Gino Scatasta*

Yellow or Savoy? An Introduction to the Nineties

Abstract: The debate around the Eighteen Nineties in England has often led to consider that decade as a phase characterised by a widespread dissemination of ideas, attitudes, and works related to Decadence and Aestheticism. The analysis of some aspects of the two most important magazines of the time might offer a more correct introduction to the period, with all its contradictions and complexity. The yellow colour, which appeared to connote the decade and gave the name to its most famous magazine, was only one of a series of colours that tinged the period, and *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, while trying to find a difficult balance among different trends and needs, reflected more than a single current or attitude, offering a composite and complete picture of those years.

Keywords: *The Yellow Book*. *The Savoy*. Eighteen Nineties. Oscar Wilde.

The answer is and has been for decades: "Yellow Nineties". However, the appropriate questions might be different: Were the Nineties really yellow? Why *The Yellow Book* and not another magazine such as *The Savoy*? And why the colour yellow?

The definition of this decade with its peculiar qualities, different from the preceding decades but also from the following ones, "dates back to the last few years before the First World War", as Koenraad Claes notes: this "popular image of the Nineties" stems from the concerns of the Georgians who wanted to break away from Victorianism and sought to identify some ideas and artworks in the last decade of the previous century that did not reflect the "sexual repression and social conformism" of Victorianism.[1] George Holbrook Jackson's seminal volume *The Eighteen Nineties*, first published in 1911, was both a consequence and an amplifier of this attitude.

However, this view of the Nineties is somewhat misleading, just like the idea of the *Yellow Book* as an *avant-garde* magazine: "It was newness *in excelsis*: novelty naked and unashamed",[2] as Jackson put it, but it was also the result of a compromise. In the Eighteen Nineties not all artists were radical, nor were all writers experimenting with new themes or different styles. It was, more or less, a decade like the others, perhaps a little more controversial, but, as usual, with authors who continued to write as their predecessors did twenty years earlier and others who tried something different. And this is true not only for literature, but for society in general: if assuming that the Nineties were *so* yellow, how would we explain the harsh sentence against Oscar Wilde, his rapid transformation from celebrity to outcast, the hysterical reactions of the mob

* Università di Bologna. Email: gino.scatasta@unibo.it

1 K. Claes, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2018, pp. 107-108.

2 G. Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, Edinburgh, Riverside Press, 1922, p. 46.

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that, after the author's trials, smashed the windows of his publishing house, The Bodley Head, in Vigo Street? The early years of the decade were perhaps characterised by a certain open-mindedness, but, again, how to explain the outraged reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890 and the shocked and disgusted reactions to Beardsley's art and Max Beerbohm's essays in the first volume of *The Yellow Book* in 1894? It is patently untrue that in England in the Nineties everybody became queer, just as it is untrue that every sexual or literary 'vice' was accepted or looked upon with a certain benevolence, that everyone was an aesthete or at least a lover of the fine arts. There was a certain tolerance for something that was previously unacceptable, it was possible to discuss topics that used to be taboo, but nothing more, and with important limitations at that.

However, the popular vision of the Nineties as 'Naughty Nineties' or 'Yellow Nineties', which was widespread in the first decades of the new century and handed down soon after, had some basis in reality, just like the reputation of *The Yellow Book* as the most shocking magazine ever published. Through an analysis of the colour yellow, which according to Jackson pervaded the period, it is possible to arrive at a more complex view of that age. Even though Jackson did not use the term 'yellow' with reference to the Nineties, he nevertheless devoted a long paragraph to this colour:

> Yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit. It was associated with all that was *bizarre* and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern. Richard Le Gallienne wrote a *prose fancy* on "The Boom in Yellow", in which he pointed out many applications of the colour with that *fin de siècle* flippancy which was one of his characteristics, without, however, tracing the decorative use of yellow to Whistler, as he should have done. Nevertheless his essay recalls very amusingly the fashion of the moment. "Bill-posters", he says, "are beginning to discover the attractive qualities of the colour [...] though its recent boom comes from publishers, and particularly from The Bodley Head. *The Yellow Book* with any other colour would hardly have sold as well – the first private edition of Mr Arthur Benson's poems, by the way, came caparisoned in yellow, and with the identical name, *Le Cahier Jaune*; and no doubt it was largely its title that made the success of *The Yellow Aster*".[3]

Yellow was queer, but less dangerous than green. Green was a colour that, associated with Wilde and his circle, spread an atmosphere of perversion far more than the 'innocent' yellow. Richard Le Gallienne expresses this clearly in his essay quoted by Jackson and published in 1900, "The Boom in Yellow", which could be described as a defence of yellow, as opposed to green:

