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## Late style and speaking out: J.A. Symonds's *In the Key of Blue*

Amber K. Regis (University of Sheffield)

*This article examines In the Key of Blue (1893)—an essay collection by John Addington Symonds—as a case study in queer public utterance during the early 1890s. Viewed through the critical lens of late style, as theorised by Edward Said, the evolution of this project, from compilation through to reader reception, reveals Symonds's determination to “speak out” on the subject of homosexuality. Paradoxically, In the Key of Blue was thus a timely and untimely work: it belonged to a brief period of increased visibility and expressiveness when dealing with male same-sex desire, spearheaded by a younger generation of Decadent writers, but it also cut against the grain of nineteenth-century social taboo and legal repression. Symonds's essay collection brought together new and previously unpublished work with examples of his writing for the periodical press. These new combinations, appearing together for the first time, served to facilitate new readings and new inferences, bringing homosexual themes to the fore. This article traces the dialogic structure of In the Key of Blue, its strategies for articulating homosexual desire, and examines the response of reviewers, from the hostile to celebratory.*

In May 1890 John Addington Symonds became the inaugural subject for a new series of biographical studies published in *The Pall Mall Gazette*: “Men and Women Who Write”. This feature praised his autobiographical travel writings as the “best things” he had written, and hinted that work was under way on a full account of his life: “But, it is whispered, still more interesting are some of the early chapters of that covetable Autobiography which our author has by him under lock and key.”<sup>1</sup> Tantalising secrecy is invoked to pique the interest of the *Gazette*'s readers, but Symonds himself was less pleased by this casual mention of a private project. In a letter to the feature's author, Ernest Rhys, Symonds thanked him for his “just” criticism but appended the following:

I only wish (apropos of yr article) that you had not mentioned an autobiography of mine, wh is something very different from what you described. But that is not your fault—mine

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<sup>1</sup> [Rhys], “Mr John Addington Symonds”, 2.

rather, who ought not to have mentioned to anyone that I was engaged on what will probably be consigned to the fire now.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to this desire for silence and threat of destruction, Symonds's autobiography—the manuscript he titled *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds Written By Himself*—was originally prompted by “a great temptation to speak out”, to recount his experience as a homosexual man living subject to the moral and legal strictures of nineteenth-century society.<sup>3</sup> But publication was, of course, impossible. The *Memoirs* insist upon the centrality of the “*vita sexualis*” to the “formation of character”, and thus deal openly with Symonds's sexual experiences.<sup>4</sup> In print, in public, they would have been seized and destroyed under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, while their revelations would have prohibited Symonds's return to England, endangering his reputation and his liberty. The autobiography could have been made to turn Queen's evidence under the terms of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, in which acts of gross indecency between men, in public or private, were punishable by up to two years imprisonment. Little wonder that Symonds feared his *Memoirs* would provide the kindling for a posthumous bonfire.

Following explicit instructions to his literary executor, Symonds's *Memoirs* survived (and survive to this day) but they could not help him speak out during his lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Public utterances on homosexual and homoerotic themes, particularly in the shadow of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, required a careful and coded performance. Seeking advice on the

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<sup>2</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 486 (August 4, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 364 (to Henry Graham Dakyns, March 27, 1889).

<sup>4</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Horatio Brown (Symonds's literary executor) bowdlerised the *Memoirs* manuscript to produce his 1895 biography of Symonds. On Brown's death in 1926 the manuscript passed to The London Library where it was subject to a fifty year embargo on publication. In 1984 Phyllis Grosskurth prepared an abridged edition, but to this day one third of the text remains unpublished. For a detailed account of this publication history see Heidt, 7-8, 12-15.

publication of an apologist essay exploring modern sexual ethics, Symonds declared to Edmund Gosse: “My heart burns within me to speak out.”<sup>6</sup> But he acknowledged this was “a dangerous affair, & would incite a disturbance if it exploded on the public.”<sup>7</sup> To avoid this furore, Symonds and other nineteenth-century writers developed and participated across a range of coded homosexual discourses, recognisable to others who shared their predilections and sympathies. Hellenism figures heavily, with its pedagogic and martial relationships between men, tinged with sensuality, while Renaissance art and history provided countless examples of privileged male beauty. These subjects provided a language for articulating homosexual desire, clinging to the coat tails of academic legitimacy and respectability, and drawn from supposedly elite literary and cultural sources. Similarly, the poetry of Walt Whitman, with its model of comradeship and love between men, provided a useful contemporary source. Though Symonds’s work in these areas constitutes a significant proportion of his literary output, he resented the concealment, the polite constructions and delicate phrases, and complained to Gosse of the need to “talk in parables & hide my meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Recognising coded homosexual discourse was thus a form of detective work, a furtive reading between the lines. Symonds’s use of the term “aura” (to describe what David Getsy has termed “homoerotic sympathy”) suggests the enigmatic, elusive quality of coded expression; it could only produce an instinctive or felt recognition, not the longed for declaration, unambiguous and unapologetic.<sup>9</sup>

In the projects undertaken in the final years of his life, following a period of intensive work on the *Memoirs* in 1889, Symonds redoubled his efforts to speak plainly, and as publicly as possible, on the subject of homosexuality. His writing for the periodical press during the early

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<sup>6</sup> Younger, 5 (February 21, 1890).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 (July 12, 1890).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (February 21, 1890).

<sup>9</sup> Younger, 6 (April 4, 1890). Getsy, “Recognising the Homoerotic”, 46.

1890s became increasingly concentrated in new magazines associated with British Aestheticism and Decadence. Of particular significance was his work for *The Artist* (five contributions between 1891-3) and *The Spirit Lamp* (three contributions in 1893, two published posthumously), the short-lived Oxford magazine edited by Lord Alfred Douglas.<sup>10</sup> *The Artist* in particular, under the editorship of Charles Kains-Jackson, was gaining a reputation for daringly public expressions of homosexual sympathy. According to Laurel Brake, Kains-Jackson was attempting “to situate the periodical as a defining centre of a gay community of readers and discourse”, achieving this by a combination of recognisable contributors and coded subjects.<sup>11</sup> The writings and art of Michelangelo Buonarroti formed part of this queer repertoire, and Michelangelo was also the subject of the last major original work Symonds saw through the press. In late 1889 he began a biography of the Renaissance artist, and in 1891 he was granted access to the Archivio Buonarroti. These studies confirmed Symonds’s suspicion that Michelangelo expressed homosexual desire, and revealed attempts to suppress, or purposefully mistranslate, examples of poetry addressed to male recipients: “I think there has been a conspiracy on the part of his Italian editors & biographers to throw dust in the eyes of the public.” Symonds determined to restore these writings, though he feared accusations of purposeful prurience: “But I am afraid of the task before me: truth-telling, without seeming to do it wilfully.”<sup>12</sup> In June 1892, three months before the Michelangelo biography was published, Symonds opened negotiations that would result in his most public (though posthumous) discussion of homosexuality. Commissioning Arthur Symons to act as intermediary, Symonds broached the subject of a book-length study of sexual inversion, offering the idea to Havelock Ellis as editor of the Contemporary Science Series at the Walter Scott Company. Ellis proved

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of these contributions see Babington, 193-4, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Brake, *Print in Transition*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 586 (to Edmund Gosse, June 22, 1891).

receptive, though he doubted such a work could appear under the existing series, while in subsequent correspondence Symonds was able to convince Ellis to act as co-author. Symonds envisioned the work as a serious study of homosexuality from the combined perspectives of history and science, shielding public discussion from accusations of obscenity by claiming authority to speak through new medical discourses, employing the “straight medical man’s co-signature” as a means of self-defence.<sup>13</sup>

*In the Key of Blue and Other Prose Essays* was a collection of Symonds’s writings conceived and published during this time of feverish activity. It was the final work Symonds would see in print: an anthology of aesthetic and homoerotic writings, many of which were drawn from recent contributions to the periodical press, with others taken from unpublished sources such as diaries and private miscellanies. Symonds sent a “prospectus” for the volume to publisher Elkin Mathews just two weeks after he commissioned Arthur Symonds to approach Havelock Ellis, and negotiations for the two projects occurred concurrently.<sup>14</sup> Symonds was also still at work, intermittently, on his *Memoirs*.<sup>15</sup> If the autobiography was a private utterance left for posterity, a delayed address to an imagined future audience, then *In the Key of Blue* is as a daringly public celebration of homoeroticism, part of Symonds’s multifaceted attempts in the early 1890s to speak out. This article traces the evolution of the project, from compilation through to reader reception, and explores how Symonds made use of the essay collection genre to re-contextualise his work. New combinations of public and private writings, appearing together for the first time, provided the means to facilitate new readings and new inferences, bringing homosexual themes to the fore. Thus Symonds was able to re-present his writings,

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<sup>13</sup> Koestenbaum, 44. Symonds would die before *Sexual Inversion* was complete, leaving Ellis to finish the project.

