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Anachronistic Decadence in an Antique Nineteenth-Century ‘Fairy Tale’:
Walter Pater and Errol Le Cain’s *Cupid and Psyche*

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In 1977, Errol Le Cain (1941-1989) illustrated Walter Pater’s retelling of the story of ‘Cupid and Psyche’.¹ Le Cain was a British animator and children’s book illustrator who was born in Singapore, where he spent most of his childhood, as well as in India. He is best known for his illustrations of numerous fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as Russian and Chinese folktales. In addition to these fairy tales, he also illustrated literary works such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Pater’s version of Cupid and Psyche. The story originates as a frame narrative in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* (second century CE), but Pater recontextualized it through his own translation in his only completed novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). For Le Cain’s illustrated version, the text, as translated and altered by Pater, was again shortened and adapted to better suit the intended younger audience. Although Le Cain’s work is set in the twentieth century, a clear decadent influence is evident in his ‘Cupid and Psyche’. While Pater was not a decadent writer per say, his work reflects aesthetic and decadent ideas. It might not be prototypical, but it can be seen as a predecessor to the fairy tale genre or, in Stijn Praet’s words, ‘an Antique “fairy tale from before fairy tales”’.² While the Romans did not use the generic classification of the ‘fairy tale’ (this occurred in the late seventeenth century), ‘Cupid and Psyche’ is a narrative that could be identified today as a fairy tale – Praet, for example, draws attention to the ‘happy end marriage’ and the ‘striking structural and thematic affinities with other well-known fairy tales’,³ such as the story’s formulaic opening sentences, ‘once upon a time in a certain city there lived a king and queen’.⁴

The combination of Pater’s retelling of the myth with Le Cain’s large-scale black-and-white drawings with curved, swooping lines and exaggerated depiction of emotion makes for a fascinating case study of fairy tales and decadent illustration. Examining how a narrative originating

in the second century CE is reconfigured within the nineteenth-century context of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and reinterpreted in a 1977 illustrated edition reveals the shifting aesthetic values that shape each retelling and this raises intriguing questions: why did Le Cain specifically choose Pater's version of the Cupid and Psyche myth for his illustrated edition, even more so since it was intended as a children's book? Why did he choose to work with a Beardsleyesque aesthetic for the illustrations? How should we interpret these decadent, anachronistic illustrations created for this reimagined text? In what ways do they aid our understanding? Attempting to answer these questions will make it clear that Le Cain's illustrations are much more than a complement to the narrative. Instead, a more sophisticated and complex synthesis of text and image is at work. The images are not secondary to the text; rather, they contribute to the narrative by creating their own sequence of events that is integral to the story, reflecting a deliberate effort to harmonize the visual and verbal elements. As writer, artist, poet, and illustrator Mervyn Peake puts it, rather than merely repeating what the author has said, the illustrations 'attempt to capture the "colour" of the writing'.⁵ In this way, Apuleius' writing, Pater's retelling, and Le Cain's illustrations, to use a phrase of Pater's, 'reciprocally [...] lend each other new forces'.⁶ In addition, by foregrounding Le Cain's work, this paper draws attention to an artist who has been overlooked in scholarship.

The Case of the Three Cupid and Psyche

Apuleius places the tale of 'Cupid and Psyche' at the heart of his *Metamorphoses*, framing it as a comforting story told by an old woman to Charite, a young girl who has been kidnapped and is being held captive alongside the novel's protagonist, Lucius, who at that moment is trapped in his asinine form. The story follows Psyche, a mortal whose exceptional beauty incurs the wrath of Venus. Venus commands Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a monstrous creature, but instead Cupid himself becomes enamoured of her, placing Psyche in a luxurious home and visiting her in secret. After being persuaded by her jealous sisters, Psyche betrays her husband's trust by attempting to uncover his identity. This betrayal leads to Cupid's departure and subjects Psyche to

a series of trials imposed by Venus. After overcoming the challenges, Psyche is redeemed and secures her immortality with the approval of the gods. The story ends with Cupid and Psyche's wedding banquet and the introduction of their child Voluptas or Pleasure.⁷