> Green must always have a large following among artists and art lovers; for, as has been pointed out, an appreciation of it is a sure sign of a subtle artistic temperament. There is something not quite good, something almost sinister, about it – at least, in its more complex forms, though in its simple form, as we find it in outdoor nature, it is innocent enough; and, indeed, is it not used in colloquial metaphor as an adjective for innocence itself? Innocence has but two colours, white or green. But Becky Sharp's eyes also were green, and the green of the aesthete does not suggest innocence. There will always be wearers of the green carnation; but the popular vogue which green has enjoyed for the last ten or fifteen years is probably passing. Even the aesthete himself would seem to be growing a

[3] *Ibidem*, pp. 46-47. Arthur Benson published his first collection of verse, *Le Cahier Jaune*, in 1892. *The Yellow Aster* was a New Woman novel, published in 1894 and written by Kathleen Mannington Hunt Caffyn with the pseudonym 'Iota'.

little weary of its indefinitely divided tones, and to be anxious for a colour sensation somewhat more positive than those to be gained from almost imperceptible nuances, of green.[4]

Yellow differs from green, and through its connections with flowers, innocence, and religion, Le Gallienne tries to distance himself from the sick, decadent, Wildean colour:

if in the vegetable world green almost universally colours the leaves, yellow has more to do with the flowers. The flowers we love best are yellow: the cowslip, the daffodil, the crocus, the buttercup, half the daisy, the honeysuckle, and the loveliest rose. Yellow, too, has its turn even with the leaves [...]. Let us dream of this: a maid with yellow hair, clad in a yellow gown, seated in a yellow room, at the window a yellow sunset, in the grate a yellow fire, at her side a yellow lamplight, on her knee a Yellow Book. And the letters we love best to read – when we dare – are they not yellow too?[5]

Even *The Yellow Book*, in this idyllic picture of a world turned yellow, loses its sinister side on the knees of a young girl. Le Gallienne's detachment from the decadent Nineties had already begun: in his memoirs *The Romantic '90s*, published many years later, in 1925, he would write: "*The Yellow Book* has become the symbol of the period and the two or three writers and artists to whom the word 'decadence' may perhaps be applied have been taken as characteristic of a time which was far from being all 'yellow,' or 'naughty,' or 'decadent'".[6] In 1925 he seemed to believe that the spirit of the Nineties was very different from the popular image of the period that had been constructed in the previous decades, although in 1900 his view of yellow had been much more sentimental. Le Gallienne knew that yellow also had a dark side:

No doubt some disagreeable things are reported of yellow. We have had the yellow-fever, and we have had pea-soup. The eyes of lions are said to be yellow, and the ugliest cats – the cats that infest one's garden – are always yellow. Some medicines are yellow, and no doubt there are many other yellow disagreeables; but we prefer to dwell upon the yellow blessings.[7]

However, yellow was a much more wicked colour than this. French decadent and naturalistic novels were sold in England with yellow covers and yellow was also "the decor of the notorious and dandified pre-Victorian Regency".[8] Yellow, like green, was also closely associated with Wilde, who wrote the poem "Symphony in Yellow" in 1889. And, again, yellow continued to appear in Wilde's works, from the yellow book that Lord Henry gives to Dorian Gray and which corrupts the young man's soul[9] to Mrs Cheveley's famous line in *An Ideal Husband* when she says that she has never read a Blue Book because she prefers books with yellow covers.[10] Wilde was suspicious of *The Yellow Book*, and, to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with it, publicly called it

[4] R. LE GALLIENNE, "The Boom in Yellow" (1900), *Victorian Web*, https://victorianweb.org/victorian/decadence/lagalliene1.html (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[5] *Ibidem*.

[6] R. LE GALLIENNE, *The Romantic '90s*, New York, Doubleday, 1925, p. 162.

[7] R. LE GALLIENNE, "The Boom in Yellow".

[8] S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", in ID. (ed.), The Yellow Book*: Quintessence of the Nineties*, New York, Doubleday, 1964, p. viii.

[9] See O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, London and Glasgow, Collins, 1977, p. 100.

[10] See O. WILDE, *An Ideal Husband* (1895), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 517.

"'horrid', 'loathsome', 'dull' and – worst of all – 'not yellow at all'".[11] However, the strongest connection between Wilde, yellow and *The Yellow Book*, which pushed the colour and the magazine firmly under his decadent influence, was unintentionally established by Wilde himself. Sally Ledger comments on a well-known misunderstanding concerning this dynamic:

> As Oscar Wilde was escorted to the Old Bailey in 1895, one or two newspaper men noted that the disgraced author had under his arm a large volume bound in yellow. According to subsequent reports in the media, the yellow-backed tome that Wilde took with him to the first of his two trials was *The Yellow Book*, the hardbacked quarterly periodical edited by Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley. As it happened, the book clutched under Wilde's arm was a French novel; the yellow dust jacket generally denoted either risqué French fiction or popular novels sold at railway bookstalls. But as far as the newspapers were concerned, Wilde was accompanied to his trial by *The Yellow Book*, and such media reports cemented in the cultural imagination of the 1890s an association between *The Yellow Book*, aestheticism and Decadence and, after April and May 1895, homosexuality.[12]

