

# Diminishing Figures: Spectral Simulacra of Authors in Henry James's and Max Beerbohm's Decadent Short Stories

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## Abstract

This paper analyses two stories by Henry James and two others by Max Beerbohm whose protagonists are, at the same time, writers and ghosts. Such a diegetic scenario is interesting because it seems to point at a disguised metaliterary treatment of current ideas about *fin-de-siècle* authoriality and a peculiar metalepsis of the concept of 'the death of the author', later disseminated by post-structuralist thinkers. After a contextualization of Henry James's and Max Beerbohm's dissimilar but equally significant contribution to the genre of the 'Decadent short story', the essay illustrates the features of their writer-ghosts, in order to illuminate their inherent theoretical and aesthetical value.

## Keywords

*Fin de siècle*; Author; Ghost story; Aestheticism and Decadence; Henry James; Max Beerbohm

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Put a novelist into a novel.  
He justifies aesthetic generalizations.

A. Huxley, *Point Counter Point*

1. Between April 1894 and January 1897, *The Yellow Book's* columns were regularly filled with contributions by two writers who might seem quite at odds with each other. Henry James's "The Death of the Lion" opened the first issue, followed by "A Defence of Cosmetics" by Beerbohm. The same happened with the second issue, where "The Coxon Fund" was accompanied by "A Letter to the Editor". Beerbohm was keener on continuity though, contributing to issues three and four with "A Note on George the Fourth" and "1880", respectively. James returned on board in July 1895 with "The Next Time", but it was not until April 1896 that Beerbohm decided to submit to Harland his "Poor Romeo" and, later that year (in the eleventh issue), "The Happy Hypocrite". James then closed the circle by participating in the magazine's penultimate issue with "She and He: Recent Documents". The often simultaneous presence of these two authors is telling, and can be interpreted from various perspectives. The aspect that will be investigated here, although circumscribed, can be interesting in many ways, since it concerns their use of short fiction to depict the artist as a character, thus creating a sort of *mise en abîme* of one of the most frequent topics in the literary criticism of that period. This topic dealt with

the role of the author in such a way that it would arguably culminate in the ground-breaking contribution by Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" (Furness 2013: 344-345). As *The Yellow Book* remains among the most notoriously influential voices in the *fin-de-siècle* period (Brake 1994, Stetz 2007), its participants were indisputably apt at foreshadowing the incumbency of modernity which was to become the prime impulse underlying early 20<sup>th</sup>-century modes of expression (Evangelista 2021: 164-205).

As contributors to such a cultural landmark, James and Beerbohm seemed to be very interested in etching a new profile of the author, suggesting a novel aesthetic space for such a character. Although James and Beerbohm had very different approaches to the Aesthetic Movement and late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Decadent culture<sup>1</sup>, they can both be considered as representatives of that period's fertile ideological unrest. At the time of the *Yellow Book*, James, already known as "the Master", and Beerbohm, a young man blessed with early success, shared such a stage where they could showcase their ability to produce fiction that responded to the coeval cultural and literary ferment. Their presence in the columns of Harland's periodical testifies to their commitment to a crucial phase of Anglo-American literature. As a matter of fact, *The Yellow Book*, in addition to its connection with the Aesthetic Movement, also elicited a formal interest in the short story. When Henry Harland first invited James to collaborate, he specifically requested short contributions. Yet, he refrained from imposing on the constraints normally endorsed by periodical publications, prompting the Master's elation:

For any idea I might wish to express I might have space [...] elegantly to express it – an offered licence that, on the spot, opened up the millennium to the 'short story'. One had so often known this product to struggle, in one's hands, under the rude prescription of brevity at any cost [...] that my friend's [Harland's] emphasized indifference to the arbitrary limit of length struck me [...] as the fruit of the finest artistic intelligence. We had been at one [...] on the truth that the forms of wrought things [...] were [...] the things; so that, for the delight of mankind, form might compete with form and might correspond to fitness [...]. Among forms, moreover, we had had, on the dimensional ground – for length and breadth – our ideal, the beautiful and blest *nouvelle*; the generous, the enlightened hour for which appeared thus at least to shine. (James 1937: 219-220)

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<sup>1</sup> See, for James, Mendelssohn 2007, and, for Beerbohm, Mahoney 2015.