In both Apuleius' and Pater's version, 'Cupid and Psyche' functions as a narrative frame. For Apuleius, it provides infinite mirroring, or *mise en abyme*, of the main plot – both protagonists, Lucius and Psyche, face the consequences for their curiosity but are rescued by the intervention of a divine power.⁸ Throughout *Metamorphoses*, the homodiegetic narrator, Lucius is at times replaced by other narrators through narrative framing, such as the *anus narratrix* comforting the girl.⁹ According to Praet, the narrative frame of Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche' serves a dual purpose: on 'the chronological level of events', it is a comforting, but ultimately deceptive tale told by an old woman to a kidnapped bride-to-be, offering false hope of a happily ever after in contrast to the girl's and her beloved's tragic deaths a little later on, and on 'the level of the narrative as a structured whole', the tale mirrors Lucius' journey as he fails to recognize its relevance to his own life.¹⁰ Both Psyche and Lucius 'originally lead comfortable lives, lose their bliss through misguided curiosity and have to endure relentless suffering before giving themselves up to divine grace'.¹¹ This highlights the paradox that fiction can both be misleading and revealing of the truth, depending on the reader's perception, as 'those who seek meaning in fiction and mistake it for truth are eventually duped by reality, while those who are duped by reality might very well find guidance and truth in fiction'.¹²

Interestingly, Matthew Potolsky attributes a similar paradox to Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, specifically in the fate of the character Flavian, with whom the protagonist, Marius, reads the story of 'Cupid and Psyche'. The two boys reading the story together in an old granary, creates a frame narrative within the novel that serves a similar purpose to the one in *Metamorphoses*. Potolsky comments on Pater's note 'that art can have too much of an impact, that its effects can exceed the intentions of those who would use it'.¹³ *Metamorphoses*, or 'The Golden Book' as it is called by Marius and Flavian, becomes a symbolic object that draws attention to the danger of conflating

life with art, as Flavian's intellectual and aesthetic ideas fail to protect him from the realities of life and his untimely death. This is not just a decorative strategy, but rather demonstrates how literature overtakes lived experience. Flavian's identity and influence on Marius are inseparable from Apuleius, as he becomes an almost living version of the text: beautiful, sensuous, golden, but also fatal.¹⁴ In other words, in both versions, the story functions as a conduit for the tension between idealized beauty and reality, leaning into decadent ideas of the double-edged power of art to both deceive and reveal. While reality or life can be approached as fiction or a work of art, this pursuit comes with seductive promises and existential risk.

The designation of *Metamorphoses* as 'The Golden Book' gives *Marius the Epicurean* a distinctly decadent undertone. As Potolsky argues, decadent writers deliberately created networks of references to one another to place themselves within this selective literary lineage, giving the example of Wilde praising Pater's *Renaissance* as a 'golden book', 'a term he borrowed from a poem by Swinburne praising Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1836), and from the term Pater himself used in *Marius the Epicurean* to describe Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*'.¹⁵ In general, Pater's approach of interpreting ancient history and philosophy in light of modern concerns mirrors the visions of decadence by both the Romans and Pater. According to Isobel Hurst, the 'transitional nature of imperial decline and the rise of Christianity' resonates with the present, while specifically foregrounding the 'elaborate literary Latin of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*'.¹⁶ Similarly, Giles Whiteley has shown how Pater aligns Apuleius' euphuistic style with his own notion of aesthetic decadence.¹⁷ This superimposition of 'different decadent temporalities of Roman antiquity and the present' is also discussed by Stefano Evangelista, who shows that Pater frames his inclusion of Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche through 'a number of recognizably decadent tropes'.¹⁸ As Evangelista notes, Pater describes the book itself as having a 'handsome yellow wrapper', being 'perfumed with oil of sandal-wood, and decorated with carved gilt ivory bosses', and depicts Marius' and Flavian's fascination with it in terms that are explicitly anachronistic.¹⁹ In Pater's words, their response is

aligned with ‘what the French writers called the macabre’, ‘that luxury disgust in gazing corruption’, that renders certain scenes from Apuleius ‘worthy of Théophile Gautier’.²⁰

The narrative framing of the story in both Apuleius’ original story and Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, thus serves similar functions. Contextualizing ‘Cupid and Psyche’ as a frame story within a larger story links the tale with ‘a long history of intricately framed fairy tale collections’.²¹ However, scholars have since long treated these tales in a vacuum separately from their original context, robbing them of their possible different interpretations and nuances of meaning.²² Notably, this is precisely what happens in the illustrated edition. The tale is set on its own, without any context. This does not, however, necessarily mean that meaning or interpretation is lost, as the combination of the text and illustrations leave room for the reader’s own interpretation. Moreover, as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has explored in her work on Christina Rossetti, ‘illustrated books are not simply physical objects or “products” but also ‘social processes, involving a complex network of relationships in historically specific situations that change over time’.²³ In the case of *Cupid and Psyche*, Le Cain provides a visual reinterpretation of a text that has been both shortened and altered twice.

