 'musical' concerns of artistic

practice.¹⁷ However, the space Binyon devotes to exploring Pater's aesthetics in detail in this instance also indicates the admiration he held for the elder writer more generally, and this impression is supported by his praise of Pater in the same book as 'one of the finest and most fastidious of English critics'.¹⁸ Binyon also reserves harsher criticism for 'writers who [in following Pater] have perverted this ideal of fusion into an ideal of emptiness' – writers, in other words, who 'have been misled by the analogy of music'.¹⁹ Binyon did not necessarily disagree with Pater; it is more that he believed the nuances of Pater's famous statement that 'all art constantly aspires towards the conditions of music' had been lost on other writers whom Pater had influenced.²⁰ Binyon believed that the importance of the more 'literary' role of cultural narrative to artistic practice – one that Pater did not necessarily reject – had been unjustly neglected in *fin-de-siècle* and contemporary Edwardian understandings of Pater.²¹ While Binyon is critical of these aesthetics in the paintings of Whistler, he does not refer to any of the writers whom he feels have misinterpreted Pater's work by name. It would be easy to assume that Binyon was thinking of figures such as Wilde and Symons when he wrote this, given what John J. Conlon has characterized as their Paterian 'debts of the wrong kind', presumably referring to the aspects of Wilde's and Symons's work that had the potential to strike contemporary readers as excessively sensual and sensationalist, at the expense of the more philosophical and spiritual qualities that critics – including, ironically, Symons – have noted elsewhere in Pater's work.²² However, Binyon does not overtly criticize either of these two writers anywhere in *The Art of Botticelli*, or any other writers who would now be associated with Decadence, and so it would be misleading to propose a clear-cut opposition between the aesthetics of Decadence and the separate form of Paterian aesthetics that Binyon was also proposing in the period.

As implied above, despite his general admiration for the fastidiousness of Pater's writings, Binyon's aims were more public-facing, and this is also the aspect of his aesthetics that most clearly distinguishes his interpretation of Pater from Symons's reading. In addition to his reverence for the subtlety of Pater's writings, Binyon was also concerned that there should be a

more substantial audience for the visual arts (and attendant progressive aesthetics) beyond the intellectual elite that Pater had envisaged as the primary audience for *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.²³ This would clearly have been informed by Binyon's professional role at the British Museum. Like Pater, Binyon was a career scholar. However, Binyon was employed by an institution that was open to the general public, in contrast to the selective educational role adopted by a traditional university such as Oxford, where Pater was a Fellow. It is notable in this regard that Binyon's first art-historical book, *Dutch Etchers of the Seventeenth Century* (1895), was published in his professional capacity at the British Museum and drew on the strengths of the Department of Prints and Drawings where Binyon was employed, while also incorporating the first of the many allusions to Pater that consistently characterize Binyon's art writings.²⁴ By contrast, Pater's first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, was specifically intended (at least initially) for a small group of readers and should not be considered educational in a traditional sense.²⁵

On a more textual level, this emphasis on a distinctively worldly aestheticism in Binyon's work also manifests itself in the open-ended structure of his texts. Instead of presenting the reader with a hermetic and dogmatic argument about aesthetics, Binyon's writings display a provisional and open-ended quality that prompts the reader to consider the relationship between his subtle, aestheticism-infused writings and the outside world. This is most apparent at the end of *Painting in the Far East* of 1908 – a blend of aesthetic criticism and informative scholarship – in which Binyon decries the state of the streets surrounding the museums that house the pristine Chinese and Japanese artworks with which his study is concerned. Here, Binyon laments how '[we] fill a museum with fine works from diverse countries, and place it in the midst of streets that desolate eye and heart, without an effort to make them part of the beauty we desire.'²⁶ After evoking the East Asian artworks that form the primary subject of the book to the nuanced degree of sensuous detail that the genre of aesthetic criticism might be said to require, Binyon implicitly questions the value of the isolated and unworldly forms of artistic contemplation that

this genre was also understood to encourage, indicating a desire to move beyond Paterian aesthetic experience for its own sake. This contrasts with Symons's interpretation of Pater in the same period. Symons's writings are impressionistic and in this way as open to the realities of urban modernity as Binyon's. However, in contrast to Binyon, Symons's poetry, essays, and Huysmans-like urban sketches utilize Pater's ideas towards an embrace of the more artificial and potentially tawdrier aspects of the modern city against which Binyon's writings seem to rebel, and, in this manner, are most accurately categorized as Decadent.²⁷ Symons's writings present a different route through which Pater's aestheticism was brought fully into contact with the urban realities of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century London, yet towards an aesthetic that embraces the impressionistic and the personal, in contrast to the more public-facing aims of Binyon's approach.

