The Smallest Genius and "The Wittiest Mind": Max Beerbohm and Lytton Strachey

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What was the association between Max Beerbohm and Lytton Strachey? Was it polite friendship or literary fellowship? Was its source a shared aesthetic or a mutual distrust of pretension? The connections between these two striking figures of English parody and prose are the subject of this essay which will be an excursion in biography with a detour into bibliography and a rest-stop at literary criticism. Three subjects will be of interest: the personal contact between Beerbohm and Strachey, their similar ideas about literature, and the sources of their mutual admiration. In December 1917, Strachey told Clive Bell, having just seen Beerbohm's caricatures at the Grosvenor Gallery, Mayfair, that he had "the most remarkable and seductive genius--and I should say about the smallest in the world." Seven years later, Beerbohm exclaimed to William Rothenstein that "the wittiest mind of the age" belonged not to himself but to Strachey with the added quality of its virtue "guarded even more strictly and puritanically than I have guarded the virtue of mind." What accounts for this parallel praise which continued to the end of their careers and what does it tell us about the similarities of their writing?

Lytton Strachey refused his first opportunity to meet Max Beerbohm. In the spring of 1906 while ill at Lancaster Gate, Strachey told Desmond McCarthy that he had "no wish to be infinitely bored" by spending the afternoon with the author of The Happy Hypocrite (1897), contributor to The Yellow Book, current drama critic of the Saturday Review and increasingly popular caricaturist. It was not until May 1912 that their paths—or rather reservations—crossed as Beerbohm spied a peculiarly dressed young man dining amid civil servants, scientists and clergymen at the Savile Club. With his brown velveteen jacket, soft shirt and dark red tie, Strachey distinguished himself among the conservatively attired crowd. Beerbohm thought him to be like Didymus, the doubting Apostle, but "rather an authority on French literature." The publication of Eminent Victorians in 1918, however, initiated an exchange of letters between Beerbohm and Strachey, but until the summer of 1920 their correspondence remained sporadic, although Strachey was quick to praise Beerbohm's Seven Men with a letter of congratulations when it appeared in November 1919.

On 7 July 1920, however, Beerbohm wrote an amusing letter to Strachey from Rapallo outlining in a comical fashion that he had replaced his fox terrier named after Henry James (which died of distemper) with a kitten. In appreciation of the pleasure derived from Eminent Victorians, Beerbohm sought Strachey's approval for christening the cat "Stre-chi (or rather Stre-cci)." "I hope you don't mind," he continued.
"I am sure you would be amused if you heard the passing-by peasants enticing it by your hardly recognisable name." Strachey's response acknowledged with pleasure the honour. Two years later Beerbohm wrote to say the kitten is "'confirmed cat'" and is "'vigorous and vagrant, but not, I am sorry to say, either affectionate or intelligent. . . . He is, however, very proud of his name, and sends his respectful regards to his Illustriissimo Eponymisto Inglese.'" One consequence of the original letter was Beerbohm's request to have Strachey visit him at the Charing Cross Hotel on his next trip to London to "'professionally stare at him.'" Having learned that Strachey was writing a life of Victoria, Beerbohm had drawn "'a caricature of him in his royal connexion.'" He wanted, however, "'to verify Strachey's image.'"

On 13 April 1921, Strachey visited Beerbohm whom he described to his brother James as "'polite and elaborate, and quite remote, so far as I could see, from humanity in all its forms.'" Strachey's letter suggests a certain distance between the two writers, almost a separation between generations although only eight years divided the two in age (in 1921 Beerbohm was 49, Strachey 41). The caption of the caricature Beerbohm confirmed, illustrating a frustrated Lytton composing the life of Victoria with an oversized quill at a busy desk beneath a diminutive picture of the royal family with both the writer and picture overwhelmed by the Queen's insignia on the room's wallpaper, reads "Mr. Lytton Strachey, trying* [--and contriving] TO SEE HER WITH LORD MELBOURNE'S EYES." The caricature appears in Beerbohm's 1921 publication, A Survey.

