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# 'A sort of breviary': Arthur Symons, J. K. Huysmans and British Decadence

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- 1 *À rebours* (1884), by the French novelist, J.-K. Huysmans is notorious. Last scion ('*seul rejeton*') of an aristocratic family in decline, the protagonist Jean Floressas Des Esseintes retreats from Paris to his country home, where he indulges his every sensual and artistic whim (Huysmans 61). These range from participating in pansexual orgies to collecting meticulous bindings on his rare books and devising an organ which plays scents instead of musical notes. The English poet and critic, Arthur Symons thought this exemplary. Writing in the *Fortnightly Review* during March 1892, he concluded his summary of Huysmans's novel:

Des Esseintes, though studied from a real man, who is known to those who know a certain kind of society in Paris, is a type rather than a man: he is the offspring of the Decadent art that he adores, and this book a sort of breviary for its worshippers. It has a place of its own in the literature of the day, for it sums up, not only a talent, but a spiritual epoch. (Symons 1892, 412)

- 2 Symons's identification of Des Esseintes and *À rebours* with the Decadent movement and his comparison of Huysmans's novel with a 'breviary' are so widely cited that they have become foundational to critical accounts of Decadence and the influence of French literature upon English-speaking writers at the *fin de siècle* ever since.<sup>1</sup> When critics

quote this comparison, however, they do not cite the *Fortnightly Review*. Instead they quote Symons's verdict as he re-formulated it in his collection, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*:

The fantastic unreality, the exquisite artificiality of *A Rebours*, the breviary of the decadence, is the first sign of that positive escape which Huysmans has always foreseen in the direction of art, but which he is still unable to make into more than an artificial paradise, in which beauty turns to a cruel hallucination and imprisons the soul still more fatally. (Symons 1908, 139)

- 3 Although verbal differences between these two passages may seem slight, I shall demonstrate that they are significant and symptomatic. Close attention to the changing pattern of Symons's response to Huysmans between 1892 and 1908 and the factors shaping that response, I shall argue, reveals a temporal dissonance within Symons's critical writings that has wider implications for our understanding of Decadence and its influence within late nineteenth-century British art and literature.
- 4 The most obvious source of dissonance between these two passages derives from the theological, social and cultural implications of the term 'breviary' itself. As a collection of papally-sanctioned hieratic texts, the breviary introduces a strong and allusive charge to Symons's remarks which may account for the purchase this comparison has had subsequently upon the critical imagination. G. A. Cevasco points out that 'breviary' not only encapsulates the accumulative, descriptive form of Huysmans's novel, as it articulates each phase of Des Esseintes' obsessions; it also captures the relationship of Decadence to Aestheticism and the 'religion of beauty' (Cevasco x). The association of the breviary with Catholic liturgical practice, described by Symons as 'the adopted religion of the Decadence' (Symons 1892, 408), indicates another set of tensions within the comparison: Symons alludes to the importance of outward forms and ritual to both Catholicism and Decadence. At the same time, he conveys the alterity of Decadence to the sensibilities of many Anglican British readers (he was the son of a Wesleyan minister, himself). He also clearly relishes the paradox of linking a devotional artefact to an artistic movement associated with social and sexual transgression. In this way, Symons's phrase chimes with those hostile contemporary critics who treated Decadence as a kind of cult: the *National Observer*, for example, denounced Oscar Wilde as 'the High Priest of the Decadents' in April 1895 (Thornton 67).
- 5 The occasion for the profile of Huysmans in the *Fortnightly Review* is important to these effects when Symons first formulated this breviary comparison in 1892. His article is closely linked to the recent appearance in French of Huysmans's novel, *Là-bas*, the previous year. This work details the preoccupation with Satanism, occult ritual and social mores of another Decadent protagonist, Durtal—thought to be loosely modelled on Huysmans himself. In this context, Symons's talk of 'worshippers' in the *Fortnightly Review* recalls the representation of the black mass in this sequel to *À rebours*. But Symons's response at this point in his career is also caught up in his own burgeoning enthusiasm for French literature and Decadence in particular. Only a year later, in his essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature,' he would enthuse about *À rebours* as a 'unique masterpiece' in which Huysmans had 'concentrated all that is delicately depraved, all that is beautifully, curiously poisonous, in modern art' (Symons 1893, 866).
- 6 When he first published the 'breviary' comparison, then, it neatly encapsulated a gleeful relish for the paradox and controversy of Decadence as Symons found it in