Symons's emphasis on the modern city in his essays and poetry, especially his interest in music-hall culture, therefore elaborates an understanding of Edwardian London life that differs from Binyon's in the primacy Symons attached to documenting his personal experiences.²⁸ This contrasts with the subject-matter of Binyon's art writing, which rarely includes direct references to his day-to-day experience of modern London. Instead, Binyon describes the art and culture of different countries and continents.²⁹ In books such as *The Flight of the Dragon* and *Painting in the Far East*, he synthesizes these descriptions with a critique of European materialism, suggesting that an improved awareness of the nuances of East Asian painting and culture might prompt his British audience to re-examine their surroundings. This is an important distinction between the aims of the two writers. While Binyon is concerned with the ways in which closer attention to Paterian detail might improve the lives of London's inhabitants, Symons's aim is to evoke the present-day city rather than to change it. In this way, the writings of Binyon and Symons in this period represent two key, often complementary and yet at times revealingly divergent visions of how Pater's ideas might meaningfully be elaborated into the early twentieth century.

* * *

Shortly after Pater's death, in 1896, Symons published an extensive essay on his formative 'master', which was subsequently included in a 1904 collection by Symons bearing the appropriately Paterian title, *Studies in Prose and Verse*. This essay demonstrates a thoughtful and discriminating understanding of Pater's work. From the beginning of the essay, Symons makes clear his high regard for Pater's writing, describing Pater's style as 'the most carefully and curiously beautiful of all English styles', with an emphasis on the 'curious' that emphasizes Pater's uniqueness, suggesting the singular influence that he would have exerted on Symons's work.³⁰ Symons reaffirms this impression by describing Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as 'entirely individual, the revelation of a rare and special temperament'.³¹ He concedes, however, that Pater's style in the *Renaissance* 'had many affinities with the poetic and pictorial art of Rossetti, Swinburne, and Burne-Jones' and further allows that the *Renaissance* seemed, 'on its appearance in 1873, to have been taken as a manifesto of the so-called "aesthetic school"'.³² This indicates that, while Symons was happy to concede synaesthetic correspondences between Pater, Rossetti, Swinburne, and Burne-Jones on an individual level, he nevertheless regarded the "aesthetic school" with a pronounced degree of scepticism (there would otherwise be no need to distance himself from it by placing its title in quotation marks and implying that this school is 'so-called' by individuals other than himself). In this way, Symons's attitude towards Pater as a unique artist resonates in a positive way with Karl Beckson's characterization of Symons as a writer who '[lacked] systematic philosophic grounding in literary theory', in the sense that he was ambivalent about conflating Pater's ideas with an entire 'aesthetic school', which might entail overlooking the 'entirely individual' qualities that instil Pater's prose with its distinctive poetics.³³

Later in the same essay, Symons describes how, in Pater's writing, 'an almost oppressive quiet, a quiet which seems to exhale an atmosphere heavy with the odour of tropical flowers, broods over these pages; a subdued light shadows them [...] here are the simplest words, but they take colour from each other by the cunning accident of their placing in the sentence'.³⁴

