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Evanghélia Stead, *Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), xii + 280 pp. ISBN 9781805113454

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In Evelyn Sharp's story 'A New Poster', published in *The Yellow Book* in July 1895, Mrs Angelo Milton is at her wits' end.¹ She is in love with 'the new black and white artist' Adrian Marks but loving him means giving up her fortune and her good name. Should she choose the bohemian love of this 'dandy artist', or the comfortable life promised by a steady man? Sharp's story seems to dramatize a recognisably fin-de-siècle dilemma: that of the modern woman who must reckon with her own independence and the limitations of marriage. But in its depiction of a disreputable 'decadent' poster artist, appearing only months after the shock dismissal of Aubrey Beardsley from *The Yellow Book*, the story also stages a covert declaration of alliance to the disgraced poster artist. 'A New Poster' provides the striking opening to Evanghélia Stead's study of Beardsley, inviting us to approach 'Beardsley' – that strange complex of image, word, and performance that fascinated the late nineteenth century – as a sum of many shifting parts. Nothing, Stead insists, 'should be taken at face value' (p. 5).²

Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley moves in three, occasionally competing, directions. The first is to re-centre Beardsley's lifelong fascination with the margin and the marginal through his engagement with the grotesque, border art, and marginalia, as he appropriated and transformed motifs from a range of artists, styles, and periods throughout his career. The second is to argue that Beardsley can be understood as a proto-performance artist, pre-empting later 'body art' by manipulating his own image through appearances in printed media, sometimes for canny self-promotion, other times for wickedly subversive play (and many times for both). Finally, the book proposes that Beardsley's designs should not be seen as isolated, finished works, but *processes* in dialogue with each other and the work of other artists, during and beyond his own lifetime. The 'Beardsley Period' named by Max Beerbohm appears in this account

not so much made up by one artist, but a composite of many shifting forms. 'In fin-de-siècle skies speckled with numerous stars', Stead asserts, 'he is a meteor no less dazzling' (p. 205). *Grotesque and Performance* therefore builds on what Jane Desmarais named the 'Beardsley Industry' in her influential account of the same name.³ Desmarais influentially repositioned Beardsley from an outlier in British art to an important contributor to European, and particularly French, art in the late nineteenth century. Stead, too, considers an 'international Beardsley' (p. 205), tracing the translations and transformation of Beardsley and his work by the intersecting forces of the artist himself, his contemporaries, and later followers and critics.

This not a conventional artist's monograph, nor does it seek to be. Following Beardsley himself, it dwells in the margins. The first chapter is indicative of this approach, exploring the 126 grotesques that made up the three volumes of witticisms by Sydney Smith and Charles Lamb, *Bon-Mots*. Often overlooked as secondary works and described by Beardsley himself as merely 'very tiny little things' in a letter to his old headteacher, Stead repositions the *Bon-Mots* as the critical testing ground for Beardsley's emerging artistic style, offering him an aesthetic and iconographic freedom that saw him ransacking the whole history of art for material. Beardsley, Stead argues, appropriated, reinterpreted, and frequently abandoned images and motifs from classical and Renaissance grotesques, medieval marginalia, as well as more recent explorations by artists such as Odilon Redon. In Stead's evocative writing, Beardsley gleefully 'hijacks' (p. 21) material from across the history of art. With his deliciously errant pen, everything is transformed into marginalia, as stray lines curl into recognisable shapes, letters can also be read as wings and tails. Even images on the margin, Stead provocatively suggests, contain their own margins, creating forms that may be endlessly read anew. Yet in this praise of Beardsley, Stead follows a well-trodden path to see Beardsley as a disruptor of an apparently prudish and conservative Victorian art world, and, surprisingly enough considering the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with marginalia, as a radical break from an undefined Pre-Raphaelite tradition, a 'style he would master, transform, and transgress' (pp. 7 & 13).

If the grotesques of *Bon-Mots* were the unwieldy ‘breeding tanks’ (p. 13) for Beardsley’s developing style, the foetal motif found in these grotesques became a ‘graphic laboratory’ (p. 57). One of the most arresting vignettes of the *Bon-Mots* is *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus*, which shows two figures gathered by candlelight (fig. 1). The left figure is Pierrot-ish: drooping eyelids, pronounced bottom lip and obstinate cowlick, they are a beautiful and terribly tired clown. Inert and impassive, they present a small foetus of bristling energy for inspection to a second witchy figure. Shocking and playful in equal measures, Beardsley used the foetus as a crucible not only for his own practice but ‘as the basis for a collective Decadent identity’ (p. 70), seized on by artists across Europe. Stead places this fascination with unborn, protean forms against a broader scientific culture of embryology, which found its way even to Alfred Loos’ famous diatribe against ornament, *Ornament and Crime*. I would have liked to see a more careful consideration of intersex and classical ‘hermaphrodite’ figures in Beardsley’s work beyond their apparently self-evident existence as ‘monstrosity incarnate’ (p. 64) – a somewhat surprising claim considering the chapter’s focus on Darwin and embryology, in which the question of primal hermaphroditism and bisexuality became a subject of considerable attention.



Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus*, BM-SS:26, in Evanhélia Stead, *Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), p. 38.