Huysmans's work. By the time Symons re-formulated his breviary comparison in the second edition of *The Symbolist Movement* during 1908, however, things had changed. Firstly, Huysmans's affiliations had shifted: after *Là-bas*, he wrote *En route* (1895), *La cathédrale* (1898) and *L'Oblat* (1902), novels that describe Durtal's religious and mystic progress as he turns away from vice and embraces the Catholic church. This closely followed Huysmans's own conversion and public commitment to Catholicism. The second version of Symons's 'breviary' comparison, then, is not only written with knowledge of Huysmans's disavowal of Decadence, it is embedded in a biographical argument that draws directly upon these events from Huysmans's life. Symons explicitly reads those qualities which would seem to make *À rebours* an exemplary Decadent text as 'the first sign' of Huysmans's turn away from Decadence. Out of context, Symons's 'breviary' comparison and reference in *The Symbolist Movement* to the 'exquisite artificiality' of *À rebours* sound like a positive assertion of Decadent aesthetics. But in a fuller context, the timing of this oft-quoted passage means that it is far from such an affirmation. There is a disjuncture between what the phrase might seem to say and Symons's localised intentions.

- 7 The version that has become influential within critical histories of Decadence may sound pithier than the equivocal note that Symons published in 1892 ('a sort of breviary') when he first formulated this comparison, but it is, in fact, much more ambivalent about Decadent values. In the rest of this essay, I shall argue that this is not an isolated instance. Tracing Symons's response to Huysmans during the period that separates these two passages reveals other tensions and contradictions within this phase of British Decadence. I am strongly indebted here to the work of Kirsten MacLeod in this field. Whilst her monograph, *Fictions of British Decadence* (2008) acknowledges the influence of French writers, it lays out the structures of a specifically British Decadent scene at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, she draws attention to the middle-class background of British writers associated with Decadence and points out that Symons, Arthur Machen, John Davidson, and Robert Hichens were all the sons of clergymen, whilst Richard Le Gallienne, M. P. Shiel, Max Beerbohm, Ernest Dowson were sons of 'the business middle class' (MacLeod 2008, 26–27). The class origins of these men are central to her main argument:

the images of the Decadent as aristocratic dandy and as bohemian emerged as a product of the tensions between the professional business fractions of the middle class from the mid-nineteenth century on, as the middle class as a whole obtained hegemonic power and as the professional fraction expanded rapidly. (MacLeod 2008, 22)

- 8 MacLeod's work thus belongs to a strand of critical thinking since the 1990s that contradicts the proclamations of material and political disinterest that characterise the emergence of Decadence from Aestheticism.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, MacLeod invokes 'the literary field' to describe the intersection of writers, discourses and agents during this period, arguing that we can read their interactions in terms of the 'battle for cultural authority' (MacLeod 2008, 38–56). Even as critics such as Symons espoused anti-bourgeois Decadent values, they can be seen as imbricated within the structures of more material 'professional' concerns.
- 9 In terms of Symons's response to Huysmans, this can be seen most clearly by examining his journalistic career in greater detail. The growing field of Victorian periodical studies complements MacLeod's work very closely here, with its emphasis on the status of periodicals and magazines as corporate enterprises driven by publishers, editors and

owners as well as the journalists and critics whose words appear in their pages. As Laurel Brake points out, the competing ideologies and interests of these actants can be obscured when material first published in a periodical is gathered together and re-issued within the seemingly monolithic form of an essay collection (Brake 1994, 66). Brake's argument derives from work on Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, but Symons is a case in point too. He is now better known for collections, such as *Studies in Two Literatures* (1897) and *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which was first published in 1899, but the contents of these works all derive from his prior involvement with a range of magazines and journals from the *Athenaeum* to the *Academy* and the *Saturday Review*. If we look again at the periodical origins of his critical work, we can see how it is embedded in the kinds of competing interests and projects identified by MacLeod as characteristic of the wider 'professional' scene of British Decadence.

- 10 Consider Symons's account of the man of letters, George Saintsbury, in the *Academy* during July 1891. Reviewing *Essays on French Novelists*, Symons made a point of praising the older critic's enthusiastic previous advocacy for the writings of Flaubert, Gautier, Henry Murger and others at a point 'when French literature was much less known in England than it is now'. 'In 1878', Symons observes, Saintsbury 'was in the very first rank of those who cared for the newest things in French literature' (Symons 1891b, 30). In 1891, however, Symons takes him to task for failing a more recent generation, accusing him of a 'curious determined exclusiveness in regard to quite contemporary French literature' (Symons 1891b, 30). Saintsbury, Symons observes, disdains Verlaine and Zola, and dismisses Huysmans as 'a farceur or as a Zolaist' (Symons 1891b, 31). Not only has Saintsbury's critical acumen failed him here, he has failed to keep up with events. For the publication of *À rebours* and *Là-bas* had made public Huysmans's break from the naturalism of Zola and the *Soirées de Médan* group. Writing off Huysmans as a 'Zolaist', Symons points out, betrays how Saintsbury has fallen behind the times.
- 11 Behind these explicit criticisms are several implicit factors relating to Symons's own authority as a critic. The first relates to periodical writing more generally. As James Mussell and Mark Turner and others have shown, time and timing in various forms are inseparable from our understanding of periodicals. This may range from the frequency or intervals at which a particular publication or type of content appears, to what Turner describes as the reliance of periodicals 'on the "new" and on the very concept of advancement, of moving forward, of futurity' (Turner 184). The latter consideration is especially pertinent to the kind of review writing that Symons undertakes in his response to Saintsbury, since reviews tend to be premised upon supplying readers with an informed perspective on recent developments in contemporary culture and literature. This orientation can be seen in Symons's emphasis upon 'the newest things' in relation to Saintsbury and 'the literature of the day' within his description of *À rebours* for the *Fortnightly Review* in 1892.
- 12 In this context, Symons implicitly asserts his own superior grasp of the contemporary literary scene by drawing explicit attention to Saintsbury's failure of historical understanding about Huysmans's career. This has a second, mimetic value: just as Huysmans succeeds Flaubert, and Huysmans's Decadent writings succeed his phase as a Naturalist writer, so Symons implicitly positions himself to succeed Saintsbury as a cultural authority for a present generation of readers.

