In Defense of Life

For the duration of *The Yellow Book*’s publication from 1894 to 1897, the quarterly magazine’s publisher and editor, John Lane and Henry Harland, respectively, consistently endeavored to distance their work from Oscar Wilde. The decision was led, in part, by the apparent scandal surrounding Wilde as well as competition between Wilde and the magazine’s art editor, Aubrey Beardsley¹—a foremost mischief-maker in the storm of late-Victorian debauchery that became known as Decadence. It was Wilde’s scandalous sodomy trial in particular that put the Decadent magazine under increased scrutiny leading up to the publication of its fifth issue. Volume V of *The Yellow Book* was published by The Bodley Head, John Lane’s publishing company, in April of 1895, just one month prior to Wilde’s imprisonment for “acts of gross indecency”². As the sodomy trials began in early April, in order to absolve the magazine of any ties to Wilde, Beardsley was promptly removed from his position due to his prior work illustrating Wilde’s 1891 play, *Salome*. A cacophony of protest against Beardsley preceded this decision, including a mob that gathered outside of The Bodley Head offices and the protest of several *The Yellow Book* contributors, the foremost of these contributors being poet William Watson.³ The controversy surrounding the publication of the fifth issue, and others to follow, as well as the works within it demonstrate something central about the magazine as a whole—the contradiction between what *The Yellow Book* purports itself to be and what it actually is.

The drama surrounding Wilde’s imprisonment and Beardsley’s removal was, for instance, not enough to purge the influence of the two men from the magazine entirely. The signature style of *The Yellow Book*’s cover owes itself to Aubrey Beardsley through the very last issue, as each cover that was not designed by Beardsley retains the same minimal, Japanese-inspired aesthetic that Beardsley championed. Beardsley’s influence left an indelible mark on the fifth volume in particular, as the cover illustration meant to replace Beardsley’s⁴ looks uncannily Beardsley-esc⁵. This deep influence also carries over into the artworks that were published in the final version of the fifth volume, as all but two artworks were handpicked by Beardsley himself.⁶ Perhaps even more indicative of Beardsley’s lasting impact on the volume is the fact that one of the poems in the volume includes a dedication to Beardsley—“Pour Mr. Aubrey Beardsley”⁷.

It would not be a stretch to therefore suggest that Beardsley’s works set the artistic tone for *The Yellow Book* as a whole, as the magazine’s editors never ditched the iconic yellow that warns of the scandalous material inside. This is perhaps the supreme contradiction of the entire project—that the editors tried so hard for nine volumes to distance the magazine from the very person who, to an extent, defined it. The same is true for the magazine’s connection to Wilde, as many of the ideas expressed in *The Yellow Book* can be attributed to Wilde’s critical and literary works alike. In the fifth volume alone, it is clear that Ella D’Arcy, William Watson, Leila MacDonald, and Richard Le Gallienne, among others, are all to some degree interacting with the writings of Wilde. A quick glimpse at the contents of both the prospectus version of the volume and the published version demonstrate just how little changed without Beardsley, and just how much support for Wilde had sneaked its way into the magazine, as the authors list includes many close friends and allies to Wilde.⁸

This issue of contradiction within *The Yellow Book* is perhaps best exemplified by William Watson in his classical ode, “Hymn to the Sea.” In this poem, the first literary work occupying the fifth volume, Watson explores the relationship between the sea, or nature, and humans. Specifically, Watson juxtaposes the steadfast, peaceful nature of the sea with the inherent tension of being human—that is, that humans are constantly striving for a goal that is never reached, even when they have become the “captive king”s⁹ of the world. The precision of the word “captive” is a critical point for Watson, as he often likens humans to prisoners in “Hymn to the Sea,” suggesting that the human soul is trapped or limited. This is in direct contrast with the sea, which has, as Watson writes in the poem’s fourth and final part, “with punctual service, fulfilled thy task, being constant.”

The main difference that Watson lays out between nature and humanity is that nature is unwaveringly faithful to its task of being, as Watson clarifies that the sea itself is “but a billow, a ripple, a drop of that Ocean” of eternity and of all things. Here, we see the point of tension that produces the human condition, as humans—exemplified by the likes of Des Esseintes of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ seminal Decadent novel, *Against Nature*—humans are always “hot with desire” to be great, to be singular, to reach a point of finality. Man is “never at peace with his goal,” whereas nature is at peace without a goal beyond the very task of existing. In this, Watson develops a spiritual philosophy oriented toward the praise of nature, suggesting that humans will always be doomed by their need for singularity, to be distinguished beings in the universe; but they are destined to become once again absorbed into everything. In the final line of the poem, Watson writes, “Man and his greatness survive, lost in the greatness of God.” It would seem contradictory to place the words “survive” and “lost” next to one another, but it speaks sensibly to the actual goal of the universe that Watson suggests—to lose the self with its individual goals and to survive as an indistinguishable part of the cloud of being.

