

‘Ériger en Lois’? Residual Decadence in T. S. Eliot and Richard Aldington

In his essay ‘The Perfect Critic’ (1920), T. S. Eliot contends that Arthur Symons’s criticism amalgamates the wish to ‘ériger en lois’ (‘to construct in laws’) with the creative impulse of personal impressions. Essentially, Symons organises his own subjective impressions into intellectual laws. This example of appropriated influence also applies to the formal experiments of young Modernist poets of the 1910s as they were under the spell of 1890s Decadence. In their effort to authenticate and formalise their poetic vision, Ezra Pound, H. D., Richard Aldington, Eliot, and others (mis)appropriate Decadent Aestheticism whilst caught up in it; they do not efface its traces but face its residue instead. My discussion will focus on Aldington and Eliot because their essays and poems feature explicit and implicit connections with Decadence. The contributions of Aldington – the war poet of Imagism – to the Imagist anthologies, and his own collections *Images: Old and New* (1916), *Images of Desire* (1919), and even *Images of War* (1919), are imbued with Decadent tropes of beauty, ephemerality, violence, eroticism, and the metropolis. Although Imagism preferred neatness of expression, rejecting excess, shared with Decadence a preference for artifice and form, and was indebted to the slight impressionist lyric of the 1890s. Eliot was famously swayed by Symons’s momentous *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Contemporaneous with the Imagist movement, Eliot’s early poetic endeavours (1909 – 1917) collected in *Inventions of the March Hare* (edited by Christopher Ricks) exhibit a particular fascination with the work of Symons, Dowson, and Wilde.