The Selected Prose of John Gray

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“Aubrey Beardsley”

La Revue Blanche, 16 (1898), 68–70.

This translation from the French is by Alan Anderson, published as Aubrey Beardsley: An Obituary Memoir (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1980).

After he was dismissed as art editor of The Yellow Book in the spring of 1895, Beardsley was supported by commissions, and later by a regular allowance, from André Raffalovich. Raffalovich’s concern also extended to Beardsley’s spiritual well-being and, following his own conversion from Judaism to Catholicism, Raffalovich, together with Gray, encouraged Beardsley’s own conversion (to the extent that it has been interpreted by at least one biographer, Stanley Weintraub, as actual pressure to convert). Beardsley did finally become a Roman Catholic on 30 March 1897, almost exactly a year before his death.

Given these circumstances, one would think that Gray would be concerned in this obituary memoir to offer an apologia for Beardsley’s life. In fact Gray flatly denied Beardsley’s reputation as an immoral artist: “All that he was, all that he did, was good,” he asserts, attempting to forestall the kind of criticism later voiced by Roger Fry, who called Beardsley the “Fra Angelico of Satanism.” Gray’s remarkable objectivity later was to extend to another controversial artist in black and white, Eric Gill.

La Revue Blanche was edited by the three Natanson brothers, of whom Gray’s acquaintance, Thadée, was the best known. But it was its most famous literary editor, Gray’s friend Félix Fénéon, who invited him to write for the journal, the most brilliant and original of the Parisian periodicals of the day. Under Fénéon, it attracted the best of the avant-garde writers and artists, one of whom, Félix Vallotton, provided a small woodcut of Beardsley’s profile for this short memoir.
Aubrey Beardsley

An artist has just died. Aubrey Beardsley was born in London about twenty-five years ago: he died in Menton on 15th March last. This was, in England, the occasion for fresh insults and for foolish forgiveness.

Fifteen months ago, in Bournemouth, he was thought to be dying: his whole appearance condemned him. Nevertheless he kept repeating: If I went to Paris, I would recover. After arriving by some miracle at the Quai Voltaire, his expectations seemed to be realised. He made a recovery. One went to see him: numbers of people frequented his sickroom and spread hope there. For a short time even he regained the strength to handle his industrious pen.

For he loved Paris in a direct and special way. All that he observed there with such clarity, he set down. He had an extraordinarily precise vision. And with this gift he wanted to be able to single out the most delicate lines as far as the eye could reach; which, in London at least, is difficult.

One finds in the force of his inclinations an assurance of his genius. This was a man who never hesitated: for all his delicate appearance and awkward gestures, he had the stamp of a great man. All that he was, all that he did, was good. He laid down his views. And, for him, the matter was settled, decided once for all.

Always satisfied with himself, he had little curiosity; he confessed artlessly to astonishing ignorance.

He detested the vague, the blurred, all that is mysterious. The most beautiful stained glass windows, even the delicate hues of ancient
rainbowed glass, left him unmoved. In literature, he leapt at a bound from the age of Augustus (see his moving translation of the *Ave atque vale* of Catullus)\(^1\) to the French writers of the 17th century. His meat and drink was what offered itself to him, without favour.

Even as a child Beardsley displayed an extraordinary gift for music. He was sought after in drawing-rooms. At the age of twelve the young Aubrey had to give up his fame as a pianist to go to school, to become a student, and to suffer the misfortune of bearing a name that his companions could find absurd.

Eight years later, an astonishing flowering.\(^2\) In an instant he was famous. Music-hall writers adorned their verses with his name. Publishers anxious to make a fortune proffered their attentions. Women's dress conformed to his wish. Wagnerian concerts were thronged with his characters. As for himself, he did nothing but draw, unmoved, and was none other than Aubrey Beardsley.

Theories followed; in the end he was explained. For some he was a monster with a contrary vision: what was meant, for example, by his fauns dressed in lace? his hideous women firmly convinced of their charm, or beauties with a tranquil and unpitying air? According to others, he had to wait, to possess himself in patience. Beardsley would begin to learn the way of the world; before long, weary of shocking good people, his whimsical imagination would be exhausted, and he would draw like everyone else; he would show himself at last responsible.

Responsible! What did they want, his judges, his admirers? His seriousness was in fact precisely to mock, but in a kindly way, without malice. One would wait long for something else from him.

He found his models by chance, viewing them in his own fashion; and when he did not wish to inconvenience himself, he took himself as a model. So much for the idiotic decipherings of his symbols.

His *Death of Pierrot* has been called a 'melancholy biography'; and so, similarly, other compositions of his. Undoubtedly, the dying
Pierrot is Beardsley; and in the group of people who tiptoe near to the bed, finger on lips, he has quite simply turned to the advantage of his art the half gestures and the hidden compassion that a discerning invalid is aware of chancing upon around him. But it is the symbol itself which interests the artist, and not what is symbolised.

In the nine pages of illustrations which he made for Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (pages moreover of the first rank among his best) all weaves its spell (is it necessary to remark the eminent distinction of every line that he drew?), all is fitting, as it should be, and in keeping. It is not that a sense of responsibility finally reveals itself; it is rather that the innocent, quintessential ridicule was already present in the poem.

Beardsley's work is scattered everywhere: in the journals of *The Savoy* and *The Yellow Book*,³ and in a number of published books. There is also, published by Smithers, a collection of fifty drawings, which contains moreover a catalogue of his pictures, drawn up after a fashion.⁴

A year ago, he had himself baptised. His character promptly showed itself in the eager study which he made of Bossuet⁵ and of Saint Alfonso de Liguori.⁶ He loved the prayers of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Since his arrival in Menton, during the autumn of 1897, his reputation for sweetness and resignation spread. And during the martyrdom of his last eight days, those days of choking blood coughed up in torrents, and of painful attempts to cure, the colony of consumptives, through the medium of the priest who confessed him, sent for rosaries similar to his own and said their prayers as fashionable people do.