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Book Reviews

THE LENS OF THE GROTESQUE

Ewa Kuryluk. *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex. The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987. Cloth \$49.95 Paper \$21.95

Although Ewa Kuryluk has used, largely, Aubrey Beardsley's work—in words and in images—to represent a stage in the artistic use of the grotesque in Western culture, her real subject proves to be the mythmaking mind of Beardsley himself. A learned exploration of the decadent dimension of our collective psyche in the late nineteenth century, it may be more narrowly useful as a scholarly equivalent to a cinematic "fantastic voyage" within the consciousness of a single individual. Future studies of Beardsley will not be able to ignore it.

A long introduction on the origins of the grotesque as an outlet for anti-social impulses, and how the grotesque has manifested itself since the first cave drawings, is followed not by examining its use among *fin de siècle* writers and artists in general, but almost wholly as Beardsley employed it. Even here, two Beardsley works are singled out for minute examination, one primarily prose, the other entirely pictorial—the Venus and Tannhäuser story as told and illustrated in *Under the Hill*, a somewhat sanitized version of which appeared in *The Savoy* (1896), and the drawings for Oscar Wilde's notorious play *Salome* (1893), made far more notorious by Beardsley's art. (Max Beerbohm even quipped that Wilde's text served to illustrate Beardsley's pictures.)

There is no question but that the grotesque dominates Aubrey Beardsley's art. "The moving force of the grotesque world," Ewa Kuryluk tells us, "was eros. It was injected into landscape and architecture, and allegorized in different ways; it appeared as a winged boy or a horned satyr, a chevalier or a beast, a dwarf and an embryo who explored the female garden, island, or planet of love, a subterranean paradise." Further, she concludes, the artists of the grotesque, preoccupied as they were with death as well as with love, "oscillated between sadism and masochism but had a stronger inclination for the second." The reason, she claims, was their sense of being surrounded, from womb to tomb, by a need for the female which left them feeling the inferior sex, whatever the clouds of male chauvinism which obscure such dependency. She does not explain how, in Beardsley's case, that need was so special and so overwhelming that it suffused almost everything he drew or wrote.

Why did Beardsley, the presiding genius of *fin de siècle* decadence, direct his art—and his entire career, self-acknowledged as brief, for he knew at twenty that he was dying—into the grotesque tradition? Why did no other artist of his time work in the grotesque so brilliantly—or so mischievously? And how was

he able to do so with an awesome display of erudition, although his training went no further than an indifferent and abbreviated public school education (he was a surveyor's clerk at sixteen), and a few months of intermittent night-school art classes? Speaking not generally, Ewa Kuryluk says only that "Grotesque ornamentation, because of its affinity with the complicated structure of organic life and the opaque and highly eroticized nature of the inner self, offered a refuge for ambiguous, unverballed feelings. . . . The grotesque could act as a vehicle for emancipation and, significantly, exploded in times of unrest and spiritual crisis. . . . The subterranean was too authentic and thus too strong to be eradicated."

By the close of 1893—Beardsley was twenty-one and had already accomplished his nearly six hundred drawings and decorations for the *Morte d'Arthur* and for *Salome*—he was already beyond visits to libraries and galleries. If not bedridden he was housebound; his tuberculosis was acute and worsening, and there was no cure. "Grotesque artists," Kuryluk writes, "were lovers of the esoteric, scholars of the hermetic, and specialists of the absurd and obscene. The wild fantasies were nourished by curio cabinets and rare books. . . ." First, however, such fantasies had to have been fed from within, yet she refers only to "the peculiar character of the grotesque artists, their unscholarly, encyclopedic erudition centered on sacrilegious eroticism, and their heated minds which jumped back and forth between antiquity and modernity, Europe and the other continents."

By 1898 Beardsley was dead, at twenty-five. His productivity had been crowded into a very few years, little of which had been spent in the notorious bedroom in his house in Pimlico, working at night by candlelight in a room decorated, in the spirit of Des Esseintes in Joris-Charles Huysmans's *À Rebours*, in bizarre orange-and-black. Much of Beardsley's work had to be accomplished in hotel rooms in seaside resorts frequented by convalescents and invalids, propped up in bed, or in a wheel-chair. "While realist painters preferred the cool and sable northern light, it can be assumed," Kuryluk hazards more from fantasy than fact, "that artists of the grotesque tended to work, like Beardsley, in the night or in rooms with covered windows and artificial light. They locked themselves away from the business of life, withdrawing into their own inner space . . . [and] projected obsessions, captured enigmas, fixed obscure signs and hieroglyphs."