What was infamous in 1895 began to be more valued and appreciated in the following decades, giving *The Yellow Book* the aura of a decadent and *avant-garde* magazine. As the colour yellow, with its complex and contradictory meanings, would teach us, however, things were more complicated and confusing. In fact, *The Yellow Book* was and was *not* a decadent magazine. To understand this apparent contradiction, we can start from the magazine's origins, as told by Henry Harland, its literary editor: he wrote that it was

> one of the densest and soupiest and yellowest of all London's infernalest yellow fogs. Beardsley and I sat together the whole afternoon [...]. We declared each to each that we thought it quite a pity and a shame that London publishers should feel themselves longer under the obligation to refuse any more of our good manuscripts [...]. And then and there we decided to have a magazine of our own. As the sole editorial staff we would feel free and welcome to publish any and all of ourselves that nobody could be hired to print.
> That was the first day of January [...] and the next day we had an appointment with Mr John Lane.[13]

The two young artists were an odd couple: Harland was an American-born novelist who had achieved some success in the United States with a sensationalist novel written under a pseudonym. In 1899, he moved to Britain, where he continued to write novels and short stories under his own name, drawing inspiration from respectable authors, such as Henry James, and from less respectable friends, such as Baron Corvo and Aubrey Beardsley. As for Beardsley, he had achieved a certain notoriety with his illustrations of *Le Morte Darthur*, but had abandoned his Pre-Raphaelite style for a new and personal mode, inspired by Japonisme and with a strongly decadent and provocative attitude. In 1893 he illustrated Wilde's *Salome*, starting an ambiguous relationship of admiration and impatience with the Irish author. Wilde himself often reacted to this arrogant young artist with an irony mixed with malice: "Dear Aubrey is almost too

[11] Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", p. xvi.
[12] S. LEDGER, "Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence", *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 50 (1), 2007, p. 5.
[13] Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", pp. ix-x.

Parisian – he can never forget that he has been in Dieppe – once", he is reported to have said, while Beardsley mocked Wilde, depicting him in his drawings "as puffily fat, effeminate, evil, in jester's cap and bells".[14] The illustrations for *Salome*, however, had given Beardsley great notoriety but also a reputation as a decadent young artist, and marked once for all a link between him and Wilde.

The man that Harland and Beardsley went to see, on that yellow afternoon in January 1894, was John Lane, the third man behind *The Yellow Book* enterprise. Described as "the most resourceful entrepreneur of British Aestheticism",[15] Lane had opened a bookshop of antiquarian books, The Bodley Head, with his partner Elkin Mathews, in 1887. A few years later, they began publishing books, both as 'The Bodley Head' and under the name of the two partners. More than Mathews, who left the firm at the beginning of 1894, Lane realised that Aestheticism, Decadence and all that was modern, scandalous and shocking could sell well, and thus exploited his intuition. *The Yellow Book* project came at just the right time: "Lane saw at once the potential of the venture", as Matthew Sturgis puts it. More than the artistic aspect of the project, "he saw at once the commercial benefits of establishing a periodical that would provide a platform for authors and artists already on his list, and a magnet for newcomers".[16]

It has often been argued that *The Yellow Book* was a compromise and that part of its success was due to its composite character. Built on a delicate balance between novelty and tradition, it presented conventional writers side by side with Beardsley's scandalous drawings and Max Beerbohm's provocative essays. The first volume of April 1894 opens with a novella by Henry James, always suspicious of what he called "the small square lemon-coloured quarterly",[17] and towards the end of the volume there is an essay by Arthur Waugh, eloquently titled "Reticence in Literature". In the middle, however, there are "A Defence of Cosmetics" by Max Beerbohm, which emphasises the importance of artifice in life and the arts, and a poem by Arthur Symons, "Stella Maris", focusing on a prostitute, although the title is an attribute of the Virgin Mary.[18]

The first four volumes maintained a precarious balance between tradition and novelty. After Beardsley's dismissal as art editor following the Wilde trials, however, this balance was increasingly difficult to keep and the magazine slowly lost its relevance. Therefore, its posthumous fame derives from these four volumes, in which the promises made in the magazine's advertisement, distributed in March 1894, were fulfilled. The Prospectus made explicit reference to such a balance: "And while *The Yellow Book* will seek always to preserve a delicate, decorous and reticent mien and conduct, it will at the same time have the courage of its moderness, and not tremble at the frown

[14] Quoted in S. CALLOW, *Oscar Wilde and his Circle*, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2013, pp. 65-66.

[15] K. CLAES, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, p. 109.

[16] M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, London, Flamingo, 1999, p. 171.

[17] Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", p. xii.