Here, Symons mentions all the senses except that of touch; for him, Pater's sentences evoke an 'almost oppressive quiet', a state in which quietness is tinged with 'the odour of tropical flowers' – an atmosphere so strong that it even appears to 'brood over [the] pages' with a 'subdued light'. Symons further emphasizes how this takes place on the most detailed textual level possible, with the 'simplest words', which are also confused with the sensuous imagery that they evoke for the reader, in the sense that 'they take colour from each other'. Symons's awareness of 'the cunning accident of their placing in the sentence' belies his use of the word 'accident' and demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the construction of Pater's sentences. Symons shows that he was aware of a near-physical sense of facture in Pater's work when he describes the 'goldsmith's work of his prose'.³⁵ Symons argues that, in this way, Pater is 'like Baudelaire', observing the paradoxical sense in which Pater's 'prose too has "rêvé le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime."³⁶ Symons implies that, without literally appropriating qualities that are specific to poetry or music, Pater nevertheless attains the effects of these media through his miraculous prose. Symons's mention of Baudelaire also demonstrates an awareness of the French precedents for Pater's art writing, which is complementary to the synthesis of Anglo-French literary traditions that would later characterize the Decadence of Symons's own work. The synaesthesia-informed mention of the 'odour of tropical flowers' in his characterization of Pater's prose suggests the influence of Huysmans's key Decadent novel, *À rebours* (1884), in which certain poems by Baudelaire are described as having 'fragrant stanzas'.³⁷ On this basis, Symons demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the nuances of Pater's aesthetics that is comparable to Binyon's in the earlier sections of *The Art of Botticelli*, even if Symons's account is informed by a more Decadent emphasis on the French influence in Pater's work that goes unnoticed by Binyon. Yet, in the final pages of his essay, Symons arguably goes further than Binyon by implying that Pater's writing reformulates our expectations of the aims of discursive art writing, beyond the already considerable achievement of subtly refining this genre with the incorporation of a sensuous lyricism that might otherwise be associated with poetry. According

to Symons, ‘philosophy, as [Pater] conceives it, is a living, dramatic thing [...] a doctrine being seen as a vivid fragment of some very human mind, not a dry matter of words and disembodied reason’.³⁸ He elaborates that, in Pater, ‘we have criticism which, in its divination, its arrangement, its building up of many materials into a living organism, is itself creation, becomes imaginative work itself’.³⁹ Here, Symons’s sense of Pater’s work as a ‘vivid fragment’ and ‘a living organism’ deepens our current sense of how the lack of premeditated theory, or ‘disembodied reason’, in both writers’ work is perhaps their key shared asset. Symons suggests, not only that Pater’s writing should be considered ‘imaginative work’ that withstands comparison with the painterly facture of artists such as Burne-Jones or Watteau, but that in Pater’s hands the essay itself is a medium uniquely able to reconfigure analytical ‘philosophy’ as ‘a living, dramatic thing’.

This aspect of Symons’s thought is clearly complementary to the sensuous emphases of Decadence, especially the open-minded receptiveness to the experience of the more dissipated elements of the modern city suggested by Symons’s poetry from the period.⁴⁰ However, it is also a quality that Symons’s writings share with Binyon’s. Although Binyon’s understanding of Pater’s stylistic methods may have been less overtly sophisticated than Symons’s appears to be in the essay that I have been discussing, his writings in *The Art of Botticelli* and *The Flight of the Dragon* (Binyon’s brief but influential 1911 study of traditional Chinese and Japanese art, which doubles as a critique of European materialism) convey the same preference for the ‘vivid fragment’ over ‘disembodied reason’, and on this basis belong to the same lineage.⁴¹ This is particularly the case in the sections of *The Flight of the Dragon* that are concerned with the image of the dancer. For Binyon, discussion of dancing is inextricable from the role of ‘rhythm’. The word is central to his aesthetics, but, consistently with the work of an aesthete who also rejected the rigidity of theory, he is reticent about providing a fixed definition.⁴² Binyon begins this early section of *The Flight of the Dragon* with a disingenuously rhetorical question. ‘But what is rhythm?’, he inquires, before elaborating that ‘No one seems to know precisely, though we can often recognise what we cannot define.’⁴³ From the beginning of this key section, Binyon partly aligns himself with what

Beckson identifies as the Paterian ‘lack of a systematic philosophic grounding in literary theory’ in Symons’s work by making it clear that he is uninterested in furnishing the reader with a straightforwardly explanatory account of this elusive subject.⁴⁴ In the next paragraph, Binyon remarks that rhythm ‘is not a mere mechanical succession of beats and intervals.’⁴⁵ Binyon’s biographer, John Hatcher, accurately describes ‘rhythm’ as Binyon’s ‘favourite word’, and it would be reasonable to surmise that the longevity of Binyon’s attraction to this term owed much to the sense that its final meaning seemed to him to always be malleable and slightly out of reach, suggesting that, like Pater and Symons, Binyon saw his aesthetic criticism as a ‘living organism’ – an imaginative form of philosophical thinking open to modification and evolution.⁴⁶