The brevity of the *nouvelle*, its «reviving, refreshing, confirming, consecrating» (James 1987: 54) ability to «touch so many subjects» and «handle so many of the threads of life» (*ibid.*: 57), seemed thus to gain a chance to bestow on British letters the prestige it had granted continental literatures, especially thanks to Harland's brilliant project and active involvement in the dissemination of the form (Hunter 2007: 33). Max Beerbohm, on his part, dramatized in a short story his own desire to write brief narratives with 'cunning subtlety', a quality that immediately betrays the Aesthetic Movement's influence on the genre:

I was determined to make a story of what I had seen – a *conte* in the manner of the great Guy de Maupassant. [He] was an impeccable artist, but I think the secret of the hold he had on the young men of my day was not so much that we discerned his cunning as that we delighted in the simplicity which his cunning achieved. (Beerbohm 2015: 3-4)

Maupassant's allegedly effortless simplicity is something that James was also very keen to achieve, as he concluded his reflection on the *nouvelle* underlining «the effort to do the complicated thing with a strong brevity and lucidity – to arrive, on behalf of the multiplicity, at a certain science of control» (James 1937: 231). The reference to multiplicity also calls to mind Walter Pater's comments on modern existence as «fissiparous, formed of tenuous, infinitely divisible impressions» (Hunter 2007: 9) that are «in perpetual flight [and] limited by time» (Pater 1980: 188).

*Fin-de-siècle* short fiction, or what has been labelled 'Decadent short story', is interesting to study as a «distinct category» in its own right, since it presents itself as «a phenomenon of immense cultural and aesthetic significance in Britain», as «a sentinel of stylistic acuity [that] evolves out of Aestheticism and feeds into twentieth-century Modernism» (Boyiopoulos - Choi - Tildesley 2015: 1). Short stories seemed the perfect harbour for many of the crucial themes that proved pivotal in the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>- century, especially when dealing with artists, writers and, more generally, creators of aesthetic objects: in other words, authors.

2. Despite adjustments and revisions, Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" still remains a most influential document when looking at the process of dissolution of the traditional idea of the author as an irrefutable source of authority. Barthes' analysis starts with an essential and succinct genealogy where he highlights the (French) cultural landmarks that first

called the author concept into question, namely, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry and the Surrealist Movement. At the same time, the image that Barthes conjures up – that of «the Author diminishing like a figure at the far end of the literacy stage» (Barthes 1989: 51-52) – can as well be fruitfully positioned in a historiographical process of redefinition of the author's role in Anglo-American literature. If Barthes' theoretical provocation seems designed to fit future developments of Modernist impersonality (Ellmann 1987: 6), I argue that the metaphor of a waning author could also be profitably contextualized within the late-19th-century production of Decadent short stories. From this perspective, authors who chose to represent artists as diminishing figures might have recognized that the canonical image of the author as a demiurge – crystallized by positivist biographism – was in demise. Such an awareness was to lead to a thematization of the loss of authority and a consequent metamorphosis of the figure of the artist. As the two examples from James and Beerbohm analysed here illustrate, when an author decided to portray an artist on the page, such a decision might have entailed a loss of corporeity, which would eventually transform the fictionalised artist into a posthumous entity comparable to the unstable, liminal presence of the ghost in short stories.

In fact, the *fin-de-siècle* ghost, freed from its extravagant and sometimes camp gothic features, began to be recast as «an ethical category that destabilizes the traditional ontology of the humanist subject» (Vinci 2020: 20) and it thus turns out conceptually useful for our analysis. Such ghosts, with all their proleptically Derridean and Levinasian 'otherness', are theoretically intriguing when associated with the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century artistic panorama. Before long, the impending crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to usher in an epistemological horizon where the artist – after the Symbolist dream of immortality through creation and the Positivist promethean exaltation of the scientist as a discoverer and saviour – was forced to yet again «kneel down [...] to the archaic altar of the dead» (Villa 1989: 34, my translation). In the literary sphere, this shift would result in an image of the artist that became less and less titanic, as the Romantic Faustian ideals of an almighty author waned towards what would later coagulate in the notorious Prufrockian ineptitude.