[18] H. JAMES, "The Death of the Lion", *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894, pp. 7-52, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, eds D. DENISOFF and L.J. KOOISTRA, Yellow Nineties 2.0, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_james_death; A. WAUGH, "Reticence in Literature", *ibidem*, pp. 201-19, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_waugh_reticence; M. BEERBOHM, "A Defence of Cosmetics", *ibidem*, pp. 65-82, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_beerbohm_defense; A. SYMONS, "Stella Maris", *ibidem*, pp. 129-31, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_symons_stellam (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

of Miss Grundy". And a few lines below: "It will be charming, it will be daring, it will be distinguished".[19] "From the beginning", according to Weintraub, *The Yellow Book* "sought respectability" and was "more a survey of the literary spectrum of the Nineties than its reputation would indicate".[20] And it was successful: earlier magazines that could be compared to *The Yellow Book*, such as *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* or *The Dial*, sold no more than 300 copies, while 7,000 copies of the first volume of *The Yellow Book* were printed, followed by about 5,000 of the second volume. A snobbish review in the *National Observer* outlined the type of audience the magazine was aimed at: young, middle-class, not particularly refined or educated but willing to follow new trends just because they were new, and ready to be manipulated;

> you can see young men going home from their labour in the city, bearing the work deferentially under their arms; it flames out from the forehead of many an 'occasional table' in Brixton and Bayswater. For the great world likes to be told what it must admire, especially when it is told to admire something new.[21]

It was an audience that slightly repelled the reviewer but who could be a publisher's fortune. As Ellen Moers recognised as early as 1960, "*The Yellow Book* was founded, after all, not by a coterie with a message, but by a publisher with an eye for value".[22]

Lane had been involved in the project of another magazine in 1893, when he and Mathews tried to revive *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, in many ways a precursor to *The Yellow Book*: "though often described as 'aesthetic', [the *Hobby Horse*] belongs as much to the Arts and Crafts movement, has connections with proto-Art Noveau, and is tinged with Decadence".[23] Financially, it had been a complete failure and Lane and Mathews's attempt to take over the magazine did not work. The last issue of the *Hobby Horse*, as it was renamed by Lane, was published in 1894 to soon disappear and be replaced by *The Yellow Book*. Lane had learned a lesson from the *Hobby Horse*: his new magazine was now "available from all major booksellers, not least of which the newsagent chain W.H. Smith that was present in all major railway stations to catch the many potential readers who now commuted or otherwise travelled by train".[24] Its launch was a massive campaign with posters, advertisements, programs and in the end it succeeded in gaining "entrance for the avant-garde into the living rooms of a broad readership that liked the idea of owning beautiful books, but that was ultimately more interested in scandal and sensation than in new literature and art".[25]

A book and not a magazine: this was also emphasised in the Prospectus so as to arouse interest in the new journal before the publication of its first volume:

[19] Quoted in S. Weintraub, "Introduction", p. xi.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. viii.

[21] Quoted in D. Denisoff and L.J. Kooistra, "*The Yellow Book*: Introduction to Volume 1 (April 1894)", *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb-v1-introduction/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[22] Quoted in S. Weintraub, "Introduction", p. viii.

[23] I. Fletcher, "Decadence and the Little Magazines", in Id. (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890s*, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1980, p. 179.

[24] K. Claes, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, p. 109.

[25] *Ibidem*, p 108.

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.[26]

This passage suggests again, in a more positive light, the bookshelf of a middle-class, quite educated man who does not buy a magazine to throw it away after reading it, but carefully places it among other valuable books: the marketing strategy of The Bodley Head included the possibility of "enticing a broad middle-class spectrum into believing they were an elite group of cultivated purchasers".[27]

'Compromise' was then a keyword for *The Yellow Book*: not only a compromise between modernity and tradition or among Aestheticism, Decadence and Philistinism, but also a compromise between art and the market. 'Compromise', however, is a misleading word, so that we had better speak of a careful balance among those elements. In this perspective, *The Yellow Book* was the true magazine of the decade, a decade that, far from constituting *only* a reaction against Victorianism, was full of contradictions and heterogeneous elements. One could just look at the music-hall, the subject of many poems by Arthur Symons and many drawings by Walter Sickert. Music-halls were extolled by artists, but at the same time were attacked by others on moral grounds. Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies* that Symons "studied the music halls, as he might have studied the age of Chaucer"[28] and his fascination is visible in many of his poems. His collection *London Nights*, published by Smithers in 1895, begins with "Prologue", whose first line is "My life is like a music-hall", while the next poem, "To a Dancer", is inspired not by a classical dancer but by a music-hall one:

Intoxicatingly
Her eyes across the footlights gleam,
(The wine of love, the wine of dream)
Her eyes, that gleam for me!

The eyes of all that see
Draw to her glances, stealing fire
From her desire that leaps to my desire;
Her eyes that gleam for me![29]

With less sensuality, Sickert published many drawings in *The Yellow Book* whose subjects were the dancers, actresses and audiences of the various music-halls in London.[30]

[26] Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", p. xi.