In addition to being extracted from its original context, the text used in Le Cain’s edition not only differs from the original, but also from Pater’s own text. Pater’s translation as included in *Marius the Epicurean* is approximately one third shorter than the original story. He made omissions and changes to the text, often, as Eugene J. Brzenk has argued, ‘directed toward the exclusion of unseemly touches of comedy and distracting naturalism’ and this way restored ‘a simple classic quality to a discursive and embroidered version of a Greek myth’.²⁴ In fact, while the text emphasizes sensory vividness it does so in a rather simple or sober way, following the principle of omission Pater coined in his essay on *Style*.²⁵ In Pater’s own words, the story of ‘Cupid and Psyche’, as remembered by Marius, takes on a more serious tone than its original version and stands out as an image of pure beauty and ideal love:

So the famous story composed itself in the memory of Marius, with an expression changed in some ways from the original and on the whole graver. The petulant, boyish Cupid of Apuleius was become more like that ‘Lord, of terrible aspect’, who stood at Dante’s bedside and wept, or had at least grown to the manly earnestness of the *Erōs* of Praxiteles. Set in relief amid the coarser matter of the book, this episode of Cupid and Psyche served to combine many lines of meditation, already familiar to Marius, into the ideal of a perfect imaginative love, centered upon a type of beauty entirely flawless and clean – an ideal which never wholly faded from his thoughts, though he valued it at various times in different degrees.²⁶

In comparing the original Latin text with Pater’s translation, Paul Turner has argued that although Pater has a ‘sure eye for stylistic superfluity, and is largely successful in his attempt to tell Apuleius’ story more simply and efficiently’, his version of the essence of the story ‘is too narrow an abstraction, in that it excludes all the humour, and most of the connections with actual human life’; accusing Pater of applying a ‘too narrow conception of beauty’ reflecting a broader Victorian tendency to avoid uncomfortable or messy truths about human nature.²⁷ However, Pater’s generalizing of specific vocabulary (for example, ‘uterus’ becoming ‘bosom’, ‘necklace’ becoming ‘ornaments, or ‘marriage’ becoming ‘sweet usage’) creates an atmosphere that is more evocative than descriptive, more impressionistic than narratively precise. In line with Pater’s theme of ‘imaginative love’, he is not merely simplifying but rather reimagining the story.

The text for the illustrated edition is again shorter, approximately half the length of Pater’s original. In comparison to Pater’s more expansive and elaborate version, the illustrated text is more concise with simpler and plainer phrasing. Take, for example, the first paragraph of the illustrated version:

In a certain city lived a king and queen who had three daughters exceeding fair. But such was the loveliness of the youngest that men’s speech was too poor to commend it worthily, The fame of her beauty went daily further into distant lands, so that many people were drawn together to behold her. Men sailed no longer to Paphos, to Cnidus or Cythera, to the presence of the goddess Venus: her sacred rites were neglected, her images stood uncrowned, the cold ashes left to disfigure her forsaken altars. It was to a maiden that men’s prayers were offered, and when the girl went forth in the morning they strewed flowers on her way.²⁸

The narrative here is direct, with Psyche's beauty described as overwhelming but in rather straightforward terms. Pater's original version, on the other hand, is more elevated, stressing the ritualized gestures and the mythic dimension:

In a certain city lived a king and queen who had three daughters exceeding fair. But the beauty of the elder sisters, though pleasant to behold, yet passed not the measure of human praise, while such was the loveliness of the youngest that men's speech was too poor to commend it worthily and could express it not at all. Many of the citizens and of strangers, whom the fame of this excellent vision had gathered thither, confounded by that matchless beauty, could but kiss the finger-tips of their right hands at sight of her, as in adoration to the goddess Venus herself. And soon a rumour passed through the country that she whom the blue deep had borne, forbearing her divine dignity, was even then moving among men, or that by some fresh germination from the stars, not the sea now, but the earth, had put forth a new Venus, endued with the flower of virginity. This belief, with the fame of the maiden's loveliness, went daily further into distant lands, so that many people were drawn together to behold that glorious model of the age. Men sailed no longer to Paphos, to Cnidus or Cythera, to the presence of the goddess Venus: her sacred rites were neglected, her images stood uncrowned, the cold ashes were left to disfigure her forsaken altars. It was to a maiden that men's prayers were offered, to a human countenance they looked, in propitiating so great a godhead: when the girl went forth in the morning they strewed flowers on her way, and the victims proper to that unseen goddess were presented as she passed along.²⁹

The shortening of the story, however, provides, literally and figuratively, more room for the illustrations. Le Cain's illustrations challenge the viewpoint that Pater's conception of beauty is too abstract or idealized. For instance, the illustrations show faces full of expression (fig. 1), inserting the rawer emotions that Pater hides in his text. This way, even if Pater reduced Venus to a tame antagonist lacking psychological realism, as Paul Turner argues, the jealousy and rage do come to the foreground in Le Cain's drawing (fig. 2).³⁰ The text of 'Cupid and Psyche' changes throughout the three different editions. In the case of the 1977 edition, the large black and white drawings, the curved, swooping lines, and the exaggerated, almost grotesque, depiction of emotion, all stand in contrast to the isolated, simplified, and shortened version of the text. As Matthew Eve argues, the story transforms from purely verbal to imaginatively visual – in this 'remarkably delicate book [...] classically inspired designs [are] imbued with a sense of the forbidden as strange creatures and landscapes cascade across the page in a macabre carnival'.³¹