Migrating from the realm of the gothic romance to the psychoanalytical domain of the Freudian unconscious, the ghostly element underwent a momentous metamorphosis, acquiring, as James's *oeuvre* tellingly encapsulated (Lustig 1984), a major relevance. In this sense, James's and Beerbohm's use of the ghostly can be read in the light of Elisa Bizzotto's reflections on the «aesthetic fantastic», as they both blend «an urgency to

redefine the role of art and artist» with a «use of the fantastic as a device to facilitate this exploration» (Bizzotto 2016: 39). As Henry's brother William turned to the occult domain of spiritism while presiding over the Psychological Society, writers such as Henry and Beerbohm seemed to be fascinated by the ghost story as a literary device able not only to probe and explore the changing scenario of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century modernity, but also to supply an apt analogue to the figure of the literary creator.

Clare Vawdrey, Ashton Doyne, Enoch Soames, and Stephen Braxton, as will be argued shortly, represent some porous catalyzers of an idea of the author that was faded enough to be perceived as questionable, but whose crisis was not ripe enough to be forthrightly labelled as a proper death. These characters became fictional representatives of an idea of authoriality which, after a Positivistic climax, was clearly becoming obsolete. It is as though James and Beerbohm were toying with 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideals of authors seen as demiurges, apparently in consonance with the views Proust would condense in his crucial "Against Sainte Beuve" pamphlet<sup>2</sup>. By relegating the figure of the author to the realm of the ghostly, James and Beerbohm seem to be willing to create a sort of new entity one may refer to as the 'writer-ghost' or the 'ghostly writer', forcedly separated from the material world of society and partaking in the mystery and impalpability of the aesthetic sphere of pure creation. Before presenting the case studies, though, it is crucial to anticipate that, as often happens when literary authors are represented in fiction, these writers are enveloped in a comic aura. A similar satirical vein would be shown by a number of Modernist authors when choosing to give life to characters who shared their condition as writers<sup>3</sup>.

3. Henry James's "The Private Life", first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1892, is a glaring example of a fictional response to factual stim-

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Proust's posthumously published work started as a short narrative as well. After a maxim-sounding beginning («Every day I set less store on intellect», Proust 1958: 17), Proust stages a tea ceremony that he will again deploy in the famous Madeleine episode in *Swann's Way*.

<sup>3</sup> Modernist fiction is literally overflowing with writer characters, and examples abound. The question of the representation of a writer poses some serious theoretical problems to the reader, who naturally tends to equate character and author. On this issue, that might be regarded as complementary to the one investigated in these pages, see the still relevant chapter about *Death in Venice's* 'second author' in Cohn (1999: 132-149).

uli provided by the author's contemporary intellectual scenario. Here, a recognizable 'Robert Browning character' lurks behind the Claire Vawdrey of the tale. In James's words, this character was inspired by «that most accomplished of artist and most dazzling of men of the world whose effect on the mind repeatedly invited to appraise him» as a figure whose inherent divided nature would engender doubts about his having a proper «private and domestic *ego*» (James 1937: 250)<sup>4</sup>. James's decision to address the tension that he perceived between Robert Browning the man and Robert Browning the poet could have just followed the (beaten) track of the Romantic *Doppelgänger*. Yet, James is able to find a balance between tradition and innovation. The *writing eidolon* working in a gloomy room while Vawdrey the socialite is entertaining guests outside is a passive entity, devoid of any agency whatsoever, of even a proper voice, a characteristic that sets him apart from the more popular fictional doubles of the coeval narrative. Vawdrey the writer is a mere working machine, a sort of writing automaton existing as a justification of an inexplicable fact, i.e. the unfathomable abyss that appears to separate a sublime author from an utterly unpleasant human being. These «water-tight compartments» (James 1937: 250) signal and highlight the presence of an ontological cleavage between the disembodied aesthetic creator and the historical writer, a motif that fascinated the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a whole and that was further conceptualized by Marcel Proust, who, less than a decade later, set out to portray this fracture through the character of Bergotte in his *In Search of Lost Time*<sup>5</sup>.

