



"Negations"

SEVEN MEN
MAX BEERBOHM

INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN UPDIKE

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

CLASSICS

SEVEN MEN

MAX BEERBOHM (1872–1956) was born in London and studied at Oxford. He published his first collection of essays, entitled *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, in 1896 and soon developed a reputation as a brilliant caricaturist and critic. He was married to the American actress Florence Kahn and lived in Rapallo, Italy, for most of his life.

JOHN UPDIKE was born in 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania. He began to publish in the *New Yorker* in 1954 and has contributed short stories, poems, and criticism. His novels have won the Pulitzer Prize among other awards.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

THE MATHEMATICALLY ADEPT reader, counting the names of the men named in the table of contents of *Seven Men*, will notice that there are only six. The seventh is the author, Max Beerbohm himself, who from story to story is seen interacting with his half-dozen heroes; in his elegant fashion he was as specialized and fantastical a specimen of late Imperial English manhood as any of these fictional creations. Born in 1872, he early developed a preternatural poise and grace as a writer and a caricaturist. While still an undergraduate at Oxford he became a contributor to *The Yellow Book*; Oxford became the magical milieu of his only novel, the blithe love-farce *Zuleika Dobson*, an extravagant collegiate *hommage*. Beerbohm retained into old age an undergraduate playfulness, spending much of his later years

ornamenting with illustration, collage, and marginalia his own books and the books of others.

His life was bookish, but the bookishness was sunny, skimming the essence, in marvelous parodies, from his more earnest and ponderous contemporaries, and penning essays collected in volumes whose titles themselves signal a refusal to take his enterprise altogether seriously: the first was *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, followed by *More, Yet Again*, and *Even Now*. As a young man he cut a dandyish figure about London; George Bernard Shaw, whom he replaced as theater critic of *The Saturday Review* in 1898, dubbed him "the incomparable Max." In 1910 the maturing dandy married Florence Kahn, an American actress renowned for her portrayals of Ibsen heroines, and the couple took up residence, interrupted only by the two world wars, in Rapallo on the Italian Riviera. Keenly appreciated but not widely bought during his prime, he achieved geriatric celebrity with his reminiscing broadcasts over the BBC, beginning in 1935, and with the postwar biographical attentions of J. M. Rewald and S. N. Behrman. By his death in 1956, at the age of eighty-four, he seemed a carefully self-preserved souvenir of a spatted, straw-hatted era long absorbed into history.

Always, even when in the thick of London literary life, Beerbohm projected the somewhat isolating aura of a man dancing to his own tune, who would not be deflected from his private bent by the competitive examples of others. The willful exquisitism of Wilde and Beardsley

stayed with him after these hothouse flowers had met their dooms, taking the French perfumes of *fin de siècle* decadence with them; the heartily prolific late Victorians and Edwardians who were his contemporaries—Shaw, Wells, Chesterton, Belloc, Bennett, Galsworthy—inspired him not to energetic emulation but to the scrupulous, devastating imitations collected in *A Christmas Garland*, the finest book of prose parodies in the English language. His brief preface arrestingly states an educational fact true for generations of British stylists:

I had had some sort of aptitude for Latin prose and Latin verse. I wondered often whether those two things, essential though they were (and are) to the making of a decent style in English prose, sufficed for the making of a style more than decent. I felt that I must have other models. And thus I acquired the habit of aping, now and again, quite sedulously, this or that live writer—sometimes, it must be admitted, in the hope of learning rather what to avoid.