Whatever Beardsley's motives, we should look at his methods. How did his encyclopedic erudition come about? Where did he see the pictures that comprised his sweeping art education? How could he have parodied abstruse learning in *Under the Hill* and his pictures for it without knowing the originals? Exploring Paris briefly in 1892 and 1893, Beardsley saw what he could, despite episodes of illness. He examined the gargoyles on Gothic cathedrals which he knew Charles Meryon had drawn, and he wandered in the galleries. In London he had already seen most of the public collections, and even some of the private ones, as in Sir Edward Burne-Jones's house and studio. He had read books under

the great dome of the British Museum Reading Room. And his retentive memory seemed to forget nothing. In his sickbed he poured over books, and picture-books, sent and lent by friends, and he bought—to the limit of his finances—books and pictures, often through the bookseller who was also, at the end, his publisher and supplier of pornography, Leonard Smithers. The young—and never-to-be-old—Aubrey Beardsley was a professor as well as a purveyor of the grotesque.

But why the grotesque? All times are times—to appropriate Kuryluk's term—of "unrest and spiritual crisis," ripe for the satirist's pen or brush. The obsessive involvement with the grotesque must reflect a crisis of the inner life exploited by the professional able to translate his problems into his art. In the art which Beardsley absorbed, defective, distorted, even bestial, physiognomy was used to portray the devil's forces of darkness, from the gargoyles which were an obscenely humorous memory of paganism to the macabre, eroticized, demonization of traditional religious scenes. There was, then, a tradition, meticulously described and illustrated by Kuryluk, into which Beardsley's artistic impulses could flow. But why? According to her, "Grossly exaggerating, every minute detail . . . , Beardsley alludes to and derides erotic art and literature as well as pornography. But he also makes the point that only by means of regression and infantilism is one able to get in touch with the most elemental desires and fears, the very fabric of life and art."

If there is a critical dimension to Beardsley's work, it was not the spur to its creation, and Kuryluk's point can be applied, as she does not do, directly to the fabric of Beardsley's being. The insatiability depicted in what Stephen Marcus (in *The Other Victorians*) and called *pornotopia* seems to Marcus "literal insatiability, and the orgies represented are the visions of permanently hungry men. . . . Inside of every pornographer there is an infant screaming for the breast from which he has been torn." Extreme as the premise is, it fits Beardsley and explains the attraction which at least one thwarted nature felt toward elements of the grotesque tradition—even had he not known of the tradition itself.

Beardsley was deprived of his mother's breast by the puerperal fever she suffered after his birth, and his illnesses as well as hers did keep them apart for large periods of his childhood. His work evidences from the beginning an obsession with mammae, which appear both anatomically realistic and grotesquely surrealistic, in shadowed or decorated borders, or hermaphroditic figures, in symbolic shapes and curious multiples on dwarfs, fetuses and hunchbacks, on trees and flowers, on pedestals and columns. As late as the drawings he completed on his deathbed the obsession manifested itself, the "M" drawing for *Volpone* (pictured by Kuryluk) portraying an angel-winged cherub reaching out its arms for a bare-breasted mother figure framed by six-breasted female-shaped pedestals. At the end, he was still reaching for the withdrawn breast.

Life for Beardsley involved even further loss. A case study as a creator of a literary and artistic *pornotopia*, he almost certainly suffered deprivation in the genial sense as well. Almost every page he wrote or drew demonstrated the intensity of his emotional hunger. In this vein there was also a theatrically phallic dimension to Beardsley's art, befitting the grotesque tradition, and a profusion of what Ewa Kuryluk called his "figures of embryos walking around in tuxedos, hiding in bottles, pots, and cages. . . . Ridiculing his obsessions, he nevertheless remained possessed by them." The reason? Not the handy grotesque culture, but the thwarted side of Beardsley's sexuality. "Once a eunuch always a eunuch," he wrote his publisher, in commenting on a story about a mutual acquaintance. "Perhaps the story might be transferred to me, with equal truth."