What is interesting in James's portrayal of Vawdrey is his crafting of a ghostly presence not so much connected with the realm of death as with an idea of spectrality capable of generating «machine simulacra» (Micali 2019: 125). If this connection is not incompatible with Romantic writing, it

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<sup>4</sup> James had expressed his disappointment in a letter addressed to his sister Alice almost two decades before he started working on the tale (8 April 1877): «His transparent eagerness to hold *de la conversation* & a sort of shrill interruptingness which distinguishes him have in them a kind of vulgarity. Besides which, strange to say, his talk doesn't strike me as very good. It is altogether gossip & personality» (James 1999: 87). On this aspect, see also Lind 1951.

<sup>5</sup> A trait that unites Vawdrey and Bergotte is their almost unnatural fame (McDonel 2015). Proust builds upon the theme of the deceptive nature of artistic celebrities in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, where, even before the encounter with the writer Bergotte, the narrator has a very disappointing impression of the Berma. Also, Mann's Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* is a well-established and respected writer enjoying the peak of his success.

also seems to foreshadow modern(ist) instances of alienation and dehumanization associated with an impersonal poetic voice, such as those that crowd Ezra Pound's early poem "The Flame" and bafflingly masquerade behind historical figures:

[...] O thou anxious thou,  
Who call'st about my gates for some lost me; [...]  
If thou hast seen my shade sans character,  
If thou hast seen the mirror of all moments,  
That glass to all things that o'ershadow it,  
Call not that mirror me, for I have slipped  
Your grasp. I have eluded. (Pound 1982: 172)

The Vawdrey unconventional revenant-automaton is immediately emblazoned as «a travelling-rug thrown over a chair» (James 1948a: 227). Despite the absence of the event of death, the initial description that the narrator gives of him, that is, of his social self, is deeply connected to the semantic area of the graveyard: his talk conveyed «a sense of our speaking of the dead» (*ibid.*: 219) and his reputation is compared to a «gilded obelisk, as if he had been buried beneath it» (*ibid.*). This explanation is intertwined with his celebrity: in a sense Vawdrey, being a famous writer, carried with him a sort of «prefiguration» through which «the legend paled then before reality» (*ibid.*). Vawdrey is a posthumous entity, and the objectification of his writing activity via the travelling-rug sounds like a literalization of the act of writing itself, an absolutization of that practice. Such an allegorical metamorphosis<sup>6</sup> clearly emerges when the narrator sneaks into the room only to find «the other Vawdrey bent over the table in the attitude of writing» (*ibid.*: 227), giving no sign whatsoever of having noticed the intruder. When the narrator recounts this fact to Mrs Adney, a very famous actress from the company in Switzerland, their exchange gradually envisages it in terms of an utter alterity bordering on animality:

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<sup>6</sup> An analysis of James's resort to allegory would require a separate paper. Suffice it to say here that anything allegorical relating to James's short fiction has to be redirected to his tight bond with his 'forefather' Nathaniel Hawthorne. On the subject, see the pages James dedicated to Hawthorne in his monographic study of 1879, in particular those where he discusses Hawthorne's short fiction (which he labelled «these delicate, dusky flowers», 1887: 59). An interesting reading of James's use of allegory is also provided by Intonti (2006).

'Are you absolutely certain it was Vawdrey?' my companion asked.  
'If it wasn't he, who in the world was it? That a strange gentleman, looking exactly like him and of like literary pursuits, should be sitting in his room at that hour of the night and writing at his table *in the dark*,' I insisted, 'would be practically as wonderful as my own contention.'  
'Yes, why in the dark?' my friend mused.  
'Cats can see in the dark,' I said.  
She smiled at me dimly. 'Did it look like a cat?'  
'No, dear lady, but I'll tell you what it did look like – it looked like the author of Vawdrey's admirable works. It looked infinitely more like him than our friend does himself,' I pronounced. (*Ibid.*: 231)

In this manner James is conceiving and concocting a type of character who is able to reach his audience and deliver a poignant reflection on the independence of the work of art from the actual, and often unrefined, human maker. This conceptual dimension unfolds through the canonical integument of the ghost story, which, in spite of its apparent simplicity, can cope with difficult aesthetical issues (Edel 1948: xxix)<sup>7</sup>.

