

ARTHUR SYMONS

Selected Writings

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ROGER HOLDSWORTH

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SELECTED WRITINGS

ARTHUR SYMONS was born in Milford Haven in 1865. He lived in London, where he frequented the Rhymers' Club, a group of writers who met at the Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street between 1891 and 1894. A friend of Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Wilde, he was an important influence on Yeats, with whom he shared lodgings for a time. He contributed to *The Yellow Book* and became editor of *The Savoy*. Symons was fluent in French and Italian; his *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) was influential in introducing French Symbolism to English readers. He was also a translator of Baudelaire and Zola, and a leading literary critic. Symons died in 1945.

ROGER HOLDSWORTH lectures in English at the University of Manchester. He has edited plays by Jonson and Middleton, and has been a General Editor of the Malone Society.

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*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

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Introduction

INTEREST in the poetry of the 1890s has grown steadily during the present century. Desmond Flower's edition of Ernest Dowson appeared in 1934, Ian Fletcher's of Lionel Johnson in 1953. Four years later Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* illuminated the period as a vitally organic phase in a developing poetic tradition, and since then we have come to view the poetry and criticism of the 'nineties as not only intrinsically worthy of serious study, but as important for its profound influence on that literature of our own time which we regard as most typically 'modern'. In spite of this Arthur Symons, in many ways a key figure, has remained out of print for over forty years.

Such neglect is the more surprising when one considers that the three major poets of the first half of this century – Yeats, Pound, and Eliot – all stressed their debt to Symons as the critic who introduced them to the French symbolists, writers whose work was to have a crucial formative effect on their own. For Yeats the introduction came in the early 1890s, when Symons began making regular trips to Paris, bringing back enthusiastic reports to his fellow Rhymers (among them Yeats) of the writers he met there, and translating their work. In 1893 he was able to arrange Verlaine's celebrated visit to England, as well as to publish 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', the survey which established him as the leading interpreter of literary trends on the continent. In his *Memoirs* Yeats records that Symons 'desired a little too obviously to speak with all famous, interesting men', but his remarks in *Autobiographies* show a keen awareness of the benefits that all this activity brought:

Arthur Symons, more than any man I have ever known, could slip as it were into the mind of another, and my thoughts gained in richness and in clearness from his sympathy, nor shall I ever know how much my practice and my theory owe to the passages that he read me from Catullus and from Verlaine and Mallarmé. . . . He

was making those translations from Mallarmé and from Verlaine, from Calderón, from Saint John of the Cross, which are the most accomplished metrical translations of our time, and I think that those from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the latter poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to *The Shadowy Waters*.

Symons anticipated these compliments by dedicating to Yeats *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), and by citing him in the preface as 'the chief representative of that movement in our country'. 'Symbolism' now replaces 'decadence', though largely because the latter term has been redefined. In the earlier essay it had described 'the most representative literature of the day', a literature characterised by 'an intense self-consciousness' and 'by a restless curiosity in research'. Now 'decadence' is restricted solely to style, to 'that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé for instance', while 'symbolism', though it embraces the same group of writers and takes in others, is used to make a much larger claim for their work: 'It is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority . . . to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness.' The book proved tremendously influential. It familiarised contemporary English readers with the European movement and fostered a spirit of internationalism in literature which is still with us. It was closely studied by the Imagists and by Eliot. Pound, for example, wrote to René Taupin in May 1928:

Influence fr. sur moi – relativement tard. Rappports fr. < eng. via Arthur Symons etc. 1908. Baudelaire, Verlaine etc. . . . l'idée de l'image doit 'quelque chose' aux symbolistes français via T. E. Hulme, via Yeat[s] < Symons < Mallarmé. Comme le pain doit quelque chose au vanneur de blé.

And in *The Sacred Wood* Eliot celebrated *The Symbolist Movement* as 'an introduction to wholly new feelings . . . a revelation'. Elsewhere he gave a more detailed account:

I myself owe Mr Symons a great debt; but for having read his book I should not, in the year 1908, have heard of Laforgue or Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for