

Critical Introduction to Volume 2 of *The Dial: An Occasional Publication* (1892)



Figure 1. Charles Ricketts, Engraved headpiece design for *The Dial*, vol 2.

In March 1892, almost three years after publishing the magazine's first number to mixed reviews, Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon

brought out a second *Dial*, now aptly subtitled *An Occasional Publication*. Although retaining the brown paper wrappers of the 1889 issue, the new volume was otherwise significantly redesigned, with its printing taken over by the highly regarded Ballantyne Press. The original quarto was replaced by a slightly larger folio format, providing even more expansive margins, and Ricketts designed and engraved a new cover. Employing laid paper instead of the previously used coated paper ensured that the inking of the letterpress would be even, while printing on a hand press maximized the visual appeal of the magazine's typography. Ricketts supervised the printing of the *Dial* himself, initiating what amounted to an informal apprenticeship with master-printer Charles McCall, manager of the Ballantyne Press in London. As Maureen Watry notes, the immediate effect of this tutelage is evident in the Prospectus to the second *Dial*.

Ricketts's first piece of ornamented letterpress set with McCall's help, the Prospectus displayed a greater "severity of design" than seen in the magazine's first number (21).

The Prospectus announced that the second number was limited, like the first, to 200 copies, but at the increased price of 10 shillings and 10 pence (compared to 7 shillings 6 pence) per copy. The elevated price reflected the greater artistic value of the magazine as a whole, which eschewed photographic processes in favour of artforms in which artists could control the production of their work—what we would call original prints today. The volume marketed itself through the aura of the artist-designer and an arts-and-crafts bias toward the artisanal integrity of printing from the woodblock rather than the electroplate matrixes used by the mass press. "The woodcuts and lithographs are directly from the hands of the artist," the Prospectus proclaimed, and "[a]ll the woodcuts have been printed from the wood to ensure the greater sweetness in printing." The woodcuts in the issue included not only the titled illustrations listed in the Contents, but also textual ornaments designed and cut by Ricketts himself to harmonize with the type (figs. 1, 2, 7). In all, Ricketts designed and engraved six borders and four initials for the second *Dial*; the labour of engraving alone took many months. Reginald Savage and Lucien Pissarro joined Ricketts in providing a full-page illustration, which each artist "designed and engraved on the wood," while Charles Shannon contributed three original lithographs, "drawn on the stone and bitten" by the artist (Contents, n.p).

The literary contents retained the previous issue's preference for fantastic tale over contemporary short story, and also introduced a significant number of poems, some of them ekphrastic, in keeping with the magazine's interest in the interrelations of visual art, literature, and design. The *Dial*'s early interest in continental art movements continued in both the volume's poetry and its two essays, one of which, "The Unwritten Book," belatedly outlined the editorial principles by which the magazine was governed. The elaborate headpiece Ricketts designed and engraved for the essay expresses the magazine's commitment to a Pre-Raphaelite combination of visual and verbal art, a symbolic approach to artistic representation, and a reverence for the mysterious wellsprings of inspiration (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Wood-engraved headpiece by Charles Ricketts for “The Unwritten Book”

Written by Ricketts but published anonymously, “The Unwritten Book” responds directly to critical reviews of the *Dial’s* first volume as “mere art eclecticism” by explicating the editors’ rationale of selection. In choosing works to present in each number, the editors sought that element “common to all good art” encapsulated for them by the term “*Document*.” As the theoretical framework for the magazine’s editorial approach, “*Document*” calls attention to the relationship of artwork, artist, and spectator as triangulated by masterpieces that live beyond their moment. Such art continues to express to the viewer “a thing known” or a “remembered delight” by conveying, in an individual, idiosyncratic detail, “the record of a mere moment in transfigured life, producing and controlling it” ([Ricketts] 25). In examples drawn from classical Greek friezes, Italian Renaissance painters, and late-nineteenth century English artists, *Document* is shown to reside in art where “Nature is strained into symbolic action, and in an atmosphere dyed by personal feeling” (27). The editorial closes with words that gesture toward the *Dial’s* own efforts toward a highly individual, symbolic approach to representing nature through “fantastic details,” “the old ornamentalness,” and “lyrical movement” counterpointed by “tense immobility” 28)—all exemplified in Ricketts’s headpiece to the essay as well as in the magazine’s contents, including its textual ornaments (figs. 1, 2, 5, 7). In the elusive quality of *Document*, the editorial asserts, we recognize that as “Art has been, Art is, so the present touches wings with the past” (27). Although most of the examples are drawn from visual art, the essay gives its closest attention to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s double work, the *Proserpine* painting and its associated sonnet. It is “in the works of the English Pre-Raphaelites,” Ricketts avers, that “document has been chiselled in new-cleft gems” (27).