Strachey's work, however, continued to earn Beerbohm's praise. To Reggie Turner he wrote "have you read Lytton Strachey's Queen Victoria? That I am a stoic is proved by my having no jealousy of him at all. . . ." Of Elizabeth and Essex, published in 1928, however, Beerbohm was less enthusiastic but by 1931 when Strachey wrote to Beerbohm to ask his permission to dedicate to him what became his last book, Portraits in Miniature, Beerbohm was ecstatic. With excessive self-modesty, he celebrated Strachey's work: "'I have always felt, and shall always feel, such a duffer and fumbler in comparison to you. But I shall be better able to disguise this feeling when my eye shall have seen my name in your book," he replied. That same year Beerbohm successfully proposed Strachey for membership in the Athenaeum Club but Strachey was never to make use of his admission, dying suddenly on 21 January 1932. Hearing the news in Italy, Beerbohm went to a copy of Portraits in Miniature and melancholically wrote "'and now Brother for all time Hail and Farewell.'" The postscript to their biographical association, of course, is Beerbohm's public appreciation of Strachey, the 1943 Rede lecture at Cambridge where he reaffirmed Strachey's literary merit in the face of strong reaction against his ironical and mocking style. Mixing biography with impressionism, Beerbohm extolled Strachey's talent as "'a delicately effulgent master, a perfect master of English prose.'"
and Strachey display their greatest and most sustained affinity, in their style, tone and aesthetic. Bibliography is helpful here because a series of intersections and crossovers quickly appear, beginning with their literary criticism. Between 1898 and 1910, Beerbohm was drama critic of the Saturday Review, succeeding Shaw. During the last five years of Beerbohm's reign, Strachey was writing criticism for the Spectator--book reviews, essays and, from 1907 to 1910, more than a dozen theatre reviews, becoming the first true drama critic of the periodical. Their tastes, however, differed. Unlike Beerbohm, who praised his half brother's acting, Strachey said nothing about Beerbohm Tree's presentation of romantic parts or talent for transfixing the audience. Strachey did, however, share with Beerbohm a strong belief in the autonomy of art, explaining in an early essay that "it is not by its uses that poetry is to be justified or condemned. Its beauty and its goodness, like the beauty or the goodness of a human being, have a value of their own, a value which does not depend on their effects." Like Beerbohm, Strachey is not a practical but a humanistic critic concerned with value, not imagery, meaning, not structure. The arts for both writers enhanced life because, in Strachey's words, they increased "the pleasure which there is in life itself." Not surprisingly, it is style that becomes one of the crucial elements of successful art for both writers which their early criticism articulates.

The publications of Beerbohm between 1911 and 1913 did not escape Strachey's eye. Zuleika Dobson (1911), "Cartoons, The Second Childhood of John Bull" (1911), A Christmas Garland (1912) and Fifty Caricatures (1913) all received critical attention in the press. Strachey's own 1912 publication, Landmarks in French Literature, however, created little interest but Eminent Victorians (1918), of course, dramatically overturned that situation. Eight months after its appearance, in October 1919, Beerbohm's Seven Men appeared (while Strachey was at work on Queen Victoria in semi-isolation at Tidmarsh), a volume containing similar ironic, biographical portraits of character, although the subjects were more comically presented and fictional. However, the focus on the manners of men and attention to telling detail, plus a sustained ironic tone, unites the two works. Indeed, Seven Men might be seen as a parodic group biography, extending in fictional ways the use of the "creative fact" Virginia Woolf celebrated and Strachey demonstrated in Eminent Victorians, where fictional technique complements his biographical style. The "characteristic specimen... to be examined with careful curiosity"--Strachey's words--is precisely what Beerbohm achieves in Seven Men. The two works are also alike in their effort "to illustrate rather than to explain" the ironic quality of what Beerbohm summarized in his 1918 essay "A Clergyman": "Every man illustrious in his day, however much he may be gratified by his fame, looks with an eager eye to posterity..."9

Something more significant than historical accident, however, accounts for the literary compatibility of Beerbohm
and Strachey. The most obvious element is their style, suggesting a stronger union between the two writers than critics have so far acknowledged. In his essay on Froude in Portraits in Miniature, Strachey calls the biographer of Carlyle—"a brilliant writer, copious and vivid, with a picturesque imagination and a fine command of narrative." But what is missing is "the supreme quality of style": "one is uneasily aware of a looseness in the texture, an absence of concentration in the presentment, a failure to fuse the whole material into organic life." For Strachey, as the "Preface" to Eminent Victorians emphasizes, this is de rigueur. "The penetrating influence of style" conditions the entire treatment of a subject and is, as Beerbohm later asserted, something to be cherished: "In essay writing . . . style is everything," Beerbohm declared.

Accompanying their attention to style is their recognition of irony and its power. This trope never permits an author to be overcome by his subject or material. Distanting the narrator from the control of his subject allows a fresh perspective, enhanced in part by Strachey's emphasis on selection, detachment and design and assisted by brevity and the freedom of the author's spirit "to lay bare the facts of the case as he [the author] understands them." This in turn permits the personality of the subject to emerge. For Beerbohm, irony is both delicate and ruthless with no one protected from its barbs, including the persona of the author. When Enoch Soames in Seven Men is given the supreme opportunity to be in the reading room of the British Library on 3 June 1997 to examine how posterity has treated him, all he discovers is a brief reference in "Inglish Littercher 189U-19UU" to a "saturi" by "a riter ov th time, naimd Max Beerbohm." For both writers irony leads, almost directly, to caricature, a method Strachey and Beerbohm both exploited. Strachey used it for minor as well as major characters such as Evelyn Baring, Cardinal Newman, Thomas Arnold and Clough, of whom Beerbohm confessed in a letter of 28 July 1918 to Strachey to be "my favourite passage in all the book." But this habit, present in Queen Victoria as well as Elizabeth and Essex, led to severe outcries against Strachey's writing; objectors to his treatment of General Gordon or Prince Albert were numerous. To Beerbohm caricature was innate and in 1901 he theorized that it allowed one to expend contempt and hostility, sharing with Strachey the belief that "most men are not at all like themselves." The job of the biographer or critic or caricaturist was to expose the difference between the image and the reality of the subject. Significant distortion was essential—but so was sympathy: "Without sympathy there can be no fun. A caricature is no good unless it makes one laugh," Beerbohm wrote. And, as both writers quickly realized, caricature created visual metaphors. Throughout his work, Strachey relied on metaphors, whether they were military, as in Eminent Victorians, or spatial, as in the spiral used in Elizabeth and Essex. Beerbohm, of course, used metaphor extensively, even in explaining the very technique of caricature: "The whole man must be melted down, as in a
crucible, and then, as from the solution, be fashioned anew. He must emerge with not one particle of himself lost, yet with not a particle of himself as it was before." This declaration stands as an apologia for both Strachey and Beerbohm and their presentation of character whether in biography or drawing, prose or pastels.

