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Aubrey Beardsley: Definition of the Decadence

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PART ONE: Aubrey Beardsley, Personification of The 1890s

The final decade of the nineteenth century is nicknamed 'the Beardsley period' in recognition of the artist whose life is said to have epitomized the era. This was the fin de siecle, a time in history characterized by an attitude of anxiety and bewilderment towards the impending new century, perhaps best summarized by the interrogative title of an 1897 painting by fellow artist Paul Gauguin, <u>Whence come we? What are we? Where are we going?</u>   Young poster illustrator Aubrey Beardsley provides a fitting figurative poster child for the prevalent mentality of urgency: Beardsley, following a meteoric rise to fame, would succumb to his lifelong battle with consumption just months short of his twenty-sixth birthday. Though Beardsley's illustrations may not be the most artistically profound, metaphorically, his ascent to world renown (with the 1894 publication of Oscar Wilde's Salome) and subsequent 1898 death frame a frantic and fruitful career that parallels the attitude of that decade in which they occurred.

Beardsley's ideology is both a factor and a product of 1890s mentality. In this respect, he had much in common ideologically with his contemporary painters, including Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and James Ensor, although the style of his artwork varies tremendously. Like these artists, Beardsley was an early Symbolist, placing an emphasis upon that which was not immediately observable to the outside world through frequent use of literary allusion. He shared Redon's disdain towards the literalism of Impressionism. Redon invoked both the literary and the dramatic in his Cyclops (1898), Orpheus (1903), and Ophelia (1905); Beardsley appealed to both forms within his own illustrations of literature and drama, resulting in the "witty, irreverent and grotesque" (Raby).

The grotesque is a common theme in Beardsley's and Ensor's shared fascination with facades. Beardsley once remarked, "I have one aim—the grotesque. If I am not grotesque I am nothing" (Weintraub). Ensor's 1890 painting, <u>Intrigue</u> is very similar to Beardsley's 1894 frontispiece to Plays by John Davidson. Both de-

pict a range of well-known people of the era (incidentally, both artists include their own sisters) though the faces of all characters carry mask-like resemblances. In an example of artistic stereotype spilling into reality, both Beardsley and Gauguin fashioned dramatic public personas, their own personal facades. In their art, they depicted themselves as sinister and somewhat demonic characters, though acquaintances described both as colorful and flamboyant in life. They differ significantly on an important point, however. Gauguin cast himself as a Bohemian, dressed in poetic black, and created a spectacle when followed by his Mulatto servant and pet monkey; Beardsley cast himself as the quintessential dandy, dressed fastidiously in the latest fashions, and created a spectacle with his manner of affectation. One man championed the Noble Savage, the other the Decadence. Fellow dandy and sometime friend Oscar Wilde once remarked that "Dear Aubrey is always too Parisian, he cannot forget that he has been to Dieppe—once." (Weintraub 60).

Beyond the ideological similarities that resulted from 1890s mentality, Beardsley had his own distinct, "unmistakably modern" (Raby 30) style. He

> managed to exploit, like no one before him, a mode of black-and-white design that reproduced easily and faithfully, thus enabling him to expand in unprecedented fashion the sensational effects and seductive allure of his equally unprecedented subversive images (Snodgrass 95)

Beardsley's work was unique in form, public accessibility, and content.

Contemporaries called Beardsley the master of the line. Stylistically, "often he left much of the surface virtually untouched, boldly, yet sensitively, striking in a line or a curve, and creating dramatic effects with masses of black and white...[he] stripped away nonessentials...simplicity was key." (Weintraub, 250). His medium was almost inevitably Indian ink, and he would work obsessively and continuously on one drawing, utilizing one sheet of paper for all stages of preparation. He first sketched everything in pencil, "constantly rubbed out and blocked in again—to indicate the general rhythm and composition and balance." He then solidified the major lines, first in pencil, and then in ink, "before erasing or obliterating anything he did not want." According to a friend,

> the whole surface became raddled from pencil, indiarubber and knife, over this incoherent surface he worked in Chinese ink with a

> gold pen, often ignoring the pencil lines, afterwards carefully re-
> moved. So every drawing was invented, built up, and completed
> on the same sheet of paper (Raby 114)

In the execution of his work, Beardsley exhibited "extraordinary concentration and almost obsessive control, but also a sense of continuously flirting with danger." (Raby, 115). The resulting illustrations were calligraphic. There is a recognizable continuum of Beardsley's transition from emphasis of the pure line in his earlier works (such as *Salome* and the *Yellow Book*) to an almost embroidered effect (notable in both *The Rape of the Lock* and *Volpone*).