Fig. 1: Errol Le Cain, 'Psyche and Cupid', illustration for Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche* (Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 20.
© Maximilian Le Cain



Fig. 1: Le Cain, 'Psyche and Venus', illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 27.
© Maximilian Le Cain

The ‘Macabre Carnival’ of Le Cain and Pater’s ‘Cupid and Psyche’

Le Cain’s illustrations for Pater’s retelling of the story are a rare example of ‘Pater illustrations’, as illustrated works of Pater’s texts are scarce. Only a few examples have emerged since the late nineteenth century.³² Other notable examples include two different illustrated editions of Pater’s story ‘Sebastian van Storck’, one illustrated by the German artist Alastair (Hans Henning Otto Harry Baron von Voigt) in 1927 and the other by Dutch artist Frank Leenhouts in 1993. There are also two other illustrated editions of ‘Cupid and Psyche’, one illustrated by the French-British artist Edmund Dulac in 1951 and another published in 1901 as *The Story of Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated with reproductions of Raphael’s paintings.³³ Lene Østermark-Johansen has written of Pater’s reluctance to have his books illustrated and notes that ‘Pater’s surviving letters to his publishers reveal his obsession with bookbinding and paper, but he clearly intended his words to carry their own powers and not be rivalled by any interfering images’.³⁴ Such avoidance of illustration by writers was not uncommon during this period.³⁵ Kooistra, for example, has shown how writers such as Alfred Tennyson, who was one of the most illustrated poets of his period and enjoyed ‘commercial viability of reissuing his poetry in illustrated form’, was nevertheless ‘a confirmed literalist when it came to visual representation’ and ‘convinced that “an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text”’.³⁶ A few decades earlier, William Wordsworth described illustrated poetry as ‘evidence of regression to a lower, more material, stage of life’, connecting pictures ‘with the childlike and primitive, which are in turn [...] associated not with innocence and spiritual elevation, but rather with a dangerous femininity undermining a noble masculine culture’.³⁷ In general, nineteenth-century illustration theory often framed image/text relations in gendered, hierarchical terms, casting the pictorial as ‘a lesser art associated with such “feminine” attributes as imitation, sympathy, charm, grace and beauty, and the verbal as a superior art associated with such “masculine” attributes as intellect, power and mastery’.³⁸ Interestingly, for Pater, these ‘feminine’ attributes such as charm, grace, and beauty are rather integral aspects to his work.

However, as Kooistra goes on to argue, Pater's British contemporaries, such as William Morris and Christina Rossetti, 'stand out as artists who actively sought out opportunities for visual/verbal collaboration'.³⁹ Moreover, the story of 'Cupid and Psyche' was popular in Pater's time, with various illustrated versions appearing. Morris and Edward Burne-Jones planned to publish an illustrated edition of Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* (1868), containing a series of woodcut illustrations of Morris' retelling of Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche', but this project was ultimately never finalized. The fascination with the story of Cupid and Psyche was not limited to the British aestheticist circle, however. In the German context, for example, Max Klinger provided illustrations for Reinhold Jachmann's translation (1880), Robert Hamerling retold the story with Paul Thumann's illustrations (1882), and Walter Tiemann created illustrations for the translation of Eduard Norden (1902). As Christoph Leidl posits, all of these can be compared to Morris' ideals of 'the artistic shaping of the book – as a work of art and beauty, which would stand in contrast to the industrialized environment'.⁴⁰ In this way, the different illustrated editions of 'Cupid and Psyche' serve as an excellent example, Leidl argues,

of keeping a text alive through adaptation and illustration, in close connection with both the development of the material culture of book-illustration [...] on the one hand and the interplay of the old and frequently reinterpreted story with modern sensibilities on the other.⁴¹

In line with Morris' ideals, the idea of 'the artistic shaping of the book as a work of art and beauty' is again encountered in Pater's and Le Cain's version of 'Cupid and Psyche'.