- 13 Symons's criticisms of Saintsbury draw out a concern with establishing his own authority as a reviewer that can also be found in his profile of Huysmans for the *Fortnightly Review*. As Symons noted in the *Academy*, most of *Essays on French Novelists* had previously appeared in the *Fortnightly*, so writing there about Huysmans may have been a means for Symons to enact his literary succession from Saintsbury whilst further establishing his own expertise upon 'quite contemporary' French literature. But these concerns are also embedded in the detail and rhetorical strategies of Symons's prose: recall the passing reference to his access to inside knowledge in his account of *À rebours*. In the 'breviary' passage, quoted above, Symons begins by alluding to the gossip which connected Huysmans's fictional creation, Des Esseintes, to a Parisian contemporary ('a real man'), Robert de Montesquiou (who later served as a model for Marcel Proust's Baron de Charlus). In the process, Symons hints at his own access to occluded biographical information and locates himself amongst 'those who know'.
- 14 This assertion of direct knowledge through personal connection is a common thread throughout his profile of Huysmans, which begins with the claim that 'the novels of M. Huysmans' are 'the sincere and complete expression of a very remarkable personality'. (Symons 1892, 402). Symons then observes:
- To realise how faithfully and how completely Huysmans has revealed himself in all he has written, it is necessary to know the man. (Symons 1892, 402)
- 15 The implication here of special access or insider knowledge informing this generalisation is subsequently made explicit:
- I have seen Huysmans in his office—he is an employé in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a model employé; I have seen him in a café, in various houses; but I always see him in memory as I used to see him at the house of the bizarre Madame X. (Symons 1892, 403)
- 16 This direct personal connection clearly sets up Symons as one of 'those who know'. But an important set of further influences also runs through this sequence. Firstly, as Ed Block has shown in relation to Symons's writings about Verlaine, he is refining and transforming a biographical mode of literary criticism inherited from Walter Pater. Where Pater hints allusively at 'the idiosyncratic or enigmatic image' of the writer in essays such as his account of Prosper Mérimée (Block 760), Symons develops his own complex model of Huysmans as a 'personality'. By citing the different circumstances in which he has encountered Huysmans and indicating the different social roles played by the French writer (artist, civil servant, café-goer, attendee at literary salons, etc.), Symons affirms a diverse model of identity; at the same time, he reconciles this complexity through the fact of his own access to Huysmans in each of these roles.
- 17 This implicit emphasis upon the authority he has acquired through social connections as well as literary expertise not only continues the preoccupation with 'cultural authority' described by Kirsten MacLeod, it confirms another aspect of the material concerns she identifies at the heart of British Decadence. For, in contrast with the exclusivities of Paterian Aestheticism, Symons's approach to Huysmans can also be aligned with popular culture and the development of the 'New Journalism' in the late nineteenth century, especially its fascination with literary celebrity. Ford Madox Ford recalled:
- In those days writers were interviewed; their houses, their writing desks, their very blotting pads, were photographed for the weekly papers. Their cats, even, were immortalized by the weekly press. (Waller 423)

