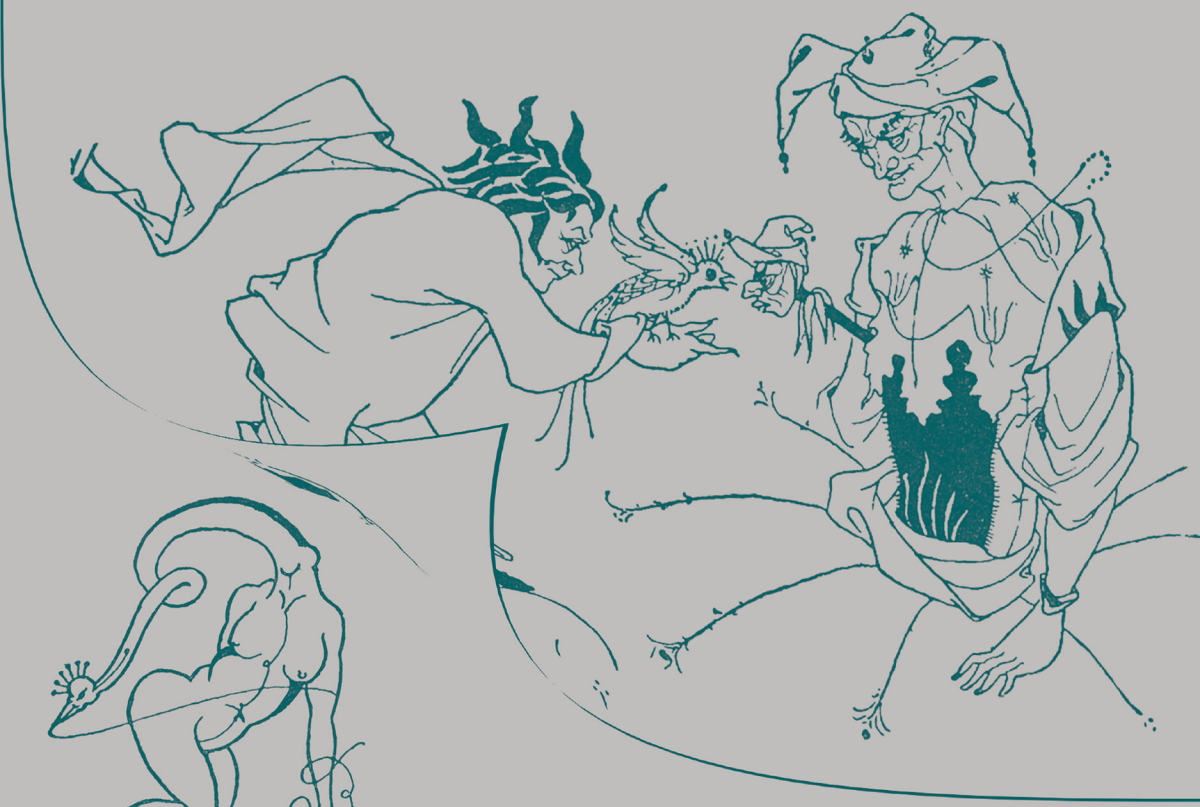
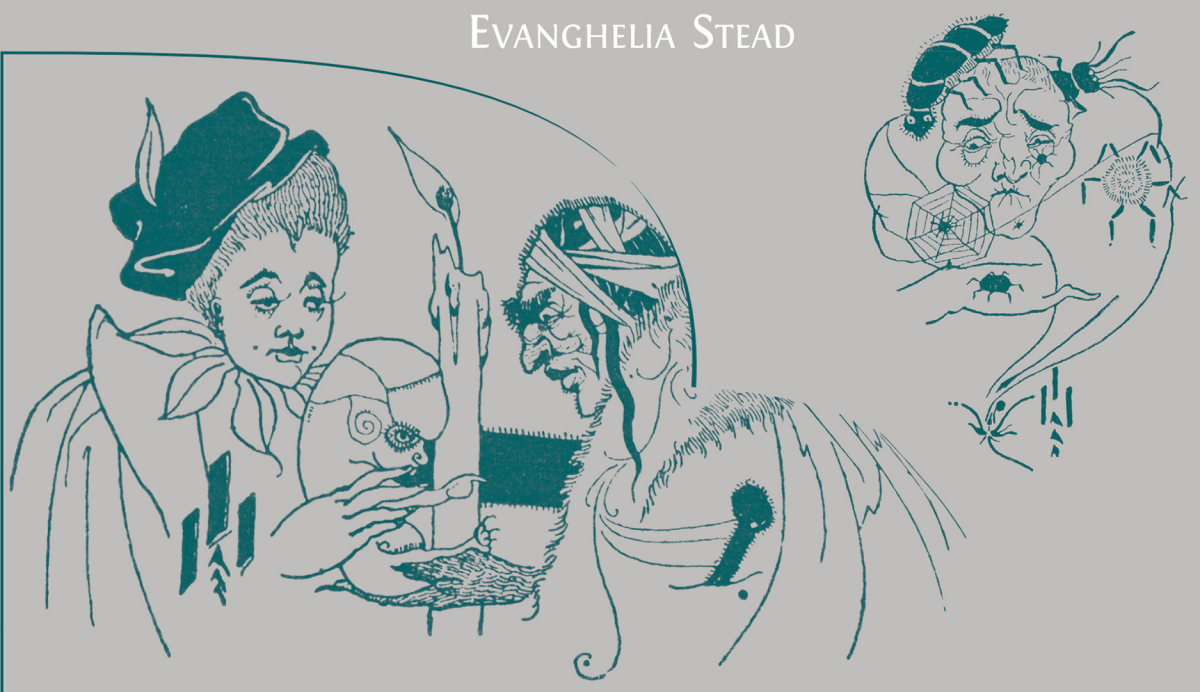


Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley

Evanghelia Stead



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2. A Foetal Laboratory and Its Influence

This chapter considers an innovative, if disturbing, motif in Beardsley's oeuvre: the foetus. He used this image first in the *Bon-Mots* vignettes and then throughout his brief career. Brian Reade and Malcolm Easton have both suggested that Beardsley's repeated depiction of the foetus could be a biographical reference to his sister Mabel's surmised abortion or miscarriage.[1] They also considered it as a minor motif that the artist would leave behind as his work and designs moved to other forms. Yet I see its significance as going far beyond the biographical, and in this chapter I show how it became the artist's most strikingly characteristic and formally innovative emblem.

At the very moment Beardsley was developing his own style and forming his artistic language through the *Bon-Mots*, he plied the foetus into baroque minutiae. He used the shock value of juxtaposition, combining the foetus with what were promoted as more Aesthetic forms, and in doing so pitted himself against the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics that had nurtured him. As an early manifesto, claiming rights to life and a new existence, he also used it as a provocative metaphor for his own artistic emergence. It came to represent Beardsley's creative and cultural bearings. The foetus also embodied the "elderly youngster," blending the old and decrepit with the extremely young, a common fin-de-siècle motif associated with artistic Decadence. Beardsley's depiction of writer and artist Max Beerbohm as a foetus – complete with top hat and walking stick – is a revealing example of this Decadent figure. The foetal

1 Easton, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady: A Beardsley Riddle* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 156–207, discusses the influence on Beardsley of Mabel's interrupted pregnancy, as well as the hypothesis of incest between brother and sister. Reade had already alluded to Mabel's miscarriage, revised ed., 22.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0413.02

motif also burgeoned throughout his later career (drawings for Lucian's *True History*, "A Kiss of Judas," *Salome*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and even a *Savoy* cover) showing an ability for this image to evolve in a way that reflected Darwinian theories of the time. In a telling shift from biology to aesthetics, the foetus exemplifies the power to adapt and differ in style, extending through architecture and caricature. Three instances from German, Dutch, and French contexts prove Beardsley's immediate effect on fin-de-siècle graphic design and its adoption by artists across the Continent.

Foetal *Bon-Mots*

Of Beardsley's seventy-five vignettes in the first volume of *Bon-Mots*, three depict foetuses. *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus* (Zatlin 700) is an important yet elusive scene given its dimensions and complexity. It features two grotesques either side of the central foetus figure (Fig. 2.1).

Fig. 2.1 Aubrey Beardsley, *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus*, BM-SS:26, BM-LJ:123 (full page, vertically), BM-LJ:151 (R<), BM-FH:165 (R<). PE coll.

A scowling witch-like person stands on the right (although some critics have read it as a frowning man) and a tall candle burns bright in the middle, a frequent Beardsley signature. The scene could be

an obscure recollection of a witches' Sabbath. It could also depict an abortion, or perhaps a foetus's nightmarish baptism. The eyes of the female figure on the left certainly droop in weariness above her floral collar. Her fedora hat sits askew on her head as she holds the foetus with one hand. The foetus lifts its arm and points an accusatory finger at the witch. Indescribable expressions and ornate outfits obfuscate what could be connivance or conflict between the hatted woman and the abortionist/witch. Even the device protruding from the right-hand figure's pocket is equivocal: probably an abortive device, it is also phallic, as Reade points out.[2] Yet, under such unclear circumstances and between unreadable figures, the foetus itself stands as a grotesque and unnerving presence. Taken perhaps from an anatomy or embryology plate with additional jots, lines, and dots, this is a new way of drawing the foetus, tense and rich in elusive gist. The fantastic scene is both poised and obsessive, as confirmed by its use throughout the three volumes.

If, as Easton argues, Beardsley was indeed free to arrange the *Bon-Mots* vignettes as he liked,[3] the artist repeats this very scene four times in the three volumes, a privilege afforded to only three grotesques. Its importance is heightened all the more as one is a full-page reproduction.[4] But even if the art direction is not Beardsley's, the vignette certainly made a strong impression on whoever took care of the layout.

In the two remaining vignettes, the foetus lends itself to whimsical treatment and the vagaries of line drawing. The skull stitches become decoration in *Fetus Figure Seated on a Peacock Feather with a Lily between its Feet* (Fig. 2.2a, Zatlin 766). They include Beardsley's Japanese signature in *Memento Mori and a Butterfly above a Fetus Eating its Pointed Tail* (Fig. 2.2b, Zatlin 722).

2 Reade, 326, n. 172, compares it to the phallic candle.
3 Easton, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady*, 176.
4 Once in BM-SS, 26; twice in BM-LJ, 123 (full page) and 151; once in BM-FH, 165. This also occurs for *Winged Demon in Evening Dress* (Zatlin 728) and *Child Holding a Stalk of Lilies* (Zatlin 749), which will serve as cover grotesque in later editions (see Fig. 1.1b).

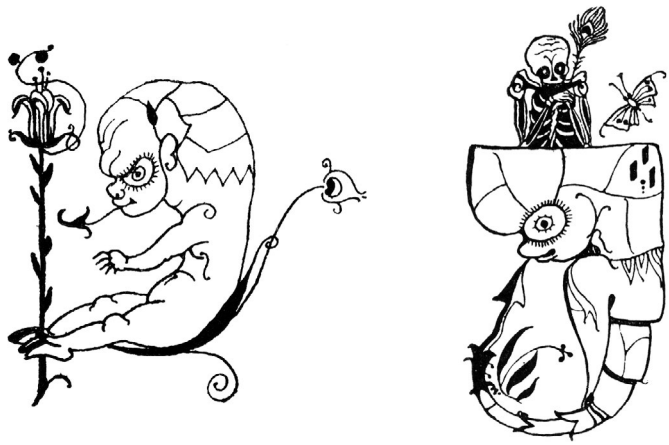


Fig. 2.2a–b Aubrey Beardsley, Two foetal vignettes. 2.2a *Fetus Figure Seated on a Peacock Feather with a Lily between its Feet*, BM-SS:192 (last vignette), BM-LJ:171; 2.2b *Memento Mori and a Butterfly above a Fetus Eating its Pointed Tail*, BM-SS:88. PE coll.

Both involve Aesthetic motifs violently colliding with the foetus as baffling companion. The foetus itself takes on random animal shapes (a shrimp or a crustacean), details from mythical creatures (forked feet) or other unnerving physical features (arrow-like tongue, claws, prickly tail). Such mocking mimicry of traditionally grotesque beings (fauns) or magical symbols (the ouroboros eating its own tail) seeks to recast the imaginary, and mythology itself, by means of new shapes. The foetus's gruesome connection with a skeleton in *Memento Mori* links the end of life to its origin. It is probable that Beardsley's own sense of approaching demise influenced the image. Yet, its aesthetic power goes far beyond the biographical. In Beardsley's work, the foetus also takes on Pre-Raphaelite motifs (a peacock feather, a lily) and a Whistlerian butterfly. Beardsley ironically uses these newly established emblems, still perceived as avant-garde, in an unexpected visual clash with the foetal form. He would eventually elevate the foetus to an aesthetic credo and manifesto on par with these other motifs.

The first and third of these grotesques return in the second volume of *Bon-Mots* (the first appears twice) as part of a set of seven, four of which are new and two full-page. After settling into volume one, the odd shape takes root and proliferates. *Seated Grotesque with a Skull on its Forehead* (Zatlin 789), original in its frontal posture, is more evocative

of anatomy samples in jars than of medical plates showing foetuses in profile (Fig. 2.3). The autobiographical explanation of the motif could be both confirmed and mocked by this sulky homunculus. Its protuberant head could allude to two "very different skulls," the first comic, the second diverse, as in Jerrold's pun (skull/scull) above it, alluding to his and a friend's different minds (see Fig. 2.4). The layout of the second *Bon-Mots* brings this vignette and *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus* face to face in the same opening (Fig. 2.4).[5] The volume's amiable flippancy reveals images that are intentionally provocative. Zatlin has commented on this foetus's fingers under its protuberant belly, creating "the outline of the head or skull of an animal, possibly a fox, whose snout forms the creature's penis and tiny genitalia or the skull's eyes, nose and upper lip."[6] As with its multiple deformed toes, the bloated shape swells with anomalous bodies.

