



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

THE YELLOW BOOK: INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 11 (OCTOBER 1896)

The editors of *The Yellow Book* chose a relatively unknown artist at the start of her career to design the front cover and the title page for Volume 11. With a local reputation as a prize-winning student at the Slade School of Art, Nellie Syrett had just begun to publish her work in artistic magazines, contributing an illustrative drawing to the previous issue of *The Yellow Book* and a decorative title page for the inaugural issue of *The Quarto* (1896-98) (Tenny and Shefrin; Houfe 106). Syrett later gained a reputation for her sensitive illustrations for children's books. The front cover image of Volume 11 is so similar to her contribution to Volume 10, "The Five Sweet Symphonies," that the two pen-and-ink renderings of Pre-Raphaelite young women in a park-like landscape can be appreciated as a diptych. For the title page of Volume 11, Syrett offers an intricate design of doves and cherubs.

A striking piece of visual art leads off Volume 11 after the Table of Contents. The only colour reproduction ever to appear inside the periodical, Max Beerbohm's line drawing of the "Yellow Dwarf" has the entire figure — from cap to toe — tinted yellow, save for his black mask. Although printed uniquely on a hard paper stock of ochre hue, the contribution failed to impress the reviewer for the *Westminster Gazette*, who speculates that the caricature "may have a hidden meaning of some sort, but which to the unenlightened seems hardly worth reproducing." No doubt *Yellow Book* followers were quick to see that the dwarf's mask recalled the infamous masked characters that graced Aubrey Beardsley's cover art for the magazine's first volume. The more obvious allusion is to literary editor Henry Harland, who, under the pseudonym of the "Yellow Dwarf," had, in past issues, published commentary on contemporary writing. Thus Beerbohm's caricature wittily offers a hybrid of Beardsley and Harland, *The Yellow Book's* original

art and literature editors. With its body turned away from the viewer, one eye leering backward, the figure captures both the attitude of many of Beardsley's own decadent figures and the acerbic tone Harland often used in his "Yellow Dwarf" writings.

The other artworks in Volume 11 include pieces by three first-time contributors to *The Yellow Book*: a drawing titled "The Child World" by Charles Robinson, who had recently illustrated R.L. Stevenson's *A Child's Garland of Verses* for John Lane; three highly stylized pieces by C.F. (Charles) Pears, and a "Bodley Head" portrait by Francis Howard of author G.S. Street. Street was best known at the time, and today, for his *Autobiography of a Boy* (1894), a revealing satire of Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas. These visual works are joined by two pieces by Charles Conder; a watercolour seascape by Gertrude Prideaux-Brune (misspelt "Gertude" in the Table of Contents); and three pen-and-ink images by Patten Wilson. Wilson's pieces reflect the nuanced patterning and intricate detail for which he had already established a reputation. His drawing for the back cover, which had been used for Volumes 6 to 10, is used again in this volume and would continue for one more. Although Wilson's work appears in earlier volumes of *The Yellow Book*, the four pieces in this issue mark the most he had yet contributed to any one issue, a level that would be sustained for the final two volumes, which would offer three and four pieces by Wilson respectively.

Verse contributions to Volume 11 include pieces by first-time contributors Francis Burdett Money Coutts (a friend of Lane), Constance Finch, and Elsie Higginbotham, as well as past contributors Charles Catty and B. Paul Newman. Frequent contributor Olive Custance is represented by her poem "The White Statue," in which an ungendered narrator describes her passionate love for an ungendered statue. Custance would later have a relationship with American writer Natalie Clifford Barney and, after that, with Alfred Douglas (Parker). Appearing in *The Yellow Book* for the third time, respected translator Alma Strettell offers translations of a French poem by Emile Verhaeren and a Romanian folksong.

At 39 pages, the longest piece in Volume 11 is past contributor B. Paul Neuman's "The Uttermost Farthing." This somewhat melodramatic story plots the emotional repercussions arising from the differing financial fortunes of two men who had been

best friends since childhood. Notably, Neuman also contributes the longest piece of verse to Volume 11, a ballad entitled “The Heavenly Lover.” It consists of 39 four-line stanzas running for seven pages. Although he published consistently from the 1890s to the end of the Edwardian period, Neuman never gained major fame. Other prose fiction works in Volume 11 include two pieces by Baron Corvo in his “Stories Toto Told Me” series, as well as stories by Constance Cotterell, Henry Gilbert, T. Mackenzie, Stanley V. Makower, James S. Pyke-Nott, Ada Radford, Robert Shews, and Reginald Turner. Katherine Mix notes that D’Arcy defined “Shews” as a pseudonym for Harland himself (230).