- 18 As Philip Waller notes, this neatly encapsulates the preoccupation of celebrity journalism with interviewing and direct contact and various forms of visual representation of the daily lives of artists and writers. Although no photograph accompanied Symons's article, he does refer to Huysmans's cat, and his evocation of Huysmans at the salon of 'Madame X' (Berthe Courrière) recalls the 'Celebrities at Home' series in *The World* under the editorship of Edmund Yates or the 'Portraits of Celebrities at Different Times of their Lives' series in *The Strand* under George Newnes (Eastley 139; Waller 352). In this light, Symons's reference to 'a very remarkable personality' acquires a double meaning: as well as referring to the complex psychology of the French writer, Symons hints at Huysmans's status as an increasingly famous person.<sup>3</sup>
- 19 This consonance between aspects of Symons's approach to Huysmans and the genre of celebrity profile confirms the findings of Laurel Brake, who discerns a closer relation between Decadence and New Journalism than might seem obvious. Focussing on Henry Harland and John Lane's *Yellow Book* as a flagship periodical publication associated with Decadence, she describes its 'textual politics' as:
- ... eclectic from the outset, looking back to the reign of the quarterlies and invoking high Art and Literature, but at the same time participating in the discourses of the new journalism, the new woman, the new culture, and the new art. (Brake 1995, 48)
- 20 The publication of Symons's essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' in *Harper's New Magazine* during June 1893 indicates that this intersection between 'high Art' and other more popular 'discourses' was not an isolated phenomenon. Also published in the United States, *Harper's* circulation in the United Kingdom alone during 1893 was around 10,000 and possibly as high as 25,000 a month (Brake 1994, 107). Whilst Symons refers to a 'Decadent Movement', the essay consists largely of individual verbal portraits, accompanied by engravings of photographic portraits too, in the case of Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Maurice Maeterlinck and W. E. Henley. Once again, Symons deploys the trappings of the New Journalism and its cult of celebrity in the service of Decadence. The mode of publication of his essay confirms a running tension between radical elitist aesthetics and populist marketing strategies that lies at the heart of British Decadence.
- 21 If 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' exemplifies the tensions between materialism and anti-bourgeois disinterest identified by MacLeod, it also illustrates a different kind of conceptual contradiction within Decadence. Although it serves as a key statement in English of Decadent values, Symons's essay also manages to call into question the coherence of any 'movement' at the outset. Noting that the individual writers he is going to discuss were uncomfortable with labels such as 'Decadent', 'Symbolist' and 'Impressionist', he observes:
- These terms, as it happens, have been adopted as the badge of little separate cliques, noisy, brainsick young people who haunt the brasseries of the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and exhaust their ingenuities in theorising over the works they cannot write. (Symons 1893, 858)
- 22 This passage draws attention to the way that younger contemporary writers in France, such as Jean Lorrain and Anatole Baju, editor of *Le Décadent*, who explicitly identified themselves as Decadents, took their inspiration from a slightly older generation of writers, including Verlaine, Mallarmé and Huysmans who felt less enthusiasm for the term. In advocating to English readers for the 'Decadent movement', Symons chose to

focus on the latter and disparage the former as 'noisy, brainsick young people'. Indeed, this passage calls the authenticity of the younger generation of French writers into question, precisely because they seek to identify themselves as Decadents.

- 23 The resulting tension between his particular choice of exemplary French writers and Symons's apparent desire to keep up with recent cultural events also affects his curious choice of contemporary English writers to represent Decadence. Neglecting more obvious candidates such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, Symons opted only for W. E. Henley and Walter Pater (who apparently resented his inclusion).<sup>4</sup> The presence of Henley is particularly idiosyncratic, since it was under Henley's editorship that the *Scots Observer* published Charles Whibley's scathing dismissal of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as suited only for 'outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys' (Wilde 372). Such was Henley's reputation for cultural conservatism that many assumed that he was the author of this unsigned review (McDonald 32–47). From some perspectives, he is the opposite of a Decadent writer.
- 24 The awkward coherence of Symons's essay is, I think, more broadly representative of defining tensions within Decadence as a concept and a movement. It informs the unease which contemporary critics experience when trying to define the very term 'Decadence'. David Weir notes: 'Practically everyone who writes about decadence begins with the disclaimer that the word itself is annoyingly resistant to definition' (Weir 1); summarising controversy on this topic, Lisa Rodensky refers to 'the definitional quagmire' (Rodensky xxv–xxvi); and Charles Bernheimer goes so far as to define Decadence as 'a semantic wound' (Bernheimer 5). Amongst the causes for discomfort, difficulties in accommodating the differences between French and English literary forms and social mores are central, but the tensions, described above, between aspirations towards the exclusive status of High Art and forms of popular dissemination are also important. Recent work by Vincent Sherry suggests that a fundamental dissonance in the orientation of Decadence towards time also plays an important role here.
- 25 Although central to our understanding of modernity, nineteenth-century Decadence was etymologically and historically rooted in ideas of decline, reflecting a peculiar orientation towards the present moment. Des Esseintes's eschewal of Virgil and Ovid in favour of Petronius and Tertullian in *À rebours* is characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the final years of the Roman Empire. Huysmans's protagonist relishes the complex style and clashing registers of Petronius' writings, but his tastes also exemplify a double time, whereby the historical crisis or decadence of Rome is felt to resonate with turbulent social and political events in the nineteenth century. The pejorative implications of the term 'decadence' are important here too. For hostile critics, Decadent works epitomised an imminent condition of decline or the threat of crisis; to its proponents, Decadence responded to those conditions, channelling what Walter Pater called 'a fine and comely decadence' (Thornton 36). In this way, the term became a badge of pride or a statement of resistance.
- 26 It is in this context that Vincent Sherry identifies Decadence as a 'literary sensibility' (Sherry 40) and, more importantly, a 'temporal imaginary' characterised by this ambivalent orientation towards present and past (Sherry 26; 33; 38, *passim*). The double time of Decadence—the way that it re-imagines the present through the past whilst seeing itself as somehow at odds with the present—imparts, for Sherry, a queer