Stylistically, Beardsley was greatly influenced by Japanese prints. As a result, his works employ the conventions of flat color, elevated perspective, diagonals and sharp edges notable in many of Gauguin's paintings. Beardsley described his own work as "something suggestive of Japan, but not really japonesque...the subjects were quite mad and a little indecent...strange hermaphroditic creatures wandering about in Pierrot costumes or modern dress; quite a new world of my own creation." (Raby 26). This statement reflects the whole of Beardsley's work: though he was greatly influenced by other styles, including the Japanese print, the works of Whistler and Burne Jones, his works were ultimately his own unique creations. It is possible that this conglomerate method is the result of Beardsley's lack of any formal art schooling.

Beardsley's work differs significantly from that of many of his contemporaries in that it was designed for reproduction. A new sort of printing press, utilizing the line-block method, was at his disposal. Whereas the painted masterpieces of his contemporaries suffered, losing effect in the process of mass production, Beardsley's illustrations flourished. Mass production was integral to his career as an illustrator; publications varied from magazines (*Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*) to literature (*Le Morte D'Arthur*) to plays (*Salome* and *Volpone*) to advertisements. In the era where the poster was not considered art, Beardsley published a treatise claiming "Advertisement is an absolute necessity of modern life, and if it can be made beautiful as well as obvious, so much the better for the makers of soap and the public who are likely to wash." (Weintraub 85). His bold statement goes on to defend the art of the poster and exhibits an overriding consciousness of the presence of modernity and change.

Beardsley led a capitalist enterprise. Effective mass production meant greater consumption, meant greater profits, both monetary and reactionary. The public came to regard his work as sensationalist—it is no coincidence that his *Yellow Book* and "yellow journalism" share a common adjective. He "evoked aspects of social and cultural life that the Victorian Establishment preferred not to be showcased in such a sardonic and suggestive manner, and, even worse, with a parodic humor poised on the edge of caricature." (Raby 108). Beardsley's art reflected the essence of the 1890's.

Beardsley's work has been criticized as subversive and praised as "sublimely elegant." (Raby). Above all, it is both celebrated and condemned as Decadent. The 1890s was the decade of the Dandy, championed by Baudelaire with the intent to "espouse[s] waste, idleness and lavish spending in direct contradiction to the bourgeois values of utility, work, and thrift." (Snodgrass 206). In direct contrast to the campaign of the natural Noble Savage, the Dandy was revered, justified by the philosophy that evil is intrinsically human and goodness is a virtue. Thus, the perceived "dirtiness" of the natural human state was rejected in favor of the artificiality of cleanliness, personified by flamboyant attire (Snodgrass 207). Human beings became objects of art and facade was of the utmost importance. The worlds depicted by Beardsley are artificial in form and corrupt in morals. The overriding philosophy was that "art should serve no master but itself; nor should the artist serve any public, but devote himself uncompromisingly to his craft." (Weintraub 103). Beardsley did not seek to please; he sought to provoke. Hence, "If Beardsley's work is 'decadent,' it is so largely because it reflects a stratum of society lacking moral fiber." (Werner 49).

From his introduction into the public spotlight with the early publication of *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1893) through his world-renowned illustrations of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894), and imminent fall from grace by association with Wilde, Beardsley's rise to fame was rapid. He solidified his reputation as "Dandy of the Grotesque," gained from *Salome*, through his role as art editor in the avant-garde *Yellow Book*. His own controversial illustrations became a staple in that literary magazine, drawing subscriptions through the hungry public's tabloid-esque fascination. Nothing was untouchable: he caricatured everyone from those whom he perceived to have wronged him (as in The Fat Woman, 1894, a caricature of Whistler's wife) to the uninvolved (Caricature of Queen Victoria, unpublished due to

censorship). His efforts as art editor of *The Savoy* have been termed pornographic, as have his illustrations for *Lysistrata* (1896). He was known for his intricate illustrations for Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1896) and Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1898), as well as dozens of posters, bookplates, title pages and magazine contributions. He was prolific and recognized enough by 1897 to publish a *Book of Fifty Drawings*, commemorating his career to that point. Though his style would transition from pure line to embellished, his inspiration would remain literary. All works demonstrate the spirit of the *fin de siecle,* as the end of his life drew nearer. Aubrey Beardsley, factor and product of the 1890s, would always exhibit an

