



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

***The Pagan Review* in Context**

When the first (and what would prove last) issue of *The Pagan Review* was published, it was met with dismissive criticism. That the publication was reviewed at all is itself something of a surprise. The magazine was not created within the London publishing industry by a well-connected editor, but in a one-shop hamlet by the relatively unknown author and editor William Sharp who, the foreword states, was aiming at “thorough-going unpopularity” (1). In addition, it was offered only on subscription, although Sharp’s wife Elizabeth (who served as the magazine’s secretary) claims that it was well subscribed (204).

The issue appeared as a 64-page pamphlet, 12 centimeters high, on inexpensive, off-white paper. It displayed no visuals or notable design features, other than the words “Sic Transit / Gloria Grundi. / One Shilling.” in the shape of a triangle in the lower left corner of the front cover. The phrase is a witty conflation of “Sic transit gloria mundi” (Latin for “Thus passes the glory of the world”) and the popular character Mrs. Grundy who, for Victorians, personified the defense of conventionality and bourgeois morality in literature. Other than this single typographical flourish, *The Pagan Review* presented the reader with a plain verbal text laid out tightly in economical, rather than aesthetic, fashion. “It is not very much to look at,” wrote Frederic M. Bird in his 1893 review for the American *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, “and offers for the customary shilling but sixty-four smallish pages, with no cover to speak of.” Far from a refined aesthetic object such as the periodical *The Evergreen* with which Sharp would later be affiliated, *The Pagan Review* came across more as a spirited gambol than an earnest, professional attempt to create a financially viable long-term venture.

Despite the issue's uninspiring appearance, Sharp's foreword—written under the pseudonym W.H. Brooks— suggests an interest in launching *The Pagan Review* into the orbit of the Aesthetic Movement. The foreword's discussion of art for art's sake, and the various references to Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Oscar Wilde, and the Pre-Raphaelites signal Sharp's wish to have his readers associate the magazine with aestheticism. By 1892, the Aesthetic Movement had already had a lengthy run of popularity and was shifting into its final, decadent phase, marked by works such as Wilde's French play *Salomé* (1891) and by Aubrey Beardsley's drawings for its English translation (1894) and for a new edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1893-94). To this phase of the Aesthetic Movement, *The Pagan Review* offers a notable contribution, with its emphasis on the dissident, mythic, and obscure. Its tendency toward overwrought descriptions and archaic dialogue is reminiscent of decadent authors and artists such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Gustave Moreau, and Félicien Rops. Meanwhile, the magazine's mystical depiction of alternative gods and spiritualities aligns it with paganism and the occult in a more earnest and thus more disconcerting way than many other British contributions to the decadent movement.

The fact that Sharp chose to write the entire first issue without searching very extensively, if at all, for other contributors encourages one to consider *The Pagan Review* not as a failed attempt to start up a periodical, but as an avant-garde experiment intended to envision a community of neo-pagan artists who saw transmutability and diversity as a part of their identity and spirituality. From this perspective, *The Pagan Review* fits more accurately in the tradition of high modernist chapbooks and little magazines. Even if Sharp had not consciously planned the project as a one-off publication, he did see the first issue as a declaration of his aesthetic philosophy and he clearly had no long-term publication strategy in place. Thus, the periodical falls in line with Sharp's other literary experiments, such as his earlier groundbreaking use of imagist blank verse in the poetry collection *Sospiri di Roma* (1891) and his later parallel career as Fiona Macleod. *The Pagan Review's* foreword, moreover, has the urgency of a manifesto, with the 36-year-old Sharp (under the pseudonym of W.H. Brooks) declaring on behalf of the "younger generation" (2) that the magazine's contributors challenged both the religion and ideals of their forefathers. The introductory piece also speaks out

for gender equality, but the magazine defines itself as primarily “a mouthpiece [. . .] of the new pagan sentiment.” The aspirations of influence were high, as they are in most manifestos.

While the first issue of August 1892 introduces *The Pagan Review* as a monthly, Sharp’s correspondence after the magazine’s release refers to its possible continuation as a quarterly. In one letter, Sharp (using the pseudonym of Brooks) suggests the next issue might come out in the spring of 1893 (qtd. in E. Sharp, 206). It is unclear why the periodical stalled so quickly. In her 1910 memoirs, published only five years after Sharp’s death, Elizabeth proposes that her husband realized the first issue’s “*tour de force*” (204) could never be matched, although no other record of it having such an impact exists. She also conjectures that Sharp realized he could never get a satisfactory roster of contributors and that the project had already succeeded for him personally by shifting his authorial identity into a “more permanent self” (204). Elizabeth does not clarify the latter claim, but it probably has to do with Sharp beginning in 1894 to publish in the role of the reclusive, neo-Celtic author Fiona Macleod — a pseudonymous identity he effectively maintained until his death.

Unfortunately, soon after *The Pagan Review*’s early demise (the Sharps held a funeral, burying a copy in the backyard), critical reception or any recognition of the magazine all but ended. Nevertheless, in *About Famous Books* (1918), John Kelman praises the magazine as “an extraordinarily clever production” (50) that, he argues, marked Sharp’s transition as author from being a talented craftsman to a divinely inspired artist (52). While *The Pagan Review* had only one issue, Sharp’s investment in neo-paganism can easily be tracked throughout his writing career, from the early poems’ idealization of Roman Italy to his contributions to the Celtic Revival in his late novels and various shorter works.

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