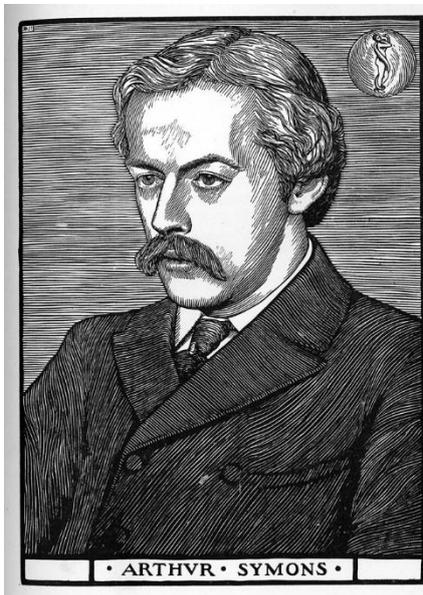


ARTHUR SYMONS (1865-1945)



Robert Bryden. *Arthur Symons*. Woodcut, 1898-99, William Archer's *Poets of the Younger Generation*, 1902, p.410, Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.

Arthur Symons was one of the key exponents of Symbolism in Britain. During the fin de siècle he built an impressive intellectual and social network that comprised the most prominent figures of the age, including Aubrey Beardsley, Mathilde Blind, Edmund Gosse, Havelock Ellis, Michael Field, Herbert Horne, George Moore, Walter Pater, Olive Schreiner, and John Addington Symonds. Symons grew up in the West of England and attended various schools before embarking on a literary career at the young age of seventeen with a study of Robert Browning. He became an extremely productive critic, journalist, poet and playwright.

The 1890s marked the height of Symons's success. The decade started with a prolonged stay in Paris with Havelock Ellis that was to have a deep impact on Symons, who fell in love with the city and became increasingly interested in French writers. He would soon establish himself as one of the leading experts of French literature and the foremost cultural mediator between England and France. It was during this period that Symons wrote some of his most influential works. "The Decadent Movement in Literature"—published in 1893 but later revised, renamed, and republished in book form as *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1899 is one of the most important programmatic definitions of literary

modernity in late-nineteenth-century criticism. Symons introduced British readers to new trends in French-language writing represented by Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, among others. The shift in the title from “Decadence” to “Symbolism” is significant as, during the nineties, Symons would try to distance himself from Decadence – which had acquired undesirable connotations especially after Oscar Wilde’s trials – while essentially holding on to its aesthetic principles.

His early criticism and his prose style show the influence of Pater, who advised Symons that he should dedicate himself to the art of prose writing rather than poetry – the same advice he had offered to the young Wilde. Highly though he held Pater’s opinion, Symons disregarded this advice. In the early 1890s he came into contact with the Rhymers’ Club, where he made the acquaintance of Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Richard Le Gallienne and W. B. Yeats. Symons developed an individual style in verse, clearly inspired by the French authors he knew so well. His poetry, in collections like *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), celebrates modernity, artificiality and the experience of urban life; it expresses interest in sin and guilt, eroticism and the fleeting nature of pleasure. Other favourite themes are *mise-en-scène*, performance and theatricality, actresses, dancers, and popular entertainment. Symons was an enthusiastic theatregoer and drama reviewer. He was also fascinated with the music hall and, before his marriage to Rhoda Bowser in 1901, became sexually involved with a ballet dancer named Lydia.

Symons contributed poetry to the first and third volumes of *The Yellow Book* but he is more closely associated with its rival publication *The Savoy*, the Symbolist illustrated magazine. Symons was the editor of *The Savoy* for its entire run of one year (1896), during which time he worked closely with Beardsley, who was the arts editor of the magazine, and Leonard Smithers, who was its publisher.

Symons suffered a mental breakdown in 1908 but he soon resumed his incessant activity, publishing extensively before his death in 1945. After his illness, though, Symons led a more retiring life. He was not in touch with the new literary trends that were developing in those years, and much of his late work consists in fact of revisions to earlier material. Symons’s work is often seen as a bridge between late-Victorian writing and the new modernist aesthetics of the early twentieth century represented by

experimental writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. Symons was also a translator of influential modern French and Italian authors, among them Charles Baudelaire, Emile Verhaeren, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Gabriele D'Annunzio.

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