4. The other *nouvelle* where James revisits the issue of the corporeity of the author is "The Real Right Thing", first published in *Collier's Weekly* in 1899, which is essentially a dramatization of the work of the biographer. The ghost around which the tale revolves is, unlike Vawdrey, a more traditional revenant from the kingdom of the dead. As happened with "The Private Life", the tale is filled with reflections on metaliterary questions, even more direct ones in this case, as when the protagonist-biographer, George Withermore, muses upon the act of writing someone's life in these terms:

Great was the art of biography, but there were lives and lives, there were subjects and subjects. He confusedly recalled, so far as that went, old words dropped by Doyne over contemporary compilations, suggestions of how he himself discriminated as to other heroes and panoramas. He even remembered how his friend would at moments have shown himself as holding that the 'literary' career might – save in the case of a Johnson and a Scott, with a Boswell and a Lockhart to help – best content itself to be represented. The artist was what he *did* – he was nothing else. (James 1948a: 556)

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<sup>7</sup> For further reflections on these issues, see Walton 1992.

This statement is quite telling as it calls into question the legitimacy of life writing as a literary task. The preoccupation with the disclosure of the private life of the author has been a prime concern for James, so much so that it was one of the central themes around which novelist and critic David Lodge built his fictionalized life of the Master in *Author Author* (Perkins 2010). Quite early in the narrative, Lodge's Henry James expresses the wish to attain a sort of post-mortem inaccessibility to the prying eyes of readers, considering such a curious attitude as most pernicious and unwholesome:

There is no privacy, no decency any more. Journalists, interviewers, biographers – they're all parasites, locusts, they strip every leaf. The art we lavish – the pains we take – to create imaginary worlds – is wasted on them. They care only for trivial fact. I feel it is our duty to deny them, to defeat them. When we are dead, when we can no longer defend our privacy, they will move in with their antennae twitching, their mandibles gnashing. *Let them find nothing – only scorched earth. Ashes.* (Lodge 2005: 87)

Ashton Doyne, the writer-ghost in "The Real Right Thing", did not destroy his private papers, and thus his wife asks Withermore to pen a biography that might rummage around in the deceased author's private effects. The biographer becomes the sort of insect that Lodge so accurately portrays. His intrusion in that hallowed harbour of privacy is narrativized as an actual trespassing that summons a guardian spirit returning from the dead to protect the precious realm of his personal life. The last exchange between the biographer and his commissioner, Doyne's widow, is clear in this respect:

'I give up.'  
'Then you've seen him?'  
'On the threshold – guarding it.'  
'Guarding it?' She glowed over her fan. 'Distinct?'  
'Immense. But dim. Dark. Dreadful,' said poor George Withermore.  
She continued to wonder. 'You didn't go in?'  
The young man turned away. 'He forbids!' (James 1948a: 556)

From a sociological angle, this *nouvelle* fits into a line of famous pronouncements of authors in matters of privacy, such as George Santayana's

meditation in his *Soliloquies in England*<sup>8</sup>. Withermore's agency is more and more blatantly represented as one of parasitical usurpation, as «it threatens to turn 'the master' into a mere 'mystic assistant' to his own literary labors» (Teahan 2011: 175). Exposing the details of a private existence without the interested party's consent amounts to thievery, to an assault into a sacred space that is of a piece with the realm of the homely (Despotopoulou 2011: 81). In this tale, the biographer's activity is scrutinised as a vampirical practice, as James was to further elaborate in *The Sacred Fount*. If in this seminal 'anti-novel' he apparently aimed to represent the modern author's «moment of torturous and absolute doubt about the actual residual possibilities of a novel [...] constructed on plot alone» (Perosa 1980: 104, my translation), in "The Real Right Thing" the theme of vampirism is instrumental in associating the creative act with an attempt to seize hold of an absent quality. In addition to the image of the vampire as a lymph-absorbing entity, its revenant nature reinforces the notion of life-writing as a coerced summoning of the dead that demands a reparation for the wrong inherent in that very summoning<sup>9</sup>.

