

Catch a

By Evelyn
Toynon

Falling Star

Aubrey Beardsley's brainchild burned bright—and then burned out. In just over a year his artistry scandalized, titillated, and gave his decade a name.

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RRREST OF OSCAR WILDE, *YELLOW BOOK* UNDER HIS ARM ran an 1895 newspaper headline heralding the story of Wilde's detention on the sodomy charge that would lead to his downfall and provide Victorian England with its most spectacular scandal. Forty-two years later, the satirist John Betjeman immortalized the scene—and the magazine—in his poem "Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel." In fact, the volume that Wilde was carrying under his arm when the police arrived was not *The Yellow Book* but a French novel with a yellow cover. Nor had Wilde's writings ever appeared in the magazine, since Aubrey Beardsley, whose brainchild it was, not only disliked him personally but superstitiously believed that "Oscar" brought bad luck. In the minds of the public, however, none of these facts made any difference: *The Yellow Book* was linked with Wilde and homosexuality. It was savaged in the press, called "the Oscar Wilde of periodicals," while Beardsley, the magazine's art editor, was widely regarded as a sort of visual counterpart to the playwright. Having produced

some notorious illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé*, and having outraged middle-class sensibilities with the drawings of leering satyrs and grotesquely smirking imps he created for other publications, he, too, was seen as a dangerous apostle of perversion.

After Wilde's arrest, crowds of wrathful citizens appeared at the offices of John Lane, *The Yellow Book's* publisher, and hurled bricks through the windows. Meanwhile, the magazine's "respectable" contributors—most strident among them being the best-selling novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward—hurled a different species of brickbat, in the form of indignant telegrams demanding that Beardsley be fired at once. Lane, in America at the time on a speaking engagement, caved in to public pressure and sent off a cable of his own, informing Beardsley that his services were no longer required. In so doing, Lane effectively killed one of the most remarkable "little magazines" ever to see print.

The first periodical in English to be devoted entirely to art and literature, *The Yellow Book* had elevated the magazine to an art form, given a name to a decade—the Yellow Nineties were never so called before its publication—and provided a showcase for some of the most talented writers and artists of its day.

John Singer Sargent, Max Beerbohm, Walter Sickert, and Charles Conder provided artwork for the magazine in its first two years of publication. But it was Beardsley who furnished all the cover designs and the greatest number of drawings, and it was Beardsley who gave the journal its distinctive character. Just twenty-one when he persuaded Lane to finance his quarterly, and ill with the consumption that would kill him four years later, the pale young man with the hatchet face and the



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bright auburn hair had already developed his own unmistakable style of draughtsmanship. Notable for its undulating outlines and broad, shadow-like surfaces, it was influenced by William Blake, by the pre-Raphaelite painters, and by the Japanese woodcuts that were made famous by James McNeill Whistler. Yet Beardsley's drawings seemed somehow wholly French in character. To the Victorian English, this Gallic quality signified corruption, frivolity, and sexual indecency—perfect fodder for critics of *The Yellow Book*.

When the first issue appeared, a hundred years ago now, the London *Times* called Beardsley's illustrations "repulsive and insolent," and declared that the artistic note throughout was "a combination of English rowdyism with French lubricity." The *Westminster Gazette* thundered that "as regards certain of his inventions in this number ... we do not know that anything would meet the case except a short Act of Parliament to make this kind of thing illegal."

In particular, the *Westminster Gazette* was objecting to Beardsley's *L'Education sentimentale*,

which Beerbohm gleefully described as "a marvelous picture [of] a fat elderly whore in a dressing-gown and huge hat of many feathers, reading from a book to the sweetest imaginable young girl, who looks before her, with her

Above: John Singer Sargent's drawing of Henry James appeared in Volume II. James wrote "The Death of the Lion," an ironic look at the perils of literary success, for the first issue. Opposite: Max Beerbohm's caricature of George IV. The artist was a regular contributor in the Beardsley era. Ironically enough, the caricature looks like Oscar Wilde—who never wrote a word for the publication.

hands clasped behind her back, roguishly winking."

Some of the magazine's other contributors were not so enthusiastic about Beardsley's work. Henry James, for example, whose story "The Death of the Lion" appeared in the first issue, was persistently uneasy about his appearances in "the small square lemon-coloured quarterly." James was only grateful that Beardsley did not attempt to provide illustrations for his fiction, apparently never noticing that none of the art in the magazine was meant to illustrate the prose.

