



INTRODUCTION TO *THE YELLOW BOOK* (1894-1897)

In early 1894 Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley successfully pitched a new kind of illustrated magazine to publisher John Lane. Like the belles lettres published by Lane and his partner, Elkin Mathews, at The Bodley Head, the periodical was to be distinctive and distinguished in format, to combine the avant-garde with the traditional in its visual and verbal contents, and to appeal to a popular, transatlantic readership interested in books as beautiful objects. By April of that year, after unprecedented pre-release promotion in the press, the first volume of *The Yellow Book* was published in London and Boston. Twelve quarterly issues later, in April 1897, *The Yellow Book* ceased publication.

Between these two events the partnership of Elkin Mathews and John Lane dissolved (September 1894), prompted at least in part by issues related to the periodical, and Beardsley was fired as art editor (April 1895), condemned by association in the homophobia occasioned by Wilde's arrest and trials. Despite the fact that the editors published nothing by Oscar Wilde in *The Yellow Book*, its reputation as a decadent magazine inspired the American periodical, *The Critic*, to dub it "the Oscar Wilde of periodicals" in a review of the first volume entitled "A Yellow Impertinence" (26 May 1894). This association, and the fact that Wilde was reportedly carrying a copy at the time of his arrest (actually, another book with a yellow cover), linked the two in the public mind. The imputed connection was intensified by an actual bibliographic link through The Bodley Head, which had recently published the English edition of Wilde's play *Salomé*, translated by his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. Giving way to considerable pressure, Lane fired Beardsley and took over the art editorship himself, with the assistance of Patten Wilson, for the next two years. Although he only oversaw the first four numbers of the magazine, Beardsley and his distinctive art-nouveau style have continued to be associated with *The Yellow Book*, just as the periodical itself has become virtually synonymous with decadence, colouring the decade as "the yellow nineties." In fact, *The Yellow Book* is central to fin-de-siècle literature and culture, a "modern magazine" connecting the popular illustrated periodicals of the nineteenth century and the "little magazines" that flourished in the modernist period.

Like the avant-garde Pre-Raphaelite journal of art and literature, *The Germ* (1850), to which it owes some of its inspiration, *The Yellow Book's* cultural significance and range of influence belie the brevity of its print run. A square yellow-and-black octavo, printed in a single column in elegant Caslon type, with asymmetrical titles and bylines, dropped initial letters and catchwords at the bottom of each page, *The Yellow Book* aspired to more than the ephemeral life of

a periodical. As Beardsley and Harland insisted in their first Prospectus, *The Yellow Book* was to be “beautiful as a piece of bookmaking”:

It will be a *book*—a book to be read, and placed upon one’s shelves, and read again; a book in form, a book in substance; a book beautiful to see and convenient to handle; a book with style, a book with finish; a book that every book-lover will love at first sight; a book that will make book-lovers of many who are now indifferent to books.

In appealing to the collector as well as the common reader, *The Yellow Book* followed Lane’s successful marketing strategy for The Bodley Head of enticing a broad middle-class spectrum into believing they were an elite group of cultivated purchasers. For Lane and his *Yellow Book* editors, this is what it meant to be, as the Prospectus claimed, “popular in the better sense of the word.” Priced at 5s, *The Yellow Book* was well within the means of middle-class buyers—costing more than a monthly review, to be sure, but less than a one-volume novel.

The editors secured *The Yellow Book*’s visual impact by being as up-to-date and modern as possible in the mechanical reproduction of the magazine’s images. Almost all the engraving was done in London’s most forward-looking, electrically lit houses of mass production: the Swan Electric Engraving Company (for process-engraving of half-tones) and one of the three Carl Hentschel and Company factories (for line-engraving of pen-and-ink drawings). The editors hoped that by these means the results would “surpass even the best obtained in France and America.”

As this reference from the initial Prospectus suggests, *The Yellow Book* was, from the start, cosmopolitan and outward-looking, sensitive to readers, makers and markets outside England, and this, too, marked its modernity. Although very much a London-based, urban magazine, it was published, marketed and reviewed in the United States as well as the British Isles, and its contributors and readers hailed from various parts of the English-speaking world as well as France. The literary editor, Henry Harland, was himself a transplanted American, and the idea for the magazine was first seeded in an artists’ community in Dieppe.