> almost compulsive desire to violate, scandalize and destabilize conventional boundaries of decorum...[with] equally strong need to affirm and incorporate the metaphysical certainty of traditional authority, particularly the absolute hegemony of art, style, and even moral truth (Snodgrass preface)

PART TWO: Analysis of Work

"I invented Aubrey Beardsley," (Raby 36) claimed the ostentatious Oscar Wilde. Though the artist himself was to become infuriated upon hearing the playwright's pompous words (Wilde's purpose in speaking them), Wilde had reason to defend the utterance of his bold statement. Beardsley's meteoric ascent to success could not have come without his association with Wilde, an acquaintance that both shaped his persona and impacted his career. Though Beardsley reportedly grew to despise Wilde, their names, as symbols of the Decadence, would remain affiliated despite strained personal relations.

The pair met before Beardsley's rise to fame. It is possible that Beardsley was initially drawn to Wilde. In 1893 Wilde published *Salome*, written in French, Wilde's "signal of his intention to be modern as well as a tribute to another culture." (Raby 36). The play was already criticized as "controversial, and confrontational" before its 1894 translation into English. The bilingual Beardsley read the French edition, which inspired his J'ai baise ta bouche Iokanaan (1893). The publication of this illustration, in turn, resulted in Wilde's gift to Beardsley of a copy of the text, "inscribed enigmatically: 'For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance.

Oscar.'" (Raby 35). Beardsley was commissioned as illustrator for the English translation in 1893.

Relations eventually grew strained, as "Wilde's most comfortable relationships were usually with people who did not compete directly with him. Beardsley's genius challenged Wilde's." (Raby 36). On one occasion Wilde remarked in his typical style of scathing compliment that

> Absinth is to all other drinks what Aubrey's drawings are to other pictures; it stands alone; it is like nothing else; it shimmers like southern twilight in opalescent colouring; it has about it the seduction of strange sins. It is stronger than any other spirit and brings out the subconscious self in man. It is just like your drawings, Aubrey; it gets on one's nerves and is cruel (Weintraub 61).

One of the most exemplary drawings of Beardsley's *Salome* series, both in terms of artistic convention and controversiality is <u>Enter Herodias</u>. The series itself depicts a gamut of Beardsley's techniques: "By the time the drawings were complete, Beardsley's style had altered." (Raby 41). The illustrations are plugged as "a series of fantastic decorations about Wilde's play which were as alien to the subject as was the play." (Weintraub 58). Perhaps the source of any hostility of Wilde towards Beardsley was that the resulting

> completed pictures were reversing the usual relationship of writer and illustrator. They were as serious as they were impudent, and possessed so much power independent of the text—that Oscar's play was in danger of being in the embarrassing position of illustrating Aubrey's illustrations (Weintraub 59).

Furthermore, the title page credits of the published volume read "Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley" (Wilde titlepage) lending credence to Beardsley's usurpation.

The composition of <u>Enter Herodias</u> rests within a triple-lined frame, a typical Beardsley convention denoting ambiguity. The mask, another symbol of ambiguity, has been called "the essence of the grotesque," and "what Beardsley's pictures ultimately 'mask' is an alienating vacuum, askewed signifiers pointing toward a metaphysical nothingness." (Snodgrass 226). The liminal atmosphere evokes unrest with its discomfiting lack of definition.

Japanese influence is replete in the diagonals evidenced by the sweep of Herodias' cloak, and stark angles are juxtaposed in the perpendiculars of the cur-

tain to the stage as is the three candles bisecting it. The three figures on the stage, in turn, are perpendicular to the stage and the fourth figure's outstretched arm, which runs parallel to both the curtain and the candles. All figures are flat, carica-turized. Indeed, Wilde later criticized the drawings, saying "They are too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine." (Weintraub 57).