and unsettling power of critique. And it is precisely this that places Decadence at the heart of modernity and Modernism.

- 27 The contradictions and awkward qualities of 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' offer some confirmation of this thesis. There is something untimely about an essay that places *À rebours* at the centre of an account of 'the newest movement in literature' even though it had been published ten years previously (Symons 1893, 859). In this context, it should be noted that Symons was not the first English writer to draw attention to Huysmans: as Cevasco has noted, George Moore reviewed *À rebours* for the *St James Gazette* in September 1884—the year of its publication (Cevasco 41–66). So there is a double sense in which Decadence, as Symons presents it, is 'the latest movement in European literature'. His Decadent manifesto is, in effect, playing catch-up.
- 28 Vincent Sherry's work makes such historical disjunctions seem ironically timely: the peculiarities of Symons's essay become expressive of a temporal dissonance that Sherry indicates is more widely representative of Decadence. However, Sherry singles out Symons explicitly for criticism, claiming that his shift of affiliations from writing about 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' in 1893 to publishing a collection of essays entitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* only six years later, misled subsequent critics, such as Edmund Wilson and Frank Kermode into accepting Symbolism as the predominant guiding aesthetic of Modernism (Sherry 6–9; 32–35). This account of Symons's shifting affiliations rests on Sherry's reading of his practice as a poet, but I shall show in the remainder of this essay that closer scrutiny of Symons's critical writings during this period through his response to Huysmans sheds further important light upon the complexities and contradictions of his shift from Decadence to Symbolism.
- 29 The nature of Huysmans's own shifting values as a writer is central here, as is his broader reception. For his public turn towards Catholicism, as Elizabeth Emery records, brought Huysmans fame and widespread popularity:
- Huysmans became a celebrity as a result of *En route*. Between 1895 and 1898 the book sold over 20,000 copies and attracted fan mail from all over the world. He had become a 'confessor' for his readers, and his correspondence, which he described as 'endless', was so abundant that he wrote a new preface to *En route* to stop the flow of letters. Some of his readers later became so persistent that they stalked him. (Emery 105)
- 30 *La cathédrale* subsequently became Huysmans's 'greatest success yet', selling 20,000 copies in France within a month (Emery 13; 119). The treatment of his work in translation indicates that this success was echoed across the channel too. Terry Hale notes that no English translation of *À rebours* appeared until 1922, but C. Kegan Paul's version of *En route* was published in 1896, only one year after the French original; Clara Bell's translation of *La cathédrale* appeared in 1898, within a year of its publication in French (Hale 684).<sup>5</sup>
- 31 Reviews of Huysmans's work in the British press confirm the spread of his renown in the U.K. Whilst the resources of ProQuest's British Periodicals database are not exhaustive, they provide a useful representative sample. Digital searches reveal poor coverage for Huysmans's work before the 1880s and yield no reviews of *À rebours* upon its publication.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, reviews of the French text of *En route* appeared in the *National Observer* and *Speaker* during 1895 and Paul's translation received reviews in *The Academy*, *London Quarterly Review*, *Review of Reviews* and *Saturday Review* during the

second half of 1896.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *La cathédrale* was reviewed in *The Academy*, *Review of Reviews*, *Saturday Review*, *Athenaeum*, and *Cosmopolis* during 1898.<sup>8</sup>