If the flamboyant Beardsley and the magisterial James seem like strange bedfellows for any publication, the connection between them can be found in their mutual disdain for the prevailing Victorian notion that art was meant to serve the cause of public virtue and moral uplift, rather like a good sermon. In their own very different ways, they were both proponents of art for art's sake. Both of them might have agreed with the French poet Théophile Gautier, one of the most famous adherents to that doctrine, who said, "The perfection of form is virtue." But James undoubtedly had a more complex and exalted notion of what such perfection entailed.

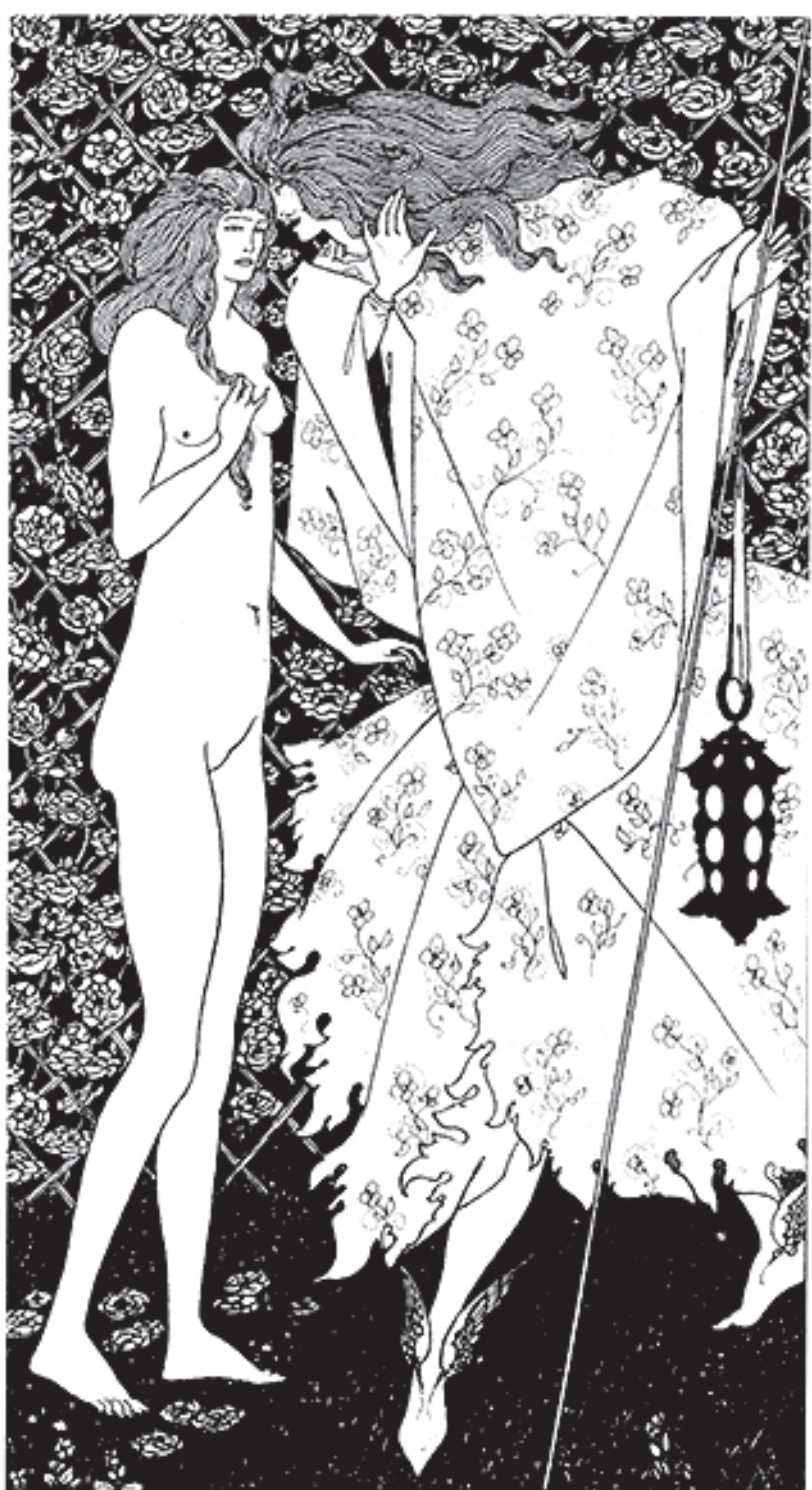
The Yellow Book was the public platform for many in the English aesthetic movement who held this view—poets like the young William Butler Yeats (he had not yet dedicated himself to the Irish cause) and fellow members of the circle of poets known as the Rhymers' Club. The best-known of these were Lionel Johnson and the melan-

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choly Ernest Dowson, from whose most famous poem Margaret Mitchell would later take the title for *Gone With the Wind*. To the Rhymers' Club poets, art seemed the only possible refuge from the commercialism and sheer physical ugliness of the industrial age. Sickened by the crassness of late-Victorian society and a sense of their own spiritual corruption, they did not attempt to depict ordinary experience in their work, but strove instead to convey heightened, dream-like states of mind.