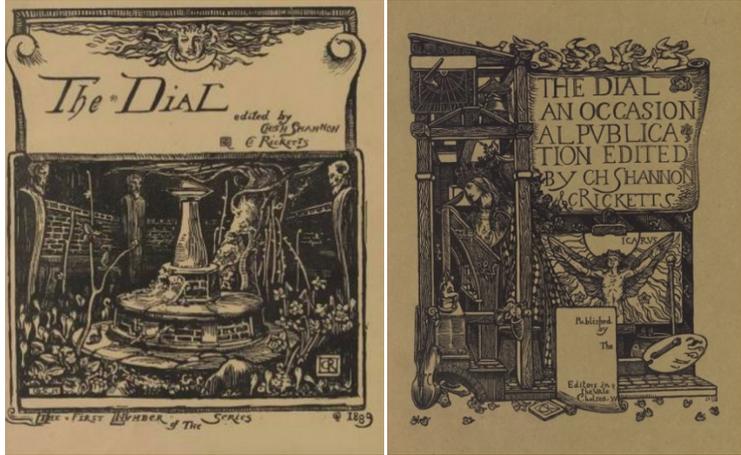


Figure 3. Left: Cover, *Dial* vol. 1; Right: Cover, *Dial* vol. 2

The *Dial*'s Pre-Raphaelite lineage is made manifest in the new cover design introduced in the second number and used for each of the remaining issues (fig. 3). In the three years since publishing the first *Dial*, Ricketts had immersed himself in Rossetti's illustrations and the possibilities of wood-engraving as an artform.

The new wood-engraved cover brings these two interests together, so that “the present touches wings with the past” by evoking the woodcut designs of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and D.G. Rossetti (1828-1882). In a symbolically detailed representation of the arts of painting, writing, printing, and music, the cover expresses the spiritual, material, and aesthetic aspirations of the magazine. Enclosed within the wooden beams of a narrow tower, the crowned spirit of the artist kneels at a prie-dieu or prayer desk, holding a quill pen. Above this scene of creative making hangs a bell and a sundial, indicating the passing of time. A flock of white doves ornaments the decorative signboard that emerges from this structure to herald the title and name the editors. Below this is a work-in-progress: an easel painting of Icarus with wings outspread before the sun. The subject alludes to Dürer's famous woodcut of this classical myth, while the composition itself incorporates the sundial's complementary motif, the flaming sun, from the *Dial*'s first cover. The iconography asserts the big ambitions of this little magazine to make an impact on the world of art, even if the attempt should end in failure. Chief among these ambitions was a desire to gain recognition for wood engraving as an artform. As Watry observes, “The second number of the *Dial* was to be the first of several efforts to educate the public in the expressive power of this medium” (17). From front to back cover, full-page illustrations to textual ornaments, the wood engravings in volume 2 of the *Dial* bear witness to the integrity of the woodblock medium and its artistic possibilities.

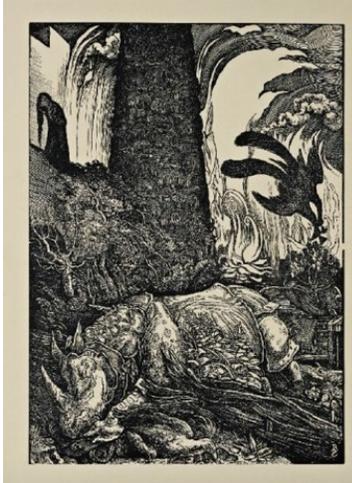


Figure 4. Reginald Savage, "The Palace Burns, and Behemoth..."

The frontispiece by Reginald Savage, a wood-engraved illustration for Ricketts's "The Marred Face," references the Pre-Raphaelites in its claustrophobic composition and symbolic detail, while also paying homage to Dürer's *Rhinoceros* and William Blake's *Behemoth* (fig. 4). The latter allusion is apt, as the fairy tale it illustrates opens with an epigraph from Blake's *Jerusalem*: "My Mountains are My Own and I Will Keep Them to Myself" ("Marred," 1). An allegorical tale of love and betrayal set in ancient China, "The Marred Face" ends apocalyptically with both the monstrous Behemoth and the fatal Queen, kissing the face of her

decapitated lover, going down in flames. Stephen Corbett suggests that Ricketts's main interest in this fantastic tale lies in its ornamental prose rather than its plot or character, but he does recognize the work's allegorical representation of the isolated artist figure (105). This figure appears again in his (unsigned) essay on French poet "Maurice de Guérin." Ricketts celebrates the "holy seclusion" from the world evoked in de Guérin's non-realistic works, with their "clatter of centaur heels" (11, 12). For the accompanying headpiece, Ricketts designed an elaborate composition depicting a centaur set amid flowing water and intricate interlacings (fig. 5). The headpiece not only illuminates the thematic core of the de Guérin essay and visually chimes with the volume's other textual ornaments, but also anticipates one of the principal motifs of the *Dial's* third volume, published the following year with "Centaur's" by T. Sturge Moore as its frontispiece.



