

Symbolist Movement. Various poets of the *Romantic Period*, including Novalis and Hölderlin in Germany and Shelley in England, often used private symbols in their poetry (see *symbol*). Shelley, for example, repeatedly made symbolic use of objects such as the morning and evening star, a boat moving upstream, winding caves, and the conflict between a serpent and an eagle. William Blake, however, exceeded all his romantic contemporaries in his recourse to a persistent and sustained **symbolism**—that is, a coherent system composed of a number of symbolic elements—both in his lyric poems and his long prophetic, or epic poems. In nineteenth-century America, a symbolist procedure was prominent in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, the prose of Emerson and Thoreau, and the poetic theory and practice of Poe. (See Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature*, 1953.) These writers derived the mode in large part from the native Puritan tradition of typology (see *interpretation: typological and allegorical*), and also from the theory of “correspondences” of the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).

In the usage of literary historians, however, **Symbolist Movement** designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire (*Fleurs du mal*, 1857) and including such later poets as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry. Baudelaire based the symbolic mode of his poems in part on the example of the American Edgar Allan Poe, but especially on the ancient belief in **correspondences**—the doctrine that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the natural and the spiritual worlds. As Baudelaire put this doctrine: “Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural* world, is significant, reciprocal, converse, *correspondent*.” The techniques of the French **Symbolists**, who exploited an order of private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness rather than explicit signification, had an immense influence throughout Europe, and (especially in the 1890s and later) in England and America on poets such as Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson (see *Decadence*) as well as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, e. e. cummings, and Wallace Stevens. Major symbolist poets in Germany are Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke.

The *Modern Period*, in the decades after World War I, was a notable era of symbolism in literature. Many of the major writers of the period exploit symbols which are in part drawn from religious and esoteric traditions and in part invented. Some of the works of the age are symbolist in their settings, their agents, and their actions, as well as in the objects they refer to. Instances of a

persistently symbolic procedure occur in lyrics (Yeats' "Byzantium" poems, Dylan Thomas' series of sonnets *Altarwise by Owl-light*), in longer poems (Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C"), and in novels (James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*).

See Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, reprinted 1958); Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (1936); C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (1943); Kenneth Cornell, *The Symbolist Movement* (1951); Edward Engelberg, ed., *The Symbolist Poem* (1967); and Anna Balakian, ed., *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* (1982). For attempts to decode William Blake's complex symbolism, see S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (1965), and Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947).