The central figure is Herodias, the femme fatale. Her enormous bare breasts and exposed navel evidence her sexuality. Yet, in accord with Beardsley's trademark ambiguity, her body below the oversized breasts is "a stiff and erect pil-lar, a kind of omnipotent phallus." (Snodgrass 228). She is the tallest in stature; her black hair and belt provide the only dark tones in the upper portion of the drawing, magnifying both her physical and psychological dominance. She is flanked on each side by an attendant. To her left is a grotesque, one of Beardsley's trademark old-man/fetuses. The old-man/fetus has been interpreted as symbolic of Beardsley's career: it is old before its time, brought into the world prematurely, its life aborted before it fully has a chance to live--paralleling Beardsley's career shortened by his premature death (Snodgrass 181). Its pointed fingernails and clo-ven foot signify debauchery as it sinisterly grips Herodias' robes in its clawed fist. She is the "oversexed female," and he succumbs to her power: "His state of sexual excitement is masked by his clothing, but in fact his erection can hardly be ig-nored." Even more scandalous, "the drawing is so composed that the creature's 'heat of passion' is in the same pen stroke highlighted and humorously under-mined: we see that this erection is about to be intersected by the center candle's flame—in effect, he 'burns' and is burned in turn." (Snodgrass 226). The candles themselves suggest phallic shapes. Despite the power of this image, the character-istic "metaphorical nothingness" is invoked. The grotesque looks not at Herodias, but stares past her—towards the other attendant or towards the fourth figure, the caricature of Wilde in the bottom corner?

The attendant to Herodias's right is distinctly human, yet distinctly an-drogynous, another typical Beardsley convention. Beyond effeminate masculinity, he offers even more paradoxical ambiguities. He holds in one hand a powder puff, a symbolic mask. Yet in both his and Herodias' naked states, nothing is masked. In his other hand, he literally holds a small black mask. Unlike the grotesque, and despite the fact that he is looking straight at her, the attendant is not aroused by the

femme fatale, "casting some doubt on Herodias' presumably pervasive erotic power." (Snodgrass 226).

Beardsley's drawings were often subject to censorship, and in a later version, the attendant's genitalia were covered by the addition of a fig leaf, overlooking the phallic candles and aroused state of the grotesque. Mocking such censorship, Beardsley rebutted, in the instance of the <u>Toilet of Salome</u>. The original deemed inappropriate, he substituted with a completely new and presumably more decent image of a Salome anachronistically clad in late nineteenth century dress. In the case of <u>Enter Herodias</u>, he assented to the change fairly willingly, adding the fig leaf, and sending a proof of the copy to a friend, with the mocking poem "Because one figure was undressed/ This little drawing was suppressed/ It was unkind--/ But never mind/ Perhaps it all was for the best." (Raby 41). Perhaps his willingness was based on a belief that the fig leaf only served to support the mocking tone of the illustration.

The final, lower right-hand figure is a caricature of Wilde, dressed foolishly, yet denoted as wise in an owl cap. He is fittingly depicted in the position of master of ceremonies, both "the original 'masker' and 'unmasker.'" Foolishly, like the grotesque, his raised arm is in danger of being burned by the flames of the phallic candles, mocking the sagacity of the owl cap. Ironically, Beardsley's japonesque signature is prominently drawn below Wilde's raised arm. Because the figure occupies a space in the foreground, his dominance combats that of Herodias, "Rather than connecting us to the 'central' action, the connecting figure actually diverts the focus to himself, creating two focal points instead of one." (Snodgrass 228). This is likely a purposeful representation of Wilde's real life demeanor. As Beardsley's dislike of Wilde grew, so did the courage of his mockery.

<u>Enter Herodias</u> has been disparaged as "The most evil of all Beardsley's designs" (Snodgrass 226) and hailed as "a strong indication of his swiftly developing mastery." (Johnson 198). One review found the mocking illustrations of *Salome* to be "a joke," (Weintraub 70) while they are also commended with having "brought out something of the play's dramatic qualities, and at the same time hinted at and suggested other levels and meanings." (Raby 44). Regardless, at its release, Beardsley "had made publishing history...some of the illustrations in the volume finally printed included more 'erotic' details than had ever been seen before

in a book opening published and distributed in England." (Weintraub 69). Further-more, by "placing it firmly in the eighteen-nineties," he created a "disturbing frame-work for the dark elements of cruelty and eroticism, and of the deliberate ambiguity and blurring of gender," shocking the prudish Victorian audience. This ambivalent reflection of infamy on Beardsley's career must have pleased him: in a 1987 inter-view he claimed

> We first of all reach the high-water mark of narrow-minded big-otry, and then follows the reaction. Rabid Puritanism comes in like a high wave and is immediately followed by a steady ebb-tide of brutal coarseness. This again is succeeded by the finicking cen-sorship of the public day, which I hope will be followed by a little more tolerance and breadth of opinion... (Weintraub 205)

Both reflecting the 1890s and mocking them, Aubrey Beardsley answered his own challenge.

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