- 32 In this context, Symons's approach to his subject was *ahead* of its time when he profiled Huysmans for the *Fortnightly Review* back in 1892. Drawing upon the methods of the New Journalism, Symons's piece anticipates the genuine celebrity which would come to the French writer only a few years later. Following the success of *En route* and *La cathédrale*, Huysmans was the subject of interviews and profiles in *The Outlook* during August 1898 (Healy 91–92) and *The Academy* in October 1898, within the 'Academy Portraits' series (Anon. 1898a, 196–97). Symons's concern at the start of the decade with Huysmans as a 'personality' looks prescient.
- 33 This popularity and relative ubiquity in the British press has other implications. In his review of George Saintsbury, Symons had staked his knowledge of Huysmans's career amongst his credentials as an exponent of recent avant-garde French writing to English readers. Relative to Huysmans, this position may have been hard to sustain as coverage of his writings became widespread.
- 34 The fact that this new fame stemmed from novels published in the late 1890s that renounce or move away from the apparent Decadence of *À rebours* produces further historical ironies. At a libel trial in 1895, the counsel for the Marquis of Granby, Edward Carson used the likelihood that Huysmans's novel had inspired parts of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to blacken Oscar Wilde's name by association with its Decadent presentation of Des Esseintes's transgressive sexuality (Wilde 386–87). Only one year later, Huysmans was being acclaimed for the apparent piety of *En route*: the *Review of Reviews* even commended this 'notable volume' to 'hardheaded' Protestants for its insights into Catholic doctrines of salvation (Anon. 1896c 173–74). The dangerous exemplum of Decadence was being lauded as a figure of virtue.
- 35 Back in 1891, Symons had built his expertise on Huysmans around his sensitivity to the novelist's transition from Zolaist naturalism to the sensual indulgence of Decadence. But Huysmans's subsequent turn away from the Satanic occultism of *Là-bas* towards the Catholic Church may raise doubts about the coherence and authenticity of his literary and spiritual values. Whilst Symons never voices such doubts openly, a concern about the direction of Huysmans's continuing career is implicit in his accounts of these later works. Initially, Symons's review of *En route* seems continuous with his previous approach. It begins with an emphasis upon the novelist's biography and person that recalls the Paterian influences upon his profile of Huysmans's for the *Fortnightly Review*:
- To the student of psychology, few more interesting cases could be presented than the development of M. Huysmans. (Symons 1895, 312)
- 36 There is a shift here, however, from the evocation of 'personality' to the pseudo-scientific presentation of Huysmans as a case study. This note of clinical detachment may reflect an element of ambiguity in Symons's own orientation towards Huysmans. Whilst the article's title, 'M. Huysmans as a Mystic' records clearly this new phase in the French writer's career, it could also imply that 'mystic' is simply another role in a varied and shifting pattern of values. In his search for a means of linking these phases of Huysmans's career, Symons draws attention to the intermediate implications of the title, *En route*:

What will be the next step, one wonders? Whatever it is, it can hardly fail to be surprising, it can hardly fail to be in some sort logical, for M. Huysmans's

development has hitherto been along an ascending spiral, an enigmatical but always ascending spiral of the soul. (Symons 1895, 313)

37 Although Symons acknowledges surprise here, his argument and figure of speech attempt to convey an underlying ('logical') constancy. The image of a spiral derives from Catholic sources, echoing Dante's progress through the *Divine Comedy* or the mystic writings of St John of the Cross; but is also unresolved. Like the title of *En route* itself, Symons opens up the possibility of further change ('the next step') or development.

38 Three years later, Symons's review of *La cathédrale* also expresses a concern with identifying the shape and trajectory of Huysmans's career:

And so, in 'La Cathédrale,' M. Huysmans does but carry further the principle which he had perceived in 'En Route,' showing as he does, how inert matter, the art of stones, the growth of plants, the unconscious life of beasts, may be brought under the same law of the soul, may obtain, through symbol, a spiritual existence. (Symons 1898, 199)

39 The evocation of 'symbol' in this passage attempts to smooth away formal and thematic transitions within the French writer's output. During the course of this review, Symbolism comes to provide Symons with a narrative about Huysmans's formal achievement: the scrupulous accumulation of 'detail' that characterises Huysmans's Naturalist, Decadent and post-Decadent writings, Symons suggests, has always been associated with an intimation of something beyond this material world. 'Hence', he concludes, 'all that description, that heaping up of detail, that passionately patient elaboration: all a means to an end' (Symons 1898, 199). Where Symons had criticised Saintsbury's inability to keep up with Huysmans's transition from realism to Decadence in 1891, this review seems to question whether there are any transitions or differences to remark.

40 These aspects of Symons's reviews of Huysmans acquire another significance in light of his own transition from Decadence to Symbolism, criticised by Vincent Sherry. Firstly, the terms Symons associates with Huysmans, perhaps unsurprisingly, seem to be co-terminous with his own predilections as he dropped Decadence in favour of Symbolism. But the manner in which he managed this transition is curious. Recognising the existence of Symbolism and Impressionism in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' during 1893, Symons deliberately subsumed them as two 'branches' of 'that new kind of literature which is perhaps more broadly characterised by the word Decadence' (Symons 1893, 858-59). When he adopted Symbolism as the master term during 1899, Symons made no acknowledgement of this previous position. Instead he referred disparagingly to 'something which is vaguely called Decadence' (Symons 1899, 9). His 'Preface' to *The Symbolist Movement* observes that readers may be surprised to find him talking about 'Mysticism' (Symons 1899, vi), a change which he attributes to the influence of his friend, W. B. Yeats. But the title of his previous review of *En route* from 1895, 'M. Huysmans as a Mystic' suggests that Symons's response to Huysmans was also influential here. This connection is strengthened by the fact that Symons also took the wording of his dismissal of Decadence in *The Symbolist Movement* from that review of *En route*, which refers to *À rebours* as 'the one real, the one quintessential book which has been produced by the literature vaguely called the decadence' (Symons 1895, 312). Through the process of revision, Symons's orientation towards both Decadence and Symbolism is closely linked to his reading of Huysmans.

