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Review of Koenraad Claes, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine* (2018)

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Reviews

Koenraad Claes, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). 288 pp. ISBN 9781474426213

The Late-Victorian Little Magazine is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on nineteenth-century periodicals, adding substantially to our knowledge of this area of the press. Much of the extant research on the range of titles explored here — from the *Germ* (1850) to the *Yellow Book* (1894–97) and beyond — is in the form of scholarly articles or chapters within books, usually addressing single titles. In gathering together the key little magazines in a focused exploration, Claes looks horizontally across several familiar and some much less familiar titles (the *Quest*, 1894–96, from Birmingham and the *Evergreen*, 1895–96, from Edinburgh, to name two), identifying their shared characteristics, interests and formations. The effect is a careful, comparative mapping of the history of the little magazine in the period, making a persuasive argument that the ‘little magazines’ are not only interesting for their unique qualities but for the ways, taken collectively, they show us how the British avant-garde was enmeshed in print culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. The book is structured around case studies which move chronologically from the 1850s–90s, and as Claes notes in the jaunty introduction, there’s no need to read the book in any particular order; the chapters stand alone as discussions of specific titles, but, read in sequence, provide an historical account of the relationship between similar-acting titles and the collaborative groups that founded them.

The invitation to read the book however you choose suggests that there may not be a sustained argument that develops across the chapters, but that isn’t the case. What links the titles — and what is a guiding principle in the way Claes

understands little magazines — is the idea of the Total Work of Art, borrowed from Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstswerk*. For Wagner, the Total Work of Art was one in which all the arts — music, acting, and poetry — would combine to elevate each to a higher level. For Claes, the little magazines do something similar in the way they variously combine writing, etchings and illustrations, book design, etc. What distinguishes the little magazine from other, usually more popular, magazines is the conscious attempt to bring various kinds of ‘art’ together, to provide a unified site of collaboration which becomes something more than merely the sum of its parts. As Claes says, it is ‘the conceptual unity of form and content that is conspicuous in several little magazines of the mid- to late-Victorian period’ (p. 8). So, for example, the innovative use of the paratext is not only significant for little magazines in a way that isn’t for other kinds of magazines, it is actually constitutive of how we should understand the little magazines.

While the multidisciplinary artistic endeavours of the little magazines are a thread that unites them, that feature may not be all that surprising. Given the close connection between individual publications and specific networks of artists, writers, illustrators, and designers, mostly embedded in Aestheticism of one kind or another — for example, the Century Guild of Art and the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* (1884/6–94) and the coterie around Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon and the *Dial* (1889–97). The significance of artistic collaboration as a unifying force is first established by the Pre-Raphaelites who launch the *Germ*, the first of little magazines in the book’s

chronology. As Claes suggests, ‘the artistic collaboration is effective from a conceptual point of view, as it again reinforces the coherence of the *Germ* as the common effort of a close-knit group and a venue for cross-medial artistic collaboration. The magazine is not only the venue in which the contributors make a collective public appearance; its collaborations make it the medium through which the Brotherhood is consolidated as a collective entity’ (p. 25).

What may be more unexpected to notice across the publications are the various ways that the little magazines negotiate the commercial world which, by necessity, is what keeps all magazines going. When titles aren’t made to pay, they don’t continue — see the *Germ*. Claes is excellent in detailing the different strategies for dealing with ‘commerce’ amid what is an essentially artistic enterprise. What Claes calls ‘zoning’ (p. 34) becomes one method to hold commerce at bay, for example by relegating advertisements to the wrappers, beyond the carefully planned design and artfulness of the magazine proper. The little magazines are, in part, defining themselves against the commercialism of the mass serials market, but they do not stand apart from market forces. Some titles tried to hold the mass at bay, as far as possible, whereas others incorporated the mass media in their strategies for defining themselves. Take, for example, the *Yellow Book*, and their clever, cheeky use of advertisements and reviews to gain publicity for their early numbers. Claes reminds us, ‘a notion of “art” and “commerce” as absolute opposites is untenable for little magazines’ (p. 64), but much of the scholarship on these publications has so far tended to explore the Aesthetic rather than commercial aspects of them. (The discussion of art and commerce brought to mind later, perhaps more frequently discussed, uses of the mass media by the modernist avant-garde — the Futurists’ publication of their manifesto in a Paris newspaper, for example.)

Claes is particularly strong on teasing out the relationships between the

magazines and the cultural formations that founded them. Each chapter contains a grounded and focused mini-history of the publication, emphasizing the ways the titles developed out of group dynamics and usually collaborative networks. This led me to think about how the ‘artistic’ groups connected to the little magazines differed from other kinds of groups who ushered in other magazines, such as the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Nineteenth Century* or even *Punch*, which were founded on the collaborative efforts of like minds. Of course, these weren’t artistic collaborations driven by avant-gardist innovation; still, the multi-disciplinarity behind the other magazines suggests an overlap in the cultural formation of a range of periodicals.

Interestingly, however, not all the little magazines were driven by group dynamics and two of the less well known titles discussed in the book — William Sharp’s single issue *Pagan Review* (1892) and Edward Gordon Craig’s *Page* (1898–1901) — were the product of single-minded figures who not only edited but also designed and supplied nearly all the content for their titles. In Sharp’s case, the magazine amounted to a single issue written entirely by Sharp and ‘can be read as a writerly portfolio in which the author experimented with different voices and tested their appeal for potential future writing projects’ (p. 7). In Craig’s case, he used the magazine as a platform for showcasing his talent as a visual artist, and he later became an important poster designer and stage designer in the early twentieth century.

Claes’s chronology ends around the turn of the century, just before the modernist magazines that are key to a well-documented history of literary modernism take hold. One of the exciting things about *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine* is that it pushes that familiar story of literary modernism and the avant-garde backwards, just as it pushes the story of innovative Victorian print forwards. There may be a continuum from the

1850s well into the early twentieth century, beyond the tidy demarcations of our usual periodization, in which the history of the avant-garde and its relation to print needs to be reconsidered. Claes's study enables us to undertake that important work of remapping and following the periodical press requires us to challenge our literary histories more than we tend to do.

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