The theme of dance also provides insight into the previously ignored resemblance between Binyon’s and Symons’s writings. Dance was an integral and recurring theme in Symons’s work – in both his essays and poetry. Of Symons’s essays, the last chapter of *Studies in Seven Arts*, ‘The World as Ballet’, which was first published in 1898, is the central text in this regard, and anticipates Binyon’s discussion of dance in *The Flight of the Dragon*, albeit with a few telling differences. The first important point of similarity is the way in which both Binyon and Symons envisage dancing as a synthesis of the spiritual (or intellectual) and the physical. In particular, Symons’s closing remarks in this brief chapter bear revealing comparison with Binyon’s sense that ‘the essence of the impulse towards creation [...] is a spiritual rhythm passing into and acting on material things.’⁴⁷ Symons accounts for the ballet in comparable terms:

And something in the particular elegance of the dance, the scenery; the avoidance of emphasis, the evasive, winding turn of things; and, above all, the intellectual as well as sensuous appeal of a living symbol, which but can but reach the brain through the eyes, in the visual, concrete imaginative way; has seemed to make the ballet concentrate in itself a good deal of the modern ideal in matters of artistic expression.⁴⁸

Symons’s sense that ballet possesses ‘the intellectual as well as sensuous appeal of a living symbol’ demonstrates that he envisaged dancing – or ballet, at least – as consisting of the same finely balanced relationship between the physical and the intellectual that Binyon implies, in a discussion that touches on dancing, when he claims that the ‘impulse towards creation [...] is a

spiritual rhythm passing into and acting on material things.⁴⁹ Binyon's further characterization of dance as a 'plastic idea' also appears at first glance to be simply a reformulation of Symons's concept of ballet as a 'living symbol'. Binyon's 'favourite word', rhythm, also appears in the last sentence of Symons's essay, when the latter remarks that the dancer's 'rhythm reveals to you the soul of her imagined being.'⁵⁰ Here, Binyon's emphasis on the relationship between spiritual and rhythmic qualities in the visual arts finds its direct parallel in Symons's account of ballet. The key difference so far is that, while Symons mentions rhythm, he is less obviously preoccupied with this quality in his discursive writing than Binyon.⁵¹ In Binyon's prose, movement and rhythm are often the prevailing qualities, in contrast to the more calmly impressionistic tenor of Symons's essayistic writings; in Binyon's criticism, even architecture is characterized by 'so many coordinated energies, each exerting force in relation to each other'.⁵² These differing emphases go to the heart of the two writers' aesthetics as expressed in their essays. Binyon's emphasis on movement and 'force' may be linked to his aversion to stasis and his accompanying desire to effect change in public attitudes through his writings, while Symons's discursive writings do not harbour these aims and so these qualities are emphasized to a lesser extent. Binyon finds the traditional arts of China and Japan to be especially congenial to his aesthetics because the 'predominant desire' of these arts, he feels, is 'to attain rhythmical vitality'.⁵³ In Binyon's account, the key distinction between European and East Asian art effectively amounts to the difference between movement and stasis. He implies that, while there may be 'a few stories of illusive deception in European art [...] like that of Philip IV mistaking a portrait of Velazquez for a man', they do not bear comparison to the stories associated with Chinese and Japanese art, in which 'we hear of horses so charged with life that they galloped out of the picture' or 'of dragons leaving the wall on which they were painted and soaring through the ceiling'.⁵⁴ This helps to explain why it was Binyon's essays, rather than Symons's, that held such strong appeal for radical avant-gardists Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, who took inspiration from Binyon's emphasis

on movement and dynamism and reconfigured it as a restless, discontent response to the pressures of modern urban life.⁵⁵