5. Although the narrative structure informing James's two stories might be loosely associated with Postmodern – and thus post-Barthesian – works such as *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes or the short-story collection *Angels and Insects* by Antonia Byatt – it is true that the choice of inserting a literary forebearer into a fictional context has been a transhistorical constant, from Virgil in *The Divine Comedy* to Goethe in Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*. This interesting phenomenon remains «situated at the crossroads between the historical novel, biography and the *Künstlerroman*», and its indeterminacy and oscillation between fact and fiction engender a «tension

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<sup>8</sup> In a very interesting study, Ross Posnock has traced Santayana's and James's relation to the concept of the «genteel yoke of respectability» (1991: 193) and investigated the repressive mechanism lurking behind their response to the ruling social restrictions imposed on them by their similar backgrounds.

<sup>9</sup> Some readings of this short story have argued that James's practice of biography was deeply linked to his perception of life writing as a somewhat 'obscene act', surreptitiously connected to his latent homosexuality (Stevens 1999). More neutral points of view see James's engagement with life writing (both his own and that of others) as an effort «to represent the reach of his memory as much as his memories themselves» (Maunsell 2018: 49). In other words, the (auto)biographical act is seen as more of an experiment in the exploration of the past than as the yielding to a confessional impulse.

between the autobiographical impulse and the recognition of the other as other» (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999: 20-21). Although Vawdrey and Doyne are not factual authors, the many implications linked to their presence pose questions related to novel-writing itself, as James suggested in "The Art of Fiction":

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of its parts there is something of each of the other parts [...] What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? (James 1948b: 13)

According to James, the gallery of characters finds itself in a sort of forced balance with the more dynamic realm of incidents, in an interconnection that recalls his well-known, parallel reflections on the dichotomy between showing and telling. However, it is also true that, when analyzing *The Ambassadors*, E. M. Forster lamented its characters' inconsistency, their being «incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism» (Forster 1955: 160). The only activity in which these «maimed creatures» seem to be engaging is observation, i.e. the same action that James himself had mentioned in the preface to the New York Edition to *The Princess Casamassima*, connecting it, quite significantly, to the pole of spectrality:

Nothing would doubtless beckon us on further, with a large leisure, than such a chance to study the obscure law under which certain of a novelist's characters, more or less honourably buried, revive for him by a force or a whim of their own and "walk" round his house of art like haunting ghosts, feeling for the old doors they knew, fumbling at stiff latches and pressing their pale faces, in the outer dark, to lighted windows. (James 1937: 73)

If such characters underwent a depleting process of spectralization, ultimately metamorphosing into ghosts who haunt James's Balzacian 'house of fiction', the case of Vawdrey and Doyne appears even more significant in this sense, being imbued with an autobiographical desire of reassuring concealment.

6. Max Beerbohm, as anticipated above, was a sort of Decadent Mod-

ernist, a condition which was far from infrequent. His works might be approached alongside Ada Levenson's, Vernon Lee's, Ronald Firbank's, Harold Acton's and even, in some respects, W. B. Yeats's, given their proclivity to envisage the literary act in a manner that was not alien to the context of the *fin de siècle* (Mahoney 2015: 15-22). An artist responsive to an aesthetic vocation rooted in the "Yellow Nineties", even in the face of the sharp break with tradition that characterized the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Beerbohm was admired and celebrated in his time and beyond, so much so that he became one of the building blocks of Susan Sontag's «canon of camp» (1982: 106). Beerbohm's art has often been interpreted in terms of a parody of the *fin-de-siècle* Aesthetic Movement, although it must not be forgotten that Beerbohm's interest in late-19<sup>th</sup>-century forms of artistic expression was serious. For instance, his only novel *Zuleika Dobson* is both a turgidly pompous descendant of Wilde's *Salomé* and Keats's *Belle Dame* and an ironical fantasy of their rebirth in early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Oxford. Beerbohm's irony could be both ruthless and delicate. His treatment of the Aesthetic Movement is a case in point: by adopting «the insider point of view» (Danson 1989: 35), he could be fierce in his criticism without being offensive, thus managing to highlight the productive and constructive core of the movement itself. This view definitely runs counter to the irksome portrait that Ezra Pound gave of him in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), just the year after *Seven Men* was given to the press, where Beerbohm was alluded to as "Brennbaum, the Impeccable" and was thus introduced:

The skylike limpid eyes  
The circular infant's face  
The stiffness from spats to collar  
Never relaxing into grace. (Pound 1957: 67)

