

**Arthur Symons** (1865–1945). Poet and critic, the first English champion of the French Symbolist poets.

Symons was well versed in European literature and knew the French writers Paul Verlain, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

He expanded his pioneering essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (*Harper's*, November 1893) into a book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which influenced both Yeats and T.S. Eliot; in it he characterized Symbolist literature as suggesting or evoking the "unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness."

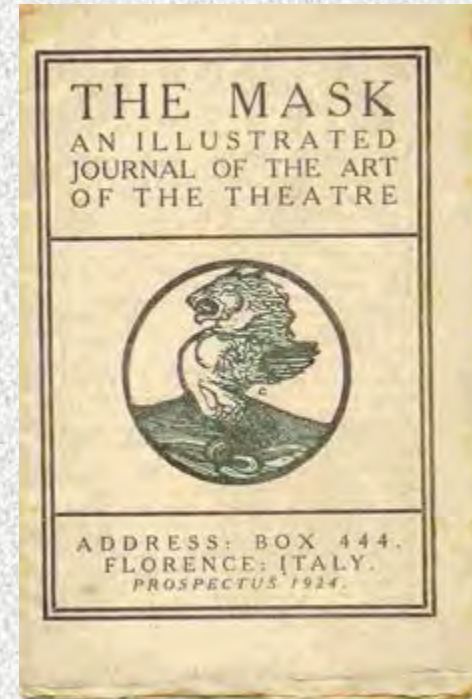
Symons dedicated his *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* to William Butler Yeats: "May I dedicate to you this book on the Symbolist movement in literature, both as an expression of a deep personal friendship and because you, more than any one else, will sympathise with what I say in it, being yourself the chief representative of that movement in our country?"

## From *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899)

“Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed, not even language. What are words themselves but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? Symbolism [...] is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings. Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest. And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it. Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.”



**Edward Gordon Craig**  
(1872– 1966)



English actor, director-designer, producer, and theorist who influenced the development of the theatre in the 20th century. His productions were marked by simplicity and unity of concept, with the emphasis being placed on the movement of actors and of light. But his productions — their artistic impact notwithstanding — were commercial failures, and the financial support that would have permitted him to develop his ideas was not forthcoming in England.

## Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911)

### 1. The mask

«[...] the mask is the only right medium of portraying the expressions of the soul as shown through the expressions of the face.»

### 2. The scenery

«First and foremost comes the scene. It is idle to talk about the distraction of scenery, because the question here is not how to create some distracting scenery, but rather how to create a place which harmonizes with the thoughts of the poet.

Come now, we take *Macbeth*. We know the play well. In what kind of place is that play laid? How does it look, first of all to our mind's eye, secondly to our eye? I see two things. I see a lofty and steep rock, and I see the moist cloud which envelops the head of this rock. That is to say, a place for fierce and; warlike men to inhabit, a place for phantoms to nest in. Ultimately this moisture will destroy the rock; ultimately these spirits will destroy the men. Now then, you are quick in your question as to what actually to create for the eye. I answer as swiftly — place there a rock! Let it mount up high. Swiftly I tell you, convey the idea of a mist which hugs the head of this rock. Now, have I departed at all for one eighth of an inch from the vision which I saw in the mind's eye?»



### 3. Acting

«They must create for themselves a new form of acting, consisting for the main part of symbolical gesture. To-day they impersonate and interpret; to-morrow they must represent and interpret; and the third day they must create. By this means style may return. To-day the actor impersonates a certain being. He cries to the audience: 'Watch me; I am now pretending to be so and so, and I am now pretending to do so and so;' and then he proceeds to imitate as exactly as possible, that which he has announced he will indicate. [...] The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the *Über-marionette* we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name. Much has been written about the puppet, or marionette. [...] There is something more than a flash of genius in the marionette, and there is something in him more than the flashiness of displayed personality. The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization. But as with all art which has passed into fat or vulgar hands, the puppet has become a reproach. All puppets are now but low comedians. [...] They have forgotten the counsel of their mother the Sphinx. Their bodies have lost their grave grace, they have become stiff. Their eyes have lost that infinite subtlety of seeming to see; now they only stare. They display and jingle their wires and are cocksure in their wooden wisdom. They have failed to remember that their art should carry on it the same stamp of reserve that we see at times on the work of other artists, and that the highest art is that which conceals the craft and forgets the craftsman. [...] Realism is a vulgar means of expression bestowed upon the blind.»



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Sophocles, *Electra*





[Face page 48.

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*



*[Face page 118.]*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*





[Face page 224.]

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*



[ Face page 136.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*