These quintessential writers of the fin-de-siècle, often referred to as the Decadents, had taken for their bible a book by Walter Pater, Wilde's erstwhile teacher at Oxford. In his innocuously titled *Studies in the English Renaissance*, Pater exhorted his readers to experience the fleeting impressions

of life as intensely as possible, to "burn always with [a] hard, gem-like flame." Art, he wrote, "comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass," while the artist's life is "one of brilliant sins and exquisite moments."

Though Pater himself was far too timid to risk destruction by living out his own philosophy, poets like Johnson and Dowson dedicated themselves, in their lives as well as their work, to a feverish pursuit of intensity. Addicted to drink and especially to absinthe, the hallucination-inducing liqueur that once again came in from France, they watched gorgeous flowers spring from drab London pavements, spent more than a few nights lying in the gutter, and died tragically young. Yeats,



Opposite: *Beardsley's The Mysterious Rose Garden* from Volume IV. Left: *Walter Sickert's drawing of Beardsley*. As the fifth issue of *The Yellow Book* went to press—at the time of Wilde's arrest—publisher John Lane recalled the magazine, expunged Beardsley's work, and fired him. The job was taken over by the decorous, and now quite forgotten, Patten Wilson.

And such eminently respectable artists as Sir Frederick Leighton, president of the Royal Academy, and Walter Crane, the influential illustrator of fairy tales, were persuaded to provide drawings for the magazine.

One reason *The Yellow Book* could attract well-known contributors like Henry James and Sir Frederick was its sheer beauty. Printed on heavy paper and bound like a book, it was clearly meant not to be read once and thrown away, but to become a permanent part of the civilized reader's library. In his announcement of its publication Lane wrote, "It will be a book—a book in form, a book in substance; a book beautiful to see and convenient to handle; a book with style; a book that every book-lover will love at first sight...." To a remarkable extent, he fulfilled this promise. He even barred advertisements from the magazine's pages, which meant he had to charge what was then the outrageous price of five shillings for each issue.

The Yellow Book was also faithful to its stated aim of putting the interests of art before commerce in its policy of allowing its contributors as much space as they required. The literary editor, Henry Harland, was a great lover of the long short-story form known as the novella, which James called "the beautiful and blest *nouvelle*." One of James's stories for the magazine—like "The Death of the Lion," it was an ironic look at the literary life—ran to 20,000 words, equal to about seventy-five pages in a modern hardcover book. Harland, an accomplished writer himself, also zealously encouraged talented younger writers, publishing some of the earliest stories of H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, as well as many first-rate critical essays on such writers as Anatole France.

The fifth issue had just gone to press in April when Wilde was arrested and Beardsley was dismissed. Lane's partner hastily recalled the magazine from the printer and had all Beardsley's drawings expunged. The job of art editor was taken over by the more decorous—and now entirely forgotten—artist Patten Wilson, and *The Yellow Book* staggered on, much purified and infinitely duller, for another eight issues.

Beardsley, meanwhile, furious at his association in the public mind with a man he hated and a form of sexuality he had never practiced, took unsuccessfully to drink—until he was rescued by an opportunity to edit another periodical, *The Savoy*, the following year. *The Savoy*, too, featured Beardsley's inimitable work and many of the old *Yellow Book* contributors. But it is *The Yellow Book*, the first venture of its kind, that stands as the symbol of its era. Although it lasted only a year under its founder, perhaps neither its elegance nor the furor it produced has been surpassed by any periodical since. □

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remembering them in his old age, called these doomed poet-friends of his youth "elegant, tragic penitents ... great men."

The Yellow Book made a point of soliciting contributions from more conservative figures, too, since even before the public outcry at the time of Wilde's arrest Lane was leery of attracting too much negative press. Thus there were poems and essays by such establishment writers as Edmund Gosse and Professor George Saintsbury, as well as an article called "Reticence in Literature" by Arthur Waugh (later the father of Evelyn) arguing that fiction should not dwell on the sordid side of life but should instead preserve a certain decorum. (In the next issue Hubert Crackanthorpe, another of the writers associated with the aesthetic movement, offered a rebuttal.)