In opposition to Pound's caustic (and antisemitic) attack, Beerbohm's art of parodying his contemporaries resided in a fine balance between fierceness and bonhomie, a combination that also connoted his activity as a caricaturist. One example of this can be found in the story "Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton", first published in 1919 in *The Century Magazine*, where Beerbohm plays on complementary portrayals of Dickens and Thackeray along the lines of a dialectics gravitating around the extremes of light vs. darkness and cheerful vs. sulky. These qualities are respectively embodied by Maltby and Braxton, two competing authors. After they both fell by the wayside owing to two unsuccessful books, the narrator – a fictional double of Beerbohm himself – encounters Maltby in Lucca, who tells

him about an odd incident that happened to him during a country-house party, many years before his downfall. Invited by the Duchess of Devonshire to spend a weekend in the countryside, Maltby, who had maliciously persuaded the aristocratic lady not to involve Braxton, would be haunted by a simulacrum of his rival, typically rendered through the *topos* of the mirror:

No one was there. Yet this I knew: Stephen Braxton had just looked over my shoulder. I had seen the reflection of his face beside mine – craned forward to the mirror. I had met his eyes. (Beerbohm 1966: 68-69)

This strange meeting does not prevent Maltby from accepting his social commitment as «Literature’s Ambassador» (*ibid.*) at the Duchess’s residence. Yet the *soirée* turns out a complete failure, as he utterly disappoints her plan to have a fashionable man of letters to lionize among her guests. When Braxton re-appears in Maltby’s bedroom, «[h]is body made not the least furrow along the bed» (*ibid.*: 76) and his image «wasn’t tangible», although «realistic». In short, the rival author «wasn’t real» (*ibid.*) After this dreadful night, the ghost of Braxton became a sort of mischievous poltergeist causing many mishaps to Maltby. The ghost would stop his malevolent tricks only when Maltby left the country house, in a sort of desperate race:

I did but clutch my hat from beneath the seat and hurry distraught from the aisle, out of the porch, into the open air. Whither? To what goal? I didn’t reason. I merely fled – like Orestes; fled like an automaton along the path we had come by. And was followed? Yes, yes, glancing back across my shoulder, I saw that brute some twenty yards behind me, gaining on me. (Beerbohm 1966: 88)

This time, then, the encounter seems to be marked by a peculiarly dehumanizing quality that contrasts with Beerbohm’s more generally humorous bonhomie. The most striking feature of the tale, though, is the effect that such a haunting weekend produced. After the event, Maltby decides to go incognito and wander around Europe to forget his loss of respectability within the aristocratic world. He thus ends up writing a novel about suburban life, a very different work from the one whereby he had originally gained the sympathy of the aristocratic reader. On the other hand, Braxton authors a «savage indictment of the British aristocracy» (*ibid.*: 93), perhaps

as a form of retaliation for not having been invited to Keeble by the Duchess.

The story comes to a close with a sort of witty and comical apologue that tones down the harshness of the rivalry between the two authors. This apologue is also tinged with a baffling note of humour as the reader understands that, despite his attempt to distance himself from the aristocratic world that had rejected him, Maltby finally marries his «padrona di casa» in Lucca, a certain «Contessa Adriano-Rizzoli», a «lineal descendant [...] of the Emperor Hadrian» (*ibid.*: 94).

7. When compared to “Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton”, Beerbohm’s “Enoch Soames” – which first appeared in *The Century Magazine* in May 1916, a few months after Henry James’s death – seems more profound, being symptomatic of the persistence of the Decadent short story at the beginning of the new century and also revolving around a character that is a direct descendant of James’s Vawdrey and Doyne. Yet, despite the somewhat subtler architecture, its dry humour strongly reminds of the Maltby/Braxton vaudevillist story. The writer-ghost in it, the eponymous Enoch Soames, is cast with manifestly laughable traits in accordance with Beerbohm’s «art of satirizing, lambasting, insulting with impeccable decorum» (Lopate 2015: xii). A Decadent poet and the author of two utterly ignored collections, Soames is portrayed as a writer who is highly committed to his ideal of Art and who is endlessly hovering around his more successful colleagues, from whom he gets neither approval nor recognition.