[27] L.J. KOOISTRA, "*The Yellow Book* (1894-1897): An Overview", *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb-general-introduction/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[28] W.B. YEATS, *Autobiographies*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 236.

[29] A. SYMONS, "To a Dancer", ll. 1-8, in ID., *London Nights*, London, Smithers, 1895, p. 5.

[30] See "The Old Oxford Music Hall", *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894, p. 85, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb1-sickert-hall/; "The Old Bedford Music Hall", *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, p. 221, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb2-sickert-bedford-music-hall/ and "Ada Lundberg", *ibidem*, p. 225, https://1890s.ca/yb2-sickert-ada-lundberg/; "Collins's Music Hall, Islington", *The Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, p. 137, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb3-sickert-musichall/, "The Lion Comique", *ibidem*, p. 139, https://1890s.ca/yb3-sickert-lioncomique/ and "Skirt-Dancing" (by Philip Wilson Steer, another British

However, the same subject that aroused the enthusiasm or interest of the artists was attacked not only by the more traditional and puritanical sectors of British society, but also by social reformers and women's rights activists. In 1894, Laura Ormiston Chant, "a suffragist, novelist, poet, and nurse, who was a prominent member" of the National Vigilance Association, "whose members were sometimes referred to as 'Purity Crusaders'",[31] organised a protest against the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square, reporting her astonishment at the immorality of the performances and the presence of prostitutes who openly solicited their clients during the show. Her efforts were successful and some changes were made to the structure of the theatre, despite the protests of the customers, to prevent the activity of prostitutes.[32]

A similarly blurred situation, which shows how that decade cannot be considered in terms of a coherent whole, not even the first part of it, is related to both Wilde and *The Yellow Book*. As Ledger writes,

> All too many New Woman writers and journalists were positively jubilant at the downfall of Oscar Wilde, regarding it as the proper comeuppance of one whose sexual mores failed to meet the high standards advocated by social purity feminists such as Sarah Grand, Laura Ormiston Chant, and some of the female journalists who wrote for feminist newspapers such as *Shafts* and *The Woman's Signal*. Contrarily, though, as Margaret Stetz and Linda K. Hughes have both demonstrated, the literary journals associated with Decadence and aestheticism not only included poems and short stories by women, but also facilitated a dialogue between male aesthetes, Decadents and New Woman writers of the *fin de siècle*.[33]

This was the case with *The Yellow Book* and more generally with The Bodley Head, which had a catalogue devoted to New Woman fiction, besides Decadence male authors. If there was a strong moralist bent in British feminism in the Nineties, within *The Yellow Book* there was also a lively debate among New Women interested in a more open approach to sexuality and marriage, both in their life and in their works. Writers such as Ada Leverson, Ella D'Arcy, Charlotte Mew, Olive Custance (who later became the unhappy wife of Lord Alfred Douglas), Evelyn Sharp, and Vernon Lee published stories and poems in *The Yellow Book*. Some of them were regular contributors and the number of female authors increased with every issue of the magazine. The third volume opened with a rather boring but provocative essay, "Women – Wives or Mothers", signed by 'A Woman' but written by a man, i.e. the critic and journalist Frederick Greenwood. The crux of the essay is that "woman, fresh from Nature's moulding, is [...] a predestined wife *or* mother. She is not both",[34] and this clearly shows how committed the magazine and the publisher were to such sensitive topics as the redefinition of gender roles at the *fin de siècle*, and how they approved at least part of the demands of the New Women. And, of course, this also brought financial profits.

impressionist), *ibidem*, p. 173, https://1890s.ca/yb3-steer-skirt-dancing/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[31] K. Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*, New York, Norton, 1992, p. 119.

[32] *Ibidem*, pp. 119-25.

[33] S. Ledger, "Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*", p. 4.

[34] F. Greenwood (A Woman), "Women – Wives or Mothers", *The Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, p. 12, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/YBV3_greenwood_women/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

If, then, *The Yellow Book* was the result of a careful balance between some trends that characterised the Nineties, and in this sense was the true magazine of a heterogeneous decade, what can be said of *The Savoy*? Was it the true avant-garde magazine of the Nineties and, although less successful than *The Yellow Book*, did it achieve what the other magazine, in its cautious attempt at a balance, failed to do? The first thing to note is that the two publications were connected for more than one reason. Firstly, they had in common not only many contributors (Beerbohm, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Yeats), but also the two editors: Symons, who had not been the literary editor of *The Yellow Book* but had nonetheless contributed to it, and Beardsley. The latter had been dismissed as art editor of *The Yellow Book* after Wilde's imprisonment: as he was associated with the Irish writer because of his illustrations for *Salome*, some contributors to *The Yellow Book* called on Lane to sack Beardsley in order to avert any connections between the magazine and the now infamous Wilde. Lane reluctantly agreed. The second aspect that the two magazines had in common was the economic one: if Harland and Beardsley are to be trusted, we know that *The Yellow Book* was born out of a conversation between the two friends, who would then discuss it with Lane, who willingly accepted their proposal. With *The Savoy*, the situation was reversed: it was John Smithers, the publisher, who realised that the new direction of *The Yellow Book* had left room for a new avant-garde magazine: "Smithers felt there might be an opening in the print market for a well-produced magazine of art and literature, especially if it featured the kind of avant-garde work that other periodicals were now increasingly reluctant to publish" and therefore "approached the poet and essayist Arthur Symons to serve as editor".[35]