<sup>14</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 700-1 (June 30, 1892).

<sup>15</sup> Symonds does not record the completion of his *Memoirs*. In a letter to his daughter Margaret, he lists the autobiography as something he hopes to complete before “I go hence & see the lovely earth no longer”. *Letters*, 711 (July 8, 1892).

producing a personally revisionist work and demonstrating what Edward Said has theorised as late style, an often shocking dissonance between an artist and the culture they inhabit as they approach the end of their life and career.

### **Symonds's late style**

Symonds was not quite fifty two when he opened negotiations with Elkin Mathews for a new essay collection under the working title, *Essays in a Key of Blue*. Though certainly not old, Symonds's poor health provided him with a preternatural sense of mortality, and he expressed the fraught relationship between age and wellbeing through metaphors of discord and disjunction. In February 1893, just two months before he died, Symonds spent three days in bed suffering from congestion in his lungs. On this occasion, he described his body as a “machine [...] always getting out of gear.”<sup>16</sup> Later that month, in a letter to Horatio Brown, Symonds returned to the idea of a self at variance with time:

I feel threadbare. Fate has made me much too young to grow old properly [...] Out there—in the void infinite, the unexplored, intangible—what is to become of a soul so untamably young in its old ruined body, consuming its last drop of vital oil with the flame of beauty?<sup>17</sup>

The physical body approaching death belies the energy of Symonds's soul, the vitality of his mind. Illness and exhaustion are leitmotifs in his late correspondence, and they produce a clear sense of difference, of his being out of place. As Hilary Fraser has suggested, Symonds's relationship to his own time, to the social body that refused his sexuality, was marked by

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<sup>16</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 812 (to John Johnston, February 3, 1893).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 816 (February 11, 1893).

dissonance and “a crippling sense of belatedness.”<sup>18</sup> This self-understanding informs the *Memoirs*, and can be seen in Symonds’s discovery of Plato and ancient Greece. He imagines “some antenatal experience” in which he “lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover”; while the present moment “vanished into unreality”, he “touched solid ground” in reading the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; while his body inhabited nineteenth-century Britain, his “soul was lodged in Hellas”.<sup>19</sup> In the final years of his life, Symonds cast aside the protection of temporal and geographical distance. Leaving the ancient world and Renaissance behind him, he increasingly addressed the contemporary moment: *A Problem in Modern Ethics* was printed privately, work commenced on *Sexual Inversion* with Havelock Ellis, and he produced a critical study of Walt Whitman that would deal openly with “Calamus” and its sensual depiction of same-sex relationships. But though he addressed the age in which he lived, he was not reconciled to it.

Symonds’s determination to speak out on the subject of homosexuality put him irrevocably at odds with his own time and (predominantly British) readership. And it is this key feature, rather than any conviction he was soon to die, that establishes his work in the early 1890s as a form of late style. Edward Said, in the work he would fittingly leave unfinished, theorised late style as an untimely or inappropriate utterance. Following Adorno, Said conceives of lateness as a state of survival, enduring “beyond what is acceptable and normal”; it is not, therefore, a matter of caution being thrown to the wind in the face of death. Rather, it is the sense of an approaching end-point expressed through a “refracted mode.”<sup>20</sup> The result is a “new idiom” characterised by “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction”; a discourse through

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<sup>18</sup> Fraser, ?

<sup>19</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 99, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Said, 13, 9.

which the artist, paradoxically, “abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it.”<sup>21</sup> Thus lateness is a form of “exile”; not catatonia, but a vital and productive estrangement, a disruptive and subversive loquacity.<sup>22</sup> Symonds’s own experience of exile was literal as well as figurative. He left Britain in the summer of 1877, taking up residence in Davos, Switzerland, until his death in 1893 and spending part of each year in Venice, Italy. The move was ostensibly due to his health, but he also enjoyed the more relaxed, tolerant attitude to homosexuality existing on the Continent. Accompanying this geographical dislocation was Symonds’s figurative exile, his acute sense of discord and self-contradiction: the public man of letters, respectable paterfamilias, and homosexual apologist.

But exile and lateness can function as forms of liberation—for Symonds, providing a release from the strictures and social mores left behind in Britain. In the final years of his life Symonds expressed his untimeliness with increasing anger and frustration. His essays on Greek and modern ethics are imagined as “wild wailings”, the result of writhing in “impotent wrath” at injustice and intolerance; his life and writings on homosexual topics become a form of martyrdom, a wasting and suffering “under the superstitious tyranny of a brutal majority.”<sup>23</sup> But Symonds kept his eyes turned to a more hopeful future:

Will the time for prophecy never come—the hour of emancipation never strike? [...] A deliverer is called for; a champion; some one at any rate to fling his gauntlet in the face of Goliath, & let the truth look.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 7, 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Younger*, 5 (to Edmund Gosse, February 21, 1890).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Attempts to speak out in the 1890s suggest Symonds envisioned himself in this role of David-like champion. *In the Key of Blue* must therefore be seen as part of his determination to challenge the “brutal majority”, the Goliath-like society from whom he felt estranged. Understood in these terms, the essay collection demonstrates a “catastrophic” late style: a refusal of “higher synthesis” with an established order, subverting the expectations of a readership and market it simultaneously addressed and defied.<sup>25</sup>

### **Late style and “new” works**

The man of letters essay collection was an established form by 1892 and one in which Symonds was well versed. As well as numerous collections of travel writing and art criticism—such as *Sketches in Italy and Greece* and *Italian Byways*—Symonds had published *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* in 1890, a two volume collection of new and previously published works on diverse topics. The collection was not well received; there was no clear organising principle and reviewers complained of a lack of coherence. *The Athenaeum* described the essays as “pleasing, but somewhat scrappy”, while *The Pall Mall Gazette* went further, renaming the collection “Mr Symonds on Things in General”: a book “so unfinished” that it “should have gone once more through the crucible, and come out reduced in bulk, refined in quality.”<sup>26</sup> Though it was possible to detect Symonds’s interest in homosexual themes—his celebration of male beauty in “The Model”, for example, or arguments against censure in “Democratic Art”—this focus is not sustained, nor is it explicit. *In the Key of Blue*, by contrast, would be remarkable for its consistency.

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<sup>25</sup> Said, 13, 12.

<sup>26</sup> “Essays Speculative and Suggestive”, 279. “Mr Symonds on Things in General”, 3.

Symonds wrote to the publisher Elkin Mathews on 30 June 1892 and offered the following “prospectus” for a new essay collection:

Prospectus for *Essays in a Key of Blue*

- 1) *In the Key of Blue*. (Unpublished)

A study in prose & verse of the effects of blue in the dress of a Venetian Facchino.

- 2) *Among the Euganean Hills*. (Fortnightly)

Descriptive Article.

- 3) *An Altar Piece by Tiepolo*. (Hobbyhorse)

Criticism & Description of a Venetian Picture.

- 4) *Platonic & Dantesque Ideals of Love*. (Contemporary).

A psychological study in prose.

- 5) *Edward Cracroft Lefroy*. (New Review)

Account of his life & poems.

- 6) *La Bête Humaine* (Fortnightly)

Critique of Zola’s Idealism.

- 7) *Old Norman Songs*. Translation of popular poems, with a prose setting.

- 8) *Clifton and A Lad’s Love*. Prose & Verse written about 30 years ago, & put together recently. Autobiographical & Inedited.