Soames seems to objectify a parody of the Decadent writer, a figure that, at the time Beerbohm was focusing on this story, was already a faint dream. The narrator, who is again a spokesperson for Beerbohm himself, provides a fitting account of this odd character, who stands out as a sort of unrealistic *macchietta*, embodying the stereotypes of bohemian *poètes maudits* in his decrepit paltry demeanour of «a stooping, shambling person, rather tall, very pale» (Beerbohm 1966: 6). Such a colourless simulacrum of an author, when confronted with more successful ‘people from the Nineties’, withdraws into an attitude of haughty indifference that makes him look like a «dumb animal» (*ibid.*: 7). His existence is inextricably bound up with the painful awareness of *not* being part of the celebrated group of writers that animated what, in his book published in 1911, W. G. Blaikie-Murdoch called *The Renaissance of the Nineties*. Max the-fictionalized-author asks his friend William Rothenstein – another historical connection in a short story otherwise characterized by a flashy fantastic quality – about that queer character, wondering why Rothenstein had refused to paint him:

'Why were you so determined not to draw him?' I asked.  
'Draw him? Him? How can one draw a man who doesn't exist?'  
'He is dim,' I admitted. But my *mot juste* fell flat. Rothenstein repeated that Soames was non-existent. (Beerbohm 1966: 9)

As the tale unfolds, we understand that Soames was also allegedly excluded from Holbrook Jackson's influential *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), a book where Beerbohm had been hailed in a chapter tellingly entitled "The Incomparable Max". The diegetic versions of Rothenstein and Jackson assess Soames in a negative way, indeed almost like a non-entity, as the emphasis on his paleness and dimness seem to suggest.

A dramatic change occurs after many years, when the narrator meets Soames in a restaurant and they begin a conversation that touches upon a vexed issue in literary studies, i.e. «neglect [and] failure» (Beerbohm 1966: 23). Overhearing the gloomy remarks of a rather disenchanting Soames is «a tall, flashy, rather Mephistophelean man» (*ibid.*: 21) who, in a Faustian twist, proposes to bring Soames forward in time to 1997, in order to allow him to see what posterity remembers of him, via a canonic check in a literary encyclopedia. The result is a comical redefinition of Soames's existence carried out by Beerbohm himself:

Fr. egzarmpl, a riter ov th time, naimd Max Beerbohm, hoo woz stil alive in th twentieth senchri, rote a stauri in wich e pautraid an immajinari karrakter kauld "Enoch Soames" – a thurd-rait poit hoo beleevz imself a grate jeneus an maix a bargin with the Devvl in auder ter no wot posterriti thinx ov im! It iz a sumwot labud satire but not without vullu az showing hou seriusli the young men ov th aiteen-ninetiz took themselvz. Nou that the littreeri profesn haz bin auganized az a department of public servis, our riters hav found their levvl an hav lernt ter doo their dutu without thort ov th morro. (Beerbohm 1966: 36)

Even in this futuristic hotchpotch language, Beerbohm confirms his reputation as a witty observer of the literary scene. If Soames is only a figment of Beerbohm's imagination, the Faust-Mephistopheles framework conveys a sense of the final devaluation of the figure of the author at large, now – that is, in the early 1910s – even incapable of asserting his own existence and selling his soul to the Devil only to be reminded of his artistic failure and existential void. The metamorphosis reaches its climax in the last passages of the story, when a dejected narrator thinks about his unfor-

tunate friend and provides a final, sympathetic portrait of him:

An authentic, guaranteed, proven ghost, but – only a ghost, alas! Only that. In his first visit, Soames was a creature of flesh and blood, whereas the creatures into whose midst he was projected were but ghosts, I take it – solid, palpable, vocal, but unconscious and automatic ghosts, in a building that was itself an illusion. (Beerbohm 1966: 42)

The whole *fin de siècle* could be said to become a swirling kaleidoscope of spectral presences consisting in fictionalized authors, automata able to write in the dark, revenants protecting private papers and, eventually, Decadent poets who thrive on the subtle line between fact and fiction. The idea of the author's fading, if read under this lens, should then be seen as less of a rupture than Barthes' seminal essay would suggest.

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