Smithers was very different from Lane. Firstly, he was not afraid of public morality and, not surprisingly, was one of Wilde's few friends who remained very close to him after his release. Wilde responded with a witty portrait of him in a letter to a friend in 1897:

> [Smithers] is usually in a large straw hat, has a blue tie delicately fastened with a diamond brooch of the impurest water – or perhaps wine, as he never touches water: it goes to his head at once. His face, clean-shaven as befits a priest who serves at the altar whose God is Literature, is wasted and pale – not with poetry, but with poets, who, he says, have wrecked his life by insisting on publishing with him. He loves first editions, especially of women: little girls are his passion. He is the most learned erotomaniac in Europe. He is also a delightful companion, and a dear fellow, very kind to me.[36]

Smithers approached Symons, and Symons in turn contacted Beardsley, who was delighted to have the opportunity to take revenge on Lane and *The Yellow Book*. As in the case of *The Yellow Book*, the genesis of *The Savoy* hinged on a compenetration of literary and artistic concerns, with an eye to the economic aspect. This balance is also visible in Symons's editorial note to the first volume of *The Savoy*, January 1896:

[35] C. KEEP, "General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)", *Savoy Digital Edition*, eds C. KEEP and L.J. KOOISTRA, 2018-2020, Yellow Nineties 2.0, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2022, https://1890s.ca/savoy-general-introduction/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[36] Quoted in J.G. NELSON, "'A Delightful Companion': Leonard Smithers and the Decadents", *The Wildean*, 26, 2005, p. 18.

All we ask from our contributors is good work, and good work is all we offer our readers. This we offer with some confidence. We have no formulas, and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art.[37]

Eschewing rigid labelling and emphasising a preference for all that was artistically elevated, the editorial note written by Symons expressed a desire to distance the new magazine from the controversies relating to the decadent and aesthetic movements in England (foremost among them, the Wilde trials). At the same time, it looked towards an artistic excellence that could rival *The Yellow Book*. As Symons later admitted, it was actually conceived as "something of a rival to *The Yellow Book*, which had by that time ceased to mark a movement and had become little more than a publisher's magazine".[38]

Unfortunately, the new magazine too was immediately embroiled in a controversy. To begin with, its very name was controversial: possibly suggested by Beardsley or his sister Mabel, it stemmed from the custom of naming a magazine after the street or the district in which it was printed.[39] Nothing scandalous about this, apart from the fact that *The Savoy* was also the name of the new hotel that had opened in 1889: if considered the height of modernity, it was also mentioned in many depositions throughout Wilde's trials as the backdrop where the 'gross indecency' acts took place. This might have worked as a subtle allusion for a few readers, as Keep seems to think, but, due to the wide press coverage of Wilde's trials, it is equally possible that the 'subtle' allusion was not so nuanced after all, being actually graspable by the general public. It could have been one of Beardsley's typical pranks, whose desire to shock his prudish readers resurfaced again and again.[40]

The same attitude can be seen in connection with two drawings by Beardsley that did not create a scandal simply because they never reached the general public. The first was submitted to Smithers for the prospectus of the new magazine: the artist proposed a winged Pierrot, but the publisher wanted something more serious, more in line with a magazine that presented itself as a container of 'good art', and therefore recommended the image of John Bull, the traditional incarnation of the common Englishman. Beardsley complied, but could not avoid adding an obscene detail, so that his John Bull presented "what Shaw calls 'a condition of strained sexual excitement'",[41] raising protests from George Moore and other literary and artistic figures who had been approached for collaboration. Beardsley was no stranger to this kind of prank. Lane had spent much time scrutinising his drawings for *Salome*, looking for hidden male genitalia, sometimes asking him to remove them and on other occasions not noticing them. Smithers was not inclined to be scandalised, but his desire to distance himself from his previous reputation as a dealer in erotic books led him to intervene in the debate, siding with Moore. Another of Beardsley's pranks was discovered on the cover of the

[37] A. SYMONS, "Editorial Note", *The Savoy*, 1, January 1896, p. 5, *Savoy Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/savoyv1-symons-editorial/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[38] Quoted in C. KEEP, "General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)", *Savoy Digital Edition*.