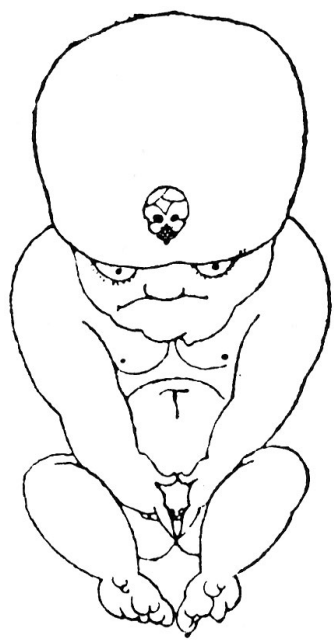
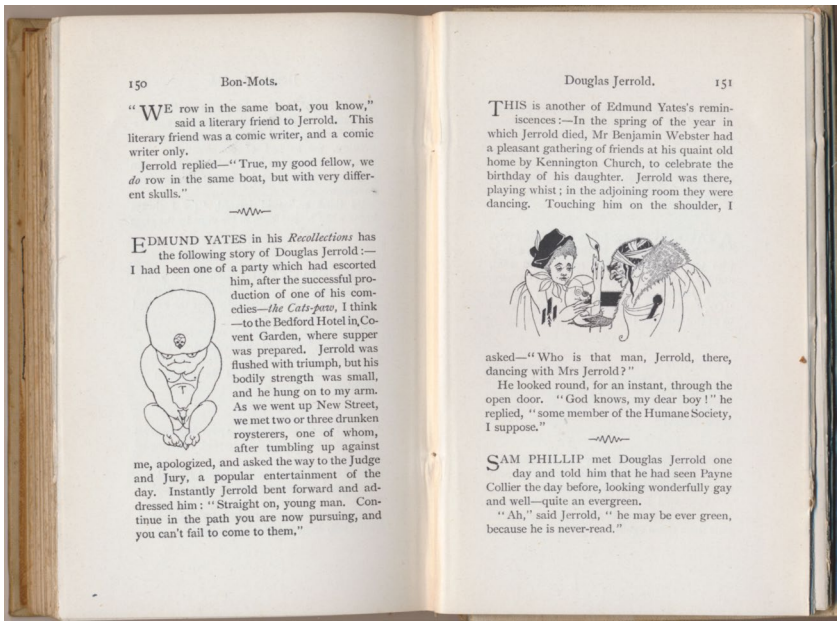


Fig. 2.3 Aubrey Beardsley, *Seated Grotesque with a Skull on its Forehead*, BM-LJ:150, BM-FH:50 (R<). PE coll.

5 BM-LJ, 150–51.

6 Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), I, 468.



150 Bon-Mots.

"WE row in the same boat, you know," said a literary friend to Jerrold. This literary friend was a comic writer, and a comic writer only.

Jerrold replied—"True, my good fellow, we *do* row in the same boat, but with very different skulls."

—∿∿—

EDMUND YATES in his *Recollections* has the following story of Douglas Jerrold:—I had been one of a party which had escorted him, after the successful production of one of his comedies—*the Cats-paw*, I think—to the Bedford Hotel in Covent Garden, where supper was prepared. Jerrold was flushed with triumph, but his bodily strength was small, and he hung on to my arm. As we went up New Street, we met two or three drunken roysterers, one of whom, after tumbling up against me, apologized, and asked the way to the Judge and Jury, a popular entertainment of the day. Instantly Jerrold bent forward and addressed him: "Straight on, young man. Continue in the path you are now pursuing, and you can't fail to come to them."

Douglas Jerrold. 151

THIS is another of Edmund Yates's reminiscences:—In the spring of the year in which Jerrold died, Mr Benjamin Webster had a pleasant gathering of friends at his quaint old home by Kennington Church, to celebrate the birthday of his daughter. Jerrold was there, playing whist; in the adjoining room they were dancing. Touching him on the shoulder, I

asked—"Who is that man, Jerrold, there, dancing with Mrs Jerrold?"

He looked round, for an instant, through the open door. "God knows, my dear boy!" he replied, "some member of the Humane Society, I suppose."

—∿∿—

SAM PHILLIP met Douglas Jerrold one day and told him that he had seen Payne Collier the day before, looking wonderfully gay and well—quite an evergreen.

"Ah," said Jerrold, "he may be ever green, because he is never-read."

Fig. 2.4 Aubrey Beardsley, shocking layout in BM-LJ:150-51, showing left *Seated Grotesque with a Skull on its Forehead*, and right *Two Figures by Candlelight holding a Fetus*. Courtesy MSL coll., Delaware

The second volume of *Bon-Mots* acts as an arena for new experiments. The foetal form becomes the basis for a new series of limp and adaptable, often epicene beings (a feature deriving from the embryo's undefined gender). In this volume, Beardsley eschews his typical arabesque and hairy-line style in favour of the black-and-white contrast that heralds the *Yellow Book* drawings. His new style inspires further innovation. The foetus's characteristic bulging head and distinctly domed skull is a key to *Caricature of Max Beerbohm* (Zatlin 770), a grotesque in black evening dress with cape I will come back to (see Fig. 2.8a). Thanks to graphic mutation, the foetus escapes the abortive or decorative context to enter a gallery of fin-de-siècle types, of which the second *Bon-Mots* provides three examples: the foetal dandy, the cloaked and masked hermaphrodite, and the man in a ballerina's tutu. The *Masked Pierrette in a Cape and a Ruff*, classified as female (Zatlin 788), is the most baffling of all three (Fig. 2.5a).

Fig. 2.5a–b Aubrey Beardsley, Foetal fin-de-siècle types from the second *Bon-Mots*. 2.5a *Masked Pierrette in a Cape and a Ruff*, BM-LJ:138; 2.5b *Bald-headed Figure in a Short Tutu*, BM-LJ:162, BM-FH:130 (R<). PE coll.

A bloated head covered in hirsute breasts, growing anarchically over a wide ruff, crowns a feminine body whose chest is flaccid. An evil grin lurks under its mask, but the creature is also a bearded Pierrot, a figure recurrent in Beardsley's work, to whom Laforgue ascribes an "air of hydrocephalic asparagus" in *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune*, a collection organised as the very space of barrenness where the foetus appears twice.[7] Laforgue and Beardsley shared a similar sensibility and Jacques-Émile Blanche recorded their intellectual kinship.[8] A *Bald-headed Figure in a Short Tutu* (Fig. 2.5b, Zatlin 792) closes the series in her dashing garb, perhaps a reminder of the monsters in Léon Genonceaux's novel *Le Tutu: mœurs fin-de-siècle*,[9] but the lure of her luscious bare breasts

7 Jules Laforgue, "Pierrots, I," in Laforgue, *L'Imitation de N.-D. la Lune* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1886 [1885]); Laforgue, *Poésies complètes*, ed. by Pascal Pia, Poésie (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 28: "*un air d'hydrocéphale asperge*." Beardsley, who certainly knew Laforgue's collection, refers to one of his drawings as *Notre Dame de la Lune* (Zatlin 196). See *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan, and W. G. Good (London: Cassell, 1970), 19.

8 Blanche, "Aubrey Beardsley," *Antée: Revue mensuelle de littérature*, 2:11 (1 Apr 1907): 1114–15 and 1122. They did not know each other, states Blanche.

9 Princesse Sapho [Léon Genonceaux], *Le Tutu: mœurs fin de siècle, avec une planche de musique céleste et une composition symbolique de Binet* (Paris: L. Genonceaux, 1891).

is at odds with her scowling, masculine, Cyclopean head. Monstrosity incarnate beckons to us.

The motif progresses again in the third volume of *Bon-Mots* with nine foetal vignettes out of sixty-six (Fig. 2.6a–d). Beardsley's more traditional themes are clearly receding as the volumes progress. Fauns or satyrs, for instance, are common in the first, decline in the second, and hardly appear in the last volume. Conversely, the foetal grotesque grows all the more prominent, as only twenty-five out of the sixty-six vignettes are new, one fifth of which are foetal. I will comment later on the *Winged Baby in a Top Hat Leading a Dog* along with the dandy foetus (both being Max Beerbohm caricatures, see Fig. 2.8a and 2.8c), to group here the *Skeleton in an Evening Frock* (Fig. 2.6a, Zatlin 803), the *Bald Dandy Doffing his Hat to a Lady*, whose ballooning head discloses pointed ears (Fig. 2.6b, Zatlin 798), and the *Devil in Morning Coat*, which may also be described as a hydrocephalic horned fop (Fig. 2.6c, Zatlin 810).

Some of the titles that have been given to the works minimise the creatures' oddity and mask their foetal nature. Yet all of them depict a bloated head, occasionally with a frown, that is characteristic of the foetus. The ballooning head rounds off silhouettes of indisputable modernity, all stamped by some incongruity: a skeletal arm, a faun's ear, a sneering mask or a horn. Reduced to pure outline, devoid of arabesques or interlacing, the contour boosts their strangeness. The reason is their grotesque nature: the foetal inspiration merges both dead and living parts. Yet in this last volume former macabre references start to recede. The *Dual-sex Grotesque* exploits previous forms to show the astonishingly plastic potential of sprouting foetal bodies (Fig. 2.6d, Zatlin 815). Here the foetal element both governs the figure and nourishes its parts. Its posture is in profile rather than frontal, its head domed, its swollen occiput covered in breasts and nipples, its skull stitches dotted. Its hermaphroditism is patent, its body shrivelling, its limbs prawn-like. Mutation is complete. A being is born that resists description or identification.

Fig. 2.6a–d Aubrey Beardsley, Foetal grotesques in the third *Bon-Mots*. 2.6a *Skeleton in an Evening Frock*, BM-FH:44; 2.6b *Bald Dandy Doffing his Hat to a Lady*, BM-FH:17; 2.6c *Devil in Morning Coat*, BM-FH:104; 2.6d *Dual-sex Grotesque*, BM-FH:148

Surfacing in just three vignettes in the first *Bon-Mots*, Beardsley's foetal grotesque appears seven times in the second (three old, four new), and nine in the third (four repeated, five new). It has clearly proliferated from one volume to the next although new grotesques decrease and old ones are profusely reused. It conquers key spaces including half-titles and even full-page spreads. The foetus may well partly be a private obsession of Beardsley, based on incidents in his life, but it also represents a revolutionary medium. A quick look at key scientific theories of the time explains why.

Monstrous Embryology

Embryology had emerged as a science in the nineteenth century and had made a major contribution to Darwinian theory. *On the Origin of Species* (1859) referred to Karl von Baer's principle of embryonic resemblance between mammals, birds, lizards, serpents, and chelonians. Darwin had him pronounce the following statement, filled with captivating uncertainty:

> [...] in my possession are two little embryos in spirit, whose names I have omitted to attach, and at present I am quite unable to say to what class they belong. They may be lizards or small birds, or very young mammalia, so complete is the similarity in the mode of formation of the head and trunk in these animals.[10]

Furthermore, Darwin used the structure of the embryo rather than the adult's as a classification basis.[11] A parallel between the similarity of the embryonic structure and similarity of descent allowed him to formulate the hypothesis of all species originating in the same ancestor: "some ancient progenitor, which was furnished in its adult state with branchiae, a swim-bladder, four fin-like limbs, and a long tail, and fitted for an aquatic life."[12] Darwinian theory did not explicitly concern the human embryo. Yet Ernst Haeckel's controversial comparative figures of tortoise, fowl, dog, and human embryos in *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868, translated into English as *The History of Creation*, 1876) made the point, further popularised in Haeckel's *Anthropogenie* (1874). Haeckel openly stated that in only an advanced state of development does it become possible to distinguish between human and animal shapes. In *The General Morphology of Organisms* (*Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*, 1866), he formulated the catchy axiom "ontogeny is an abridged and accelerated recapitulation of phylogeny." He meant that the growth and development of an individual organism recapped the evolutionary history of a species. Although this was far from a full-blown theory, it implied that, during the intra-uterine period, the human embryo undergoes all the stages involved in the evolution of species.

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10 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), repr. 1900, 605.

11 *Ibid.*, 617.

12 *Ibid.*

Though incorrect, the theory fascinated the fin-de-siècle imagination.[13] The foetus potentially contained all forms. It was individualised by science and also existed in a state of gestation. It was concurrently a synopsis of the evolution of the species, a possible mould for the monster, and a form by nature subject to transformation. Beardsley transferred its transformative ability to his work. In his vignettes, the foetus embraces a variety of graphic languages (fine outline, hairy-line style, arabesque, black-and-white contrast). An inherently pliant image, it lends itself to new creations. It is the dominant motif of a new conception of the grotesque, the very emblem of a budding new – indeed, embryonic – artform.