According to Matthew Eve, Le Cain started his career in a very favourable environment with, firstly, 'technical changes in the reproduction process of line and tone' which 'made available a superb explosion of colors and visual effects'. Secondly, there was more attention and recognition for 'word and picture in a child's book, balancing text with image, and book production with overall architectural shape'. Thirdly, the dominance of nostalgia towards late Victorian and Edwardian illustrators (such as Edmund Dulac, who also provided illustrations for Pater's 'Cupid and Psyche') made it fashionable to fuse contemporary with classic forms of illustration, something which Le

Cain mastered. Lastly, fairy tales proved to be an excellent ‘fantasy outlet’ to detach from the ‘ever-threatening external realities of the Cold War’.⁴² The idea for an illustrated ‘Cupid and Psyche’, in particular, came when Le Cain shifted his work to more diverse texts instead of traditional fairytales. Together with Phyllis Hunt, the children’s book editor at Faber and Faber, Le Cain wanted to create a black and white picture book for slightly older children, based on Pater’s text. In the end, ‘Cupid and Psyche’ was a long and complex piece, considered ‘too adult’ for its intended audience. Le Cain tried to market it as an art book, but this, too, only enjoyed limited success.⁴³ Despite this lack of commercial success, Eve describes the book as ‘one of the artist’s most harmonious attempts at marrying different styles with his own mannerisms’. Indeed, the book combines Art Nouveau curvilinearity and classical visual language with a decadent atmosphere, drawing inspiration from figures such as Beardsley and Harry Clarke. It follows the style of Pre-Raphaelite illustrations with its rectilinear borders, where the pictures frames do not fade or are not fuzzy, making it possible, in Kooistra’s words, to ‘incorporate a wealth of symbolic detail; and to feature a large, central figure or figures in a dramatic and defining moment’.⁴⁴

The illustrations in the book consist of a frontispiece (showing the same image as depicted on the cover), twenty illustrations (alternating from the left page to right page, with the text consistently on the opposite page), and lastly a double-page spread depicting the wedding of Cupid and Psyche. The black and white illustrations are dark and intense with curved lines and a grotesque distortion of form, and other influences include Greek vases with their classical faces and postures as well as, Eve argues, cartoons such as ‘*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, and *Fantasia*’, ‘the visual style of Hollywood designers and early Disney features’, and the work of ‘Nielsen, Dulac, and Beardsley’ who ‘filtered through the Hollywood system’, making ‘this stylistic amalgam [...] one of many clearly discernible elements’.⁴⁵ In addition, Le Cain ‘added his own idiosyncratic Eastern flavor by disproportionately elongating each character, placing emphasis on stylized folds of drapery and the masklike head, hands, and feet’.⁴⁶ Le Cain’s decadent style not only takes

inspiration from artists such as Beardsley but also exhibits an Indonesian influence of *wayang kulit* [shadow puppetry], offering a broadened interpretation of decadent form (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Le Cain, 'Psyche and her Sisters', illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 16.
© Maximilian Le Cain

This comes close to Beardsley's art. However, Rachel Teukolsky comments that 'Beardsley's visual experiments were famously influenced by foreign styles – most strikingly, those of nineteenth-century Japan and eighteenth-century France', with Japanese prints making him experiment with 'linear forms and flattened picture planes'.⁴⁷ The elongated figures are also reminiscent of Edward Burne-Jones' *Psyche's Wedding* (1895), and, given Le Cain's familiarity with decadence and the aesthetic movement, it is plausible that he was inspired by, or at least familiar with *Psyche's Wedding* or with the 1860s illustrations of Morris' and Burne-Jones' *Story of Cupid and Psyche*.

As these diverse sources of inspiration demonstrate, Le Cain was an eclectic artist who was constantly changing and adapting 'his style, according to the prose, its tone, and the setting',

working ‘consistently on rejuvenating traditional fairy tales, legends, myths, and the old stories of different countries that fired his interest and imagination’.⁴⁸ He did not hesitate to draw inspiration from different time periods, different traditions or different cultures. In an interview from 1987, Le Cain provides insight into his eclectic creative process and describes himself as ‘a thieving magpie’:

[...] because I work in the cinema and think theatrically rather than as an illustrator. People who work for films, set designers, tend to find the key to a story’s setting through looking at various paintings. There isn’t actually anything original around: the only original thing is you as the filter through which all your experiences pass. *The Cabbage Princess*, my first real book, happened to come out of a book I was looking at about the commedia dell’arte. That was the key, but I didn’t rigidly sit down and study it, it was just the inspiration. The spinning-wheel scene in *Thorn Rose* was actually inspired by Rembrandt, and yet when you look at it now it isn’t at all Rembrandt. And I always loved the way the grass is laid out in those ‘Lady and the Unicorn’ tapestries, spangled with flowers... But I don’t sit with the thing in front of me. Copying it. I just remember what I’ve seen.⁴⁹

Rather than shiny objects, Le Cain draws inspiration from a synthesis of influences and ideas borrowed from others. Absorbing different visual influences and reinterpreting them through his own perspective enable him to combine inspiration with originality. Interestingly, Pater suggests something similar when he claims that experiencing art is about finding beauty and inspiration in various forms. This makes Le Cain the quintessential aesthetic critic – or, in this case, aesthetic artist:

What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done.⁵⁰

Later in the interview, Le Cain states that his background in film, and his experience of working as an animator at the Richard Williams Studios, influences his approach to visual art, making him think ‘theatrically rather than as an illustrator’. This means that his approach is dynamic, focusing on the storytelling aspects of visual art.⁵¹ Although he received no formal art education, he stated in an interview that the Roxy Cinema next door to where he grew up provided his art training: ‘I always think in terms of film, working out different angles to lead you dramatically through the

book'.⁵² It is therefore unsurprising that cinema and animation were Le Cain's most important sources of inspiration. Indeed, his illustrations for 'Cupid and Psyche', though inanimate, create the illusion of movement within and between the still images. In addition to his love of film, he was familiar with rod and shadow puppetry from growing up in India, which operate on a similar principle of balancing movement and stillness.⁵³ This is evident in his illustrations, which sometimes appear as inanimate figures that 'move' within the illustration. In 'Cupid and Psyche', Le Cain's drawing of Psyche, her two sisters, and their elongated shadows, is reminiscent of the visual language of shadow puppetry. The cinematic quality of his illustrations is further enhanced by the sense of movement within stillness and the incorporation of certain practices characteristic of cinematic language, such as the use of a close-up in the illustration of Psyche's eye (fig. 4).⁵⁴ Le Cain's approach to the relationship between the text and illustrations likewise develops the filmic quality. While the illustrations closely follow the story and Pater's text, the sequence of twenty-one illustrations forms its own visual narrative. The drawings effectively 'translate' the narrative, into a comprehensible visual work while maintaining an equal balance between text and image. Le Cain speaks of an 'imaginative text' where the words and drawings belong to each other inseparably:

The first task of an illustrator is to be in full sympathy with the writer. No matter how splendid and exciting the drawings may be, if they work against the mood of the story the picture book is a failure. I am all for illustration with a lot of relevant detail [in which] a child can discover fresh things at every look. I like bold 'simple' pictures which are humorous or dramatic, subtly underlining and extending the story, giving the young imagination something to feed on. Some graphically superb books are often too abstract and pseudo-childlike. They please adults but children get very little out of them. My idea of the perfect picture story-book is one with an imaginative text, simply told, where the words and drawings belong to each other inseparably.⁵⁵

The illustrations follow Pater's text closely, yet they still exhibit the same tendency of essentially telling their own visual story by combining the text with the image. Le Cain's and Pater's

‘collaboration’ thus demonstrates how this synthesis between the written and visual can even cause an image to adopt characteristics from text and film.

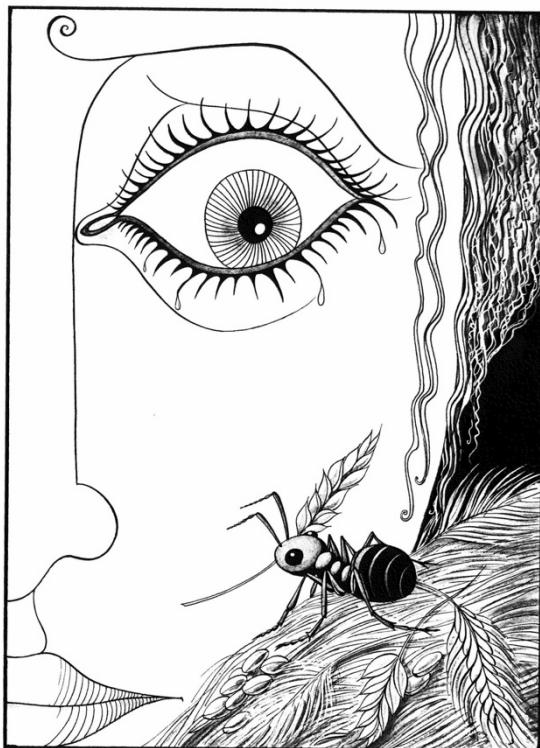


Fig. 4: Le Cain, ‘Psyche’s Eye’, illustration for *Cupid and Psyche*, p. 28.
© Maximilian Le Cain

In his conception of the idea of ‘Anders-streben’ in *The Renaissance*, Pater, like Le Cain, emphasizes a synthesis or rather a border-crossing of art forms, where each art form enhances the other.⁵⁶ Pater writes that ‘the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces’, which translates into ‘delightful music’ approaching ‘pictorial definition’, architecture aiming ‘at fulfilling the conditions of a picture, as in the Arena chapel’, or the condition of ‘sculpture, as in the flawless unity of Giotto’s tower at Florence’, or even of ‘true poetry, as in those strangely twisted staircases of the chateaux of the country of the Loire’.⁵⁷ Similarly, Le Cain’s illustrations aim at fulfilling an equal condition as the written text, and at times even approaches the condition of moving pictures.