- 9) *A Somersetshire Homestead*. Description of Sutton Court, my brother-in-law Sir Edward Strachey’s place. Inedited.

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- 10) *Culture. Its Meaning & its Uses* (New Review).

- 11) *Notes on Fletcher’s Valentinian* (Fortnightly).

12) *On the Lyrism of the Elizn [sic] Drama* (Fortnightly).

13) *On Lyrics from Elizn [sic] Songbooks* (Inedited).<sup>27</sup>

Symonds's work across multiple disciplines was to be placed side by side—literature, art, history, travel writing, poetry and cultural criticism—and in his preface to the collection, he insists on the “representative” breadth of *In the Key of Blue*, encompassing “the different kinds of work in which I have been principally engaged” (iii).<sup>28</sup> But Symonds's use of syn(a)esthetic terminology and musical metaphors is suggestive of coherence. In particular he stressed to Mathews the central importance of the titular essay: “The essay wh gives the title, comes in the body of the book. But it is quite new, & tunes the whole.”<sup>29</sup> This rhetorical combination of music and colour should be seen in the context of Walter Pater's famous assertion in “The School of Giorgione” that “*All art constantly aspires to the condition of music*”, and Symonds's later commentary on Pater's essay in “Is Music the Type or Measure of all Art?”<sup>30</sup> Though Symonds accepted the argument that content and form should cohere in art—and Pater gives music as the example *par excellence*—he refutes Pater's suggestion that “Art [...] is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception.”<sup>31</sup> Symonds accused Pater of advocating “vagueness of intellectual intention”, of promoting an exaggerated sensuousness: “the lust of the eye or of the ear is of more moment than the thought of the brain.”<sup>32</sup> Symonds, then, retained the ideal of intellectual conception and intention as revealed

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<sup>27</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 700 (June 30, 1892). There are slight variations between the titles of individual essays in the prospectus and how they appear in the final collection.

<sup>28</sup> Symonds, *In the Key of Blue*, iii. All further references are to this edition and page numbers are given in the body of the text.

<sup>29</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 700.

<sup>30</sup> Pater, “The School of Giorgione”, 528 (italics in the original).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>32</sup> Symonds, “Is Music the Type or Measure of all Art?”, 45. When Symonds reproduced this essay in *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, he toned down his use of sexual connotation: the “lust[s]” of the eye and ear are reduced to “delight[s]”. Cf. Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, 186.

through aesthetic beauty and pleasure. His title for *In the Key of Blue* is thus a suggestive allusion (a “blue”-print?) to the collection’s design. Constitutive essays are working together, in harmony, but why might blue be significant? It was the colour of Harrow and Oxford, both important sites of sexual self-discovery for Symonds, but it seems likely that Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* was being invoked. Goethe had been an important influence on Symonds since the 1860s; he adopted his “im Ganzen, Guten, Schönen resolut zu leben” as a creed, using it as an epigraph for *Studies of the Greek Poets* and having it embossed in gold on the cover of *Animi Figura*. For Goethe, the moral associations of blue were to “darkness” and a contradictory, “stimulating negation”. Blue thus epitomises the mixture of fascination and repulsion with which Symonds described his desires: blue “draws us after it”; it vacillates “between excitement and repose”; it is “gloomy and melancholy”, reflecting Symonds’s characterisation of “L’Amour de L’Impossible”.<sup>33</sup> *In the Key of Blue*, therefore, signals its aesthetic and erotic coherence.

If the titular essay was essential, “[tuning] the whole”, the final four pieces were not an integral part of this chorus of voices and hues; Symonds marked them for potential omission if the expediencies of publishing required a shorter book. “In the Key of Blue” was one of five previously unpublished essays included in the collection, the others comprising two works on songs (“Medieval Norman Songs” and “Lyrics from Elizabethan Song-Books”) and two older pieces extracted from Symonds’s diaries (“Clifton and A Lad’s Love” and “Notes of a Somersetshire Home”). In bringing these works before the public, Symonds was particularly concerned by the potential impact of “In the Key of Blue” and “Clifton and A Lad’s Love”. In his letter to Mathews, Symonds warned the former “may be inappropriate for publication” while

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<sup>33</sup> Goethe, 310, 311. “L’Amour de L’Impossible” is a sequence of fourteen sonnets published in *Animi Figura*. In his *Memoirs*, Symonds describes this sequence as autobiographical and written under the stress of attempted sexual repression. Cf. Symonds, *Memoirs*, 240, 267, 272.

the latter was perhaps “too immature.”<sup>34</sup> But in correspondence with sympathetic friends, he singled these works out as vitally important. He urged Edward Carpenter to look closely at “‘Clifton’ and the First Essay” alongside “The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love”, one of the collection’s previously published works; while to Gleeson White, editor of *The Studio*, he described the early diary essays as “[t]he pieces in the book I care for most.”<sup>35</sup> Symonds’s conflicted concern for “In the Key of Blue” and “Clifton and A Lad’s Love”—that they must be read, but they might cause offence—suggests they are foundational to the project. It is no coincidence, therefore, that both describe homosexual desire with a frank, autobiographical voice.

“In the Key of Blue” is a meditation on the figure of Augusto, a Venetian *facchino*, combining poetry and prose in a “word-painting” (15), testing the capacity of language to express colour and the beauty of the male body. Modern critics have not been slow to recognise the explicit homoeroticism of the piece. Catherine Maxwell suggests it be read as an “open love letter” that co-opts the reader’s gaze, making them “complicit in this love affair.”<sup>36</sup> Julia Saville, by contrast, reads Augusto as a literary antecedent for male nudes in mid- to late-Victorian visual art, setting Symonds’s verbal undressings (“*A flawless form [...] ivory-white, / Upon the couch in candle-light*”, 15—italics in the original) alongside Henry Scott Tuke’s erotic portrayals of male bathers.<sup>37</sup> Symonds is ever present in this essay: prose sections detail his encounters with Augusto, their companionship, their travels through city and country; poetry expresses desire, his admiration of male beauty, couched in a Whitmanesque language of comradeship and sympathy. “Clifton and A Lad’s Love”, by contrast, is more directly confessional; there is no careful

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<sup>34</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 701.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 797 (December 29, 1892), 802 (January 10, 1893).

<sup>36</sup> Maxwell, 238, 239.

<sup>37</sup> Saville, 263-5.

contextualising, no academic frame. Symonds's preface takes note of the thirty year "interval" (iii) separating these autobiographical acts, but when the reader arrives at "Clifton and A Lad's Love", they are plunged without further warning into an immediate, immersed account, composed between 1860-6 and extracted from diaries.<sup>38</sup> Setting the template followed by "In the Key of Blue", this essay combines poetry and prose, but rather than celebrate the body and presence of the beloved, the speaker mourns his absence and loss.

The period of composition for "Clifton and A Lad's Love" coincides with Symonds's earliest relationships, chaste and idealised, with Bristol choristers Willie Dyer and Alfred Brooke. Symonds was forced to sever ties with Willie after confessing their "romantic affection" to his father in 1859.<sup>39</sup> His confession came amidst the "Pretor-Vaughan affair", in which he exposed the relationship between Dr Vaughan, headmaster at Harrow, and a pupil, Alfred Pretor.<sup>40</sup> In the *Memoirs*, this event becomes the sign and symbol for many subsequent renunciations, and, with hindsight, Symonds considered this relationship a prophetic turning point: "The back of my life was broken when I yielded to convention, and became untrue in soul to Willie."<sup>41</sup> If memories of Willie provide "Clifton and A Lad's Love" with an element of mourning, its bitter tone was no doubt exacerbated by his frustrated infatuation with Alfred Brooke—"more intense, unreasonable, poignant" than his feelings for Willie—in the years 1861-2.<sup>42</sup> Symonds was again subject to desires he could not indulge, and he turned repeatedly in his private writings to the subject of self-denial. Thirty years after the event, he chose to lay this personal, poetic indictment of forced separation before the public, articulating his anger and hurt. Anonymity and apparent immaturity provide the published essay with a modicum of protection

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<sup>38</sup> For the dating of prose sections in "Clifton and A Lad's Love" see Babington, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 116.