An Aesthetic Proposal

Beardsley's *Incipit Vita Nova* (Fig. 2.7, Zatlin 243) is an Indian ink and white gouache drawing on brown paper. Zatlin dates it to May 1892, which precedes the *Bon-Mots* by four months, and differs from them in size, technique and meaning. It shows a woman and a foetus with a book in between them. The woman belongs to the Pre-Raphaelite type frequent in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work, which Beardsley caricatures. Her streaming hair on the left and a lonely curl on the right claim the central book as her own. On the open page of the book is written "Incipit vita nova" ("Here begins a new life"), which, we assume, refers to the foetus, its wide-open eye, demanding gesture and jutting-out foot pulling the book towards it. The phrase is taken from the first paragraph of Dante's *Vita Nova*, translated into English by Rossetti between 1846 and 1847, and already twice published in *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo d'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri* (1861) and *Dante and His Circle* (1874). Beardsley, who must have known it,[14] appropriates it by transferring it to his own creature, who claims a right to its own atypical life.

13 Further on this, see Évanghélia Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le fœtus: Tératogonie et Décadence dans l'Europe fin-de-siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2004), 420 ff.

14 Beardsley had previously drawn inspiration from Dante's relation to Beatrice Portinari, referenced through Rossetti's work and the Pre-Raphaelites' relation to Dante's *Vita Nova*. See Beardsley's *Annovale della Morte di Beatrice* (Zatlin 228) as well as his *Dante in Exile* (Zatlin 185) and *Francesca di Rimini* (*Dante*) (Zatlin 184).

Fig. 2.7 Aubrey Beardsley (May 1892), coll. Linda Gertner Zatlin; WikiArt, Visual Art Encyclopedia, https://www.wikiart.org/en/aubrey-beardsley/incipit-vita-nova

Beardsley was fascinated by the Pre-Raphaelites in his early days. He visited Edward Burne-Jones in person and excitedly discovered eleven Rossetti paintings in the collection of Frederick Leyland, a major Pre-Raphaelite patron.[15] He was certainly familiar with one of Rossetti's most famous works, *Beata Beatrix*, which was acquired by the Tate Gallery in 1889. This Beatrice is the only one of her Rossetti namesakes to be pictured with her eyes closed, a detail referring to the last sentence of the *Vita Nova*, as Rossetti himself specified in a letter of March 1873: "Beatrice is rapt visibly into Heaven, seeing as it were through her shut lids (as Dante

15 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 19.

says at the close of the Vita Nuova): 'Him who is blessed throughout all ages.'"[16] Rossetti had even unscrupulously changed the last sentence in the *Vita Nova*, "*quella benedetta Beatrice la quale gloriosamente mira*…" ("that blessed Beatrice, who gloriously beholds…"), to include the title of his own painting ("*beata Beatrice*") in his *New Life of Dante Alighieri*.[17]

Beardsley's female figure in *Incipit Vita Nova* may be a caricature of the generic Pre-Raphaelite type cast by Rossetti (sensual lips, flowing hair, voluptuous expression), and Zatlin has argued, based on hairstyles, that there is a kinship between Beardsley's drawing and four Rossetti pictures in Leyland's collection.[18] However, her shut eyelids link her specifically with *Beata Beatrix*. Beardsley would thus combine the opening formula (*Incipit vita nova*) with the final phrasing of Dante's text while challenging the Pre-Raphaelites' very leader, Dante's namesake and English translator. Indeed, far from being a harmless skit, his drawing is a subversive manifesto addressed to an image acquired by national collections.

"Here begins a new life" is to be taken in the literal sense. The mystical and exalted dimension of Dante's original disappears in favour of a literal pun, a matter-of-fact interpretation of metaphor, typical of fin-de-siècle style.[19] It "brings Dante's tale of ideal love down to earth with a bump" in Zatlin's felicitous phrase.[20] Facing the caricature of one of the most famous Pre-Raphaelite paintings of the time, the sullen foetus, indignantly clenching its fist and gesticulating as in many vignettes, claims the right to ultimately come of age into grotesque *aesthetic* existence. Such is this very drawing but also the *Bon-Mots* vignettes, as they freed the artist from the Kelmscott Press philosophy and choices, inflicted on him by the illustration of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. The incongruous foetus rebels here against the overwhelming Pre-Raphaelite mother. Reade, referring to Art Nouveau designs by Peter Behrens, argues that the motif holds promise of "stylized economies of

16 Letter dated 11 Mar 1873, in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: The Tate Gallery / Penguin Books, 1984), 209.

17 *The New Life of Dante Alighieri. Translations and Pictures by Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1901), 12.

18 Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, I, 139.

19 On this, see Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le fœtus*, 39–40, 43, 70, 128, 209, 233–38, 248.

20 Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, I, 140.

form and tone."[21] As in the vignettes, pliability and formal invention exemplify a new grotesque vocabulary with the foetus as emblem.

Without overlooking the personal or emotional weight it may have for Beardsley, I consequently argue that the foetus represents above all a graphic, symbolic, and aesthetic crucible. It persists in Beardsley's work until at least 1896. Since the artist died in March 1898 aged twenty-five, frequent blood losses hardly allowing him to work during the last year, it could well be that the unusual motif, either primary or secondary, colonised three to four of the six short years of his production. A quick examination of Beardsley's work, with the exception of *Le Morte Darthur*, shows the motif's regular return. It features, for example, in two of the four drawings published in *St. Paul's* in 1894 (Zatlin 333–36). It re-emerges in the plates for several texts, Lucian's *True History* (1894), X. L.'s narrative "The Kiss of Judas" (1893), the English translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894), and Alexander Pope's heroic-comic *The Rape of the Lock* (1896). It transcends genre. Each of these incidences has its own weight and deserves consideration. We face a motif capable of readily transforming itself and blending with others. It is no accident the foetus embodied genesis and development, concepts strongly emphasised by evolutionary theories of the time. It even became the basis of a collective Decadent identity.

Portrait of a Generation

Despite its Dantean title, Ezra Pound's "'Siena mi fé; disfecemi Maremma'" is an account of the Yellow Nineties and English fin de siècle. The poem begins by describing Victor Plarr, "Among the pickled foetuses and bottled bones, | Engaged in perfecting the catalogue" of the Royal College of Surgeons, of which he was a curator from 1897.[22] In the corresponding short collection *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1919), Pound mentions several other figures of the day: Ernest Dowson, the Rhymers' Club, Lionel Johnson, Selwyn Image, and, last but not least, Beerbohm in "Brennbaum," the poem immediately following "'Siena mi fé.'" *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* includes, as John J. Espey has shown, a collective

21 Reade, 335, n. 269.

22 "'Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma,'" *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley by E. P.* (London: The Egoist Ltd., 1919). Qtd. in Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, ed. by Richard Sieburth, The Library of America 144 (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 553.

generational portrait and an elliptical painting of degeneration[23] in which Beerbohm's effigy is favoured:

> The sky-like limpid eyes,
> The circular infant's face,
> The stiffness from spats to collar
> Never relaxing into grace;
>
> The heavy memories of Horeb, Sinai and the forty years,
> Showed only when the daylight fell
> Level across the face
> Of Brennbaum "The Impeccable."[24]

Like Pound's verses, Beardsley's vignettes depict a flawlessly elegant Beerbohm as a foetus in black evening dress with a fake collar (Fig. 2.8a, Zatlin 770), or as a winged infant in a top hat, with a stick and dog-leash in hand (Fig. 2.8c, Zatlin 797). There is a striking resemblance between this Beerbohm-as-foetus and the opening vignette that Maurice Mac-Nab published with his poem "Les Fœtus," issued in Paris in his 1886 collection *Poèmes mobiles* (Fig. 2.8b).

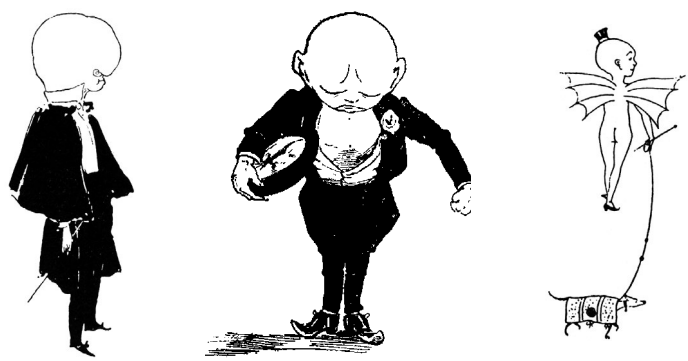


Fig. 2.8a–c Aubrey Beardsley, Beerbohm as foetus, and Mac-Nab's foetus vignette. 2.8a Beardsley, *Caricature of Max Beerbohm*, BM-LJ:23, BM-FH:156; 2.8b Mac-Nab, *Foetus Vignette in Evening Dress*, *Poèmes mobiles* (1886), 17; 2.8c Beardsley, *Winged Baby in a Top Hat Leading a Dog*, BM-FH:15 (half-title vignette for "Samuel Foote"). PE coll.

23 John J. Espey, *Ezra Pound's "Mauberley:" A Study in Composition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1955), 15 and 91–93.

24 Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 554. The references to Horeb and the Sinai in relation to Beerbohm are enigmatic. Beerbohm was not Jewish, although his name may be taken as such.

Mac-Nab's foetus bows in a black suit, and Beardsley may have reworked this form, emphasising the bloated head, black garb, and shirtfront, and increasing the black-and-white contrast. Mac-Nab himself performed the poem as a monologue in deadpan style at the Chat Noir cabaret, of which he was an early star, contributing to its tongue-in-cheek entertainment and humour.[25] The satirical magazine *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* published on its cover a full-length portrait of Mac-Nab carrying a protesting foetus in a green jar under his arm in 1887.[26] The cover of the following issue pictured Stéphane Mallarmé as a faun. Respected symbolist poets and cabaret performers met in the press. In such context, the foetus had become an iconic image related to the mischievous avant-garde. Beardsley, who first visited Paris in 1892 and referred to the Chat Noir in an 1893 letter, may have seen such drawings.[27] He certainly spent time with the Pennells at the Chat Noir and other Parisian cabarets in 1893.[28] As for Beerbohm, he was certainly aware of his two grotesque "portraits" by Beardsley, since he depicts the latter in *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen* (1896), trailing a pet dog on wheels,[29] as Beerbohm himself dragged a pet puppy behind him in the Beardsley vignette.

But why would Beerbohm become a grotesque with a foetal head? And why a foetus-dandy portrait in Pound's verse several years later? Perhaps for the very same reason that Beerbohm provides a rather unusual portrait of himself in a January 1895 *Sketch* interview with Ada Leverson (Fig. 2.9).

25 Maurice Mac-Nab, "Les Fœtus," in Mac-Nab, *Poèmes mobiles: Monologues, avec illustrations de l'auteur et une préface de Coquelin cadet* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1886), 15–22, with vignettes.

26 Pierre et Paul [Léon Vanier], "Maurice Mac-Nab, dessin de Fernand Fau," *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, 6:295 (1887): 1, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k11924086/f369.item.zoom

27 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 53 (letter to John Lane, postmarked 12 Sept 1893).

28 See Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 1929), I, 253.

29 Max Beerbohm, *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen, with an Introduction by L. Raven-Hill*, London, Leonard Smithers, 1896, 12. See https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_RsIrAQAAMAAJ/page/n35/mode/2up?view=theater

JAN. 2, 1895 THE SKETCH. 439

A FEW WORDS WITH MR. MAX BEERBOHM.

Mr. Max Beerbohm left Oxford only last term to plunge into the delights of literature in London. In that short space of time, by his curious contributions to the *Yellow Book*, he has gained a more than merely esoteric fame. Indeed, he may be said to occupy in literature somewhat the same position as does Mr. Aubrey Beardsley in art. The success of each has been a success of astonishment. Both are essentially modern, and "implected," to borrow some of Mr. Beerbohm's own favourite phrases, with a love of the "mysteries of style," a passion for "paradox and marivaudage"—in fact, for "all unusual things." The style of each, moreover, is wonderfully sure and complete for artists so very young.

I went with a letter of introduction to Mr. Beerbohm's house some time ago. It is one of that row of houses known as Hyde Park Place. Its windows command a charming view of the Park—a place which, as Mr. Beerbohm remarked to me, is "quite as nice as the country, and not half so provincial." The room in which Mr. Beerbohm received me and spends most of his time is the same room in which Kinglake wrote his famous history of the Crimean War. I could not help wondering what

MAX BEERBOHM IN BOYHOOD.

Kinglake would have thought of his youthful successor's History of George the Fourth. Youthful certainly he is—not, indeed, quite as youthful as he is seen in the portrait which he gave me for reproduction in *The Sketch*, and which, he explained, is the only one that has been taken in recent years. He has altered very little since then, though he no longer wears a fringe and has exchanged the frivolities of the white and blue sailor suit for the sterner realities of the frock-coat and high collar. His inscrutable, somewhat cynical, expression heightens his appearance of youthfulness, and his manners are studiously urbane.

"I am afraid," he said, in his gentle, musical voice, in answer to my request, "that there is very little to tell about my life so far. I have done the ordinary things. I went to Charterhouse when I was twelve, but I don't know that I enjoyed myself much there. I agree with that cosy writer, Mr. James Payn, who has so often pointed out that boys are not a nice race. They are bullies or cowards, according to their size. Not that there was 'bullying' in the accepted sense—that has all been suppressed, along with highway robbery and town-and-gown rows. Boys, nowadays, indulge in a kind of social terrorism among themselves that is far more objectionable than the roasting and tossing of the good old days. The snobbishness of boys is amazing. The gossip and the scandal that go on at a public school would alarm a dowager. But Oxford—Oxford is the perfect city. I shall never have such a happy time as I had there."