Henry James and Conrad earned, it would seem, his warmest admiration, and only Kipling, with his sometimes brutal jingoism, a real animosity. But the ambition of these men, their willingness to extend their gifts into laughable exertions, was alien to the incomparable Max. In "James Pethel," the most earnest of the stories collected in *Seven Men*, the somewhat Conradian hero says

to the narrator, who has been admiring Pethel's nerve and sang-froid while gambling, "Ah, but you despise us all the same!" Us—the gamblers, the doers of the world. Pethel adds "that he has always envied men who had resources within themselves." Beerbohm, by his account, in answer "laughed lightly, to imply that it was very pleasant to have such resources, but that I didn't want to boast." A few pages later in the evening of this encounter, Pethel, who has described himself as a "very great admirer" of Beerbohm's work,

asked what I was writing now, and said that he looked to me to "do something big, one of these days," and that he was sure I had it "in" me. This remark (though of course I pretended to be pleased by it) irritated me very much.

The story that contains this delicately confessional exchange is the only one that has no element of formal parody and that shows, in driving home its moral, some strain: Beerbohm's antipathy to ruthless gamblers exceeds, by a shade, the reader's.

Pethel, with no interior artistic resources, must keep testing himself, and those he loves, against high-stakes risk; the heroes of the other four tales are captive to imaginations more distinctly literary. A.V. Laider's "limpness of demeanor" is marked only by an incongruous shock of white hair that gives him a touch of the charlatan; behind

his bland reticence he is revealed to be a compulsive story-spinner, a wildly inventive bard. The tortuous shifts and obsessive pains of literary rivalry are displayed with a fiendish animation in "Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton," a distinguished specimen of the raft of ghost stories which Victorian religiosity trailed after it. The moment when poor Maltby is, while attending church service, encased within the phantom body of his rival—"All I knew was a sudden black blotting-out of things; an infinite and impenetrable darkness. . . . I calculate that as we sat there my eyes were just beneath the roof of his mouth. Horrible!"—transcends comedy, funny as it is, and touches a chord worthy of an earthier author, deep within the human body, where Beerbohm did not usually choose to go.

Maltby's nightmare, given a placid dénouement in Italy's Lucca, and "'Savonarola' Brown" both date from 1917, when Beerbohm, having taken shelter from the First World War in a cottage on the English farm of his friend the painter Will Rothenstein, found further shelter in recollection of the literary London of his youth. Brown, first met at school and remet fifteen years later, is a "second-nighter"—a more passionate devotee of the stage than the showy first-nighters. "He did not seem to know much, or to wish to know more, about life. Books and plays, first editions and second nights, were what he cared for." The model tragedy, concerning the Florentine monk Savonarola, upon which Brown has been portentously

laboring, turns out, when he dies, to be one act short of five, and in its maladroitness blank verse and mob of Renaissance characters a travesty of Shakespeare. Max was a versifier of dainty skill, and the comic effects, to be savored line by line, hinge on fine points, such as contractions run riot to fit the meter, unhappy coinages like “friskfulness,” clanging iambs, and drooping enjambements. Yet there is something wild and disheveled about the piece overall, especially the last three pages, where Beerbohm asserts his own presence; Bardolatry is possibly so big and well-armed that it has splayed his pen.

“Enoch Soames” is the first and oldest of these sketches, and to me the most moving. The *littérateur* who has everything—dedication, ego, bohemian flair, an adequate private income—except talent is an apparition too close to home for any writer to contemplate without unease. The narrator’s tone, especially intimate and insistent, urges our sober attention, yet with a lovely urbane lightness carries off even the shopworn presence of the Devil, in a fondly described vanished restaurant. Soames’s visit, purchased at the price of his soul, to the British Museum of a hundred years hence is heartbreaking—a visit to his own nonexistence, in the one realm that matters to him.

Were Beerbohm, now, to make a similar pilgrimage, he would be greeted by more structural changes, in the grand but overburdened research facility, than his tale predicts, but he would be rewarded by finding in the

fabled catalog (computer-accessed by now) not only his modest list of titles but enough bibliographical attention to flatter a major artist. Minor artistry became in him a creed, a boast; like Ronald Firbank and Nathanael West, he remains readable while many mightier *oeuvres* gather dust. The filigree is fine, but of the purest gold.

—JOHN UPDIKE