<sup>40</sup> Grosskurth, 38. For an account of these events see Chapter 2, "Harrow".

<sup>41</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 117.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

against accusations of impropriety, enabling it to express what the *Memoirs* concealed within its pages. And indeed, the *Memoirs* are an important key to the essay, where strong intertextual echoes reveal the unnamed male subject of the poems to be Willie. “[F]ear of men, and shame” (158) and lovers separated by a distance “more far than death” (175) are shared and recurring motifs, and both accounts retrace the sounds and landscapes of their relationship: Leigh Woods, the cliffs near the suspension bridge, the music of a “sailor’s melancholy chant” (171).<sup>43</sup> Contemporary readers of *In the Key of Blue* did not, of course, have access to this key, though “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” was clearly and recognisable homosocial; it enabled Symonds to provide some public redress for the lover and relationship he was forced to relinquish—a public utterance with an immediate audience, superseding the more explicit account buried within the pages of the *Memoirs*.

In his prospectus, Symonds described “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” as an “[i]nedited” piece, while in a letter to Charles Kains-Jackson, he singled this essay out as “[a] wholly artless composition of my youth.”<sup>44</sup> Both observations emphasise the work’s raw honesty, a quality antithetical to the polished, polite productions of Symonds’s mature writerly self. In contrast to the coded discourse marking of Symonds’s professional oeuvre, the speaker in “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” deals openly, seemingly unembarrassed, with his desire for a male subject. This “artless” utterance, for Symonds, is indicative of a naive yet authentic expression: a giving voice that was incompatible with the Victorian establishment’s culture of silence. But his use of the term “[i]nedited” goes further to suggest purposeful subversion; though often used as a synonym for unpublished, the term can also imply an absence of censorship, “without [...] alteration or

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Symonds, *Memoirs*, 104-6. A reference to Willie—“as he used to be, as I used to be” (181)—in “Notes on a Somersetshire Home” provides further evidence that he (not the more contemporary Alfred Brooke) is the subject of “Clifton And A Lad’s Love”.

<sup>44</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 701 (to Elkin Mathews, June 30, 1892), 796 (December 22, 1892).

suppression” (*OED*). It seems likely that materials comprising “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” underwent multiple revisions before publication in 1893, giving the lie to Symonds’s claim that it was “artless.” Rictor Norton suggests the work was “probably worked over” in 1885 when Symonds showed the material to Horatio Brown ahead of preparing a privately printed miscellany, and it is reasonable to assume a further, final polish while preparing *In the Key of Blue*.<sup>45</sup> But though the work may have changed along with its audience, Symonds’s claim that it was “[i]nedited” reveals a telling resistance to censorship: private writings from the 1860s are presented to an 1890s audience, without significant suppression beyond the absence of names. And here we return to Said’s conception of late style, for the publication of “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” (and, to a lesser extent, “Notes on a Somersetshire House”) is untimely in two senses. First, taken literally, Symonds’s writings from the 1860s are a form of juvenilia published out of turn. And second, this work reveals an earlier self published out of time. The expressiveness of Symonds’s early writing cuts against the expectations of an 1890s audience—to adopt Said’s vocabulary, they are *inappropriate* and *unacceptable*. It may seem contradictory to read these early writings through the lens of late style, but Symonds’s decision to make them public, in what would be the final months of his life, poses a challenge to popular conceptions of late work as the product of maturity and the crowning glory of an artist’s career. Not the historian of the Renaissance, not the biographer and critic of Shelley, Sidney, Jonson and Michelangelo; Symonds chooses instead to celebrate the youthful, introspective diarist, stripping away the years of public, professional training and experience, presenting instead a self on the cusp of adulthood and its painful disillusionments. In his *Memoirs*, Symonds conceived of human subjectivity caught in a continual process of bargain and capitulation: “We are, all of us, composite beings, made up, heaven knows how, out of compromises we have effected between our impulses and

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<sup>45</sup> Norton, <http://rictornorton.co.uk/symonds/poetry.htm> (accessed October 15, 2012).

instincts and the social laws which gird us round.”<sup>46</sup> As we age, our concessions accrue and we become ever more composite, ever more compromised. If “In the Key of Blue” gives voice to Symonds’s resistance after the fact and his refusal to capitulate further, then “Clifton and A Lad’s Love” gives voice to his self at the beginning of this process, raging against the hurt and injustice felt in the wake of a first significant compromise.

### **Late style and “old” works**

Previously published writings appearing in *In the Key of Blue* were taken, in the main, from Symonds’s contributions to periodicals between 1890-2. The sole exception to this rule was “Some Notes on Fletcher’s *Valentinian*”, first published in 1886 and one of the four essays marked for possible omission. These writings demonstrate a late voice belonging to the latter stages of Symonds’s career, but in their original context of publication, this was dispersed throughout the periodical press. It is also significant that Symonds chose not to include his work for recognisably queer or Decadent periodicals, such as *The Artist* or *The Spirit Lamp*. These pieces were short, many of them poems, unfitted to the pattern of extended essays set by *In the Key of Blue*. But they were also in little need of rescue or recovery; they already inhabited a remarkably open forum for discussions of same-sex desire. Perhaps too open, when one considers the removal of Charles Kains-Jackson as editor of *The Artist* in 1894 as a result of too explicit copy (discussed below).<sup>47</sup> Symonds’s translation of an unfinished Michelangelo sonnet, “On Love and Beauty in the Artist’s Heart”, first penned on the back of a drawing of a male nude, found a ready home within the pages of *The Artist*. And so proved *The Spirit Lamp* for Symonds’s own composition, “To Leander”, a poetic study of male beauty and the “Live image

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<sup>46</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed account of Kains-Jackson’s removal from *The Artist* see Brake, *Print in Transition*, 126-9.

of Uranian Love.”<sup>48</sup> To republish these short pieces, perhaps, would be to court controversy unnecessarily. Thus, as he compiled the collection, Symonds turned instead to his work for straight publications, both popular and specialist, seeking new audiences and recontextualising his late voice.

Four of the selected articles first appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*, established in 1865 as an antidote to periodicals enforcing a monolithic perspective. The *Fortnightly* rejected “restrictions of party and [...] editorial ‘consistency’”; it appealed to “a very various public” and offered “great diversity of individual opinion”.<sup>49</sup> Articles from the *Fortnightly* appearing in *In the Key of Blue* were predominantly literary, including criticism (“Some Notes on Fletcher’s *Valentinian*”, “The Lyricism of the English Romantic Drama” and “*La Bête Humaine*”) and travel writing (“Among the Euganean Hills”). As originally published, the periodical’s eclecticism functioned as protective tissue paper, packaging and containing Symonds’s more daring public utterances. “*La Bête Humaine*”, for example, was published in October 1891 alongside essays exploring English and American flowers, social life in Australia and debates on a national pension fund. In this review, Symonds claimed Émile Zola for idealism, not realism, arguing that his work was heavy with symbol and metaphor. Significantly, Symonds recognised the “aura” of homosexual themes in *La Bête Humaine*, expressed through the character of Jacques Lantier, a man who isolates himself from the company of women due to the homicidal nature of his sexual urges. Writing to Edmund Gosse after reading the novel, Symonds suggested that Zola “should make a study of Sexual Inversion”, and in the published review, he describes Lantier as a “neuropathical” case study subject to a “terrible perversion of the sexual instinct” that “derives

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<sup>48</sup> Symonds, “To Leander”, 29.

<sup>49</sup> “The Fortnightly Review”, 436.

from a remote ancestry” (117).<sup>50</sup> Symonds had encountered sexology and early sexual psychiatry while preparing *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, and the influence of writers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebing can be felt in this pathologised reading of Lantier, couched in the language of heredity and disease. In the *Fortnightly*, however, Symonds’s vicarious interest in heterodox sexuality is buried amongst its pages, sandwiched between Frederic Harrison’s conservative article on “The Emancipation of Women” and E.B. Lanin’s apologetic account of “The Demoralisation of Russia”. Extracted from the *Fortnightly* and read as part of *In the Key of Blue*, “La Bête Humaine” is differently accented, its interest in the connections between passion and perversity brought to the fore.