Volume 11 also includes two nonfiction works. American artist and critic Eugene Benson’s essay—which John Woodhouse recently described as “unconsciously amusing” (34)—explores the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio as a “Pagan” writer using “the Natural as the symbol of the Spiritual” (294). Henry S. Salt’s piece, meanwhile, also explores the work of a poet, John Barlas (pseudonym for Evelyn Douglas). A socialist and contributor to William Morris’s *Commonweal*, in 1891 Douglas shot at the House of Parliament as a form of protest and, after arrest, was bailed out by Oscar Wilde. Salt himself was a well-known social reformer and animal-rights activist credited for introducing the works of Henry David Thoreau to Mahatma Gandhi. Notably, both Benson and Salt situate their subjects—d’Annunzio and Barlas—within the decadent literary tradition, compare their subjects to Algernon Swinburne, and discuss the “Greek” (81, 294) and “mystic” (95, 294) qualities in their work.

Critics continued to review *The Yellow Book*, although there is on occasion a sense of impatience with the process, verging on a lack of interest in the magazine. *The Atlantic Monthly* observes that, while *The Yellow Book*’s intentions have often been a puzzle, it is apparent that, with Volume 11, it has changed direction. But after making this tantalizing claim, the critic offers no specifics on the major shift, noting only that “the cult of which it was originally the prophet expresses itself far more quietly” (716). *The Dial* is equally cursory, declaring that the Table of Contents offers fewer “first-rate names” than previous volumes (293) and then complimenting Benson’s essay on D’Annunzio. Conversely, the *Literary World* is more detailed in its response to the issue, albeit also more caustic. Summarizing the contents as representative of the “new

impressionist school,” the reviewer is particularly dismissive of the artwork. Declaring Syrett’s cover to be “one of those hideous parodies on art which the poster world has made so fashionable and notorious,” the critic also asserts that Beerbohm’s depiction of the Yellow Dwarf is “another of the monstrosities that would not elsewhere be tolerated outside of a nursery book of the most primitive description.” The allusion here is to Countess d’Aulnoy’s French children’s tale “The Yellow Dwarf”; Andrew Lang published a translation of it in his 1889 *Blue Fairy Book*, accompanied by H. J. Ford’s illustration of the wicked titular character (32). The reviewer goes on to praise five of the visual works in Volume 11, before concluding, in contrast to the writer for *The Atlantic Monthly*, that the periodical “caters to an exceptional taste, like olives, or caviare, or some other uncommon dish, with a flavor of its own, and is rather heavily spiced.”

The *National Observer* offers yet another perspective on Volume 11, choosing to laugh with, rather than down at, *The Yellow Book*. The critic admires the humour of three of the first four pieces — Syrett’s cover, Beerbohm’s drawing of the Yellow Dwarf, and Beerbohm’s story “The Happy Hypocrite.” Oscar Wilde similarly found “The Happy Hypocrite” amusing as a rewriting of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Mahoney). However, the *National Observer*’s writer does not find these three works sufficient to save the volume from criticism. The critic proceeds to offer nuanced, thoughtful comments on many of the works, often complimenting certain aspects while pointing to minor defects, all in a warmly comic tone of his own. On noting that Ada Radford’s story suddenly begins referring to the character Aunt Lizzie in the past tense, the reviewer muses with false anxiety about the cause of her sudden demise: “The last we heard of her was that a new servant had starched and ironed a piece of her old lace. But this seems inadequate.” While not complimentary toward the poetry in the volume, the critic again offers a far more sensitive reading than is the norm. Of particular curiosity is the reviewer’s claim that, according to rumour, the contributor Ella D’Arcy is herself “a ‘creation’ of *The Yellow Book*”; in hindsight, the comment appears to speak to the fact that, although D’Arcy was a key contributor to the editorial process of the periodical, she was never officially credited as such.

The critic for the *Westminster Gazette* notes having heard that the publisher, John Lane, had actually considered not including any artwork in Volume 11. Pleased that

Lane had not followed through, the reviewer observes that, despite variations in quality, the visual works are crucial to establishing the character of the periodical as a whole. Like the *National Observer's* critic, the writer for the *Westminster Gazette* suggests that Syrett, in her work for the front cover, intended the female figures to be read as comical, “gobe-mouches passant” —that is, mouths agape (literally, “fly-swallowing”) and moving to the viewer’s left with one leg raised (from the term “passant” in heraldry). The reviewer gives thoughtful commentary on six of the seven contributors of visual works, seeing Patten Wilson’s drawings as the strongest. The prose works also come off as of mixed quality, while the verse contributions are collectively panned as uninspired.

Ultimately, the critical response to Volume 11 of *The Yellow Book* is revealing in its inconsistency. While some reviewers are relatively positive in their assessment, others are far less so, and while some offer thoughtful commentary, others appear to have not read the entire issue, simply gleaning information from the Table of Contents, for example. Perhaps the only notable constant among these reviews is that the vitriolic voice often directed at the earliest volumes has now been replaced by an acceptance of *The Yellow Book* as part of 1890s culture. There is a sense even of playful comradery and a desire, on the critics’ part, to take part in the fun.

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