Figure 5. Ricketts, headpiece for "Maurice de Guérin"

In both his editorial selections and his visual and verbal contributions, Ricketts favoured the fantastic as a mode capable of expressing meaning symbolically. Notably, the second *Dial's* literary contents open and

close with exotic fairy tales by Ricketts that explore something of the "transfigured life" expressed in *Document's* symbolic details. T. Sturge Moore's "King Comfort" also uses the fantastic setting of a remote castle rife with intrigue, betrayal, sex, and death in an

allegory focused on the titular isolated and misunderstood King and his desire for Privacy. In this way, the “fantastic details” and “old ornamentalness” of *Document* weave throughout the second volume’s literature, art, and textual decoration.

John Gray contributed three poems, all influenced by French writers, and Sturge Moore contributed eight brief lyrics, including an elegy “To the Memory of Arthur Rimbaud” and ekphrastic poems after specific artworks by Puvis de Chavannes and Shannon, as well as one on myth of “Pygmalion,” whose sculpture comes to life. Both Gray and Moore also offered original translations of French verses. The former imitated Paul Verlaine’s “Parsifal,” a poem about conquering physical desire to realize spiritual truths, while the latter took a more sensuous approach with “Les Chercheuses de Poux” (“The Lice-Hunters”), a translation that bears comparison with Ezra Pound’s later rendition of the French original. The magazine’s French connections were reinforced in Lucien Pissarro’s lovely woodcut “Sister of the Woods,” whose simplicity of design and use of white line engraving contrasts the style of the English-trained Ricketts and Savage (fig. 6).

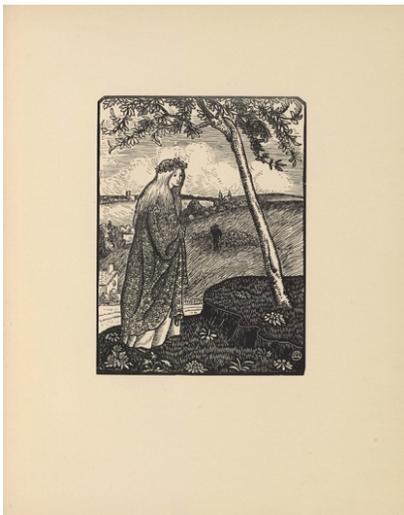


Figure 6. Lucien Pissarro, “Sister of the Woods”

Herbert Horne, editor of the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, contributed his first and only poem to the *Dial*, “To the Flowers, to Weep,” perhaps in exchange for the publication of Charles Shannon’s lithograph, “Vallatus Lilis,” in the previous year’s *Hobby Horse*. His was the only poem praised by the critics; the *Saturday Review* singled it out as a “charming lyric” (“New Books,” 462). Shannon’s three lithographs in the second *Dial* show his increasing mastery of the medium’s potential for the effects of light and shade, in contrast to the black and white masses and lines of the woodcut. The lantern’s rays in “Shepherd in a Mist” show the lithograph’s capacity to express gradations of illumination, while “Repeated Bend” and “With Viol and Flute” demonstrate the soft tonal effects that can be achieved on the stone.



Figure 7. Two of Charles Ricketts's illuminated initials for Volume 2 and the Ballantyne Press Colophon

If motifs of flames, flowers, butterflies, and monsters form a pattern from cover to cover in the *Dial's* first number, they return to add visual

harmony to its second number and thus to the series as a whole. Rather than the open butterfly with outstretched wings, however, the new volume favoured flocks of butterflies with closed or semi-closed wings, chiming with the flock of doves found on the cover and in a number of textual ornaments (see figs. 2, 3, and 7). The latter may pay tribute to the new partnership with the Ballantyne Press, whose colophon, printed at the back of the volume, featured seven white doves (fig. 7). As a work of overall design in the art of the book, the *Dial's* second number shows significant development in typography and ornament. As Nicholas Barker rightly observes, Ricketts's desire to have artistic control over every aspect of the magazine's production made him a "real pioneer, the ancestor of the modern designer" (Foreword in Watery xxi).

Ricketts and Shannon were justifiably proud of the *Dial's* second volume and sent a complimentary copy to William Morris. The older man confessed that to him, "the talent and the aberration of the talent seemed...in about equal portions," but graciously invited the two editors to visit him at Merton (Ricketts, *Self-Portrait* 20). Morris refrained from commenting on the literary contents, but reviews in the press once again dismissed the *Dial's* poems, fairy tales, and essays, with the *Academy* critic calling them "sheer nonsense" ("The Art Magazines" 332). The same critic, however, acknowledged that the graphic art (including textual ornaments) "of the whole number...is so fresh and strange that one does not care to criticise it too minutely" (ibid). The *Saturday Review* went further, saying that "Mr. Shannon's lithographs. . .and Mr. Ricketts's cuts in the text, are designs that appeal, as music does, to the artist" ("New Books" 462). The aesthetic appeal of volume 2 of the *Dial* lies in the harmony of its design and the success of its conception and execution. It is no wonder that it influenced the arts of wood-engraving, lithography, and the making of little magazines at the turn of the last century.

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