By contrast with Binyon, Symons's writings on the role of dance tend more towards impressionism than Vorticism, allowing us greater insight into the differences between Binyon's and Symons's aesthetics in the Edwardian period, despite their both drawing substantially on Pater and seemingly agreeing on the ideal fusion between the spiritual and physical that dancing, as an art-form, encapsulates. Symons's writings on dance notably differ from Binyon's in the positive, Decadent emphasis they place on artificiality. This was closely related to the fact that, while Binyon was drawn to the generalized theme of dancing in various historical cultural contexts, Symons was drawn specifically to ballet in the context of 1890s London.⁵⁶ Nicholas Freeman has argued recently that 'ballet's fusion of music, dance, and theatrical design make it, for Symons, the greatest of arts', elaborating that the genre also allowed Symons to '[celebrate] artificiality as something in itself rather than basing its success on mimetic assessment.'⁵⁷ Symons shares Binyon's and Pater's positive emphasis on the imagined, but, in the particular delight that Symons took in attending balletic and music-hall performances in London, this emphasis becomes inextricable from an accompanying pleasure in the artificial that was specific to his Decadent milieu.⁵⁸ In an essay titled 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', first published in *The Savoy* in 1896, Symons describes his impressions both as a spectator and behind the scenes at the Alhambra theatre on Leicester Square.⁵⁹ This sense of artificiality is made apparent from the beginning of the essay, when Symons remarks that 'in the general way I prefer to see my illusions very clearly, recognizing them as illusions, and yet, to my own perverse and decadent way of thinking, losing none of their charm.'⁶⁰ In particular, Symons is preoccupied with the *maquillage* (the cosmetics) of the dancers, which was also the titular subject of a poem from his 1892 collection, *Silhouettes*.⁶¹

Symons's unabashed delight in the artificial in this 1896 *Savoy* essay prefigures his description of dancers in 'The World as Ballet' (1898), where it acquires a more overtly erotic – and, to a modern reader, uncomfortably objectifying – dimension. Symons describes

[...] all these young bodies, made more alluring by an artificial heightening of whites and reds on the face, displaying, employing, all their natural beauty, themselves full of the sense of joy in motion, or affecting that enjoyment, offered to our eyes like a bouquet of flowers, a bouquet of living flowers, which have all the glitter of artificial ones.⁶²

In this later essay, the positive emphasis on the artificial becomes more sophisticated, to the extent that even the 'living flowers' to which the dancers are compared take on the appearance of artificial ones. This emphasis on the artificial is symptomatic of Symons's Decadent interpretation of Aestheticism, in the sense that artificial aids such as cosmetics remind the viewer of the unreality of what they are seeing, which, to the same extent in Symons's work as in Binyon's and Pater's (but in a different manner), brings our attention to the inadequacy of unvarnished truth and fact in the face of the synthesising power of the imagination. With the lengths to which Symons goes in evoking the *maquillage* of the dancers and the fabricated ambience of the theatre, he implicitly accords the same imaginative artistic status to the pronounced artificiality of theatrical costume and set design as Binyon accords to the fine arts. In the same way as the ballets Symons attends lose '[none] of their charm' despite, or perhaps even because of, the heightened artificiality of the setting, 'the waves on Korin's famous screen' in an example from Binyon's account in *The Flight of the Dragon* lose none of their aesthetic impact because of their supposed lack of fidelity to the appearance of 'real waves'. Binyon even implies that these imagined waves are superior because they have been 'divested of all accident of appearance'. 'We might in dreams see waves such as these', Binyon claims, attesting perhaps to his belief in the aesthetic superiority of the imagination and its occasionally tenuous relationship to external stimuli.⁶³

Symons's *Savoy* article on the Alhambra theatre also exhibits a pronounced degree of literary impressionism, of the variety that links Symons's work with French texts such as

Huysmans's *Croquis parisiens* (1880).⁶⁴ This is particularly apparent when Symons describes viewing 'a ballet from the wings'.⁶⁵ To do this, Symons claims, 'is to lose all sense of proportion, all knowledge of the piece as a whole; but, in return, it is fruitful in happy accidents, in momentary points of view, in chance felicities of light and shade and movement.'⁶⁶ Symons's perspective is passive as he registers the details that arise from 'happy accidents' and 'chance felicities' that, he seems to imply, require no effort of will on his part. In a sense that is closely related to the role of impressionism in his work, Symons suggests that standing in this position catches the aesthetic critic off-guard, temporarily suspending the Paterian desire to construct an imaginative narrative around sensory experience. This position causes the spectator to 'lose all sense of proportion, all knowledge of the piece as a whole'.⁶⁷ Symons seems to anticipate this interpretation when he elaborates that viewing the stage from this unorthodox position is akin to '[seeing] the reverse of the picture', implying that this first-hand composite experience of viewing a ballet both as a normal member of the audience but also – more importantly – seeing the ungainly mechanics of the ballet from the wings does not properly fit with the pristine imaginative and sensory spaces that aesthetic criticism seeks to evoke in its non-Decadent formulations.⁶⁸ For both Binyon and Pater, an atmosphere of 'shrine-like seclusion' is at times an integral part of the contemplative aesthetic narratives they wish to unfold for the reader.⁶⁹ Huysmans's *À rebours*, also takes place in hermetic confines, but it is significant that, towards the end of his novel, the protagonist and consummate aesthete Des Esseintes' self-imposed and determinedly artificial seclusion results in the disintegration of his physical health and mental wellbeing.⁷⁰ It is telling that, in possibly the most well-known episode from Huysmans's novel, Des Esseintes' attempt to impose his exacting aesthetic will on a tortoise – first, by gilding its shell and then by encrusting its gilded shell with jewels – only results in the animal's death.⁷¹ In this way, both Huysmans's and Symons's Decadent texts elaborate Aestheticism by testing the hermetic implications of the movement against a more disorderly and naturalistic version of reality.

