Dans l’ensemble, le panorama offert dans *Presse, nations et mondialisation au XIXe siècle*, même s’il offre des analyses de grande qualité, m’apparaît un peu moins cohérent que ce que proposaient les deux précédents recueils dirigés par Thérenty et Vaillant. La question des identités nationales est certes le fil qui unit la majorité des textes, mais la dispersion géographique et thématique des différentes études ne favorise pas une confrontation approfondie entre la presse française et les autres cultures. Le lecteur reste un peu sur sa faim. Le projet était cependant très ambitieux et les directeurs n’ont pas perdu leur pari; cette multiplicité d’horizons démontre bien que la presse s’impose comme un outil de transfert culturel et de construction des identités nationales.

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In the introduction to his bibliographical history of John Rodker and the Ovid Press, Gerald Cloud states that his project is “an effort to record his contribution to the small presses and avant-garde literature of his period.”1 It may be asked why John Rodker and his literary press matter – the press that he founded and operated in London after the First World War for a brief, two-year period only. The answer will become clear in what follows.

Not quite condemned to footnotes, Rodker’s early life has attracted the interest of art and cultural historians who have tended to focus mainly on his Anglo-Jewish identity. This, however, is not the entire story. Rodker emerged in a time of radical cultural change across Europe, and in the English context he may be viewed as an individual who was attracted to the adage of the age – “Making it New.” This he accomplished by rejecting the languid world of the Aesthetes in favor of a radical fissure with the past. Like many of his

1 Cloud’s monograph is based on his dissertation, “John Rodker Printer and Publisher: A Bibliographical Study” (University of Delaware, 2005).
contemporaries, Rodker embraced Imagism and Vorticism, which dismissed traditional art forms in favour of an anti-bourgeois, non-representational aesthetic that spread across Europe in successive waves and under numerous guises during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

John Rodker (1894-1955) was born in Manchester. His parents were Jewish immigrants who eventually settled in London’s East End. With a gift for language and poetry and possessing a passion for modern French literature, Rodker befriended future visual artists, Issac Rosenberg, David Bomberg, and Mark Gertler, among others, while attending high school. Meeting regularly to discuss poetry and art, the group became known as the Whitechapel Boys. In 1912, Rodker published his first poems in such little magazines as The New Age and Poetry: A Magazine of Verse. Two years later Rodker met Ezra Pound, the American poet, impresario, and polemician who had turned literary London upside down with his promotion of free verse. Pound befriended and encouraged Rodker, although he expressed some doubts regarding the young poet’s talent. Through Pound, Rodker was introduced to the Vorticists, the English avant-garde movement spearheaded by Wyndham Lewis and inspired by Italian Futurism; other members of the group were Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Edward Wadsworth. Among the Vorticists’ most notable contribution to the English avant-garde was the publication of the first issue of Blast, a little magazine edited by Lewis. Intended to “blast” typographic conventions and complacency from the arts, it was published by John Lane, whose self-named imprint had been one of the premier publishing channels for the Aesthetes and Decadents in the 1890s.

Despite the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Rodker self-published his first volume of poetry and he continued to publish poems and essays in the little magazines. Unlike some of his close friends and associates including Rosenberg, Bomberg, Lewis, and Gaudier-Brzeska, Rodker chose not to enlist in the English army; instead, he opted out of the war as a conscientious objector. (Rosenberg and Gaudier-Brzeska were both killed during the war). From 1916 to 1918 his literary life was on hold and he went underground to avoid the authorities. While living in obscurity, Rodker was questioned about his papers; he was soon arrested. He spent six months in Dartmoor Prison and he was released on the condition that he engage in community service of national importance. At the conclusion of the war, Rodker re-emerged on the London avant-garde literary scene and reconnected with Pound’s circle in London.
In 1918, Rodker married Mary Butts (1890-1937), a like-minded experimental writer. At Pound’s suggestion, Rodker purchased a press and began printing the work of Pound and his friends, most notably T.S. Eliot. It is unclear how Rodker raised the money to purchase a Columbian Press and type, but he did, and in 1919 the Ovid Press was launched. Rodker asked Wadsworth to furnish him with a printer’s mark and a set of Vorticist-inspired woodcut initials. With limited capital and a limited distribution network, Rodker and Butts set out to produce finely printed limited editions. Their enterprise was short-lived.

Although Pound was ambivalent regarding Rodker’s poetic talents, he acknowledged his critical and editorial skills. In 1918 when Pound resigned as foreign poetry editor of the Chicago-based Little Review, he encouraged the magazine’s publisher, Margaret Anderson, to offer the editorship to Rodker. She did and Rodker held the post for one year.