Beardsley’s influence is evident not only in Le Cain’s use of line and figure, but also in the way he relates the illustrations to the text. This reflects the influence of *The Yellow Book* and the idea of placing art and literature on an equal footing. Decadent illustrators such as Beardsley

demonstrate that illustrations can function as more than mere pictorial paraphrases of a text. Jane Desmarais argues that the ‘description of one art in terms of another was common among aesthetes and decadents on both sides of the Channel’ drawing on ‘the tendency to emphasize the plastic qualities and visceral effect of great art on the viewer’.⁵⁸ Specifically, ‘the decadents revolted against the idea that the arts were rigidly distinct from one another and they implemented their belief in what Walter Pater termed ‘*Anders-streben*’; the condition whereby the arts ‘reciprocally lend each other new forces’.⁵⁹ Similarly, while Le Cain’s illustrations do provide insights into Pater’s narrative, underlying themes and settings, they are, however, not secondary to the story. In the book, this translates to each illustration occupying an entire page and accompanying a piece of text. The illustrations and text alternate between the left and right sides of the page, often referring to passages from preceding or subsequent pages. This reinforces the sense of a sequence of moments, recalling not only the temporality of literature, but also that of film. Although each illustration is framed by a black line, this framing does not isolate the images from the text. On the contrary, it emphasizes their equal importance.

Conclusion

Although the choice of Pater’s ‘Cupid and Psyche’ made the illustrated book perhaps too complex for its intended young audience, it endures today as a valuable work of art. The recurring motif of decadent influences in Le Cain’s illustrations makes ‘Cupid and Psyche’ seem anachronistic for its time and align more with Pater’s aesthetic. As we have seen, this decadent influence is not only noticeable in the illustrations itself, but also in the way the text and illustration relate to each other. It is precisely the lending of ‘new forces’ that Pater describes that shapes the artistic ‘collaboration’ between Pater and Le Cain. Le Cain’s illustrations follow Pater’s descriptions, but at a different, yet harmonious, pace that creates a story of its own. Moreover, since the text is a condensed version of Pater’s translation (which in its own turn is a condensed version of the original), that uses simpler and more factual language, the illustrations add an additional layer of emotional depth that aid the

reader in interpreting the text. If fairy tales, in Maria Tatar's words, 'open up a theatre of possibilities and create and unparalleled sense of immediacy, at times producing somatic responses with nothing but words',⁶⁰ then this effect becomes even more pronounced in 'Cupid and Psyche' through Le Cain's illustrations.

¹ I am grateful to Maximilian Le Cain for granting permission to reproduce Errol Le Cain's illustrations for *Cupid and Psyche*.

² Stijn Praet, 'Reader Beware: Apuleius, Metafiction and the Literary Fairy Tale', in *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, ed. by David Calvin and Catriona McAra (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 37-50 (p. 37). For another discussion of how the story is a 'predecessor' of the fairy tale genre, see Hendrik Wagenvoort, 'Cupid and Psyche', in *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion* (Brill, 1980), pp. 84-92.

³ Praet, pp. 37-50 (p. 38).

⁴ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Volume I: Books 4-6, ed. and trans. by J. Arthur Hanson, Loeb Classical Library, 44 (Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 195-293 (p. 195).

⁵ See the transcription of Mervyn Peake's talk in the series entitled 'As I See It', recorded on 20 May 1947. Reprinted in Mervyn Peake, 'Illustration', *Peake Studies*, 12.2 (2011), pp. 15-21 (p. 17).

⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California press, [1873] 1980), p. 105.

⁷ Apuleius, pp. 195-293.

⁸ Stephen Harrison, 'Some Epic Structures in Cupid and Psyche', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass II, Cupid and Psyche*, ed. by Maaike Zimmerman, Vincent Hunink, Thomas D. McCreight, Danielle van Mal-Maeder, Stelios Panayotakis, V. Schmidt, and B. Wesseling (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), pp. 51-68 (p. 64).

⁹ Danielle van Mal-Maeder and Maaike Zimmerman, 'The Many Voices in Cupid and Psyche', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass II, Cupid and Psyche*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁰ Praet, p. 47.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Matthew Potolsky, 'Fear of Falling: Walter Pater's "Marius the Epicurean" as a Dangerous Influence', *ELH*, 65.3 (1998), pp. 701-29 (p. 721).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 707.

¹⁵ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters. Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (University of Philadelphia Press, 2013), p. 93.

¹⁶ Isobel Hurst, 'Nineteenth-Century Literary and Artistic Responses to Roman Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 47-65 (p. 59).