Three of the selected articles were first published in periodicals established during the final decades of the nineteenth century: periodicals seeking a readership beyond traditional audiences for monthly reviews. Symonds’s short work of art criticism, “On An Altar-Piece by Tiepolo”, first appeared in the October 1891 number of *The Hobby Horse*, that “odd journal” (as Symonds described it) established by the Century Guild of Artists in 1884.<sup>51</sup> *The Hobby Horse* was highly illustrated and printed on good quality rag paper; it was expensive, with a price of two shillings on its first cover, rising to one pound in 1893, with a limited circulation never exceeding five hundred copies.<sup>52</sup> Symonds’s celebration of Tiepolo and his depiction of the blinding of Saint Lucy, an artist out of favour for much of the nineteenth century on account of his perceived Venetian sensuousness, would thus have reached only a small, exclusive readership. According to John Stokes, later numbers of *The Hobby Horse* demonstrate a nascent Decadence, and the journal was a forerunner to better known *fin de siècle* publications such as

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<sup>50</sup> Younger, 6 (April 4, 1890).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 (to Edmund Gosse, July 21, 1890).

<sup>52</sup> Codell, 43. Stokes, 103.

*The Yellow Book*.<sup>53</sup> In choosing to reproduce “On An Altar-Piece by Tiepolo” in the collection, Symonds made clear the Decadent impulses behind his later work, presenting his study of “those higher purposes of elevated pleasure for which the fine arts were created” (51) to a wider audience. In contrast, the readership for essays first published in *The New Review* was already broad. Symonds’s account of the life and work of “Edward Cracroft Lefroy” and his Arnoldian disquisition on “Culture: Its Meaning and Its Uses” first appeared in the March and July 1892 numbers of this periodical, established in 1889 with the hope of attracting working-class readers, its cover price of just six pence intended “to place within the reach of all a critical periodical of the first order”, rising to nine pence in 1891.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the former essay, the decision to publish in a periodical with democratic aims was itself an act of daring. Following a brief account of Lefroy’s life, Symonds identifies a distinctly sensual, homosocial poetic: Lefroy’s “sympathy with youthful strength and beauty, his interest in boyish games and the athletic sports of young men” (89). Symonds celebrates the poet’s “Hellenic instincts”, his “almost pagan delight in nature” (89), and in a telling but secret allusion, Symonds reproduces the phrase previously used in his *Memoirs* to describe his own discovery of Greek “paiderastia”: “Lefroy [...] had his soul lodged in Hellas” (103).<sup>55</sup> Recognising these shared sympathies and desires, Symonds co-opts Lefroy into key nineteenth-century homosexual discourses, reproducing several examples of poetry demonstrating a keen homoerotic gaze, such as the “lad with sun-illuminated eyes” (97) in “Bill: A Portrait”, and a sequence of four sonnets describing the athletic beauty of boys playing at sport (“A Football Player”, “Cricket-Bowler”, “Before the Race” and “A Palæstral Study”). Symonds’s eulogistic article was, in turn, co-opted by *The Artist*: in the

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<sup>53</sup> Stokes, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Houghton, 303.

<sup>55</sup> Pailerastia, from the Greek παιδεραστία, was the term used by Symonds to describe male same-sex relations in ancient Greece, see *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, 43. Cf. Symonds, *Memoirs*, 103.

Art Literature column of the April 1892 number, Symonds's words from *The New Review* are paraphrased or reproduced verbatim. His interest in Lefroy as a poet of male beauty forms a ready part of the gay periodical discourse being fostered in *The Artist*, but Symonds's decision to publish in *The New Review* ensured a broad, popular readership for this otherwise exclusive discourse.

*In the Key of Blue* extends Symonds's project of addressing new audiences. "On An Altar-Piece by Tiepolo", for example, was rescued from the relative obscurity of *The Hobby Horse*, while articles from established or popular monthly reviews were collected together, presenting a new concentration of homoerotic themes. The inclusion of Symonds's polemical essay "The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love", first published in *The Contemporary Review* in September 1890, sets the tone for this more expressive and direct treatment of homosexuality. The article was occasioned by a dispute in 1889 between Symonds and Benjamin Jowett. Symonds was angered by his former tutor's suggestion that love between men in Plato was "in the main a figure of speech", and, in a letter to Jowett, he condemned this tendency to allegorise and deny same-sex relations.<sup>56</sup> Symonds, in his own life, had come to realise the impossibility of sublimating desire through ideal cultural forms, and had grown suspicious of attempts to deal with "the central difficulty" of sexual contact between men "by any dexterity in the use of words."<sup>57</sup> There was a dangerous contradiction, he argued, felt acutely by certain students of Plato, in a society that upheld ancient Greece as an ideal while forbidding homosexuality: "What you call a figure of speech, is heaven and hell to him—maddening, because it is stimulating to the imagination; wholly out of accord with the world he has to live in; too deeply in accord with

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Symonds, *Memoirs*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 101 (to Benjamin Jowett, February 1, 1889).

his own impossible desires.”<sup>58</sup> Soon after this exchange, Symonds penned “The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love”, a public denouncement of idealised sexual relations whether heterosexual, as in the case of Dante and Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*, or homosexual, as in the case of Plato. For Symonds, the mixing of real desires and figurative expression, characteristic of both these source materials and their subsequent critical traditions, results in a “misleading mystical philosophy” (85). Cults of chastity and demands for sublimated desire promise to transform sex, through repression, into “a ladder for scaling the higher fortresses of intellectual truth” (61). But this proves an elusive (and illusive) “will-o’-the-wisp” (85): such promises are dangerous “delusions” and “wandering fires of the imaginative reason” (86); they are castles in the air.

Symonds’s growing abhorrence for evasive circumlocutions and denials of sex provides an important context for the revisions made to articles reproduced in *In the Key of Blue*. Many small revisions were for practical purposes, ensuring internal coherence and consistency between chapters, such as the omission of a short tailpiece to “Some Notes on Fletcher’s *Valentinian*” in which Symonds imagined a “future occasion” and further essay on Fletcher and Beaumont.<sup>59</sup> But other revisions were more pointed. “The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love”, for example, is reproduced without an apologetic and euphemistic caveat positioned early in the original essay: “So far as Greece is concerned, I cannot here avoid touching upon matters alien to modern sympathy.”<sup>60</sup> The removal of justificatory and polite warnings was accompanied elsewhere in the collection by significant additions, the insertion of new material into previously published works dealing more expansively, even defiantly, with homosexual themes. On its first appearance in the *Fortnightly*, “Among the Euganean Hills” was marked by a significant absence: Symonds does

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>59</sup> Symonds, “Some Notes on Fletcher’s *Valentinian*”, 345.

<sup>60</sup> Symonds, “The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love”, 415.

not name Augusto, his lover and companion on these travels. But in *In the Key of Blue*, his name recurs where previously erased; he is present (“and Augusto”, 38) at a jovial scene of drinking and eating, and plays a key role in the revised essay’s new, wistful conclusion:

I will save one tiny episode from the ascent to Pendice, and put it in the form of a dialogue, as it really happened.

*Domenico.*—What herb is that?

*The Peasant.*—Hemlock

*Augusto.* (*bending down to touch the plant.*)—Poor Socrates!

*I.*—Socrates was the Jesus Christ of Greece.

*Augusto.*—Just so. (42-2)<sup>61</sup>

Demonstrating a dual inheritance from Plato and Whitman, Symonds is cast here in the role of Socratic and democratic teacher, educating youth and crossing class boundaries, mourning the Hellenic past. Readers of *In the Key of Blue* have the advantage over readers of the *Fortnightly*; they have access to, and are able to recognise, the coded eroticism of this exchange. The significance of Augusto as an object of desire is made clear to later readers (or re-readers) whereas Symonds complained that the original essay was incomplete:

I had to omit the nicest parts of my diary, to wh. the rest (what I printed) served but as a setting. Some things cannot be published; and the frame goes to the Salon without the picture. I could not introduce Augusto to the English public.<sup>62</sup>

*In the Key of Blue* restores the picture, but does so more thoroughly, more completely, going beyond the inclusion of Augusto’s name. Readers making their way sequentially through the

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Symonds, “Among the Euganean Hills”, 116, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Younger, 7 (to Edmund Gosse, July 12, 1890).

collection will encounter “Among the Euganean Hills” having already enjoyed the titular essay. Read side by side, the new essay elucidates the old: the second poetic study in “In the Key of Blue” was inspired by the same journey to Val San Zibio described in the third diary extract of “Among the Euganean Hills”. Thus the opening essay provides an intertextual and prefatory reference to the second, and Augusto is “introduce[d] to the English public” through the medium of Symonds’s erotically-charged “word painting” (15)—a process peculiarly suited to his metaphor of the empty frame.