In "The Spirit of Caricature" Beerbohm cites another quality that links him with Strachey: scale. "The most perfect caricature is that which on a small surface, with the simplest means, most accurately exaggerates to the highest point, the peculiarities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment, in the most beautiful manner," he explains. The passage is a virtual prescription of Strachey's method with its stress on detail, the "most characteristic moment" and beauty. In his biographical studies Strachey strives for the deft touch that in a minor character is devastating (such as Clough tying up those parcels in brown paper) and in a major character (such as the serpent-like actions of Sir Francis Bacon) is destructive. Beerbohm had, as S. N. Behrman suggests, a theory of limits which permitted the attainable through the miniaturized. Strachey in his emphasis on brevity, "which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant," makes this "the first duty of the biographer." "Let us have," he wrote in 1931 in Portraits in Miniature, "the pure essentials--a vivid image, on a page or two, without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding." Beerbohm, in his concentrated drawings, refined style and subtle irony, had already demonstrated his agreement.

David Cecil and Michael Holroyd, biographers of Beerbohm and Strachey, have stressed a familiar connection between the two. The former writes that "Max felt to him [Strachey] as to a younger brother" and describes their friendship as "the most significant new literary relationship of Max's later life." For Cecil, Strachey became Beerbohm's connection to a younger generation. Holroyd argues that Beerbohm saw Strachey as "a modified edition of himself," although Beerbohm may have falsified the likeness. Nonetheless, according to Holroyd, Beerbohm believed he was to Strachey what Wilde was to him. But in retirement in Rapallo (1914-1915; 1919-1925; 1947-1956), removed from the culture of England, Beerbohm failed to grow with the intellectual changes taking place, while Strachey appeared to be at the centre of them according to Holroyd. However, Beerbohm continued to create, publishing his three best-known works: ZuUeki a Dobson (1911), A Christmas Garland (1912), and Seven Men (1919). But what Cecil and Holroyd both neglect is the social but the literary connections between the two figures who vividly portray the shift from a world of late Victorian aestheticism to Edwardian counter-reaction.

Through their sense of each other's literary virtues, Beerbohm and Strachey were able to bisect a culture from two opposing angles. Beerbohm, looking at the nineties, found a world of amusing artifice; Strachey, however, skipped that generation to study its predecessor and then travelled further back in time to the Elizabethans to expose, again, the contrast
between the image and the reality. The writers might be thought of as extensions of one body, Strachey continuing in prose what Beerbohm began in his caricatures. (Beerbohm produced very little after 1922, although the Collected Edition of his work appeared between 1922-1928.) As early as June 1921, Beerbohm sensed this transition and inheritance when he praised Strachey's work to Reggie Turner: "his mind and his prose are so like mine and so exactly like what I should have loved mine to be. For sheer divine beauty of prose, and for clairvoyance of mind in dealing with past personages, and for wit, and for much else, nobody comes within a hundred miles of him." For his part, Strachey felt equally indebted. His note of 15 April 1931, thanking Beerbohm for his assistance with his membership in the Athenaeum, evokes his debt. He expresses it in his hope that only Beerbohm will guide him about the esteemed building: "I haven't put my nose in yet. I wish you could be there to show me round. I shall feel rather like a New Boy at school." Beerbohm's decision in 1943 to lecture on Strachey at Cambridge is that belated guided tour—but for the benefit of others.

NOTES


2Holroyd, Strachey, I, 289.

3Max Beerbohm, Lytton Strachey (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1943), p. 5. All further references are to this edition.

4Beerbohm in Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, II, 393; Beerbohm, Lytton Strachey, p. 7; Strachey in Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, II, 393.

5Beerbohm, 21 March 1931, in Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, II, 659.

6Beerbohm in Cecil, Max, p. 350; Beerbohm, Lytton Strachey, p. 7.

7Strachey in Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, I, 375, 376.


9See, for example Guy Boas, "The Magic of Max," The


13Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, II, 294.


17Cecil, Max, p. 350; Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, II, 394.