"What are your plans now? Are you going in for literature wholly?"

"No; I intend to draw as well—always caricatures. You may have seen my series in *Pick-Me-Up* and the *Pall Mall Budget*. One or two of those drawings have been thought rather cruel, I believe. I can't understand how anyone can resent a mere exaggeration of feature. The caricaturist simply passes his subject through a certain grotesque convention. That the result is not a classically beautiful figure proves nothing about the personal appearance of the subject. There is no such thing as a good or a bad subject for caricature. To the true caricaturist Adonis or Punchinello is equally good game. I never pretend that my caricatures are meant for portraits. And I do not think that the men themselves whom I have drawn have ever been offended."

"Perhaps their wives have been? Now tell me, Mr. Beerbohm, about your writing. Tell me about the article on 'Cosmetics'—the best-abused thing in the first number of the *Yellow Book*—or about your white-washing of George IV."

"My article on 'Cosmetics' was a very good joke, but—I thought when I wrote it—rather obvious. I was surprised the critics did not see it at once. It is not often a new writer has to complain of being taken too seriously. 'George IV.' was received in a far more reasonable manner. My point of view was more nearly understood. I meant all I said about George, but I did not choose to express myself quite seriously. To treat history as a means of showing one's own cleverness may be rather rough on history, but it has been done by the best historians, from Herodotus to Froude and myself. Some of my 'George' was false, and much was flippant; but why should a writer sit down to be systematically serious, or else conscientiously comic. Style should be oscillant."

"Oscillant? Is that one of your queer words, of which we have heard so much? Do you intend to abandon them, as an affectation?"

"Certainly not. They are not affected. At times there is no word in the English dictionary by which I can express my shade of meaning. I try to think of a French, or Latin, or Greek one. If I can't, then I invent a word—such as 'pop-limbo' or 'bauble-tit'—often a compound of some well-known English word with an affix or prefix to point its significance. Sometimes I invent a word merely because the cadence of a sentence demands it."

"And are you writing much now?"

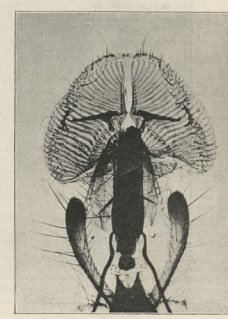
"I am doing some work for the new *Saturday Review*, and I am in treaty with a publisher to produce a little book of studies and essays. At this moment I am writing a treatise upon 'The Brothers of Great Men,' including a series of psychological sketches of Mr. Willie Wilde, Mr. Austin Chamberlain, and others."

"You are a brother of Mr. Beerbohm Tree, I believe?"

"Yes; he is coming into the series!"

HOW THE MAILS ARE STOPPED IN CENTRAL AFRICA.

Who ever heard of a flea being capable of such important transgressions as to actually hinder the delivery of her Majesty's mails? And yet the thing has occurred quite recently in British Central Africa. This horrid little beastie has, it appears, certain corkscrew capabilities with which it insinuates its unwelcome presence, principally in the victim's foot, and this lively traffic in humanity has lately become so general that many of the native postmen have been lamed, and so considerable delay has occurred in transmission of the mails. Locusts are also a power to be reckoned with in the land, coming in uncountable myriads and picnicking on native plantations. So far, they have avoided the tea and coffee shrub grown largely in the Shiré province, and have disdained European crops generally, to the surprised satisfaction of the settlers. But how long it will take them to cultivate a false appetite is another question quite; and one vigorous young colonist, writing home, piously assures me that there is a fortune for any of "those inventive fellows who can produce a remedy or antidote against the inroads of these blankety blank locusts," or still more, no doubt, the doubly blanked "jigger." Speaking of fleas brings one naturally to flies, and here is an interesting photograph of the proboscis of a fly, taken by Mr. Richard Smith, of Hovis Bread fame.



THE PROBOSCIS OF A FLY.
From a Photograph taken by Mr. R. Smith, of Hovis Bread fame.

Fig. 2.9 Beerbohm's portrait in a sailor's suit, "A Few Words with Mr. Max Beerbohm," *The Sketch*, 8:101 (2 Jan 1895): 439. University of Minnesota Libraries

In a sailor's collar, he is only ten years old, and the text emphasises his extreme youth – shared with Beardsley:

> Youthful certainly he is – not, indeed, quite as youthful as he is seen in the portrait which he gave me for reproduction in *The Sketch*, and which, he explained, is the only one that has been taken in recent years. He has altered very little since then, though he no longer wears a fringe and has exchanged the frivolities of the white and blue sailor suit for the sterner realities of the frock-coat and high collar. His inscrutable, somewhat cynical, expression heightens his appearance of youthfulness, and his manners are studiously urbane.[30]

Was he not a premature genius? His photograph testified to this. Similarly, period accounts on Beardsley by Dugald Sutherland MacColl and Evelyn Sharp stressed his own boyish personality.[31] Beardsley, at the height of his fame, gave *Sketch* a photograph of himself at eleven and a half in April 1895 (see Fig. 4.6).[32] The British public craved posturing more than facts, and extreme youth was one of the fashionable poses. The paradox of a fresh yet cynical being, young yet experienced, youthful yet elderly, resurfaces in Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties*, a rich record of English Decadence. It relates, at least in part, to having an upper-crust British education: Beerbohm was an eminent Old Carthusian, still honoured at Charterhouse public school. However, the fresh yet cynical fellow, youthful yet elderly, was also a common fin-de-siècle type, associated with the Decadents. Jackson's portrait of Beerbohm, for example, references W. S. Gilbert's trope of the "precocious baby":

> Max Beerbohm gives the impression of having been born grown-up – that is to say, more or less ripe when others would be more or less raw and green. One can well imagine such a youth a few years earlier filling,

30 "A Few Words with Mr. Max Beerbohm," *The Sketch*, 8:101 (2 Jan 1895): 439.

31 MacColl starts with the expression "that extraordinary boy" (17) and frequently repeats the word. See D. S. MacColl, "Aubrey Beardsley", in *A Beardsley Miscellany*, ed. by R. A. Walker (London: The Bodley Head, 1949), p. 15–32 (21, 22, 29). See also Evelyn Sharp, *Unfinished Adventure: Selected Reminiscences from an Englishwoman's Life* (London: John Lane, 1933), 60: "Aubrey Beardsley, who rather liked to pose as a very youthful genius."

32 See further Chapter 4.

in a more elegant way, the part of Sir W. S. Gilbert's immortal "Precocious Baby,"[33] who was born, it will be remembered, with

> "A pipe in his mouth, and a glass in his eye,
> A hat all awry,
> An octagon tie,
> And a miniature-miniature glass in his eye."[34]

Similarly Paul Verlaine describes several fin-de-siècle men of letters as "eyeglass kids" ("*Mômes-monocles*"), so named because of their young age and the monocle they share with Beerbohm, "the cherished emblem of the upcoming generation of this decadence."[35] Verlaine goes on to portray Édouard Dubus as "hairless and pale," and Dauphin Meunier and Julien Leclercq as "glamorous, presumptive, beardless."[36] The profile returns in "Silhouettes décadentes," a series of written portraits broached by the little-known Pierre Vareilles for the review *Le Décadent*: "Razor-sharp, beardless as a virgin, and hairless, here comes Georges Toulouse."[37] Even the coterie in Charles Buet's novel *Saphyr* is made "of beardless Decadents and elderly Parnassians."[38]

A fin-de-siècle type emerges: the Decadent wears an eyeglass (as Beerbohm and the "*Mômes-monocles*"); he looks exceptionally young, and is therefore hairless or beardless; and he is born both adult and premature. It makes sense that Beardsley depicts Beerbohm in the guise of a foetus. Two standard expressions in French refer to this paradoxical figure: the "elderly youngsters" (*les vieux-jeunes*) and the "Decadent foetuses." The foetus, to which all such features silently refer, combines extreme youth with great old age: according to Mac-Nab, it

33 See "The Precocious Baby, A Very True Tale (To be sung to the Air of the 'Whistling Oyster')," *Fun*, n.s. 6 (23 Nov 1867).

34 Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), repr. 1922, 118.

35 Paul Verlaine, "Gosses [Mômes-monocles]," *Art et Critique*, 2:76 (8 Nov 1890); *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. by J. Borel (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 227: "*l'emblème chéri de cette décadence-ci.*"

36 *Ibid.*, "*glabre et pâle*" (227); "*superbes présomptifs imberbes*" (230).

37 Pierre Vareilles, "Silhouettes décadentes: I. Georges Toulouse," *Le Décadent*, 1 (10 July 1886): 2: "*Figure tranchante comme une lame de rasoir, imberbe comme celle d'une vierge, et glabre, c'est Georges Toulouse.*"

38 Charles Buet, *Saphyr* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1897), 14: "*les Décadents imberbes et les Parnassiens très âgés.*"

is "dead before [it] was born"[39]– a mischievous, subversive picture of a generation.

Such vocabulary pointed to fin-de-siècle literature as well as imagery. One of the copious French allusions to the phenomenon includes *Physiologies parisiennes* by Albert Millaud, who, reviving in 1886 the long tradition of *physiologies* under the pen name of Labruyère, offered a portrait of the "Decadent," a "species" described in curtailed and jarring verse as the unnatural or abortive outcome of a hybrid genealogy:

> He is the son of the modernist,
> Grandson of the idealist,
> Nephew of the impassive,
> Great-nephew of the parnassian [*sic*],
> A bit of a bastard of the realist,
> And twelfth cousin of the old romantic.
>
> *Il est fils du moderniste,*
> *Petit-fils de l'idéaliste,*
> *Neveu de l'impassible,*
> *Arrière-neveu du parnassien,*
> *Un peu bâtard du réaliste,*
> *Et cousin au douzième degré de l'ancien romantique.*

By a significant inversion of roles, it was no longer the muse who gave birth to verse but the Decadent who "gave birth" to poetry (and also "set her low" thanks to a pun on the French expression *mettre bas*). He generated – against all logic – a fascinating lineage:

> Still, the Decadent, however low he has set poetry, is not yet the last. He has beneath him a tadpole, which now starts to exhibit itself under the name of "deliquescent." It is the beginning of a grand series, which will go from the "infused" to the "putrefied" via the "liquefied."
>
> *Toutefois, le décadent, si bas qu'il ait mis la poésie, n'est pas encore le dernier. Il a sous lui un têtard qui commence à s'exhiber sous le nom de "déliquescent." C'est le commencement d'une suprême série, qui ira des "influsés" aux "putréfiés," en passant par les "liquefiés."*[40]

Such an *Incipit vita nova* would have delighted Beardsley. It gave full meaning to his foetus frowning and lifting its fist against a Pre-Raphaelite

39 Mac-Nab, "Les Fœtus," 20, v. 42: "*mort avant de naître.*"

40 Labruyère [pseud. of Albert Millaud], "Le Décadent," in Millaud, *Physiologies parisiennes: 120 dessins de Caran d'Ache* (Paris: À la Librairie Illustrée, 1886), 175 and 178.

caricature and a national heritage picture. The foetus exemplified the new generation. It was a proclamation exemplifying Decadent intentions, style and tone.

Much of Beerbohm's literary career illustrates such foetal poetics. Extremely young (and old) at twenty-four in 1896, he published *The Works of Max Beerbohm*. The ostentatious title materialised as a tongue-in-cheek slim booklet of just seven articles previously issued in avant-garde periodicals, followed by an eighteen-page bibliography of their slightest occurrences and variations, and John Lane's biography of this (ironically) prolific writer. Lane described Beerbohm as a Decadent in his youth (1894), and a historian in his maturity, i.e., but a year later (1895), whose voluminous work had led to the recent extension of the National Archives. The Decadent period was represented by "A Defense of Cosmetics," and his "historical work" by two articles of about thirty pages on two "suspect" periods, that of Aestheticism ("1880") and that of an effeminate king ("King George the Fourth"). The booklet closed with "Diminuendo," in which Beerbohm, declaring that he belonged to "the Beardsley period," would prepare for his exit and, exhausted by such demanding literary labour, step down in favour of the youngsters.

A joint project between author and publisher, the booklet is a good example of the art of making books from rudiments. The seven youthful articles read inconsistent with the grandiose title and swollen bibliography. Rules of common sense are perverted and the joke might have been limited to an amiable prank. However, although his decadence passed with his youth, the titles of Beerbohm's later collections still bear the memory of it. Over a period of twenty-five years they apologetically echo his "Diminuendo" promise: *More* in 1899, *Yet Again* in 1909, *And Even Now* in 1920. Such loyalty to his youthful pose as a "Decadent foetus" illuminates in retrospect the meaning of "elderly youngsters."