As this example demonstrates, essays old and new speak to each other across the collection, their revisions and juxtapositions enabling greater expressiveness. But Symonds was also able to use the occasion of selecting and revising his work as an opportunity to return to old debates, speaking out belatedly in self-defence. The most significant revision to any of the pieces in *In the Key of Blue* is the addition of an entirely new section in “Edward Cracroft Lefroy”. The original essay jumps from a brief biography to the “criticism and illustration” of Lefroy’s poetry, but, in the collection, this transition is interrupted by a discussion of Hellenism and the controversies surrounding the Oxford Professor of Poetry election in 1877.<sup>63</sup> Symonds had been in contention for the position, alongside Walter Pater, but both men withdrew their candidacy following attacks in the press. In his Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater had urged his readers to celebrate their individual, transient and sensory experiences: “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life”<sup>64</sup> But this credo was censured. John Wordsworth warned Pater that such declarations formed a rejection of “fixed principles [...] of religion or morality”, prophesying “the dangers into which [he was]

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<sup>63</sup> Symonds, “Edward Cracroft Lefroy”, 343.

<sup>64</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 210.

likely to lead minds weaker than his own.”<sup>65</sup> Following the controversies sparked by this book, and in the context of continuing euphemistic accusations of paganism, Pater failed to muster enough support and withdrew from the race. For Symonds, the crushing blow came in the form of an article by Richard St. John Tyrwhitt—“The Greek Spirit in Modern Literature”—published in *The Contemporary Review* in March 1877. Though he declared “Mr. Symonds is probably the most innocent of men”, Tyrwhitt nonetheless attacked his “polemical estimate of the glories of Greek life”, his celebration of Greek art, literature and beauty.<sup>66</sup> For Tyrwhitt, the pages of Symonds’s *Studies of Greek Poets* placed Hellenism above Christianity, and, in doing so, staged “a rebellion against nature.” Invoking the homoeroticism of Plato’s *Charmides*, Tyrwhitt declared that “Greek love [...] went frequently against nature”, insinuating Symonds himself in this censure.<sup>67</sup> In the weeks following this publication, Symonds also withdrew from the race.<sup>68</sup>

As published in *The New Review*, “Edward Cracroft Lefroy” made no explicit reference to the Professorship controversy. But in the collection, Symonds speaks back to his critics. Shortly after he and Pater had withdrawn, Lefroy waded in on the debate, publishing “Muscular Christianity” in *The Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduates’ Journal* in May 1877. In the same vein as Wordsworth and Tyrwhitt, Lefroy denounced “Pater-paganism and Symonds-sophistry”, accusing both men of encouraging the reading public to “follow freely the bent of [their] own unchastened disposition” (92, 93). Symonds quotes at length from Lefroy’s article in *In the Key of Blue*, claiming to “discern an echo of the controversy” (92) and drawing an explicit

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<sup>65</sup> “John Wordsworth on Pater’s Philosophy”, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Tyrwhitt, 557, 556.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.

<sup>68</sup> Pater withdrew first between late March and early April 1877. According to *The Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduates’ Journal*, his departure left Symonds “the sole representative of what his friends delight to call ‘culture,’ his enemies ‘Paganism’ or again ‘wishy-washy sentimentalism’.” Symonds withdrew between late April and early May 1877, shortly before John Campbell Shairp was declared the successful candidate. For a detailed account of these events see Grosskurth, 168-73. (Quoted in Grosskurth, 172.)

comparison with Tyrwhitt.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps disingenuously, Symonds insists: “I have not introduced this passage with any polemical object” (94). Rather, he claims to be making Lefroy’s intellectual position clear, to be “[striking] the key-note” (91) of his temperament and poetry. But Symonds performs a sleight of hand, raising Lefroy’s opposition to Hellenism only to counter by exposing his inconsistency. He begins the new section (“II”) with a quotation from Lefroy’s private correspondence in which he confesses:

I have an inborn admiration for beauty of form and figure. It is almost a passion. And in most football teams I can find one Antinous, sometimes two or three. [...] Some folk would say it was a mark of sickly or diseased sentimentalism to admire any but feminine flesh. But that only proves how base is the carnality, which is now reckoned the only legitimate form. [...] Platonic passion in any relationship is better than the animalism which will go to extremes. (91)

Referencing Tyrwhitt invokes the disapproval and censure roused by certain aspects of Symonds’s work, but here he stands alongside his accuser, bringing Lefroy out of the Hellenic closet. Lefroy is shown to rehearse the same arguments posited by Symonds in his most explicit writings on Hellenism and homosexuality, drawing on athletic male beauty and ancient Greece to counter discourses of disease and effeminacy. With seeming magnanimity, Symonds brushes aside Lefroy’s attack: “I need not discuss the question how far [he] was just to either Mr. Pater or myself, as regards our doctrine and our practice” (94). Yet by raising this question and leaving it unanswered, Symonds invites his reader to be judge and jury: in 1877 he had quietly withdrawn from the Professorship competition; in 1893 he speaks out, exposing hypocrisy and injustice.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Lefroy, 451.

### Deaf ears and stopped mouths

Readers purchasing *In the Key of Blue* in 1893 would immediately have been aware that it was an extraordinary work standing apart from Symonds's oeuvre. In contrast to the plain boards in rich, dark colours that were typical of the majority of his works—particularly those published by Smith, Elder between 1872 and 1886—the first edition of *In the Key of Blue* was a beautiful book clothed in the best styles of British Decadence. It was the only one of Symonds's major works published by Elkin Mathews and John Lane, whose business at The Bodley Head was gaining a Decadent reputation (and would later publish *The Yellow Book*). The collection was issued in cream boards ornamented in gold with a striking hyacinth and laurel design by Charles Ricketts; Symonds praised its “charming colour and excellent typography”, claiming it satisfied his “every sense of what is desirable in design.”<sup>70</sup> For readers and reviewers, this materiality signalled the collection's participation in emerging aesthetic trends. *The Westminster Review*, for example, noted the “dainty print and [...] binding worthy of the ‘aesthete’”, suggesting a new phase to Symonds's work.<sup>71</sup> As a Decadent object, *In the Key of Blue* materialises Symonds's late style and untimeliness, and even *The Artist* was surprised by its daring: “A blare of gold on his cover may suit a charlatan of genius like Mr. Oscar Wilde, it is hardly suitable to a follower of the Greek Sophrosyne like Mr. Symonds.”<sup>72</sup> For all its expressiveness and Decadent beauty, *In the Key of Blue* was perhaps too loud, speaking out with a voice that was not (paradoxically) Symonds's own. *The Artist* identifies him as a writer of an older, quieter generation; his public engagement with homosexual themes had previously been measured, controlled and prudent,

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<sup>70</sup> A few copies of the first edition were issued in blue boards, but this run was halted at the request of Charles Ricketts who feared an unflattering association between “Ricketts' Blue” and the Reckitt's brand of laundry bluing. See Babington, 83. Symonds, *Letters*, 802 (to Gleeson White, January 10, 1893), 794 (to Elkin Mathews, December 20, 1892).

<sup>71</sup>“Contemporary Literature: Art”, 342.

<sup>72</sup> “A Volume of Essays by John Addington Symonds”, 39.

expressed and dispersed through coded discourse. But *In the Key of Blue* performed with an outspokenness better suited to new generation of writers, and *The Artist* invokes Wilde as a figure of controversy, hinting that Symonds's latest work might face hostility—a particularly resonant allusion in the years following the scandalous publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Symonds sent copies of the collection to several friends and correspondents—including Edward Carpenter, Charles Kains-Jackson, Arthur Symons and Henry Scott Tuke—providing himself with an immediate and sympathetic audience. But how receptive would the monthly and weekly reviews be? How would they respond to this Decadent book and Symonds's attempt to deal publicly with homoerotic themes? Would his attempt to speak out fall on deaf ears?