[39] *Ibidem* and M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, p. 256.

[40] See, among others, C. KEEP, "General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)", *Savoy Digital Edition*.

[41] Quoted *ibidem*.

first volume of *The Savoy*, showing the drawing of a beautiful young woman and a half-naked cherub. In the first version of the drawing, the cherub urinated on a book hidden in the grass, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be *The Yellow Book*. Smithers asked Beardsley to change the drawing and the latter complied again, although such amendments delayed the publication of the first issue until January 1896, thus missing the opportunity offered by the Christmas sales. The first volume of *The Savoy* included as a gift another beautiful image by Beardsley, this time a religious representation of the Virgin with Jesus. Was this an attempt to please a pious audience? Not exactly, because the richness and splendour of the Virgin's clothing are in open contrast to the ideals of poverty and simplicity usually associated with Christmas images.

As we are trying to demonstrate, therefore, *The Savoy* faced the same problems as *The Yellow Book* had done a few years earlier, and this should come as no surprise. What is more, times had changed for the worse: the Wilde scandal had opened a wound that would not be easily healed, and trivial controversies, such as those surrounding *The Savoy* even before the publication of the first volume, were inflated to the detriment of the magazine's contents. As a matter of fact, the quality of the artistic and literary contributions to *The Savoy* was very high, probably higher than that which could be found in any issue of *The Yellow Book.* The choice to publish not only literary works, but also criticism on a wider scale than *The Yellow Book*'s, was crucial: it was thus that Friedrich Nietzsche was introduced to the British public by Havelock Ellis, along with some essays on William Blake by Yeats. The same can be said for the choice to publish serial works such as, but not limited to, Beardsley's unfinished novel *Under the Hill*.

An important difference from *The Yellow Book* is however the lack of women writers. Lane was perceived as the publisher of the New Women, since there were several examples of New Woman fiction in his catalogue and many regular contributors to the magazine were women. As for *The Savoy*, it remained primarily a gentleman's magazine, with an implicitly male audience and little interest in women's condition. Yet, there were a few notable exceptions. One of these was Olivia Shakespear, a close friend of Yeats: her short story, "Beauty's Hour", was published in two instalments in the fourth and fifth volumes of the magazine and remains one of the few examples from the period of a woman's work focusing on the theme of the double. Equally significant was the contribution, in the fifth volume, of Sarojini Chattopadhiay, an Indian poet living in London. A few years later, Chattopadhiay returned to India, where, under the name of her husband Naidu, she became an important political activist, fighting for national independence and women's emancipation.[42] However, most of the *Savoy* contributors, both writers and artists, were male.

Broadly speaking, *The Savoy* anticipated the next century more than *The Yellow Book* did, for instance thanks to the contributions of poems and short stories by Yeats, a short story by Joseph Conrad and a poem by Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer). All

[42] O. SHAKESPEAR, "Beauty's Hour: A Phantasy", *The Savoy*, 4, August 1896, pp. 11-24 and 5, September 1896, pp. 11-27, *Savoy Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/savoyv4-shakespear-beauty/ and https://1890s.ca/savoyv5-shakespear-beauty/; S. CHATTOPADHYAY, "Eastern Dancers", *The Savoy*, 5, September 1896, p. 84, *Savoy Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/savoyv5-chattopadhyay-eastern/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

this might be read as an early approach to the Modernist turn that English literature would take in the following years. Reviews of British art from previous decades were also prominent in many contributions, putting not only Blake but also the Pre-Raphaelites into perspective. Cosmopolitan interest was equally in the foreground through translations of Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, among others (not surprisingly, considering Symons's interest in French Symbolism), but also via the introduction of Nietzsche, as mentioned above, and Cesare Lombroso to the British public. If one wants to stress that the Nineties were indeed a bridge between Victorianism and Modernism, then the magazine to be seen as more emblematic of the decade was not *The Yellow Book* but *The Savoy*.

The Savoy was not an economic success and it remained circumscribed to a series of only eight volumes. There was a major change with the third issue, when it abandoned all ambition of being a book, like its rival, and became a literary magazine. Much negative criticism did not concern its contents but once again, as with *The Yellow Book*, the illustrations: this time, not only Beardsley's drawings but even Blake's. This was most probably a subtle way of limiting its sales at a time when the publisher and editor had achieved a balance between the mass market of monthly publications and the demands of a literary magazine. An image by Blake in the third volume, showing a naked male giant and illustrating an episode from Dante's *Inferno*, was deemed controversial by W.H. Smith, who was then the main distributor of printed material in England, particularly in railway bookshops. Smith decided to withdraw the magazine from distribution. Smithers, Symons and other intellectuals protested against this decision, emphasising the spiritual aspects of Blake's works, but the distributor was immovable. This was a fatal blow for *The Savoy*, whose sales slowly but irreversibly declined and, although the quality of the contributions remained high, the magazine was now doomed.