In a serial *Punch* skit entitled "Letters from a Débutante," Leverson also pictured a juvenile socialite under the name of Baby Beaumont, probably a reference to the phrase *le beau monde*, i.e., the refined upper crust. Paradox has him "really almost nineteen, but wonderfully well preserved, very clever, and so cynical that he is quite an optimist."[41] Unsurprisingly "*gay and decadent*," and deemed to be the author of *The Mauve Camellia*,[42] he

41 "Letters from a Débutante," *Punch*, 107 (6 Oct 1894): 168.
42 "Letters from a Débutante," *Punch*, 107 (13 Oct 1894): 180, emphasised.

displays the same ironic discrepancy as the French foetal Decadents, dead before they were born. Precocity and youth corresponded to a less morbid British version. As Osbert Burdett put it, "the very children were living in an age of experience" in Beardsley's time.[43]

Leverson's sketch pre-empts Edward Frederic Benson's novel *The Babe B. A.* (1897) whose first much shorter version was published in instalments in the Cambridge student magazine *Granta*.[44] The magazine imitated Beardsley's designs at least twice.[45] Describing trivial incidents of Cambridge life, the novel intends to be a futile narrative on an anti-heroic protagonist, the Babe. The character and looks of this "cynical old gentleman of twenty years of age," as angelic as beardless when "waltzing gaily about among rough-bearded barbarians," are that of the quintessential Decadent.[46] His age is equivocal ("old in everything else, but not in years") and his sexuality ambiguous (he cross-dresses and is often compared to women).[47] Yet because of his youth no one takes his transgressions seriously. He tries to grow old by adopting a bulldog as escort (a jocular allusion to Beerbohm and Beardsley pictured with pet dogs) and reading the *Yellow Book*, each volume of which is supposed to add twenty years to the reader's age.[48] Links with Decadence are ironic, as Benson, with a wilfully silly sense of humour, pastiches three fin-de-siècle figures – Wilde's Salomé, Walter Pater's Mona Lisa, and Gustave Flaubert's Saint Anthony – by transferring their reactions or phrases to the Babe.[49]

43 Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925), 104.

44 See E. F. Benson, "Scenes from the Life of the Babe at Cambridge" (originally only eight chapters), published weekly in *The Granta* 9:175–82 (18 Jan–10 Mar 1896). Benson's *The Babe* was no confidential publication and even had a popular edition (London: William Heinemann, 1911).

45 Once for a Beardsleyesque version of the cover by Cam, *Design for New Cover of the "Granta." (à la BEARDSLEY)*, *The Granta*, 8:155 (23 Feb 1895), 212; and S. T., *A Cambridge Night-Piece (with Apologies to Mr. Aubrey Beardsley)*, 9:169 (2 Nov 1895), 37. The latter cheekily replaces with Cambridge dons Beardsley's streetwalker from his drawing *Night Piece*, published in *The Yellow Book*, 1 (Apr 1894): 127.

46 Edward Frederic Benson, *The Babe B.A., Being the Uneventful History of a Young Gentleman at Cambridge University* (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 30 and 31.

47 *Ibid.*, 88 (age), and 43, 165, 202 and 283 (comparisons with Clytemnestra, Sarah Bernhardt, Œnone, Alice in Wonderland, and Danaë).

48 *Ibid.*, 38.

49 *Ibid.*, 100, 168 and 193.

Such a network of mocking allusions points at gleeful dissipation. The Babe could well be a disguised reference to the fin-de-siècle foetus: the model was Herbert J. Pollitt, a hardly angelic friend of Wilde, a devotee of Beardsley's more daring drawings and, later still, Aleister Crowley's disciple in black magic. Beardsley knew Benson's novel sufficiently well to write to Leonard Smithers on 19 February 1897 that it mentioned his own name three times.[50] A week later, in a letter to André Raffalovich, he identified Pollitt as one of Benson's models for the Babe.[51] Beardsley was friendly enough with Pollitt to mark out as a gift for him *Bookplate of the Artist* (Zatlin 1065), the ex-libris design he intended as his own but had never used. Close in conception to *Enter Herodias*, the drawing depicts a foetal creature lifting a heavy tray of books in front of a fleshy, naked woman selecting suitable reading (Fig. 2.10). It is possible that Benson's novel inspired Beardsley in choosing a bookplate for Pollitt.

Fig. 2.10 Aubrey Beardsley, *Bookplate of the Artist* (Sept 1896), Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Cambridge, USA, repr. from *Fifty Drawings*, 195

There is a further very direct reference to Beardsley in Benson's novel, in which the Babe expresses a desire to be drawn by him: "He looks like a man out of the *Yellow Book* by Aubrey Beardsley. I wish I could

50 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 254.
51 *Ibid.*, 261.

look as if Aubrey Beardsley had drawn me."[52] Would such a desire have been projected onto the foetal creature of the plate Beardsley imparts to Pollitt? There is no answer to the question in the twenty-eight letters from Beardsley to Pollitt in the artist's published correspondence. But the second to last of these, dated 10 January 1898, speaks of a child and giving birth two months before Beardsley's end:

> My dear pretty Pollitt,
>
> I will make you the most adorable Bambino as soon as ever I can say "finished" of Volpone. Continue to light candles for my safe delivery.[53]

Ironically enough, *Volpone* would be a volume that was indeed aborted due to Beardsley's untimely passing. Yet his bookplate, assigning a foetal creature to his library, calls for an investigation of the foetal motif in books on which Beardsley had left his stamp.

In Lucian's Steps

On 9 December 1892, the publishers Lawrence and Bullen commissioned Beardsley to illustrate Lucian of Samosata's short second-century novel, *True History*. These would have constituted about thirty full-page plates, according to a letter to Arthur William King.[54] Conceived, however, in parallel with the *Bon-Mots* grotesques, they are described in a 15 February 1893 letter to George Frederick Scotson-Clark as "thirty little drawings to do for it 6 inches by 4" (ca. 15.3 x 10.2 cm). Lucian's fantastic narrative, which includes the first literary voyage to the moon, had plenty to seduce Beardsley, who described his drawings as "the most extraordinarily things that have ever appeared in a book both in respect to technique and conception," adding "they're also the most indecent."[55] Did such boldness stay the publishers in prudish Victorian England? Or was Beardsley overwhelmed with work? The book, issued in 1894, contained only sixteen plates, with just two by Beardsley, *A Snare of Vintage* (Zatlin 270) and *Dreams* (Zatlin 271). A third plate, the first version of *A Snare of Vintage* (Zatlin 269), was inserted only in fifty-four copies on Japanese vellum. The fourteen remaining are by William

52 Benson, *The Babe*, 101.
53 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 422.
54 *Ibid.*, 38.
55 *Ibid.*, 44.

Strang and J. B. Clark, who would continue to work for Lawrence and Bullen. Beardsley, however, did not. The hypothesis of the publishers censoring a shocking production seems plausible, especially since two plates, *Lucian's Strange Creatures* (Zatlin 272) and *Birth from the Calf of the Leg* (Zatlin 273), were published after the artist's death by Smithers in *An Issue of Five Drawings Illustrative of Juvenal and Lucian* as "too free in design for general circulation." Of these five, three relate to the foetus.

Three passages struck Beardsley when he read Lucian's novel: the sailors' couplings with the vine-women at the beginning of Book I, twice rendered in the two versions of *A Snare of Vintage*; the customs of the moon-dwellers (Bk. I, § 22); and the arrival at the Isle of Dreams (Bk. II, § 32–35), also treated twice. I follow Milly Heyd's suggestion that we may successively read in them coitus, birth, and adoration of the child, yet all of unnatural devising.[56] The *Birth from the Calf of the Leg* (Zatlin 273) depicts marriage and births on the moon, the land of men who do not even know the name of woman (Bk. I, § 22). Francis Hickes's translation of Lucian cautiously omits a detail from the Greek, which I have completed within square brackets below. The passage, however, is explicit enough for Beardsley to have based his plate on it:

> they [the children] are not begotten, of women, but of mankind: for they have no other marriage but of males: the name of women is utterly unknown among them: until they accomplish the age of five and twenty years, they are given in marriage to others: from that time forwards they take others in marriage to themselves: [they carry the child not in the womb, but in the calf of the leg] for as soon as the infant is conceived the leg begins to swell, and afterwards when the time of birth is come, they give it a lance and take it out dead: then they lay it abroad with open mouth towards the wind, and so it takes life: and I think thereof the Grecians call it the belly of the leg, therein they bear their children instead of a belly.[57]

By mischievously recalling the pederast practices of Greek Antiquity, Lucian mocks the story of Bacchus born from Jupiter's thigh. He takes literally the word *gastroknēmia*, "calf" in Ancient Greek, and breaks it up in its two components, "belly" (*gastēr*) and "leg" (*knēme*). Here, it is not the function that creates the organ, but language itself. Decadent

56 Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley: Symbol, Mask and Self-Irony* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 61–62.

57 *Lucian's True History, Translated by Francis Hickes, Illustrated by William Strang, J. B. Clark and Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Privately Printed [Lawrence and Bullen], 1894), 61–62.

monstrous creation had taken ample advantage of such linguistic sleight-of-tongue as I have shown elsewhere.[58] Similarly, in *Birth from the Calf of the Leg* (Fig. 2.11), Beardsley breaks with personal trauma. The image may reflect his latent homosexuality or an interruption of pregnancy, as Reade and Easton have argued,[59] but here I am interested in the ambivalent signs surrounding the foetus's extraction at birth. The incision in the thigh (not the calf) recalls the pubic area and an open vagina. Beardsley multiplies the signs of cruel and bloody delivery (a knife, dots for blood on the foetus and hands), even castration (scissors pointing to an absent organ), but caricatures the foot and the little finger, alleviating tension and trauma. The presence of an elegant toilet table and the drapery cast doubt on the sex of the person whose thigh is incised. In Lucian, the child comes into the world dead, which reactivates the spectre of the unborn foetus. Beardsley's newborn characteristically frowns in discontent with eyes wide open. It does not take much for the relentless extraction to turn into a killing.

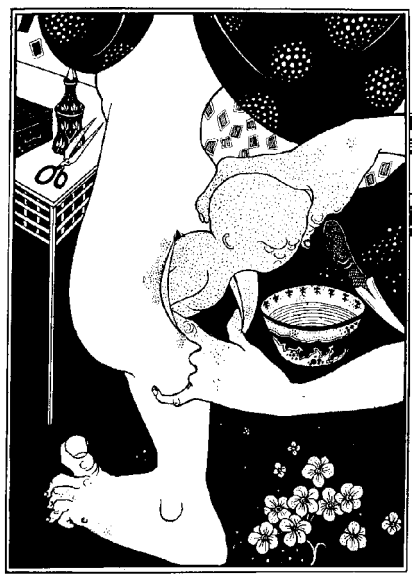


Fig. 2.11 Aubrey Beardsley, *Birth from the Calf of the Leg* (Dec 1892–March 1893), repr. from *Five Drawings*, no. 5

58 See Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le fœtus*, 28, 36–40, 70, 128, 205, 228–29.

59 Reade, 333; Easton, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady*, 178–79, following Reade but also opening a new perspective through embryology. See also Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V & A Publications, 1998), 65, referring to Reade and the motif of "irregular births."

Heyd's "adoration of the child" is based on Lucian's Island of Dreams, populated by all sorts of reverie, as shown in Hickes's translation:

> These dreams are not all alike either in nature or shape, for some of them are long, beautiful and pleasing: others again are as short and deformed. Some make show to be of gold, and others to be base and beggarly. Some of them had wings, and were of monstrous forms: others set out in pomp, as it were in triumph, representing the appearances of kings, gods and other persons.[60]

An attentive and passionate reader, Beardsley scrupulously singles out monstrosity and pictures only the ugly. The first *Dreams* plate (Zatlin 271), positioned opposite this very extract, is invaded by spidery lines, bats or butterflies, spiky, grimacing, and dragon-like forms, close to the *Bon-Mots* grotesques and *Le Morte Darthur*, his Japanese-style signature, and roving parts of bodies (Fig. 2.12). Yet, in this brief deformed vision, gazes converge on a well-known central scene: the hand presenting the aborted foetus as in *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus* (see Fig. 2.1), although the foetus now looks more resigned to its fate. There are lines and patterns superimposed in a way that the disturbing scene may go unnoticed. Such is not the case in the second version, cautiously entitled *Lucian's Strange Creatures* (Zatlin 272). In this, the strong black-and-white contrast makes forms more explicit although endowed with a fluid, dream-like quality (Fig. 2.13). A woman's hand blatantly presents the protesting foetus, but this time nobody is watching. Lightly layered over each other and turned towards the viewer, the peripheral figures hover and float in a characteristically vague vision. They glide and drift, which promotes a mimetic spreading of the foetal form to the bloated head of a masked Pierrot – recalling the *Masked Pierrette in a Cape and a Ruff* (Zatlin 788, see Fig. 2.5a) –, here split into two, himself and a lithe hermaphrodite whom the Pierrot tickles. At the very top, the foetus, stark white on an inky background, turns into a nucleus of black-and-white art while various caricatures of contemporary individuals also crowd the plate. The sexual ambiguity that reigns in these drawings, thanks to the inherently ambiguous and potentially erotic nature of the dream, will be elevated to a system in Beardsley's plate for "A Kiss of Judas."

60 *Lucian's True History*, 209–11.