The admission may have been medically accurate, but Beardsley seemed to have been implying illness-related or psychosexually-caused impotence. W. B. Yeats confided to pages of the memoirs he did not see fit to print the tale that for Beardsley "sexual desire under the pressure of disease had become insatiable," and that he had been told at the time of Beardsley's death "that he had hastened it by masturbation." The concept was a quack-medical Victorian fiction, but it is easy to see in Beardsley's later drawings how the rumor could have gained currency. An isolated personality who lived so much of his life vicariously, he seemed, in the masturbatory daydreams he drew, to reflect his sexually arrested state. His letters to his last publisher (a part-time pornographer to whom Beardsley may have deliberately played up) even state as much. In them his virginity is "broken" only by "reves mouillés," and although a "eunuch" the description of "the lace of her pantalons" in a picture he has drawn is allegedly sufficient to raise an erection in the writer.

Chronically tubercular since his boyhood, he lived in feverish fantasies arising from illness from deprivation, creating, he realized, an obsessive intellectual interest in sexual matters. Writing once about a painful extraction he had submitted to, he drew the tooth, with three long roots, and added, to Smithers, "You see even my teeth are a little phallic." Making wry fun of his inadequacies, he noted a newspaper reference to "*The Rape of the Lock* by Mrs. Beardsley, Illustrated by herself." It was a doubt reinforced by the evidence as to who were his friends. He had little choice but to accept and cultivate the approbation of the coterie of aggressively homosexual men in the literary and artistic circles of the nineties who influenced contemporary taste. He could be revolted by the corrupt vulgarity of a Wilde, but he could not reject them all without jeopardizing his livelihood. If anything, his sense of entrapment reinforced the sexual ironies in his work.

Beardsley's thwarted instincts found both expression and release in grotesque literature and art, often in its most sardonic and perverse extremes. Similarly, in his own work there was no conventional romantic beauty in the erotic impulse, and he was impelled to the illustration of works like *Salome*, where the mood was morbid, animalistic or otherwise corrupt. He not only would draw

people who were emotionally abnormal but would portray mental states physically by portraying people as anatomically grotesque. A human being did not have to wait for birth to become Beardsley's victim. "The little creature handing hats," he once wrote his publisher about a drawing, "is *not* an infant but an unstrangled abortion."

Does this *ad hominem* approach suggested invalidate Ewa Kuryluk's investigations? Only in its omission of the internal springs to creativity. For Beardsley as for others who found inspiration and outlets in the grotesque tradition, and who enriched it with new variations and new meanings applied to a changing world, the grotesque remained a perversely accurate lens to the psyche. It is rewarding to have such an encyclopedic guidebook into the cave.

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BLOOM'S PATER

Harold Bloom, ed. *Walter Pater*. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. \$19.95

As a writer on Aestheticism and on the English decadence, Harold Bloom needs no introduction. He is the author of a provocative essay on Yeats and the editor of an anthology of Pater's work. His reader of critical writing on Walter Pater continues that interest. It will be welcomed by students of the period because it adds to the available critical material on Pater by bringing together nine essays by noted authorities—although it has to be said that none of the essays is particularly difficult to find in its original form. Bloom suggests in his "Editor's Note" that his volume contains a "selection of the best and most representative criticism that is now available on the great critic, Walter Pater." No one would quibble with that assessment of the quality of the contributions to the anthology; so why, then, does this collection of critical writing on Pater, including as it does such eminent critics as John Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom himself and Graham Hough, finally disappoint?

One of Harold Bloom's own pieces—"The Place of Pater: *Marius the Epicurean*"—gives us a clue. The title now has a quaint ring to it: indeed it sounds oddly Leavisite in its formulation and implications—the perception of a canon of writers as a "history" in which each may be "placed" with an unerring precision. The essay dates from 1971 and was important in that it offered a way of seeing Aestheticism within a predominantly *English* context. Bloom suggested that the (until then) usual assumptions about the genealogy and origins of Aestheticism (in "the literary Paris of the 1850s") gave the wrong emphasis. He suggested that the aesthetics of Aestheticism derived in no small measure from English Romanticism. But that *was* 1971, and very few paid up faculty members—formalists, structuralists, post-structuralists or whatever—are innocent now of the claims of semiotics, particularly of the semiotics of acculturation. Indeed the whole notion of a "national culture" and the ways in which