Interestingly, across the four parts of this poem, Watson uses Decadent philosophy in order to undermine it by exalting nature (a dirty taboo in the world of artifice-praising Aesthetes). He expounds a return to nature essentially by using Oscar Wilde and Watler Pater against themselves, contradicting the purportedly Decadent nature of *The Yellow Book*. Particularly, he seems to recall Wilde’s idea of “vulgarity,” a concept which Wilde fervently opposes in his critical essays. In “The Decay of Lying,” for example, Wilde writes that the characters in late nineteenth century English melodrama “are taken directly from life and reproduce its vulgarity” and that “wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar.”¹º Such vulgarity is implicitly defined by Wilde as a lacking sense of mystery, an inclination to take objects for face value rather than choosing to see in them all that the individual can impress upon them.

Similarly, Watson indicts the “tarrying minstrel, who finds and not fashions his numbers” and “cages the [ocean’s] volatile song,” essentially reproducing and making vulgar the likeness of the sea, taking from it some sense of beauty or mystery. However, unlike Wilde, Watson goes on in the first part of “Hymn to the Sea” to express the great awakening of nature, in Paterean language, exalting its “sweet agitations.” He expresses this nature of the ocean to be inherent, a turn away from the Decadent notion that such an awakening of nature would be a human invention, as Wilde’s mouthpiece in “The Decay of Lying” argues, “Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation.” Watson therefore uses Wilde’s notion of vulgarity to praise the sea’s beauty, something he sees as natural and inherent, not, as Wilde would have it, as an invention.

A majority of the poem’s ideas, however, seem to be interacting with those of critic and life zealot Walter Pater—a man whose prose is indeed so brimming with a sensuous passion for life that the charge of “hedonism” was liberally leveled against him. Watson calls back to Pater’s observation in *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* that Michelangelo’s sculptures seem to be perpetually breaking through, the viewer feeling that something would be irreparably lost “if that half-hewn form ever quite emerged from the rough hewn stone”¹¹. This idea of being on the cusp but never reaching a satisfied conclusion is appropriated by Watson when he writes, “Sea that breakest for ever, that breakest and never art broken.” Watson points out that the sea does not strive to be broken, while humanity, in contrast, is “immortally pining and striving” to be fulfilled.

However, Watson’s poem does reach a conclusion that Pater would never dare suggest. Watson elucidates, in all its finality, an ultimate end to humanity wherein it is absorbed into the whole of the universe and ceases to be a singular entity—in short, oneness is the goal. Such a goal would never be expounded by Pater, as Watson’s explanation offends Pater’s reverence for mystery and his sensibility that such a oneness is not to be achieved but is to be simply realized. Watson further uses the writings of Pater for his own end in his nod to the subjective nature of objects, wherein he acknowledges the tendency of human subjects to impress themselves upon an object. “We, self-amorous mortals,” Watson writes, “our own multitudinous image/ Seeking in all we behold, seek it and find it in thee.” He then goes on to contend, however, that such individual impressions only serve to “sully the hue of [the sea’s] peace,” which is more perfect than our fragile human extrapolations of meaning. Watson is faithful to his rebuttal of Pater until the end.

A close analysis of Watson’s “Hymn to the Sea,” then, demonstrates just how anti-Decadent the poem is, begging the question of how it ended up in a Decadent publication like *The Yellow Book*. Watson’s ode to nature seems to be in stark opposition to the title of Huysmans’ *Against Nature*, an odd choice for a magazine that was in some sense begotten by that very novel. However, Watson’s poem is not the only instance of an anti-Decadent stance in the fifth volume of *The Yellow Book*. Kenneth Grahame’s short essay called “The Inner Ear” takes a similar stance in favor of nature, where he argues that “the least we can do is to make ourselves as small as possible”¹² so as to yield to nature, to which humanity is utterly “superfluous.” This could not be a further degeneration of Charles Baudelaire’s seminal Decadent assertion that “‘Nature embellishes Beauty’”¹³.