The unintended death of a tortoise in *À rebours* and the ‘reverse of the picture’ in ‘At the Alhambra’ complicate the pristine spaces of Paterian aestheticism by allowing for the respectively disquieting and diverting intrusions of the types of reality that would be more easily associated with the naturalistic aims of Impressionism, suggesting the manner in which Decadent texts synthesized and developed aspects of both earlier movements. This is related to Symons’s claim that, in this same music-hall setting, he saw his ‘illusions very clearly, recognizing them as illusions, and yet, to my own perverse and decadent way of thinking, losing none of their charm.’⁷² This demonstrates a naturalistic awareness on Symons’s part that his aesthetic experiences are based on ‘illusion’, not reality. They are Decadent rather than idealistic experiences because Symons recognizes that they are prevented by their artificiality from effecting any Binyon-esque change in the outside world. These ‘illusions’ only seem to affect Symons, with his ‘own perverse and decadent way of thinking’, and only then in the moment at which he experiences them. This allows us to imagine a certain sense in which Symons, with his uncomfortable and even slightly seedy proximity to the theatre and to the dancers themselves, was interacting more directly with the realities of modern urban life than Binyon, which suggests more significantly that there are categories of human experience that Paterian aesthetic criticism cannot plausibly accommodate. The remainder of Symons’s description of seeing ‘a ballet from the wings’ confirms the dawning impression that – in this essay, at least – Symons is presenting himself as more of a Baudelairian *flâneur* than as a reticently Paterian aesthetic critic. This urbane, dissipated quality even inflects the prose itself, when Symons describes how ‘[you see] the girls at the back lounging against the set scenes [...] you see how lazily the lazy girls are moving, and how mechanical and irregular are the motions that flow into rhythm when seen from the front.’⁷³ In this quotation, Symons’s vocabulary becomes more languid as he comes to accept the reality of the scene in which he finds himself. Appropriately, he slyly gives the impression that he is slothfully incapable of thinking of a synonym for ‘lazily’ other than ‘lazy’, lending the prose itself a raw, louche quality very different from the classically rigorous prose that animates *The Flight of*

the Dragon. Symons's suggestion of these 'irregular [...] motions that flow into rhythm when seen from the front' evokes a pessimistic sense in which Binyon's more generalized emphasis on rhythmic qualities can only be appreciated in the rarefied air of the British Museum Print Room. In the 'Alhambra' essay, the refined Paterian aestheticism with which Symons was clearly enamoured fuses with the grittily real metropolis, prompting the intrusion of the impressionist sensibility that was an equally important aspect of his Decadent aesthetics, and also the feature that distinguished his work most clearly from Binyon's.