Although the little magazine was the vehicle of choice in Europe for radical art, in London the idea of the “small press” dedicated to serving the needs of the avant-garde was just beginning to take hold. Apart from sophisticated publishers like John Lane and Elkin Mathews, there was a lack of presses sympathetic to the Modernist cause. Among the most notable attempts to create a small press was Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, begun in 1917. The first works from the Hogarth Press were hand-printed, and the founding of the Ovid Press was, perhaps, inspired by the Hogarth example of an author-owned and -controlled literary press.

With no formal training as printers, Rodker and Butts, with the possible assistance of others, learned to print on the job. During the two years of operation under the Ovid name, Rodker published six volumes of poetry, three portfolios of drawings (Gaudier-Brzeska, Lewis, and Wadsworth), two ghost imprints, and several unattributed broadsides and ephemera. In contrast to the radical typography of Lewis’s Blast, the Ovid imprints are unremarkable and conventional in many ways despite the daring words: form and content seem to be at awkward odds.³

² Fifteen years later, Pound would advise the aspiring poet James Laughlin to do the same thing. With Laughlin’s printing of manuscripts directed to him by Pound, New Directions Press was born.

After the Ovid Press ceased operation in 1920, Rodker moved to Paris where he remained for three years. While there, Rodker emerged as the co-publisher of the first English edition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1922 under the joint imprint, Egoist Press–John Rodker. For this act alone, Rodker has a secure place in literary history. For the next thirty years, he engaged in a number of publishing and translation projects. Most notably he founded the Casanova Society, which published a number of French works in translation (many translated by Rodker himself). In contrast to the Ovid Press publications, Casanova Society imprints were considered handsome and collectible.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Rodker met Sigmund Freud and at Freud’s suggestion founded the Imago Publishing Company. Partnering with the psychoanalyst’s daughter, Anna, Rodker published the first complete edition of Freud’s works in English. Although Rodker died in 1955, the Imago Publishing Company continued operation until 1961.

It is clear why Gerald Cloud chose to focus his study on the limited output of the Ovid Press. In contrast to the finely printed Casanova books or the intellectually important Freud volumes, the Ovid Press ones make for an excellent case study of failure. During its brief operation, the Ovid Press printed Pound’s early masterpiece *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* and T.S. Eliot’s *Ara Vus Prec* (which had been promised to the Woolfs). It amassed no stable of authors and generated no legacy of fine craftsmanship, but the Ovid Press achieved great literary and symbolic value in a short space. It was the quintessential small press.

Cloud is to be commended for the extent of his research and the quality of his bibliographic analysis. The volume is divided into two parts, comprising, first, the most comprehensive biographical study of Rodker’s life and writings to date and, second, the descriptive entries of his Ovid Press books (including his output from 1914 to 1922, for a total of seventeen descriptions). As an exercise, I compared his entries for Pound, Eliot, and Lewis with existing bibliographies. What soon became apparent is that in the years since these were published, Cloud has been able to track down many more copies for examination. He has effectively identified more copy-specific details and aberrations

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and thus enriched our understanding of Rodker and his ambitions as a small-press publisher of the English avant-garde.

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At Riverside [Press], eleven of his books, old and new, were on the press at the same time … there was a rush for movie rights. The bidding for ‘Scaramouche’ became furious … Nor did ‘Scaramouche’ stop with the movies. It has been ably produced on the stage … Even the opera rights have been sold.

This quotation from Houghton Mifflin publicist Esther Forbes in 1921 attests to the immense popularity of an author who has today been largely forgotten. Yet during his lifetime, Rafael Sabatini (1875-1950) wrote and published forty-seven books – mostly romantic historical adventure novels.

Sabatini’s life had its own exotic chapters. His English mother and Italian father were opera singers, and he spent his youth in Italy, England, Portugal, and Switzerland, easily adopting the languages of these countries and reading voraciously along the way. At seventeen, he settled in the busy port city of Liverpool and lived primarily in England for the rest of his life. He worked in the Intelligence section of the British War Office during World War I, became an editor and translator at Martin Secker, married twice, lost both his son and stepson in tragic accidents, restored his finances after being embezzled by an American accountant, and enjoyed his two non-literary passions, fishing in England, and skiing in Switzerland, until the final weeks of his life.

While in his twenties, Sabatini began to write stories. Without much effort it seems, he had them published in leading magazines of the day, which led to a contract from C. Arthur Pearson Ltd. to write a novel. The Lovers of Yvonne was published in 1902, and its positive reception paved the way for Sabatini to become one of the most successful novelists of the 1920s and 1930s, penning, “in florid style and with an enormous vocabulary” as Knight puts it, such classics as