¹⁷ Giles Whiteley and Cecilia Lindskog Whiteley, 'Decadence and Euphuism: Walter Pater, John Lly, and "New English" Style', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 73.1 (2025), pp. 7-19 (p. 9). See also Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater's European Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 171-172; and Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 121-124.

¹⁸ Stefano Evangelista, 'Transnational Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 316-31 (p. 319).]

¹⁹ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (Macmillan and Co., [1885] 1910), i, pp. 55-56, quoted by Evangelista, p. 319.

²⁰ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, pp. 60-61, quoted by Evangelista, p. 319.

²¹ Praet, p. 44.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration: A Publishing History* (Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 6-7.

²⁴ Eugene J. Brzenk, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Comparative Literature*, 10.1 (1958), pp. 55-60 (pp. 57 & 60).

²⁵ Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (Macmillan and Co., [1889] 1910), p. 16.

²⁶ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, p. 92.

²⁷ Paul Turner, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Victorian Studies*, 3.3 (1960), pp. 290-96 (p. 296).

²⁸ Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated by Errol Le Cain (Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 1.

²⁹ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, pp. 61-62.

³⁰ Turner, 'Pater and Apuleius', p. 294.

³¹ Matthew Eve, 'Errol Le Cain: The Very Best Aspects of Book Illustration', *Children's Literature in Education*, 30.2 (1999), pp. 85-102 (p. 94).

³² In addition to these illustrated books, there have been several standalone or 'loose' illustrations made for Pater's text. For example, British artist Reginald Arthur 1891 engraving called *Marius the Epicurean*, depicting the character Marius from Pater's eponymous book. In 1895, the Irish artist Phoebe Anna Traquair created a series of four pieces of embroidery called *The Progress of a Soul* based on Pater's story of 'Denys L'Auxerrois'. Lastly, American artist Charles Demuth's 1918 sketch for Pater's 'A Prince of Court Painters'. For more on Demuth and Pater, see my paper, Lina Vekeman, 'A Study of Art Crossing its Borders: Walter Pater's *Anders-streben* and Charles Demuth's *Aucassin and Nicolette* and *A Prince of Court Painters*', *Word & Image*, 41.1 (2025), pp. 104-13.

³³ Walter Pater, *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche*, illustrated by Edmund Dulac (The Heritage Press, 1951), and Walter Pater, *The Story of Cupid and Psyche: with Illustrations by Raphael*, ed. by R. H. Russell (Merrymount Press, 1901).

³⁴ Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'Serpentine Rivers and Serpentine Thought: Flux and Movement in Walter Pater's Leonardo Essay', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), pp. 455-82 (p. 456).

³⁵ See, for example, Anna Sigríður Arnar's discussion on Stéphane Mallarmé, in *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 60-68.

³⁶ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 392-418 (p. 394).

³⁷ Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', pp. 395.

³⁸ Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', pp. 395-96.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 404.

⁴⁰ Christoph Leidl, 'Between Symbolism and Popular Culture. Cupid and Psyche in Fin de Siècle Book Illustration', in *Cupid and Psyche: The Reception of Apuleius' Love Story since 1600*, Trends in Classics: Pathways of Reception 1, ed. by Regine May and Stephen Harrison (De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 247-72 (p. 247).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴² Eve, p. 85.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁴ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture* (Ohio University Press, 2011), p. 59.

⁴⁵ Eve, p. 87

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁷ Rachel Teukolsky, 'On the Politics of Decadent Rebellion: Beardsley, *Japonisme*, Rococo', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.4 (2021), pp. 643-66 (p. 643).

⁴⁸ Eve, p. 100.

⁴⁹ Penny Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain', *Books for Keeps*, 47 (1987),

<https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/article/authorgraph-47-errol-le-cain/> [accessed 29 December 2025].

⁵⁰ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California Press, [1873] 1980), p. xxi.

⁵¹ Lee Kingman, Grace Allen Hogarth, and Harriet B. Quimby, eds, *Illustrators of Children's Books 1967-1976* (The Horn Book, 1978), p. 138.; Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain'; and Eve, p. 88.

⁵² Sibson, 'Authorgraph No. 47: Errol le Cain'.

⁵³ Eve, p. 87.

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that the motive of a close-up or standalone eye is also present in Harry Clarke's illustrated *Faust* (1925). Perhaps Le Cain was likewise inspired by Clarke's prominent use of the eye as a decorative motif.

⁵⁵ Kingman, et al., p. 139.

⁵⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald Louis Hill (University of California Press, [1873] 1980), p. 105. The original title *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was revised as *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in 1877.

⁵⁷ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ Jane Haville Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France 1893-1914* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), p. 124.

⁵⁹ Desmarais, pp. 124-25.

⁶⁰ Maria Tatar, 'Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative', *Western Folklore*, 69.1 (2010), pp. 55-64 (p. 56).