*The Artist* celebrated the collection's "high and unquestionable excellence", reviewing *In the Key of Blue* in February 1893 alongside a second notice of Symonds's *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*—an account paying particular attention to the biography's revelations concerning the male addressee of Michelangelo's sonnets.<sup>73</sup> For Laurel Brake, this number of *The Artist* demonstrates an "intensity" of gay periodical discourse "at its fullest", and this is evident in the review's focus on Symonds's confessional writing.<sup>74</sup> A quotation from "Clifton and A Lad's Love" is reproduced and allusions are drawn to Critobulus and Cleinias, lovers from Xenophon's *Symposium*, thus making clear the collection's interest in male beauty and same-sex desire. But the review goes further still, suggesting such themes are essentially Symonds, a core component and common thread running throughout his writing career: "it is in technique and experience only that Mr. Symonds, the eminent lecturer on the Renaissance, has advanced on 'Symonds of Magdalen' of nearly thirty years ago."<sup>75</sup> The young man celebrating "Lad's Love", mourning the

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Brake, *Print in Transition*, 126.

<sup>75</sup> "A Volume of Essays by John Addington Symonds", 40.

injustice of forced renunciation, is present still in the mature writings of this eminent ‘man of letters’ and homosexual apologist. Thus understood, *In the Key of Blue* marks the culmination of a lifetime’s work. But it is not surprising *The Artist* proved a receptive audience; Symonds was one of their own: an important contributor and the subject of many column inches. It served the journal’s interests, and the interests of its queer community of readers, to recognise and make clear the homoeroticism, and homosexual advocacy, found in *In the Key of Blue*.

Elsewhere reviews were tentative and coded at best, hostile at worst. *The Athenaeum* and *Academy* chose to focus their attention on Symonds’s literary and cultural criticism, merely hinting at (or mildly condemning) the collection’s more controversial themes. Writing for *The Academy* in March 1893, Richard Le Gallienne dedicated much of his review to extended quotation from “Culture: Its Meaning and Its Uses”; he deemed it “[t]he best paper in a book of many interests”, but it is also one of the safest: homoeroticism is muted and it was one of the four chapters marked for possible omission.<sup>76</sup> This essay speaks out on the subject of homosexuality when read as an integrated part of the collection, but not when treated in isolation. Here Symonds develops his theory of culture as “self-effectuation” (197), a “ploughing and harrowing of self by use of what the ages have transmitted to us from the work of gifted minds” (200). *In the Key of Blue* holds a mirror to this use of culture as self-fashioning: Symonds’s construction of self and sexuality through his writings, critical and creative, on a range of literary and artistic subjects. But Le Gallienne passes over this possibility, and appears discomfited by Symonds’s more suggestive, more explicit output. One might have expected him to be a sympathetic reviewer; Le Gallienne was an associate of Elkin Mathews and John Lane who published *In the Key of Blue*, serving as the firm’s reader and helping to establish *The*

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<sup>76</sup> Le Gallienne, 213.

*Yellow Book*. But in 1892 he parted company with The Rhymers' Club, a grouping of young poets founded by Ernest Rhys and W.B. Yeats, setting himself up in opposition to Decadence.<sup>77</sup> The results of this can be seen in Le Gallienne's response to Symonds autobiographical essays, for which (in contradistinction to *The Artist*), he reserves his strongest criticism. Both "In the Key of Blue" and "Clifton and a Lad's Love" are considered failed experiments in intermezzo form, while the former gives Le Gallienne cause for concern in its evocation and use of the male gaze. Symonds's highly eroticised study of Augusto's physical form is deemed inappropriate: "Though ingenious, one cannot profess that they are inspiring; perhaps they would appeal more to one if Augusto were anything but a man. Humanity resents his being made a mere 'clothes-horse' of."<sup>78</sup> But Le Gallienne goes further; he implies that Symonds's study of colour is disingenuous, a cover for his erotically charged "word painting" of the male nude, eliciting a note of explicit censure: "nor have we quite got over our feeling that there is indignity towards the human creature in the life-class."<sup>79</sup>

Curiosity is a recurring theme in Le Gallienne's review: Symonds is a man of "insatiable curiosity", and "The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love" will be "read with curiosity" by those who enjoyed his treatment of "the same theme in his *Life of Michelangelo*."<sup>80</sup> Curiosity is also present in *The Athenaeum* in its part-review, part-obituary published in May 1893; it becomes a leitmotif in descriptions of the titular essay: "a somewhat curious experiment in literary impressionism"; "[t]he attempt is curious and interesting."<sup>81</sup> Curiosity functions here as a coded discourse: both reviews are hinting at the collection's sexual heterodoxy—the *OED* traces

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<sup>77</sup> Pittock, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34477> (accessed January 12, 2013). I am grateful to the peer reviewer of this article for drawing this biographical material to my attention.

<sup>78</sup> Le Gallienne, 214.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, 214.

<sup>81</sup> "In the Key of Blue and Other Prose Essays", 598.

the use of “curious” for erotic and pornographic works back to 1877. *The Athenaeum* and *Academy*, both scholarly weeklies (and the latter with a family readership of both men and women), were unable to relinquish the codes that Symonds had discarded in *In the Key of Blue*. The tendency in both reviews, therefore, is to reserve praise for the “safe and more familiar ground” of Symonds’s cultural and literary criticism—those four essays marked for possible omission—while providing recognisable hints (or warnings) of homosexual themes to those readers in the know.<sup>82</sup>

If the self-styled intellectual press turned a blind eye to the homoeroticism of *In the Key of Blue*, the self-appointed moral guardians of the reading public were not content with such coded silences. *The Saturday Review*—known in certain circles as *The Saturday Reviler* on account of its “robust, at times rambunctious [...] prejudices”—was scathing in its condemnation of the collection.<sup>83</sup> Symonds’s descriptive writing is “too luscious” and fault is found with the breadth of the collection: “the canvas, so to speak, is rather too crowded.”<sup>84</sup> Brief and reluctant praise is bestowed on “Among the Euganean Hills” in the review’s penultimate sentence, but passed over without further comment: “the best essay is one we have not noticed.”<sup>85</sup> No such hesitation restrains its attack on the titular essay. The review delights in translating Symonds’s subject, a Venetian *facchino*, into “porter, a scoundrel”, revealing the source of the essay’s transgression, in both class and morality, and adopting a tone of mock surprise that such attention could be paid to the body and clothing of a working man:

But to berhyme a young Italian man’s tie, and hose, and other properties, is a performance so startling that it takes away the breath of the most benevolent critic. The

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Tilley, 558.

<sup>84</sup> “In the Key of Blue”, 52.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

hansom is the gondola of London [...] and what Venetian poet would come here and sing about a cabman's necktie?<sup>86</sup>

Continuing in this vein of hyperbolic disapproval, the review lampoons the essay's eroticism, suggesting the attempt might just have been permissible if the subject belonged to a different class and sex, and only "if [Symonds] was on very friendly terms with her."<sup>87</sup> In its failure to choose an appropriate subject, the essay becomes an archetype for the collection, sharing in the censure of multiple chapters that "deal with topics concerning which we need only say that there seems to be a difficulty in keeping Antinous's head out of the memorial."<sup>88</sup> Hellenism is invoked to suggest the homoeroticism of *In the Key of Blue*, and despite the stated intention of saying no more on the subject, the review embarks on an extended and explicit discussion of Hellenic sexuality in a manner reminiscent of Tyrwhitt's attack on the "Greek Spirit" in Symonds's writing. The reader is warned of the "savage ideas and habits" belonging to the ancient Greeks of history; these behaviours were "refined and allegorised" by writers such as Plato, but they remain nonetheless "very unholy."<sup>89</sup> And such illicit desires and behaviours can be found among the pages of *In the Key of Blue*, lurking between the lines:

We have all heard of the famous Symphony in Blue, and of the *Closet Blue*, and here is *The Key of Blue*. It sounds a little as if a word had been omitted—*The Key of Bluebeard*. That, however, is not the kind of key which Mr. Symonds has in mind.<sup>90</sup>

The reviewer adopts the same syn(a)esthetic terminology employed by Symonds, and, at first, nothing seems out of place with these allusions to James McNeill Whistler and Dante Gabriel

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Rossetti.<sup>91</sup> But the review performs a stunning sleight of hand in its evocation of closeted spaces and the figure of Bluebeard. In the 1890s the closet was not a symbol for repressed or concealed homosexuality, as we might be tempted to read it today, but it would certainly have carried connotations of privacy, secrecy, and might also contain a skeleton or two.<sup>92</sup> Juxtaposed with the key of Bluebeard, whose closet contained many dangerous secrets (and many literal skeletons), *In the Key of Blue* threatens to bring to light what is otherwise hidden. Though the reviewer moves swiftly on, acknowledging this is not an intended reference, once raised, the idea of Symonds as a Bluebeard figure unmasked is difficult to dispel. Same-sex desire—the head of Antinous—lies closeted within the pages of *In the Key of Blue*, and *The Saturday Review* would prefer it to remain shut, locked up, unread.

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One suspects that Symonds, though sensitive to bad reviews, would have preferred the opposition of *The Saturday Review* to the coded silence found elsewhere. In a manner comparable to the praise of *The Artist*, such open hostility proved his attempt to speak out had not fallen on deaf ears; however unreceptive the audience, Symonds's disquisitions on male beauty and same-sex desire had nonetheless been heard. Such outspokenness was the product of a broader tendency at work in late nineteenth-century print culture. Laurel Brake has traced the movement from an "author-led (and dispersed) gay periodical discourse", in which queer figures and writings were scattered throughout the press, to an "editor-led" discourse enabling

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<sup>91</sup> *The Saturday Review* invokes the symphonies, arrangements, variations, nocturnes, harmonies and notes suggested by the musical titles of many of Whistler's works from the 1860s onwards, particularly his *Symphony in Blue and Pink* (1868). Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Closet Blue* (1857), according to fellow Pre-Raphaelite F.G. Stephens, was "an exercise intended to symbolise the association of colour with music". Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 41.

<sup>92</sup> The idea of having a skeleton in the closet was popularised by William Makepeace Thackeray in the 1840s and 1850s, and it has remained in common parlance ever since (*OED*).

periodicals to develop their own queer identities.<sup>93</sup> *In the Key of Blue* belongs to this later moment in which writings on homosexual topics and themes coalesce. Collected together, with strength in numbers, the homoerotic discourses developed within each of these essays shifts from implicit to explicit, facilitating a process of reading (or re-reading) as accrual. Writings that first appeared in mainstream publications are reproduced and re-contextualised, set alongside previously unpublished work, read in combination for the first time and with new inferences drawn. Bound between the Decadent boards bearing Rickett's design, *In the Key of Blue* encapsulates this *fin de siècle* moment of daring homoerotic expression. In his landmark study, *The Eighteen Nineties*, Holbrook Jackson described the work as "a book so typical of the Nineties that it might well have been written by one of the younger generation."<sup>94</sup> Typical of its time, perhaps, but not typical of Symonds's generation; *In the Key of Blue* played fast and loose with his public reputation as a man of letters and member of the old guard. Speaking out at the *fin de siècle*, Symonds produced the "catastrophic" book of Edward Said's late style, an art work subverting "the order or system of things" (*OED*).<sup>95</sup> He eschewed the ripeness and maturity of an artist at ease with his cultural moment, choosing instead to break through the silence that shrouded same-sex desire, giving voice to the unspeakable, the unnameable.

But for all its daring untimeliness, *In the Key of Blue* was also the product of a short-lived moment of queer visibility and public utterance. Shortly after its publication, restrictions were re-imposed and mouths were stopped. The literal silencing produced by Symonds's death was accompanied by a figurative silencing in the press as reviews of *In the Key of Blue* gave way to the memorialising impulse of obituary writing. *The Saturday Review* could be vociferous in its disapproval while Symonds was still alive, but reviews published after April 1893 tended to turn

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<sup>93</sup> Brake, *Print in Transition*, 111.

<sup>94</sup> Jackson, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Said, 13.

a blind eye (or deaf ear) to the more daring aspects of *In the Key of Blue*. Richard Le Gallienne's coded review, for example, was published in the weeks following Symonds's death and approximately one third of its column inches are dedicated to a eulogistic celebration of his life and work. Even *The Artist* was thrown off track. The journal had originally planned an extended review of the collection with notices across successive volumes, but the first instalment—numbered “I” and concluding with a promise, “[t]o be continued”—would prove to be the last.<sup>96</sup> The scheme appears to have been halted by Symonds's death and the review was not continued. In May 1893, *The Artist* published an obituary poem, ‘In Memoriam. John Addington Symonds’, in which, rather appropriately, his attempts to speak out were celebrated in terms that echoed his own. Recalling the David-like champion imagined by Symonds in his letter to Edmund Gosse, *The Artist* casts its subject as a slain warrior who raged against the censure of society and the limits of his sickly body:

Twenty years in the breach he stood  
                   Watchful, keeping the foe at bay  
 Fighting the death which was in his blood  
                   Knowing still he had words to say  
                           That should lighten the hearts of his fellow-men  
                   Twenty years with the fighting pen  
 He strove to make that knowledge good,  
 Made it; then let the doom have way.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “A Volume of Essays by Mr John Addington Symonds”, 39, 40.

<sup>97</sup> “In Memoriam. John Addington Symonds”, *The Artist* (May 1, 1893), reproduced in Brake, *Print in Transition*, 125. Cf. Younger, 5 (to Edmund Gosse, February 21, 1890).

As Laurel Brake notes, this obituary poem is “notably free of the embarrassment of the rest of the mainstream press about Symonds’s ‘excesses’”, and goes so far as to put frank and explicit words into the mouth of its subject: “‘Let men be lovers’; your voice rang clear,/ ‘Let men be lovers, and Truth be Truth.’”<sup>98</sup> And yet, a more tempered view of Symonds’s outspokenness, of the reach and reception of his voice, was offered by Lord Alfred Douglas in *The Spirit Lamp*:

Alas! too, he had not finished his work, there was more to do; there were chains he might have loosened, and burdens he might have lifted; chains on the limbs of lovers and burdens on the wings of poets. I can say no more. Words, words, words,—what are they?<sup>99</sup>

It was Douglas’s assessment that would prevail. The potential for greater expressiveness, for speaking out through an open homosexual discourse, was soon curtailed in the mid-1890s. In April 1894 Charles Kains-Jackson published “The New Chivalry” in *The Artist*, arguing that same-sex relationships should be encouraged at times of over-population; in response, the journal proprietors removed him from his post, and, under the new editorship of Viscount Mountmorres, began a “homoerotic purge”, an apostasy distancing the periodical from previous associations with gay discourse and Decadence.<sup>100</sup> The following year would see the infamous trials of Oscar Wilde and his successful prosecution on charges of gross indecency. These court cases would see literary writing, in the form of poems by Lord Alfred Douglas and Wilde’s novel *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, used as evidence against the accused, as proof of sexual deviance. The Wilde trials may have crystallised a public image of the homosexual, but a

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<sup>98</sup> Brake, “The Deaths of Heroes”, 174. “In Memoriam. John Addington Symonds”, reproduced in Brake, *Print in Transition*, 125.

<sup>99</sup> Douglas, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Brake, “*Artist and Journal of Home Culture*”, 25. For a detailed account of Kains-Jackson’s removal from *The Artist* see Brake, *Print in Transition*, 126-9.

punitive legal system and reactionary press would discipline and occlude this voice. Though it would not be possible to close the closet door again, the possibility of speaking out would be constrained by silence, secrecy and coded discourse until the middle decades of the twentieth century. *In the Key of Blue* was an untimely and eccentric text in its outspokenness; a daring final work by an eminent man of letters and a product of the early Yellow Nineties, that transient moment of late style Victoriana.

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