In the last volume of December 1896, Symons commented in a bitter and dispassionate tone on the closing of *The Savoy*, highlighting certain events that were responsible for it, but above all subverting the erroneous perception that the Yellow or Savoy decade of the Nineties was a particularly fertile period for the arts in Britain:

> Our first mistake was in giving so much for so little money; our second, in abandoning a quarterly for a monthly issue. The action of Messrs. Smith and Son in refusing to place "The Savoy" on their bookstalls, on account of the reproduction of a drawing by Blake, was another misfortune. And then, worst of all, we assumed that there were very many people in the world who really cared for art, and really for art's sake. The more I consider it, the more I realize that this is not the case. [...] Comparatively very few people care for art at all, and most of these care for it because they mistake it for something else.[43]

Symons might be right or, perhaps, as the reviewer for *The Referee* commented, "there are many people who really do care for art, and Mr Symons is not the first clever young

[43] A. Symons, "A Literary Causerie: By Way of Epilogue", *The Savoy*, 8, December 1896, p. 92, *Savoy Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-critical-introduction/, https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-symons-causerie/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

man who has mistaken affectation for fine art".[44] Perhaps *The Savoy* was too advanced for the time or perhaps it was just a posthumous victim of the Wilde trials. Whatever the case, it was a magazine that, like *The Yellow Book*, always took into consideration the economic side of the enterprise and not just the demands of a group of writers and artists. However, unlike *The Yellow Book*, and despite Beardsley's pranks in the first volume, it was a serious periodical, with serious aims and little room for trivialities and frivolities. In this sense, it was *not* the magazine of the decade, because the Nineties were also characterised by a reaction against Victorian seriousness. In fact, they opened with the great success of the American song *Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay*, arguably coming from a St. Louis brothel but brought to England and into vogue by Lottie Collins, who sang it in London music-halls in 1892, accompanying it with a dance inspired by the 'infamous' French cancan. If popular Britsh historian R.H. Gretton is to be believed, the song

> was such an affront to English respectability as had never yet been administered, not only because it flaunted a vision of a high-kicking dancer on a music-hall stage, but because the very sound of the tune was jeering, as well as ludicrous. The sudden absurd jolt of its high note became a grin at the gait and carriage of a respectable man. Its penetrating shrillness warned people that nothing was going to be taken seriously. [...] The wildest of comic songs hitherto had been something said, which might appeal to you individually as funny, or be dismissed as nonsense. This one said nothing.[45]

The inclination to provocation, mixed with the tendency to treat serious things trivially and trivial things seriously, was also a characteristic of Beerbohm's contribution to the first volume of *The Yellow Book*, as shown by his essay "A Defence of Cosmetics", which provoked harshest reactions from reviewers. In the second volume of the magazine, Beerbohm replied with "A Letter to the Editor", claiming that his essay was just a hoax, a parody of the style of decadent writers, but ending his response by reiterating the same ideas that had scandalised his critics.[46] It was a lesson that he had learnt from Wilde: a taste for paradox whereby it was impossible to grasp whether the writer was joking or should be treated seriously. This was the real provocation and the real reaction to the stiffness of Victorian mentality: that is to say, the refusal to accept that there was only one truth and that seriousness and earnestness were what really mattered. Truth could be expressed through a mask, dialogic exchanges, parody and irony, in an endless game of ever-changing statements. At the end of the previous decade, Wilde had written in the closing paragraphs of one of his essays: "Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth".[47] And what he said about art could also be applied to any other field.

[44] C. KEEP, "Critical Introduction to Volume 8 of *The Savoy* (Dec. 1896)", *Savoy Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-critical-introduction/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[45] R.H. GRETTON, *A Modern History of the English People*, London, Grant Richards, 1913, Vol. I, p. 305.

[46] M. BEERBOHM, "A Letter to the Editor", *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, pp. 281-284, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/YBV2_beerbohm_letter/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

[47] O. WILDE, "The Truth of Masks" (1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 1078.

Both *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* entered into dialogue with somebody who contributed to neither, but exerted a powerful influence on both, impacting on these magazines' spirit and certainly their destiny. Without Wilde, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* would never have been what they were. The choice between Yellow or Savoy Nineties, or between yellow and green, therefore, is misleading: the period is complex and full of contradictions, and at least another adjective could be brought up, even if it does not exactly cover the decade: 'Wilde Nineties'. We should keep in mind the perspective of Wilde's Vivian in "The Decay of Lying", as he states with bold nonchalance, as if embodying the spirit of the decade: "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people".[48] Likewise, an age that is consistent is bound to be dull and doctrinaire and tedious. It might of course be argued that Wilde did not publish the first version of "The Decay of Lying" in the Nineties, but at the end of the Eighties. But then, anyway, who wants to be consistent?

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[48] O. WILDE, "The Decay of Lying" (1889, 1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 971.

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