Fig. 2.12 Aubrey Beardsley, *Dreams* (Dec 1892–March 1893), Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Cambridge, USA, repr. from *Lucian's True History*, facing p. 209

Fig. 2.13 Aubrey Beardsley, *Lucian's Strange Creatures* (Dec 1892–March 1893), repr. from *Five Drawings*, no. 4

Judas, Mary, and the Foetus

In his book on vampires, Christopher Frayling identified the American writer Julian Osgood Field as the author of the short story "A Kiss of Judas," originally published under the pseudonym X. L. in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1893.[61] Beardsley granted it a parodic and enigmatic plate, named *The Kiss of Judas* after the story (Fig. 2.14, Zatlin 313). Field's text emphasises the parody of a Christian rite[62] and the mysterious appearance of a beautiful woman.[63] His story offers a vampiric treatment of Judas's kiss when betraying Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and reads as the antipode of Christ's sacrifice to save humanity from its sins. It is based on a Moldavian legend of the Children of Judas, who are inversions of Christ: they are branded by unparalleled ugliness, hate their fellow men instead of loving them, and commit suicide instead of sacrificing themselves for them. Their suicide entitles them to return to Hell, reincarnate and come back in the form best suited to their vengeance on mankind but not as a female. This vengeance takes the form of a deadly kiss. The mark XXX on the victim's body refers to the Gospels' thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 27, 3–6), the "price of blood."[64]

Such is the fate of the story's protagonist, Colonel Hippy Rowan, who causes the wrath of one of the Children of Judas, Isaac Lebedenko, having discovered his hideous face, ferret-like muzzle, and wet, slimy mouth. Field's long description[65] must have interested Beardsley, all the more as the Child of Judas, a monster, commits suicide and – contrary to the legend – transforms into a woman (repeatedly likened by Field to the Madonna) as dispenser of the fatal kiss. Beardsley referred in a letter to T. Dove Keighley, the *Pall Mall Magazine*'s editor, to "an awfully striking legend" which he proposed to treat in a drawing that "should contain in one decorative scheme – the strange form kissing its victim (as the centre), with the other incidents (such as the diabolical

61 Christopher Frayling, ed., *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 221.
62 X. L. [Julian Osgood Field], "A Kiss of Judas," *The Pall Mall Magazine*, 1:3 (July 1893): 339–66 (351).
63 *Ibid.*, 364.
64 *Ibid.*, 350.
65 *Ibid.*, 344.

commission, the suicide and victim after death) worked round it."[66] However, the drawing he sent from Paris a few days later[67] omits the peripheral incidents, retaining only the kiss that a foetus-like creature is about to lay on the forearm of another figure, no less ambiguous, lying under a tree.

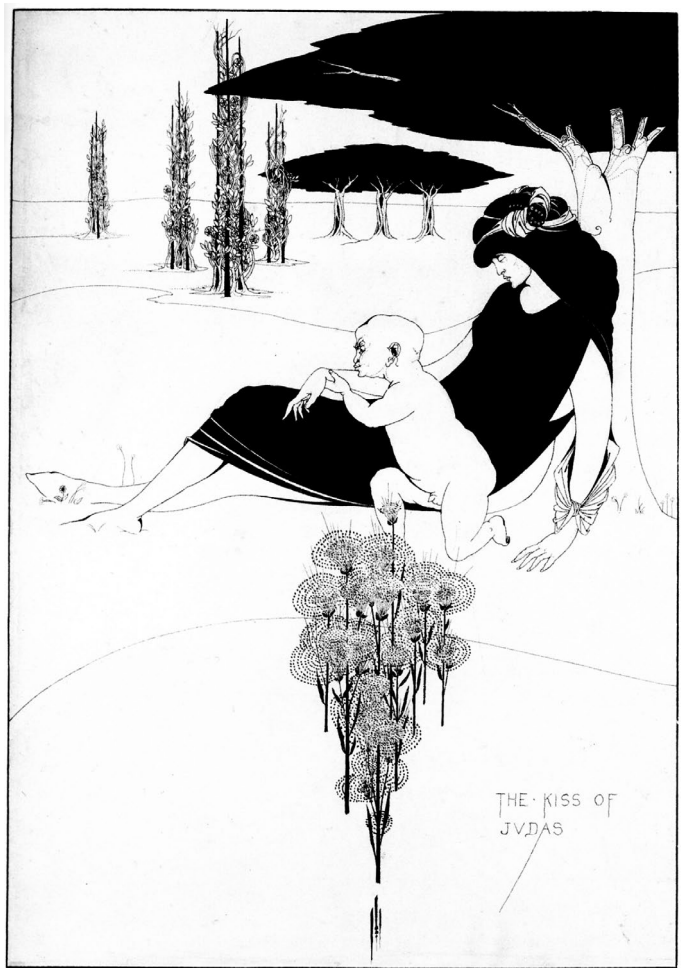


Fig. 2.14 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Kiss of Judas* (ca. 18 May 1893), Victoria and Albert Museum, London, *The Pall Mall Magazine*, 1:3 (July 1893), facing p. 339; repr. from *Early Work*, no. 16

66 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 48.
67 *Ibid.*, 48–49.

Building on a parody of the Christian rite that is central to the tale, Beardsley reworks the kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. In his drawing, vertical trellises in the back and the Judas tree flowers in the foreground represent the garden. The figure under the tree would be Christ with Judas at his side, or rather the "Child of Judas," an expression taken literally: a kind of monstrous infant. The interpretation responds to the various forms taken by Judas's offspring and its repulsive ugliness: the foetus, able to assume all forms, summarises an ideal monstrosity. The text calls Lebedenko a "monster," a "hostile monster," a "monster not born of woman."[68] Beardsley instead chooses the being *par excellence* born of woman, creating a bold new take on this figure.

Although the legend depicted the Children of Judas as Christ's opposites, Field inverts this by projecting Christ's sufferings onto Lebedenko: at the mercy of Hippy Rowan, who would have whipped him and relentlessly nailed his hands to a tree,[69] the Child of Judas endures flagellation and crucifixion. Foetal in the image, monstrous in the text, reincarnated in a woman likened to the Madonna, he is also both Jesus and Judas. Beardsley's aged infant serves a multiple monstrosity, a compound of ugliness, animalism, vampirism, and hermaphroditism. It is the perfect medium to depict the contradictory roles and status of Field's character, and shows that the artist read text far more subtly than is commonly thought.

This is further shown in the figure beneath the tree, a decidedly feminised Christ, since Beardsley assigns him the "all black" garment worn in the novella by the Marian figure, "as that of a member of some religious order" enclosing the face in "a covering not unlike a cowl."[70] Such complexity borders on confusion in Beardsley's *The Kiss of Judas*. The monstrous Lebedenko has returned as a Madonna figure, and the plate reflects such doubling up by that of a Judas/foetus and feminised Christ. The object of Lebedenko's vengeance, Hippy Rowan, has disappeared. We are faced with two monsters, one virginal, the other foetal, and a doubly disturbing message: if the Judas of the text has Christ-like aspects, the Christ of the image is

68 X. L. [Julian Osgood Field], "A Kiss of Judas," 344, 345, 354.
69 *Ibid.*, 352–53.
70 *Ibid.*, 363.

like Mary. If the foetus is also Jesus, the Christ is also a Madonna. According to Field, Lebedenko's reincarnation and return resemble a ghostly masquerade on a night close to Christmas.[71] Beardsley's drawing could, in this light, be read as a kind of grotesque Nativity scene.

The kiss of Judas, here that of the foetus to its mother, is just another expression of the grotesque foetus's wrath, as previously discerned in its clenched fist. The foetus takes revenge on the mother in a vampiric, possibly incestuous, way. Furthermore, from a formal point of view, *The Kiss of Judas* is akin to *A Platonic Lament*, one of Beardsley's plates for Wilde's *Salome* (1894), in which a black-clad figure leans over another before a floral background (Zatlin 868).[72] The first version of Beardsley's *Enter Herodias* (Zatlin 870) already looms large.

In *Enter Herodias*, my interest lies with the hydrocephalic monster on the left (Fig. 2.15), a *Bon-Mots* offspring, as shown by its nipple-covered neck and pointed thumbnail. The figure does not raise its fist as it has in previous works, but stands erect in front of a ripe, provocative Herodias. Although masked by its loose clothing, the creature's erection is underscored by the candle's flame and echoed by the three phallic candlesticks at the foot of the image. Still, the naughty detail escaped the publisher's notice. Reade, who tracked the history of the original and its two subsequent versions, has shown that Lane censored Beardsley's plate (reproduced here) to mask the genitals of the young man on the right.[73] No changes whatsoever were made to the foetal creature, which is not only an iconographic novelty, but also carries a covert and disturbing spirit, playfully superimposing desire and tension.

71 *Ibid.*, 361.

72 On Beardsley's *Salome*, see my article "*Encor Salomé*: entrelacs du texte et de l'image de Wilde et Beardsley à Mossa et Merlet," in *Dieu, la chair et les livres. Une approche de la Décadence*, ed. by S. Thorel-Cailleteau (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 421–57, fig. 1–12, and "Triptyque de livres sur Salomé," revised and enlarged version, in Stead, *La Chair du livre: matérialité, imaginaire et poétique du livre fin-de-siècle* (Paris: PUPS, 2012), 157–203.

73 Reade, "Enter Herodias: Or, What Really Happened?," *Los Angeles County Museum of Art Bulletin*, 22 (1976): 58–65.

Rich Foetal Avatars

Fig. 2.15 Aubrey Beardsley, *Enter Herodias* (late autumn 1893), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA, repr. from Reade, 285

Enter Herodias is in this sense resumed in the first (rejected) version of *The Toilette of Salome*, also intended for Wilde's drama (Fig. 2.16, Zatlin 871). In this work, the nappy around the frail foetus on the front left-hand shelf of Salomé's dressing table might also hide another erection. A small vase with a pointed protuberance seems to endorse the assumption. The Japanese perspective and furniture also recall the misshapen Japanese figurines present in fin-de-siècle texts such as Pierre Loti's "human embryos with octopus tentacles."[74] The biblical dancer is in the hands of a Pierrotic and foetal hairdresser who owes much to *Masked Pierrette in a Cape and a Ruff*, classified as female (Zatlin 788, see Fig. 2.5a). A clash between sundry cultural references is mirrored on the table itself, a crucial piece of furniture in Beardsley's work according to Easton.[75]

74 Pierre Loti, *La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1905), 167: "*embryons humains ayant des tentacules de poulpe.*"

75 Easton, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady*, 121–26.

A gloss on femininity and coquetry, the dresser carries a fossil that would better suit the Natural Science museum. The foetus has become a decorative, removable article, and sits amongst pomade jars, ointments, a powder compact and a jewel case. The books stacked under Salomé's dressing table – including two then scandalous titles, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Zola's *La Terre* – add a final touch to this curiosity cabinet to stress the weight of incongruity in fin-de-siècle culture. The dressing table turns bookshelf and display case. Gustav-Adolf Mossa's watercolour *Le Fœtus* (1905) may have referenced Beardsley's invention in an exaggerated version: it shows a gigantic ornate jar with a tiny foetus bathing in its liquid in the foreground while its mother powders her nose in front of her mirror in the background, ready to depart with a supercilious suitor.[76]

Fig. 2.16 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salome*, first version (summer 1893), coll. Marie Mathews, Key West, Fl., USA, repr. from Reade, 287

76 Gustav-Adolf Mossa, *Le Fœtus* (ca. 1905), watercolour, graphite, ink, gouache relief and gilding on paper, 50 x 32 (34 x 19) cm, Nice, Musée des Beaux-Arts. See *Gustav Adolf Mossa. Catalogue raisonné des œuvres "symbolistes"* (Paris: Somogy, 2010), 152–53 (A 68).

Richness and variety mark Beardsley's treatment of the foetal motif, though critics like Reade and Fletcher have downplayed its significance. Although Reade frequently evokes the foetus in his comments, he describes it as a "minor obsession." Fletcher does not recognise the motif in Beardsley's work after 1893.[77] Yet, it is well and fivefold present in the most complex rococo-influenced plate of 1896, *The Cave of Spleen* (Zatlin 983), after Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Beardsley's attention is indeed drawn by the same detail in Pope as in Lucian:

> Unnumber'd Throngs on ev'ry side are seen
> Of Bodies chang'd to various Forms by Spleen.
> Here living Teapots stand, one Arm held out,
> One bent; the Handle this, and that the Spout:
> A Pipkin there like Homer's Tripod walks;
> Here sighs a Jar, and there a Goose-pye talks;
> *Men prove with Child*, as pow'rful Fancy works,
> And Maids turn'd Bottles, call aloud for Corks.[78]

Two male figures in the lower left-hand corner of *The Cave of Spleen* exhibit such unusual pregnancies (Fig. 2.17). In the swollen, transparent belly of the first, stylised female genital apparatus and a foetus appear in profile – the one external to the other. The second figure carries the foetus in a part of the "body" resembling the thigh, as in Lucian. This would have sufficed for a hemistich. Yet, in the heart of the picture, to the left of the turbaned figure looking at us, a third foetal form emerges in profile from the very vapours of spleen, a literal response to the second hemistich "as pow'rful Fancy works." Finally, two dandies (akin to the foetuses in the grotesque vignettes) sit in a lantern and a jar in the lower right-hand corner. Such proliferation does not belong to a morbid spirit, absent from Pope's text, but to graphic caprice. Indeed, unlike Beardsley's "pictured" books or volumes "embellished with drawings," *The Rape of the Lock* is "embroidered," as states its subtitle "embroidered with eleven drawings by Aubrey Beardsley." Wreaths, ringlets, loops, festoons, broken lines, dots and all

77 Reade, 22; Fletcher, "A Grammar of Monsters: Beardsley's Images and Their Sources," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 30:2 (1987): 141–63 (147).

78 Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, ed. by Geoffrey Tillotson, 3rd ed. (London, Methuen Educational Ltd., 1971), Canto iv, v. 47–54, my emphasis.

the subtleties of openwork, crochet and filigree create such embroidery. Versatile and pliable, the foetal form generates and invades them, the viewer no longer knowing what is foetal and what not. *The Cave of Spleen*'s probable influence on artists such as Alan Odle and Alastair[79] – and Marcus Behmer as presented below – shows the plastic potential of the foetal shape.