This is all to say that the entire project of *The Yellow Book* is riddled with contradiction—down to the very assertion that it is a Decadent publication. Borne from a movement that exalts artifice as supreme, *The Yellow Book* repeatedly includes works that exalt nature. Such a choice could be seen as an editorial decision to present a balanced survey of opinion; however, Watson was published in five issues of *The Yellow Book*, which might serve to undermine this argument.

Such contradiction within *The Yellow Book* is not limited to the Wilde-Beardsley drama nor to the interplay between artifice and nature. Another revealing instance of contradiction can be found within the vital role that women played in the magazine’s publication, in terms of both providing works and publishing them. Volume V aloneincludes works by the women Ella D‘Arcy; Rosamund Marriott-Watson, or Graham R. Thomson; Mrs. Murray Hickson, or Mabel Greenhow Kitcat; Leila Macdonald; Nora Hopper; Evelyn Sharp; and Ada Leverson.¹⁴ The large number of women published in the volume, however, creates a depiction of women’s role in *The Yellow Book* that is incongruous with the actual amount of agency they had over the publication. This begins with the kinds of works that were published. Within the pages of *The Yellow Book*, one can find evidence of misogyny in Arthur Waugh’s essay “Reticence in Literature” and in Henry James’s short story “The Death of a Lion,” to name just two instances.¹⁵ However, the magazine also includes many works by women about the “New Woman,” who signified a novel, sporty, and intellectual form of femininity. Particularly, Volume V includes Ella D’Arcy’s short story “The Pleasure-Pilgrim,” which offers a satirical portrayal of men’s objections to the New Woman.

The story’s two main characters symbolize two starkly different philosophies, Lulie representing the artistic and sexually unencumbered New Woman and Campbell representing the ascetic Victorian institution. Lulie spends the duration of the story pining for the affection of Campbell, who is convinced that she is only playing a part and is not truly in love with him—or with any man, for that matter. To Campbell, Lulie is (in true femme fatale fashion) an overly promiscuous enchantress who only wants to cause men anguish, seeking only to add “another victim to her long list” of men she’s “fooled.”¹⁶ In this, D’Arcy seems to satirize the portrayal of wicked, conniving women in Victorian literature, as Lulie, though flighty and obsessive, shows no actual sign of being either wicked or conniving, contrary to Campbell’s insistence. Lulie’s connection to the New Woman is made rather explicit when Campbell’s friend, Mayne, suggests that Lulie “is simply the newest development of the New Woman,” demonstrating how the concept of the New Woman was regarded by some men as just another iteration of the evils of women. She defies the Christian values of the century, travelling for pleasure rather than for profit, seeking to, in Mayne’s Paterian language, ‘“acquire fresh sensations,’’ making her a perfect target for men informed by the Christian institution.

The feminist social critique of D’Arcy’s story is strongest, however, when she writes of the objectification and idealization of Lulie, which ultimately leads to her suicide. It is rather clear from the beginning that Campbell refuses to see Lulie as an individual, non-idealized woman, as he lauds himself for “formulating” her beauty, which does not belong to her but rather to the subject. D’Arcy goes on to write that Campbell “had a high ideal of Woman, an immense respect for her” and of Campell’s “impressions of the girl.” When Lulie does not live up to Campbell’s ideal, he tells her, “you have deliberately...tarnished your beauty,” while it is clear that what was tarnished was only Campbell’s vision of her beauty. After this downfall, Campbell cannot see beyond the scandalized ideal of the wicked New Woman in Lulie, so he refuses to believe that Lulie may be an exception to this ideal, that she may be sincere in her affection for him. In order to convince him that she actually does love him, Lulie abruptly shoots herself in the chest, leaving Campbell to wonder, still, if she loved him. To the end, Mayne insists that Lulie is nothing but an excellent actress, an ideal and objectified Woman, telling Campbell of her suicide, “‘The role she had played so long and so well demanded a sensational finale in the centre of the stage...She was the most consummate little actress I ever saw.’” This ending leaves readers with a seething indictment of the Platonic idealization of women, reading almost as a cautionary tale against men holding this view. Such an indictment is not in agreement, however, with the actual position of women in the publication of *The Yellow Book.*

The publication of several short stories in *The Yellow Book* could not grant D’Arcy more than an unofficial “sub-editor” position, the only editorial position, official or unofficial, held by a woman. Furthermore, D’Arcy’s work for the publication was met with ample sexism, as she was given the gendered moniker “Guardian Angel” of the magazine and had very little power beyond proof-reading, pagination, arranging pictures, and indexing materials.¹⁷ When she finally asserted her power by redoing the April 1896 volume’s contents list, she was promptly fired from her position.¹⁸ This demonstrates that not only did the publishers of the magazine not value the voices of women but also that they did not agree with a good deal of what they themselves published, as they did publish a fair amount of feminist societal critique, critiques which they as an organization failed to live up to. It would seem, then, that their inclusion of women in the publication was simply a passing fad, or, more convincingly, a way to cut costs, as one scholar points out, “Lane and Harland favoured newer writers because they could be paid a smaller fee”¹⁹. It seems likely that many skilled women were newer writers and could be paid this small fee.