- 41 In this context, Symons's preoccupation with the consistency of Huysmans's literary and spiritual values in his review articles is highly suggestive of an anxiety (conscious or not) about the authenticity and permanence of his own affiliations—the absence of comment in *The Symbolist Movement* upon his previous advocacy for Decadence as a master term is particularly revealing here. As such, the detail and context of his critical journalism help confirm Sherry's criticism of similar shifts in the aesthetics of Symons's poetry. But the repercussions are much broader than Symons's own career and intellectual development. For his influential description of *À rebours* as 'the breviary of the decadence' was also shaped by this period of apparent vacillation and anxiety.
- 42 As discussed at the start of this essay, Symons first compared *À rebours* to the 'breviary' in the *Fortnightly Review* during 1892, before this comparison evolved into the form by which it has been so widely repeated in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. However, this phrase did not appear in the first edition of *The Symbolist Movement*: the familiar wording of this 'breviary' comparison only came into existence as Symons revised his collection for a second edition during 1908. At that point, he changed the title of one essay from 'Huysmans as a Symbolist' to 'The Later Huysmans' and added approximately 1,350 words of material from an unsigned review of *De tout* (1902) in the *Athenaeum* of 16 August 1902 and from 'M. Huysmans as a Mystic', which he had already re-published elsewhere in *Studies from Two Literatures* (1897). He made only minor verbal changes to the other essays in the collection, so these alterations are extremely unusual in their extent. They mark out Huysmans's importance to Symons in the aftermath of his recent death in May 1907, but also indicate how closely Symons's public pronouncements on Huysmans had become associated with his own shifting patterns of aesthetic and spiritual affiliation.
- 43 As Symons made these changes, he altered the reference in 'M. Huysmans as a Mystic' to *À rebours* as 'the one real, the one quintessential book which has been produced by the literature vaguely called the decadence', substituting the now familiar reference to 'the fantastic unreality, the exquisite artificiality of *A Rebours*, the breviary of the decadence'. This may reflect a practical necessity: as noted above, Symons had referred to 'something which is vaguely called Decadence' in his original preface to the collection, so the change may have been intended to avoid introducing repetition into the second edition. But part of the oddity of the breviary phrase in its familiar form as it enters *The Symbolist Movement* is that it supplants the kind of disparaging allusion to Decadence elsewhere in the volume associated with Symons's turn to Symbolism. I think this hidden textual history is also suggestive in terms of the influences and tensions associated with Huysmans for Symons. The result is an odd palimpsest of his responses to different phases of Huysmans's career over a period of fifteen years. In contrast with Symons's earlier insistence upon fidelity to the sequence and teleological trajectory of Huysmans's career, the 'breviary of decadence' phrase embodies a knotted, contradictory chronology.
- 44 My claim for the broader repercussions of what might seem a minor textual anomaly, rests here on the degree to which the genesis and evolution of this phrase provide curious confirmation of Sherry's conception of Decadence as a complex and paradoxical 'temporal imaginary' (despite his direct criticisms of Symons). The timely fixations of Symons's journalistic career discussed in the first half of this essay—his preoccupation with cultural authority; the connections between reviewing and the

'newest' texts and cultural events; his deployment of the trappings and methods of the New Journalism's culture of celebrity—turn out to be continuous with this deeper untimely aspect to his work, a quality which resonates with the conflicting and untimely values of Decadence outlined by Sherry. In this context, the imbrication of the 'breviary' phrase in the intertwining fluctuations of Huysmans's artistic pathway and Symons's career as a critic further could stand as a figure for the tensions and contradictions within Decadence itself.

- 45 In concluding, a comparable change of mind by Oscar Wilde provides further evidence that this crux resonates more widely within the *fin de siècle*. It is generally recognised that *À rebours* provided one model for the 'novel without a plot' sent to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When his novel was first published in *Lippincott's Magazine* during 1890, Wilde referred to

The style in which it was written . . . that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Décadents*. (Wilde 259)

- 46 Revising this passage for book publication, he changed the final word to 'Symbolistes' (Wilde 104). Wilde's change of heart pre-dates Symons by several years. It suggests that any equivocation within the longer history of Symons's response to Huysmans reverberates more generally within this period. The timing of this change indicates that even Symons's attempt to ditch Decadence for Symbolism may have been a belated move. The vexed contexts of Symons's famous 'breviary' comparison point to a fundamental hesitation or equivocation about Decadent values which contributes to the general belated and awkward character of Decadence for British writers even when they come closest to their French counterparts.

