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Review of Evangelia Stead, *Sisyphe heureux. Les revues artistiques et littéraires, Approches et figures*

Maaike Koffeman

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Reviews

Evanghelia Stead, *Sisyphe heureux. Les revues artistiques et littéraires, Approches et figures* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020). 305 pp. ISBN 9782753579354

Quoting Albert Camus's famous 'Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux' (from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), Evanghelia Stead opens her collection of essays with the image of the periodical researcher as a reincarnation of Sisyphus: condemned to push a rock up a huge mountain of periodicals, only to see it roll back down again, he or she is happy nonetheless. What is it that makes this 'absurd, because infinite labour' ('tâche absurde [...] car infinie, p. 7) pleasurable? That is the question that this book intends to answer by bringing together the results of about two decades of research on artistic and literary magazines. It is a collection of (reworked) essays that were originally published between 2004 and 2020 — both in French and in English — and an interview with the author. *Sisyphe heureux* offers the reader a fascinating voyage through the European periodical landscape of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The numerous illustrations — many in full colour — play an essential part in showcasing the complex and multidimensional interplay between text and image in the periodical press of this period.

Evanghelia Stead, professor of Comparative Literature at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines and Fellow of the Institut Universitaire de France, is a leading figure in the world of European periodical studies. She has been running the [TIGRE seminar](#) on print culture at the École Normale Supérieure since 2004 and organized the 7th International ESPRit conference on 'Periodicals as Mediators' (Paris, 2018), among other things, and has published or co-edited a number of ground-breaking studies on European periodicals, most

notably *L'Europe des revues*, with Hélène Védrine (2 vols., 2008 and 2018). Thanks to her broad erudition, interdisciplinary approach, and multilingualism, Evanghelia Stead is an *agent de liaison* between different cultures and academic networks, and this accounts for one of the major qualities of this book.

The first part of the volume is dedicated to methodological issues. In an interview with Gábor Dobó, Evanghelia Stead makes a strong plea for the adoption of comparative, transnational approaches, focusing on the exchange and circulation of materials between different countries. Periodical research, in her view, is inherently interdisciplinary, and not a discipline in itself — since this would imply a system of rules and regulations — but rather a crossroads where various scholars can meet, exchange their points of view, and develop new relations. By their very nature, periodicals appeal to researchers with backgrounds in fields as diverse as (comparative) literature, media history, book history, cultural studies, art history, network analysis, sociology, anthropology, and digital humanities. To underscore the value of this interdisciplinary and collaborative approach, Evanghelia Stead shares some of her experiences with the TIGRE seminar that brings together students and researchers at different stages of their careers, and fosters exchanges that can lead to important publications such as the above-mentioned *L'Europe des Revues*.

One of the main assets of the current volume is that it provides a critical reflection on conventional terminologies and categorizations, such as *petites revues* (little magazines associated with modernism and the avant-garde) as opposed to *grandes revues* (more

commercially oriented mass magazines). After giving a broad overview of the usage of these terms and their equivalents in other European languages, both within the periodical field itself and in the scholarly literature, Stead demonstrates that this antagonism does not stand up to scrutiny. Based on her analysis of the complex material realities of the periodicals and their position-takings in the field, she arrives at the conclusion that the notion of the *petite revue* or little magazine sometimes has more to do with expressing a certain posture than with the intrinsic qualities of the periodical as an object, or with its longevity.

It would be impossible to sum up all the case studies presented in this volume, which involve cultural phenomena as diverse as fashion, songs, travel and celebrity culture. The author rightly insists that periodicals should be studied in the broader context of the media ecosystem and of print culture in general, especially in the *fin-de-siècle* era which saw the advent of new printing techniques, new genres, and new markets. Throughout the book, the reader is presented with a view of the periodical as an active cultural agent, not a simple mirror of society ('pas comme un miroir de la culture, mais comme une composante centrale, une part vive et active de l'histoire culturelle', p. 127).

I would like to highlight one particularly interesting case study, where Stead demonstrates how an interdisciplinary and transnational approach allows her to lay bare unexpected, and hitherto neglected, ties between the French and the British literary fields. In one of the methodological chapters ('Quand la revue se fait livre', Ch. IV), she shows that the design and title of Aubrey Beardsley's famous *Yellow Book* were indebted to the French genre of realistic and naturalistic novels called *livres jaunes* (most famously Huysmans's *A Rebours*, the 'yellow book' that plays an important role in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

In one of the later essays in this collection, Stead zooms in on a relatively

small detail in the history of the *Yellow Book*, which opens up a whole world of meaningful intersections between French and British cultural history. In 1895, the magazine introduced a Yellow Dwarf as its mascot. This figure was directly based on 'le Nain jaune', a character from a rather gruesome seventeenth-century fairy-tale by Mme d'Aulnoy (*Les Contes de fées*, 1697). The Yellow Dwarf manifests himself in the magazine in different ways: as the author of letters to the editor, as the character in a story, and as the subject of a drawing.

In order to fully understand the significance of these seemingly trivial references to a French fairy-tale character, one needs to take into account its reception history throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Evangelia Stead offers an overview of English translations of the story of the Yellow Dwarf, which were sold in numerous, often lavishly illustrated editions, and its many theatrical adaptations, which account for the huge popularity of the character. She then goes on to dissect the underlying political message that Henry Harland, the magazine's director, instils into his story 'The Queen's Pleasure'. His version of the repulsive French dwarf is a bastard and a 'monster of secret immorality' (p. 208), and serves to express an anti-republican ideology; this dwarf of peasant descent, who wants to force a noble princess to marry him, can be read as a symbol of the French Revolution.

The author not only traces the representational traditions around the Yellow Dwarf, but also contextualizes the figure in the history of the press, in order to show that, throughout the nineteenth century, there have been a number of satirical periodicals bearing the title *Le Nain jaune* or the *Yellow Dwarf*. In this context, the fairy-tale figure introduced by Mme d'Aulnoy developed a particular iconography: he was shown with a bow and winged arrow, symbolizing his attacks on the establishment. The drawing of the Yellow Dwarf which appears in the

October 1896 issue of the *Yellow Book* clearly stands in this tradition.

By showing how all these different strands of cultural history resonate in the *Yellow Book's* mascot, Evanghelia Stead demonstrates her mastery of a very wide range of materials, as well as the added value of the interdisciplinary

and transcultural approach she has been advocating throughout this collection of essays. One can imagine Sisyphus's happiness.

Maaike Koffeman
Radboud University Nijmegen