In the third chapter, we move from decadent *grotteschi* to grotesque performance. Beardsley's 'intellectual dandyism', Stead argues, is evident not only in his art but his life performance, as the artist staged *himself* as a margin through photography and self-portraiture, ironically seeking to resemble the monsters of his pen. In 'Portrait of Himself', published in 1894 in *The Yellow Book*, Beardsley presents himself as a miniature figure in bed, almost swallowed up by vast swathes of drapery, peering out absurdly from his sumptuous setting. Slowly 'losing substance' (p. 119) within these folds, Stead argues that such self-portraits have the effect of rendering the artist himself as a 'modern-day monster' (p. 118). Beardsley further exploited this monstrosity to great effect in photography, such as the photographs by Frederick H. Evans where the artist posed as *Le Stryge* after Charles Meryon's celebrated 1853 etching of a gargoyle of Notre-Dame gazing over Paris. For Stead, it is notable that Beardsley did not identify himself with the whole cathedral, but with a 'monstrous detail' (p. 138), playing on his own ill health to celebrate the monster and to merge with the margin and the grotesque of medieval tradition. In using his body for his art, and by turning his body into an artform, Stead argues that Beardsley's life-practice anticipates and heralds avant-garde experiments in performance and body art.

The final chapters place Beardsley in the 'Europe of Reviews' (p. 141), concentrating on the role of English, Italian, and French periodicals in mythologizing Beardsley and his work, as well as the artist's own attempts to manipulate the periodical press. This was risky business, and the artist's crafty wit could easily be misinterpreted. After his death, Beardsley's image quickly slipped out of his control, epitomized in the transformation of 'Death of Pierrot' into a misguided self-portrait in the French press. The art critic Joseph Pennell launched Beardsley's career with his feature on the artist in *The Studio*. In it, Pennell made a direct connection between the 'Beardsley age' and technical revolutions in printmaking, writing that the artist 'has recognised that he is living in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and he has availed himself of mechanical reproduction for the publication of his drawings'.⁴ The implications of this emphasis on process for Beardsley, however, are left somewhat underdeveloped, although Stead does highlight the importance of

photomechanical reproduction for the portability and availability of Beardsley's designs. Pennell's article became a practically obligatory reference point for all subsequent criticism. Yet, as Stead shows, it was adapted and revised too. Italian periodicals such as *Emporium* shifted attention towards biography, frequently scolding Beardsley for the qualities of childish precociousness that the artist had himself playfully cultivated in another English magazine, *The Sketch*. Such shifting forms, Stead deftly argues, demand an approach which recognises publications as 'shared practices and processes through which individual artists and communities engage, barter, and trade' (p. 143).

In the final chapter we encounter Beardsley as, in the words of Julius Meier-Graefe, 'the first Englishman who turned whole-heartedly to France', to consider the artist's reception in French periodicals and the press.⁵ Whilst Beardsley's self-avowed Francophilia is familiar ground, Stead contributes important new directions by focusing on the role of illustrations in press reviews, and once again highlighting the ever-shifting transnational exchange between periodicals.

No doubt because it is composed of previously published essays and articles, read as a whole the book can feel occasionally repetitious. Certain details and premises are re-introduced as if new from chapter to chapter, whilst central theses, such as Beardsley's mobilisation of 'media-driven modernity' (pp. 8, 54 & 205) recur without much development. Whilst it 'calls on histories of culture and aesthetics' (p. 7), it is not always clear what these histories are, with a bibliography largely centred on Beardsley scholarship (although curiously no discussion of Linda Gertner Zatlin's 1997 article on 'Beardsley's "Japanese" grotesques').⁶ Ultimately, however, this book contributes welcome new directions to Beardsley scholarship, richly illustrated and available open access, revealing the astonishing lives of Beardsley's designs as they were continually reimaged and remade into a 'grotesque vocabulary' (p. 205) by his own pen, performances, and the work of others. His afterlife at the margins of the body and work of art is neatly captured in a final anecdote on a tableau of his work staged at the mansion of Winnaretta Singer, the Princess de Polignac, in which Beardsley's figures seemed to 'escape' (p. 207) from sheets of paper to be brought to life in three-dimensional form.⁷ At every turn, Stead presents her reader with an artist who delights,

dazzles, and confounds the beholder, a visual alchemist who transfigured his own form and the creatures of his marginal imagination. At its heart, the book is a cheeky provocation to be more Beardsley: to think in swirls and curls, past linear models of genealogy and reception into more germinal and protean forms of transmission.

¹ Evelyn Sharp, “A New Poster,” *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895), pp. 123–66.

² Evanghélia Stead, *Grotesques and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024). All references are cited parenthetically in text.

³ Jane H. Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France from 1893-1914* (Routledge, 2018).

⁴ Joseph Pennell, ‘A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley’, *The Studio* 1.1 (April 1893), pp. 14–19.

⁵ Julius Meier-Graefe, ‘Aubrey Beardsley and his Circle’, in *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, trans. by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, 2 vols. (G. P. Putnam’s Sons; William Heinemann, 1908), II, 253.

⁶ Linda Gertner Zatlin, ‘Aubrey Beardsley’s “Japanese” Grotesques’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25.1 (1997), pp. 87-109.

⁷ Alexandre de Gabriac, ‘La Vie à Paris: Un spectacle d’art’, *Le Figaro* (1 June 1908), p. 1.