To make this dynamic even more ambiguous, many of the illustrations in the fifth volume are depictions of women or girls performing everyday tasks or posing for portraits. In fact, out of fourteen total illustrations, nine of them depict women or girls; and many of these illustrations are the creations of men. It is perhaps unclear whether such depictions should be taken as feminist drawings or as objectifications of women. There is Robert Halls’ “Portrait of a Girl”²⁰, for instance, which seems to comment on the very issue of objectification, for the head of the girl is detailed and realistic, while the girl’s body is geometric and strange. Such a contrast between realism and surrealism would seem to suggest some relationship between the reality of the girl and the vague, imagined version of her, or the idealized one. One might recall Simone de Beavoir’s *The Second Sex* and conclude that such a portrait is remarkably ahead of its time.

However, this portrait appears in a volume with R. Anning Bell’s “Chrysanthemum Girl,” an illustration of a girl dancing in a pleated dress, surrounded by flowers.²¹ It is unclear how one should take this drawing, though it is reminiscent of Richard Le Galliene’s Romantic poem, “Song,” from the same volume, wherein he writes, “She calls me in the wind’s soft song,/ And with the flowers she comes again.”²² It is again unclear how this is to be taken by the reader, as images of perfect beauty often perform an all too troublesome balancing act between admiration and dilution of the object.

*The Yellow Book* presents a problem to its reader, then, of how to reconcile nature with artifice, Romanticism with Decadence, misogyny with the New Woman. The magazine’s Decadent origins seem to be undermined almost at every turn, and yet there is something strikingly unified about the entire project. There is some spirit that underlies it all, one some may single out as Aubrey Beardsley or Oscar Wilde or the very idea of shock and scandal. One might even single out echoes of Walter Pater, but that, too, would be slightly missing the point. Undergirding everything in *The Yellow Book*, and in Volume V, particularly, is a unified defense of life.

Over the course of Volume V, John Lane and Henry Harland construct an argument in praise of living, an argument that is at once controversial and scandalous in a Christian framework that lauds the promise of heaven, the fulfillment of duty, and the will to obey. To live life for its own sake is to undermine every Victorian institution, and this would seem to be the source of *The Yellow Book*’s position as a scandalous artifact of *fin de siecle* culture. Authors published in the magazine are unified by this ethic of praise for life despite their varied positions in different movements of the day. Praise for life as an end in itself is what drives Watson’s ode to the sea. It is what drives Rosamund Marriott-Watson to write in the poem “The Isle of Voices,” “Green grows the grave there that holds the heart of me”²³, which indicates a desire to be alive eternally, notably, on earth. It is what drives Ella D’Arcy’s Lulie to travel and live in pursuit of pleasure. It is what drives Henry Harland in “Rosemary for Remembrance” to write, “We who have crossed a certain sad meridian, we turn our gaze backwards, and tell the relentless gods what we would sacrifice to recover a little of the past”²⁴, a little youth—for what is pining for youth but a longing to live? It is what drives Leila MacDonald to write in “Refrains,” “At best our life is all we have”²⁵. *The Yellow Book* could perhaps not be summed up any better than that.

In its defense of life, *The Yellow Book* encapsulates a larger movement that expands beyond Decadence. Informed by Decadence, the publication gathers together voices from Decadence, Romanticism, and Realism as well as the voices of New Women, traditionalists, and Wilde fanatics and critics alike. It is true to the philosophy of Pater, who writes in his conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end;” yet it also signifies a larger turn toward contemporaries like philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who affirms life in his 1882 *The Gay Science,* and poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who grounds the divine in his 1905 *Book of Hours*. Though contradictory to its core, the magazine is unified by life itself, pulling together a more diverse group of authors than would seem to make sense for a niche publication. *The Yellow Book* was and indeed still is shocking, for how could anyone be at peace with insisting that “at best our life is all we have”? And, yet, that is precisely what *The Yellow Book* dares to do.

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