In conclusion, both Symons and Binyon were clearly influenced by Pater's aesthetic criticism, especially as it was formulated in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. The two younger writers share the same Paterian emphasis on the importance of the more sensuous yet ascetically imaginative aspects of aesthetic experience, and the subtle interplay between these two qualities that characterizes the *Renaissance*. However, Symons and Binyon developed these points of similarity towards different ends. Symons's essays and poetry in the 1890s were informed as much by French Decadence as they were by Paterian aestheticism, and this is apparent in the Des Esseintes-esque imaginative emphasis he places on the artificial, and in the unabashedly subjective delight he takes in his experiences of 1890s urban nightlife. Binyon's aims in key texts such as *The Flight of the Dragon* were different. Rather than luxuriating in the seductive, fabricated pleasures of 1890s and Edwardian London, Binyon instead imagines ways in which the streets of the city might be transformed by closer sensuous attention to the artworks of the European *quattrocento* and of East Asia, out of a desire that the 'streets that desolate eye and heart' might be made to aspire towards 'the beauty we desire'.⁷⁴ Future research into Binyon's work might further explore the implications of these idealistic desires. This idealism might be why Binyon's restless prose summons forth fantastical images of soaring dragons and crashing waves, while in his more discursive writings Symons is happy simply to immerse himself 'in chance felicities of light and shade' and the enjoyably obvious *maquillage* of the music-hall dancers.⁷⁵

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- ¹ Jason Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 87; Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (London and New York: Oxford University Press), p. 358.
- ² David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 98.
- ³ Ezra Pound, 'Vortex', *Blast*, 1 (1914), 154.
- ⁴ Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 36; Arthur Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), pp. 3-4.
- ⁵ Arthur Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: J. M. Dent, 1904), p. 76.
- ⁶ Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, pp. 3-4.
- ⁷ Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 63; Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (New York: Dutton, 1907), p. v; Walter Pater, *Letters of Walter Pater*, ed. by Laurence Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 70.
- ⁸ Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. v.
- ⁹ John Hatcher, *Laurence Binyon: Poet, Scholar of East and West* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 45.
- ¹⁰ Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 105; David Peters Corbett, 'Make It New: Laurence Binyon, Pound and Vorticism', *Paideuma*, 26, 2-3 (1997), 183-84; Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 13.
- ¹¹ See Kostas Boyiopoulos, 'Introduction: Sensual Text, Textual Sense – Aestheticism to Decadence', in *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- ¹² John J. Conlon, *Walter Pater and the French Tradition* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1982), pp. 68-69, p. 139.
- ¹³ Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Laurence Binyon, *The Art of Botticelli: An Essay in Pictorial Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1913); Herbert P. Horne, *Botticelli: Painter of Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- ¹⁶ Binyon, *Art of Botticelli*, p. 39.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ²⁰ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 124.
- ²¹ In the preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater describes how 'artists and philosophers' in this period 'do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts', conveying Pater's nuanced sensitivity to the role of cultural narrative in fifteenth-century Italy. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²² Conlon, *Walter Pater and the French Tradition*, p. 69; Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 78; Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 76.
- ²³ Robert M. Seiler, ed., *The Book Beautiful: Walter Pater and the House of Macmillan* (London and New Brunswick: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 70.
- ²⁴ Laurence Binyon, *Dutch Etchers of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Seeley, 1895), pp. 9-10.
- ²⁵ Seiler, ed., *The Book Beautiful*, p. 70.
- ²⁶ Laurence Binyon, *Painting in the Far East* (New York: Dover, 1959), pp. 271-72.
- ²⁷ Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, p. 12.
- ²⁸ Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), p. 92.
- ²⁹ Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, pp. 271-72.
- ³⁰ Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 63; Beckson, *Arthur Symons*, p. 53.
- ³¹ Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 64.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 97.

- ³⁸ Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 74.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ⁴⁰ Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, p. 12.
- ⁴¹ Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, p. 74.
- ⁴² Laurence Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon* (London: John Murray, 1911), p. 9.
- ⁴³ Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁴ Beckson, *Arthur Symons*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁵ Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁶ Hatcher, *Laurence Binyon*, p. 179.
- ⁴⁷ Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁸ Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. 391.
- ⁴⁹ Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁰ Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. 391.
- ⁵¹ This is separate from the role of rhythm in Symons's poetry, which is outside the scope of the current article.
- ⁵² Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 17.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 20.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ⁵⁵ Corbett, 'Make it New', 183-84.
- ⁵⁶ Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 88.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁵⁸ Beckson, *Arthur Symons*, p. 77.
- ⁵⁹ Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 88.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ⁶¹ Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, p. 47.
- ⁶² Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. 389.
- ⁶³ Binyon, *Flight of the Dragon*, p. 21.
- ⁶⁴ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Parisian Sketches*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2004), p. 16.
- ⁶⁵ Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 92.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 6.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Binyon, *Art of Botticelli*, p. 115; Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 119.
- ⁷⁰ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 173.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.* pp. 36-38, pp. 42-43.
- ⁷² Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 90.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ⁷⁴ Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, pp. 271-72.
- ⁷⁵ Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, p. 92.