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## NOTES

1. See, for example: Baldick 119 and 480; Boyiopolous 2; Pittock 71; Murray 11; Gagnier 2004, 45; Bernheimer 71; Sheehan 33; and Sherry 9.
2. See, for example, Gagnier 1984; Fletcher; Denisoff.

3. OED 'Personality' Sense 3b includes historical citations from Thomas De Quincey in 1848, George Bernard Shaw in 1889 and Virginia Woolf in 1919 indicating that the word 'personality' was acquiring precisely this association with celebrity during the second half of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth.
4. Symons subsequently removed the passages on Pater. Although 'Apollo in Picardy' appeared in the same issue of *Harpers*, Laurel Brake suggests that Pater may have feared that the association of Decadence with sexual transgression would make his homosexuality public (Brake 2004, 268–82).
5. Hale points out that, in comparison with Huysmans's sales in France, the print runs for *En route*, *The Cathedral* and *The Oblate* in translation were 2,000 copies; *En route* was so successful it prompted a second edition of another 1,000 copies in the same year as its initial appearance.
6. Moore's review (discussed previously) is a notable exception to this—absent from the ProQuest database—that also confirms the general lack of coverage prior to Symons's interventions. This paucity of reference may explain why Symons's later phrase has acquired such a purchase upon the critical imagination.
7. See Derechef 1895; Anon. 1895; Gull 1896; Anon. 1896a; Anon. 1896b; and Anon. 1896c.
8. See Anon. 1898a; Anon. 1898b; Anon. 1898c; Brunetière 1898; and Gosse 1898.

## ABSTRACTS

Arthur Symons's description of J. K. Huysmans's *À rebours* as 'the breviary of decadence' is widely cited by critics. It has had a significant influence on our understanding of Huysmans and upon histories of the Decadent movement more generally. This article examines the complex and changing textual history of this phrase as it is found in Symons's journalistic writings. Across various periodicals, I trace the literary and social concerns that underlie Symons's response to Huysmans during the 1890s. In the process, I uncover a set of conflicting motives and forms that can be traced to the contradictions and complexities of Decadence as a movement and concept. Symons's comparison of *À rebours* to the Catholic breviary is exemplary here: although he first formulated this during 1892, he did not arrive at the familiar form in which it has been so influential until 1908, at which point he had disavowed Decadence for Symbolism. Drawing on recent work by Vincent Sherry I argue that this textual crux has broader consequences for our understanding of the untimely nature of Decadence, especially as it was encountered by English-speaking British readers. I show how Symons's response to Huysmans epitomises the elusive and difficult nature of Decadence within the form of his writings, as much as his critical pronouncements.

« Le bréviaire du mouvement décadent »: ainsi Arthur Symons qualifiait le roman de J. K. Huysmans *À rebours*. Cette description, que les critiques citent souvent, eut une influence significative sur notre compréhension de Huysmans et, plus généralement, sur les différentes histoires du mouvement décadent. Cet article examine les vicissitudes de l'histoire textuelle de cette expression telle qu'on peut la trouver dans les écrits journalistiques de Symons. À travers l'étude de divers périodiques, l'article retrace les préoccupations littéraires et sociales qui sous-tendent la réaction de Symons à Huysmans durant les années 1890. Ce faisant, l'étude permet de révéler un ensemble de motivations et de formes conflictuelles qui peuvent être reliées aux contradictions et complexités de la Décadence comme concept et comme mouvement. La



comparaison proposée par Symons entre *À rebours* et le bréviaire catholique est exemplaire à cet égard. En effet, bien qu'il ait formulé cette comparaison en 1892, il ne parvint pas à la forme qui eut le retentissement que l'on sait avant 1908, date à laquelle il renia le Décadentisme comme équivalent du Symbolisme. Sous l'égide des travaux récents de Vincent Sherry, l'article suggère que le cœur de ce problème textuel a de lourdes conséquences sur notre compréhension des qualités intempestives du Décadentisme, surtout dans la forme sous laquelle elle fut découverte par les lecteurs britanniques. Enfin, il montre comment, dans ses écrits et ses critiques, la réponse de Symons à Huysmans synthétise la nature insaisissable du Décadentisme.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Symons (Arthur), Huysmans (J. K.), decadence, symbolism, periodicals, Saintsbury (George)

**Mots-clés:** Symons (Arthur), Huysmans (J. K.), décadence, symbolisme, périodiques, Saintsbury (George)

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