Fig. 2.17 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Cave of Spleen* (ca. 6 March 1896), Bigelow coll., Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA, repr. from *Rape of the Lock*, facing p. 24

79 Reade refers to Alan Odle's early works, 353, n. 410.

Fig. 2.18 Aubrey Beardsley, *Choosing the New Hat* or *Cover and title page for issue No. 2* (by last week of March 1896), repr. from *The Savoy*, 2 (Apr 1896). Courtesy MLS coll., Delaware

In *Choosing the New Hat* (Fig. 2.18), his April 1896 cover for the *Savoy*, catalogued as *Cover and Title Page for Issue No. 2* (Zatlin 1003), Beardsley uses a style close to the Pope plates. In the image, two women try on hats proffered by a pageboy. "The little creature handing hats,"

Beardsley wrote in a letter to Smithers, emphasising negation, "is *not* an infant but an unstrangled abortion."[80] If we are to follow him, many other beings still in the limbo of existence pervade his work: the three musicians in the foreground of the third *Comedy-Ballet of Marionettes, as Performed by the Troupe of the Théâtre-Impossible, Posed in Three Drawings, III* (Zatlin 897a); the creature carrying a tray of books on the bookplate later given to Pollitt (see Fig. 2.10); even the monkey in *The Lady with the Monkey* (Zatlin 1050) following Reade, who sees in it "perhaps an unconscious *revenant* of the foetuses of 1893, in more plausible terms."[81] I will not attempt to list them all, but one thing is certain: the only image of reassuring, blossoming motherhood in Beardsley's oeuvre appears nestling between the symbolically protective legs of the letter M (alluding to Mother),[82] an initial letter designed for Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (Zatlin 1084r), under the empty gaze of two figures with multiple breasts (Diana of Ephesus-like), half-women, half-statues. Too late: that book would remain unfinished and be published posthumously.

Beardsley's Sway on Fin-de-siècle Art

Beardsley's uniquely rich body of foetal work is no doubt related to his precarious state of health. It cannot be excluded that he turned the foetus into a kind of *alter ego*, as Heyd and Zatlin have both proposed.[83] Yet, such a view is also strangely restrictive. I would argue that it conceals two more powerful considerations: the role of the foetus in the post-Darwinian Decadent imagination; and the part it played in fin-de-siècle graphic design. A morbid myth of "species" origins was emerging at the time, of which the foetus was the most striking corollary.[84] Beardsley's graphic art saw in the foetus a pliable shape apt to impregnate and pollinate his creativity. It further spread into other artists' work as in three examples from the German, Dutch, and French context, each revealing

80 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 120.
81 Reade, 364, n. 492.
82 Contrariwise, in the published version of *Volpone*, the initial is that of Mosca (London: Leonard Smithers, 1898), 82 (Act III, scene I).
83 Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58–67; Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 212–17.
84 See Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le fœtus*, 419–510.

a different paradigm. The motif would be spelled out varyingly, nurture complex *mises en abyme*, and associate with caricature as a superior form of deforming art.

Beardsley's art was sufficiently significant at the end of the nineteenth century for Burdett to name his book on the English fin de siècle *The Beardsley Period*, turning Beerbohm's originally droll quip into a significant scholarly study.[85] Beyond Britain, several European countries, including Italy, France, and Germany, welcomed his graphic work. As the last chapter in this book shows in detail, several of his drawings were published in Jules Roques's *Le Courrier français* from 1894 onwards, then in *La Plume* and *L'Ermitage*. The question of his reception in France, attempted by Jacques Lethève, was again addressed by Jane Haville Desmarais,[86] and will be further discussed based on new evidence. In Germany, Franz Blei in *Pan*, Otto Eckmann in *Die Kunst*, and Emil Hannover in *Kunst und Künstler* praised him in Berlin art magazines between 1899 and 1903. Julius Meier-Graefe followed suit in his notable study on the evolution of modern art.[87] Volumes on Beardsley were included in prestigious series: "Die Kunst" issued by the Berlin publisher Julius Bard and "Moderne Illustratoren" published by Reinhard Piper.[88] These are but a few examples of a genuine craze. Critics acclaimed and hailed his unique designs.

Beardsley's work was particularly reflected and expanded upon Marcus Behmer, a German water-colourist, talented draughtsman, engraver, illustrator and original book artist. Fascinated by Beardsley, Behmer learned English to read his idol's few literary remains in the

85 Beerbohm, "Diminuendo," in Beerbohm, *The Works of Max Beerbohm, with a Bibliography by John Lane* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 160. Beerbohm wrote "I belong to the Beardsley period." Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925).

86 Jacques Lethève, "Aubrey Beardsley et la France," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 68:1175 (Dec 1966): 343–50; Jane Haville Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France, 1893–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

87 Julius Meier-Graefe, "Aubrey Beardsley and his Circle," *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, trans. by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons; London: William Heinemann, 1908), II, 252–66.

88 See Rudolf Klein, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Berlin: Julius Bard, [1902]), already at its second edition; and Hermann Esswein, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Munich and Leipzig: R. Piper & Co., [1908]).

original.[89] He decorated the walls of his Charlottenburg studio with photographs of the Englishman, knew the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy* well, owned Beardsley's published work in reproduction, and commented ironically on the blunders of a German edition of his letters.[90] Between 1900 and 1902, his drawings for the art and literature review *Die Insel* widened the orbit of Beardsley's foetal grotesques, as did some of his own major designs.

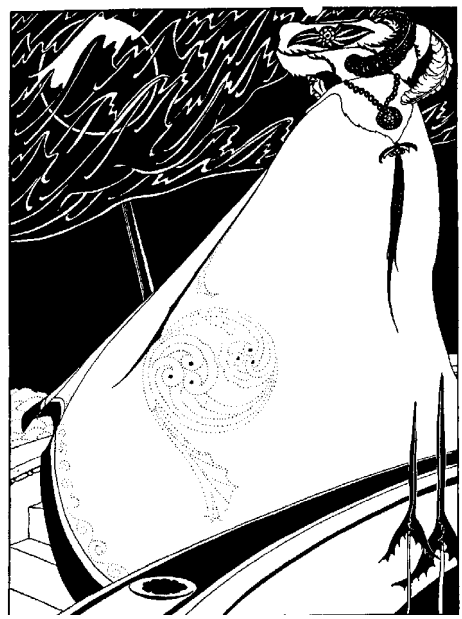


Fig. 2.19 Marcus Behmer, 9th plate [Herod or Herodias?], in *Salome, Tragödie in einem Akt von Oscar Wilde,* Übertragung *von Hedwig Lachmann* (1903), after the 1999 reprint, priv. coll.

Behmer's ninth plate for Wilde's *Salome*, translated into German in 1903, is both a tribute to Beardsley and a highly original work (Fig. 2.19). A fishtailed arabesque dotting a character's ample cloak with embryonic shapes recalls the genitalia and foetuses of the transparent wombs in Beardsley's *The Cave of Spleen* (see Fig. 2.17). In Behmer, the motif

89 Martin Birnbaum, "Marcus Behmer," in Birnbaum, *Jacovleff and Other Artists* (New York: Paul A. Struck, 1946), 153–54.

90 Marcus Behmer and Max Meyerfeld, "Beardsleybriefe," *Kunst und Künstler*, 7:3 (1909): 134–38, particularly 137–38.

sustains gender uncertainty, now relating to Wilde's play. We may waver to recognize in this figure either Herod hurrying away from the terrace, or Herodias repeatedly accused in the text of sterility.[91] Amplified and transformed, the borrowed foetal motif also gains new graphic heft as it reflects the half-hidden lunar disc. Behmer thus unexpectedly reinterprets Beardsley's *The Woman in the Moon* (Zatlin 864), a *Salome* plate wittily referring to Wilde's homosexuality, while feminising the German folklore figure of the man in the moon. In his graphics for the German *Salome*, Behmer assumed the place and role of his English counterpart. His inverted B, used as his signature, literally mirrors Beardsley's initial in several plates and honours his debt with a twist. The *Salome* plates were a consecration of both Beardsley and Behmer's graphic achievements.

In the monthly *Die Insel*, Behmer's foetal grotesques meet in turn with his expert entomological knowledge to create a series of beings (Fig. 2.20a–g). The grotesque lies in the juxtaposition of two monsters – laughable yet terrible – a shapeless newborn babe and a fly (Fig. 2.20a). The design turns the infant into a bundle of flesh, a body *plastic*, an adjective which fin-de-siècle culture understood as "likely to take various forms." In another drawing, Behmer's morbid imagination takes over, placing the foetus in the arms of a skeleton swathed in black (Fig. 2.20b). No more cloven feet or arabesques, just beings fitting one and the same hydrocephalic species, depicted in outline with characteristic black-on-white economy of means, as Beardsley had promoted: a spindly diver suspended in mid-air (Fig. 2.20c); an oversize silhouette crossing a landscape (Fig. 2.20d); an enigmatic figure in a black mantle (Fig. 2.20e). Even the full-page illustration for Paul Ernst's short story "Der Schemen" bears the mark (Fig. 2.20f): the bulging skull and profile posture come from Beardsley's work, especially the *Bon-Mots* foetuses. Last but not least, a hydrocephalic Pierrot bites into a mask with eyes rolling upwards while his long scrawny arm falls victim to the frame's very edge (Fig. 2.20g). Its eerie appearance, the uncertain forms within folds and lines (is it one or two figures?), the stark contrast of black and white recall the creatures hovering on the left-hand side of *Lucian's Strange Creatures* (see Fig. 2.13), Beardsley's bold version of *Dreams*.

91 See further on this Stead, *La Chair du livre*, 192–203.

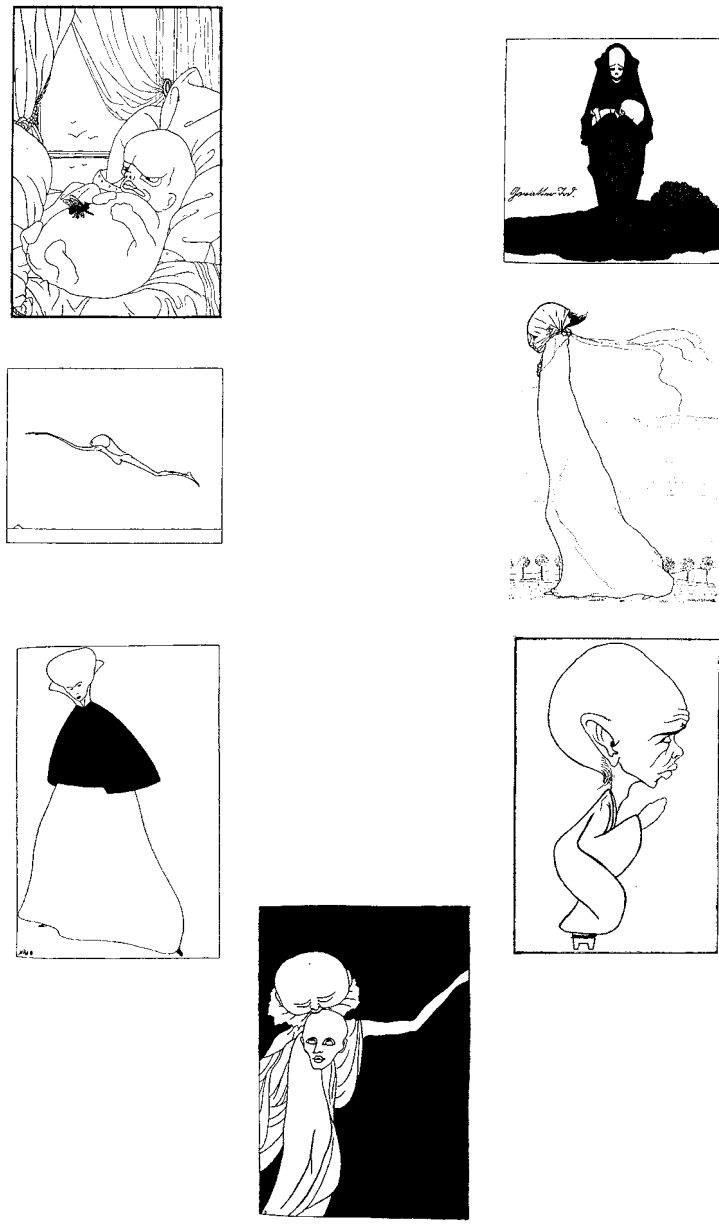


Fig. 2.20a–g Marcus Behmer, Foetal Grotesques from *Die Insel*. 2.20a *Newborn Babe and Fly*, *Die Insel*, 2.4:10 (July 1901): 127; 2.20b *Fœtus and Skeleton*, *Die Insel*, 3:10 (July 1902): 107; 2.20c *Spindly Diver*, *Die Insel*, 1.3:7 (Apr 1900): 93; 2.20d *Oversize Silhouette*, *Die Insel*, 1.3:9 (June 1900): 375; 2.20e *Figure in Black Mantle*, *Die Insel*, 3:7–8 (Apr-May 1902): 135; 2.20f Full-page Illustration for Paul Ernst, "Der Schemen," *Die Insel*, 2.1:1 (Oct 1900): 81; 2.20g *Hydrocephalic Pierrot Biting into a Mask*, *Die Insel*, 3:5 (Feb 1902): 245

Even more daringly, the Englishman's influence on Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, known as "the Dutch Aubrey Beardsley," plays with the very idea of the foetus and the book, perhaps a foetal book. De Nerée's drawing *Sourire* (1901) sets eye to eye on the cover of an open volume an elegant mother with a disgruntled foetus complete with umbilical cord (Fig. 2.21). The drawing, inspired by the prose and verse collection *Witte Nachten* (*Sleepless Nights*) by de Nerée's friend Henri van Booven, engages in a series of subtle *mises en abyme* with Beardsley's *Incipit Vita Nova* as the overt inspiration (see Fig. 2.7). First, a male character in female attire (reminiscent of Beardsley's *The Black Cape*), holding the book open, postures as the reader. Instead of looking at the volume, he stares at the viewer. While a book is involved in a first *mise en abyme*, two potential readers of van Booven's volume consider each other in de Nerée's drawing.

