

Title: The Modernist Book and the Crisis of Symbolism
Author: Jonathan Stone, Franklin & Marshall College
Email: jon.stone@fandm.edu

Several narratives can be constructed around the decline of Russian Symbolism around 1910. Infighting and increasingly fractured relations among its practitioners compounded with challenges to its aesthetic launched by a new generation of modernist poets amounted to an assault on Symbolism from within and without. These explanations, typical of discussions of the “crisis of Symbolism,” account for only a piece of the picture. They do not offer much consideration of the more nuanced view of Symbolism as part of the material and print culture of early twentieth-century Russia. As I show, evidence of Symbolism’s crisis can be gleaned here as well since the whole of Russian Symbolism’s history and conceptual development are wrapped up in the story of its appearance in print, institutions of publication, and presentation to the reader. From this perspective, its moment of crisis tracks as a breakdown of all three of these instantiations of Symbolism. While 1912-13 was a watershed for Acmeist and Futurist books, this moment also sounded the death knell for the Symbolist publications. This talk will consider how three books published in that period – Valerii Briusov’s *Zerkalo tenei*, Osip Mandel’shtam’s *Kamen’* and the Futurists’ *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* – reflect the extent to which Symbolism’s aesthetics were undermined by shifts in how modernism was produced and consumed. The overall loss of value that Symbolism experienced at this moment – framed as competition for readers – delineates the crisis of Symbolism. I argue that a reader’s encounter with Russian modernism in 1912-3 provides a telling glimpse of the plethora of options presented to the public. Such an imagined quandary, the process of how a reader inclined towards modern verse might choose to spend a couple of rubles, gets to the heart of the dilemma in which Russian Symbolism found itself at this moment.