Together with his sub-editors, Ella D’Arcy and Ethel Colburn Mayne, Harland ensured that *The Yellow Book* would be unlike contemporary periodicals in its literary contents. In keeping with The Bodley Head list, a significant percentage of the contributions was dedicated to poetry, often by poets associated with The Rhymers’ Club like John Davidson, Ernest Dowson, Richard Le Gallienne and W.B. Yeats, but also by women poets like Graham R. Tomson, Dollie Radford, Olive Custance and Edith Nesbit. Some short drama, too, was occasionally included, as well as non-fiction memoirs, essays and reviews. Unlike most periodicals, however, *The Yellow Book* had no editorial apparatus or statement, no “letters to the editor” section from general readers (Max Beerbohm’s “Letter” in the second volume was a paid contribution), and no advertisements except the publishers’ lists printed at the back. Perhaps its greatest distinction was that the magazine published no serialized fiction, a

staple of contemporary periodicals. An important result of this editorial decision was that the magazine sponsored significant development in the style and content of the modern short story. A long work of short fiction by Henry James was the lead piece in the first volume; “New Women” authors, including George Egerton and Ella D’Arcy, were frequent contributors. Although a magazine that, at least in its initial volumes, seemed principally directed to the male reader, *The Yellow Book* had significant representation from women in both its editorial management and its literary and artistic contents.

Another means by which *The Yellow Book* set itself apart from “the bad old traditions of periodical literature” was by calling itself an “Illustrated Magazine” (Prospectus) but keeping the pictorial and literary portions distinct. Rather than illustrating the literary content, the pictures were stand-alone works of art, printed full-page and separated from the letterpress by fly-title pages and tissue-paper guards. Featured equally with the authors in promotional materials, press reviews, table of contents and back cover, the artists also received appropriate fees for their work. And, though the first four covers stamped *The Yellow Book* with the unique Beardsley style, inside the covers, and in subsequent binding designs, the magazine displayed a diverse range of artistic styles, mediums, genres and artists.

While many new artists, like the undergraduate caricaturist Max Beerbohm or children’s book illustrator Mabel Dearmer, were represented in its pages, the magazine also featured more established artists, notably the President of the Royal Academy, Sir Frederic Leighton. Sketches, etchings, pen-and-ink drawings, chalk and wash drawings, crayons, water colours, oil paintings—all reproduced photomechanically in either line- or process-engraving—offered readers a veritable gallery of contemporary art: impressionist genre paintings, portraits, life drawings, landscapes and decorative art nouveau. Moreover, in keeping with the editors’ determination to associate *The Yellow Book* with the book arts in the minds of aesthetic collectors, the first Prospectus promised to include “a series of new and artistic book-plates” as a regular feature of each number.

Traditional analysis of *The Yellow Book*’s contents has divided the print run into an avant-garde and daring period before the arrest and trial of Oscar Wilde and a more conservative, less adventurous phase thereafter. More recent scholarship, however, has shown that the magazine was innovative in both literary and artistic contents throughout its 13 volumes, challenging accepted hierarchies in art, literature, and life, and introducing a new form for the illustrated magazine.

Select Bibliography

Beckson, Karl and Mark Samuels Lasner. “*The Yellow Book* and Beyond: Selected Letters of Henry Harland to John Lane.” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 42.4 (1999): 401-32.

- Brake, Laurel. "Endgames: The Politics of *The Yellow Book* or, Decadence, Gender and the New Journalism." *Essays and Studies* 48 (1995): 38-64.
- Dowling, Linda. "Letterpress and Picture in the Literary Periodicals of the 1890s." *Yearbook of English Studies* 16 (1986): 117-31.
- Hughes, Linda K. "Women Poets and Contested Spaces in *The Yellow Book*." *SEL* 44.4 (Autumn 2004): 849-72.
- Mix, Kathryn Lyon. *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1960.
- Lasner, Mark Samuels. *The Yellow Book: A Checklist and Index*. Occasional Series No. 8. London: The 1890s Society, 1998.
- Stetz, Margaret D. and Mark Samuels Lasner. *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition*. Cambridge: The Houghton Library, 1994.

Archives

John Lane Archives, Harry Ransom Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library

Websites

Modernist Magazines Project http://www.cts.dmu.ac.uk/exist/mod_mag/index.htm