Fig. 2.21 Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, *Sourire* (1901), Paris, Musée d'Orsay, inspired by Henri van Booven, *Witte Nachten*. © PE for a high-resolution scan made from a © RMN photograph acquired in 1990

Upper right-hand on the book cover, besides Beardsley's reworked characters, the corner monogram WN refers to van Booven's title. *Witte Nachten* opens with a significant preface, a literary manifesto celebrating deliverance. It recalls the renaissance of Dutch letters at the end of

the nineteenth century and marks van Booven's distance from two *Tachtigers*, i.e., members of the 1880s generation, Willem Kloos, secretary of the *Nieuwe Gids* review, and Herman Gorter, professor of classics and author of the *School der poezie*, from whose influence van Booven had since freed himself. His liberation, in the form of verse emancipated from established forms, amounts to the birth of a poet. In stressing such a fact, the preface uses a familiar phrase in small caps: "INCIPIT VITA NOVA."[92] Here we witness a second *mise en abyme*: van Booven's book is the content of the Beardsley drawing on its cover, but also its container, since the preface ends with the title of Beardsley's drawing now summarising the volume's meaning. Redrafting Beardsley, de Nerée projects on van Booven's book a foetus. A tribute to Beardsley, the image takes up the challenge of Beardsley's 1892 drawing to transpose it onto van Booven's text. Here is a new poet who revolts and comes to life to join Pound's foetal-like depiction of the English Nineties and Verlaine's "eyeglass kids."

In an article published after de Nerée's death, which remains a valuable source of information on this self-taught artist, van Booven repeatedly refers to the influence of Beardsley on his friend, who also died from tuberculosis. He shows him "sitting propped by pillows, browsing in Beardsley's 'Early Work,'" a book he himself had given him.[93] It was in it that de Nerée had discovered *Incipit Vita Nova* as reproduction no. 34, now entwined with *Witte Nachten*. Even though, in de Nerée's drawing, neither Beardsley's woman nor the foetus has moved from the book cover, the meaning of the image has changed. The young woman, eyes wide open, looks perplexed at a foetus that turns away with arm raised in protest but umbilical cord afloat. Her wonder is stressed by de Nerée's androgynous reader's hand that has entered the space of Beardsley's drawing in yet another *mise en abyme*. In de Nerée's drawing, the hand is there in principle to hold the book, but its tapered ringed fingers also

92 Henri van Booven, *Witte Nachten* (Haarlem: Gebrs. Nobels, 1901), XII, small caps in text.

93 Booven, "Karel de Nerée," *Elsevier's Geillustreerd Maandschrift*, 21:42 (July–Dec 1911): 18: "*Nog zie ik hem zitten overeind in de kussens, bladerend in Beardsley's 'Early Work'.*" On Nerée and van Booven, see also Sander Bink, *Carel de Nerée tot Babberich en Henri van Booven: Den Haag in het fin de siècle, met een voorwoord van Caroline de Westenholz* (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2014); and Bink, "Konlookerarel de Nerée tot Babberich's Forgotten Torture Garden," *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, 68:4 (2020): 335–58.

belong to the young mother herself, marvelling at the foetus confronting her. The Dutch artist's drawing enters that of the Englishman to modify it. In a clearly Decadent kaleidoscope, the foetus signals both a problematic domain and the innovative state of a text in limbo.

Henri Gustave Jossot also turned to the foetus. The French caricaturist, illustrator, poster designer, painter, writer, and rebellious thinker, was fascinated by deformation and the arabesque. He created exaggerated interpretations of Art Nouveau, marked by inflated forms and extreme distortion. In 1897 he published in Édouard Pelletan's art review, *L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, a leading article on posters and caricature decked *inter alia* with two drawings of monsters and a tailpiece of stylised jumping frogs.[94] He was sufficiently involved in the periodical to be entrusted with a coloured composition and the back-cover vignettes to three volumes bringing together all the issues of this short-lived venture.[95] Jossot's article protested against a widespread view, namely that his twisted shapes and warped figures were not art, and claimed new vigour for decoration and poster bills based on deformity. Keen to "assault the viewer's gaze," and even stun the onlooker by his "grotesque drawing, pushed to the point of monstrosity,"[96] Jossot used thematic and linguistic violence in both text and drawings as well as formal disparity. His highly flavoured defence of abnormality and contortion assaulted Baudelaire's verses on beauty in his well-known homonymous poem, turned by Jossot himself into a commonplace:

> Baudelaire lost a rich opportunity to put down his pen and roll a cigarette the day he wrote:
>
> I hate the movement that shifts the lines,
> And I never cry, and never laugh.
>
> It was he who brought us the band of the symbol-brokers with their straight and forthright females, (oh so very forthright!) holding stiff lilies (hieratically, my dear!) in their rigid-fingered hands.
>
> *Baudelaire a perdu une riche occasion de poser sa plume et de rouler une cigarette, le jour où il* écrivit*:*
>
> *Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,*
> *Et jamais je ne pleure, et jamais je ne ris.*

94 Jossot, "L'Affiche caricaturale," *L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, 10 (15 Dec 1897): 238–40.

95 See Philippe Di Folco, "*L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, une revue méconnue (1897–1899)," *La Revue des revues*, 52:2 (2014): 24–35.

96 Jossot, "L'Affiche caricaturale," 239: "*violenter les regards du passant*," "*mon dessin grotesque, poussé jusqu'au monstrueux*."

> *C'est lui qui nous a amené la bande des symbolos avec leurs bonnes femmes droites et longues,* (*longues, oh combien!*) *tenant des lys tout droits* (*hiératiquement, ma chère!*) *dans leurs mains aux doigts longs.*[97]

In Jossot's work, the deliberate deformation of line is rooted in a rough draft of the human form. As an undefined shape of the creature-to-be, the foetus fostered the deforming power of his pencil. Rich in variance and mutation, evolution had engendered the monster at the end of the nineteenth century. In a pamphlet entitled *Le Fœtus récalcitrant* (*The Reluctant Foetus*), Jossot drew on the foetus's unwillingness to leave the womb and be in the world, in order to scourge forced education on children, pit a war machine in dissecting social flaws, and promote the development of a critical mind.[98] Monstrosity in his case was regarded as a sure sign of revitalisation. The editors of *L'Estampe et l'Affiche* defended Jossot's work: "he has renewed caricature, decoration and the art of the poster." They saw his direct lineage in Castel Béranger at 14 Rue La Fontaine, architect Hector Guimard's first Art Nouveau building in Paris.[99] Such lineage was based on Jossot's line, and such a line was foetal, as architect Adolf Loos would soon show.

Loos's famous essay and lecture *Ornament and Crime*, originally published as *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1910), criticised excessive ornamentation of objects and interiors. It opened with an eloquent evolutionary pattern: "The human embryo goes through all the animal evolution phases while in its mother's body."[100] In so doing, Loos succinctly establishes a parallel with the process of design, which evolves in gestation, but tolerates no redundancies for ultimate fitness to purpose.

Rather than breaking with Loos's conception of criminal embellishment and over-ornamentation, many artists of the late nineteenth century focused with fascination on the mystery of wombs, where the future of races and the superfluity of deforming decoration both came to life. The foetal form looked both backward and forward,

97 *Ibid.*, 238.

98 Jossot, *Le Foetus récalcitrant*, ed. by Henri Viltard ([Bordeaux]: Finitude, 2011).

99 La Direction, "Nos Illustrations. Jossot," *L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, 10 (15 Dec 1897): 233: "*Il a renouvelé la caricature, la décoration, l'affiche.*"

100 Adolf Loos, "Ornament und Verbrechen," in Ulrich Conrads, *Programme und Manifeste zur Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bauwelt: Fundamente, 1964), 15–21: "*Der menschliche embryo macht im mutterleibe alle entwicklungsphasen des tierreiches durch.*" Loos's essay deliberately omits capital lettering current in German.

promising growth and harbouring decay. Likewise, the fin de siècle oscillated between birth and demise, deformation and germination. Deformation was often the very name given to *Jugendstil* and Art Nouveau shapes and designs. Evolution had met regression while the foetus captured and condensed a key vacillation between existence and annihilation.

In the first of Jossot's drawings for *L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, a hydrocephalic monster with webbed feet, a cock's tail, and a second head growing out of its breastbone, bites into an infant's limp body (Fig. 2.22a). It performs as the aggressive version of Beardsley's sophisticated *Triple-faced Grotesque* (Fig. 2.22b, Zatlin 790), itself redrafting Erhard Schön's *Des Teufels Dudelsack* (see Fig. 1.11a–c). A third creature may be compared to them: a monster named "Epignathus," from Christian Friedrich Schatz's *Die Griechischen Götter und die menschlichen Mißgeburten* (*Greek Gods and Human Abortions*), in which, by congenital malformation, one foetus swallows another (Fig. 2.22c).[101] In 1901, Schatz organised the contents of his book as a parallel between typical Greek monsters and anomalous creations of the womb, all explained as Cyclops, mermaids, harpies, and centaurs. Three reproductions of a bodiless, an anidian,[102] and a headless foetus were proposed as Medusa prototypes.[103] In such endeavours, a time-honoured tradition of mythological monsters was coming to an end. Fifteen years after Charles Gould had sought to explain monsters by geology, evolution, and philology in *Mythical Monsters*,[104] Schatz opened up a new perspective with his womb anomalies. The congenitally malformed monster Epignathus, as Schatz purported, explained the myth of Saturn and Jupiter devouring their children.[105] When compared to Beardsley's and Jossot's foetal creatures, the formal analogy is striking. Beardsley's *Triple-faced Grotesque*, an oval shape from

101 An epignathus is in fact a tumour affecting the sphenoid bone, the palate, the pharynx, tongue, and jaw, but is used here in a wider sense.

102 An anidian (formless) embryo or foetus is an amorphous cluster of hair, teeth, bone, cartilage, muscle tissue, etc.

103 Dr Christian Friedrich Schatz, *Die Griechischen Götter und die menschlichen Mißgeburten. Vortrag gehalten im Docentenverein der Universität Rostock am 3. Mai 1901, mit 62 Abbildungen im Text* (Wiesbaden: J. F. Bergmann, 1901), fig. 30, 51, and 53, https://archive.org/details/diegriechischen00schagoog/page/n2/mode/2up

104 Charles Gould, *Mythical Monsters, with Ninety-three Illustrations* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1886).

105 Schatz, *Die Griechischen Götter und die menschlichen Mißgeburten*, 32, fig. 43.

which emerge three heads and an arm, Jossot's hydrocephalic monster, and Schatz's Epignathus all sit at the crossroads of Decadent grotesque with monstrous obstetrics.

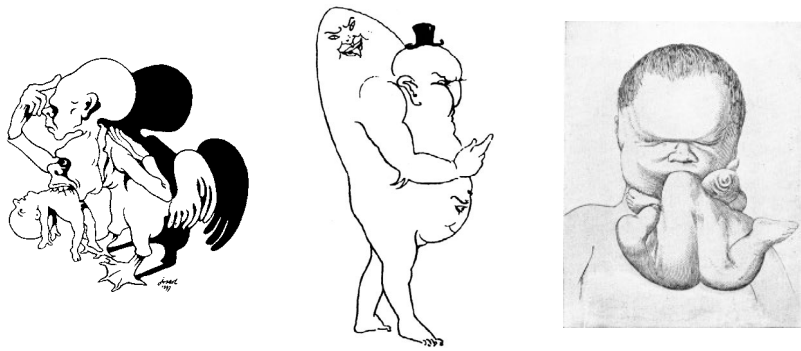


Fig. 2.22a–c Three Grotesques in Comparison. 2.22a Jossot, Two-headed Monster Biting into a Child's Body, *L'Estampe et l'Affiche*, 10 (15 Dec 1897):240 (detail); 2.22b Beardsley, *Triple-faced Grotesque*, BM-LJ:156, BM-FH:22 (R<). PE coll.; 2.22c Dr Schatz, "Epignathus," in *Die Griechischen Götter und die Menschlichen Mißgeburten* (1901), no. 43

Teratological imagination was an integral part of Decadent Aestheticism and such aesthetic issues reached out, well beyond the realm of Beardsley's vignettes and drawings, to the arts in general. Beardsley's complex oeuvre had given the kick-off to such extensive use of the foetal motif. In his art, the motif broadly permeated scenes and shapes. Others appropriated it in creative assimilation. However, his ingenious imagination was also held in check by a polished intellect. He completed his grotesque art with refined posturing and the stance of a dandy. Delighting in play and extravagance, he would incorporate the grotesque to his natural love of notoriety and his own portraits.