The Novelist's Eye

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Toward the end of his career as an artist-illustrator du Maurier expressed the rather daring opinion that the illustrator in black-and-white may be as important as the novelist or painter -- provided he 'illustrate life from [his] own point of view... (as the social artists of Punch have done from the beginning)'. If he has done his work well, he argues, and has 'faithfully represented the life of his time -- he has perpetuated what he has seen with his own bodily eyes... his unpretending little sketches may, perhaps, have more interest for those who come across them in another hundred years, than many an ambitious historical or classical canvas' (p. 374). In rendering the characters and social details of his day, the illustrator 'may still have the power to charm and amuse' later generations by the mere virtue of the 'literal truth' that resides in his drawings.

Although he illustrated numerous books, du Maurier believed that the pages of Punch afforded him the proper medium in which to develop his drawings into an art form that was as autonomous and enduring as an oil painting or a novel. As an illustrator of books he was keenly aware of the subservient role of the artist whose duty was to portray someone else's characters and scenes. 'If authors would learn a little how to draw themselves', he writes, 'they would not put such difficulties in the artist's way, and expect the impossible of him, such as that he should draw three sides of a house in one picture, or show the heroine's full face, tearstained, as she gazes on her lover vanishing in the middle of the background' (p. 371). Despite some striking illustrations he did for the novels of Mrs Gaskell, Douglas Jerrold, and Thackeray, du Maurier's artistic talent flourished in the more congenial atmosphere of Punch. No longer restricted by an author's conception of character and scene, du Maurier was faced with the awesome task of drawing directly from life and reproducing what he saw there in a structured and meaningful way. He was helped in this endeavour by the organization of the magazine itself, which had on hand artists who had staked out their special areas, including the lower classes of society, sporting events, and politics. As du Maurier put it, 'I have generally stuck to the "classes" because C.K. [Charles Keene] seems to have monopolized the "masses"' (quoted Lucy, p. 391).

After doing a number of random drawings, initial letters, and literary parodies, du Maurier began to develop a pattern and structure for his drawings in Punch that gave them a life of their own. Between the late 1860s and the end of the 1880s he created a fictional world as complex and self-contained as many a novel. As Henry James put it, 'Punch had never before suspected that it was so artistic; had never taken itself, in such matters, so seriously' (p. 344). An avid reader as well as a prodigious illustrator of fiction and a great admirer of Thackeray, Meredith, Henry James, and Mrs Gaskell, du Maurier produced work in Punch that was strongly influenced by the form of the novel. The editor of Punch gave him his subject -- the upper classes -- and the novel provided him a structure for rendering that subject. The fact that late in life he turned to writing novels is really not surprising when one considers his thirty years of work in Punch not only as an artistic end in itself but as his lengthy apprenticeship to becoming a novelist. The relationship between du Maurier the artist and du Maurier the novelist is an intimate one.

Henry James was the first person to observe the similarity between du Maurier's drawings and the English novel of manners. Writing about the illustrations in the Cornhill he says that du Maurier has reproduced every possible situation that is likely to be encountered in the English novel of manners; he has interpreted pictorially innumerable flirtations, wooings, philanderings, raptures. The interest of the English novel of manners is frequently the interest of the usual; the situations presented to the artist are...
apt to lack superficial strangeness. A lady and gentleman sitting in a drawing-room, a lady and a
gentleman going out to walk, a sad young woman watching at a sick-bed, a handsome young man
lighting a cigarette. ... In these drawing-room and flower-garden episodes the artist is thoroughly at
home (pp. 344-45).

James goes on to say that du Maurier's drawings in Punch remind him of the fashionable novel that
flourished in the 1830s, and if it were to be revised du Maurier would be the man to do the pictures:
'the pictures of people rather slim and still, with long necks and limbs so straight that they look stiff,
who might be treated with the amount of derision justified ... by their passion for talking bad French'.
James draws still another parallel between the drawings and literature: 'he has made "society"
completely his own -- he has sounded its depths, explored its mysteries, discovered and divulged its
secrets. His observation of these things is extraordinarily acute, and his illustrations, taken together,
form a complete comedy of manners' (p. 357).

Like George Meredith and Henry James, du Maurier preferred persons that, in the words of Meredith's
Mountstuart Jenkinson, 'shone in the sun' (Egoist, p. 11). And like them he was more concerned with the
subtleties of the comic spirit rather than with the vulgarities of boisterous laughter. It is in the setting of
the Victorian drawing room and, more finely, in the mid-region between two people in conversation,
where false constructions are put by either party upon what is said, that du Maurier, like the novelists,
perceived the source of comedy was to be found. The drawing room belonged to an age that was willing
to sacrifice much for the sake of appearances: illusion became the only reality. It was like a stage in
which elegantly costumed people, set against carefully arranged furniture and draperies, acted out their
lives accordingly to the rigid script of good manners. Against this artificial setting, manners were
destined to be false, and good manners became almost synonymous with insincerity.

Du Maurier's public world is essentially restricted to the drawing room, the after-dinner entertainments,
the alcove looking out to the drawing room, or the dinner table -- high society trying its best to be highly
civilized. Unlike Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, du Maurier showed little interest in the outer world
of highways or rugged heaths. When he does depict outdoor scenes they are usually of manicured
lawns, tennis matches, or the artful landscaped area of Hampstead where he lived.

The characters that du Maurier created to inhabit and visit the elegant rooms of his drawings also
suggest the novelist's eye. As a comedy of manners, the panoramic world of his pictures contained
hundreds of different characters and character types, from foolish Frenchmen to ridiculous clergymen.
The features and dress of a character may vary from drawing to drawing but the type remains
essentially the same. What gives some of du Maurier's characters a novelistic turn, however, is that he
created a set of specific characters who appeared many times over the years. Serial publication was the
common form used for fiction during this period. Figures such as Mrs Cimabue Brown, Jellaby
Postlethwaite, Maudle, Mrs Ponsonby de Tomkyns, and Sir Gorgius Midas became popular attractions
that gave a unity to the drawings in much the same way that the Pickwickians did for the monthly parts
of Dickens's picaresque novel. The characters usually do not develop and grow but the reader is
delighted to hear and see more of their sayings and doings in each new issue of the magazine. Gradually
their reappearance invests them with a life of their own. Having established a world of artifice where
style makes both the man and the woman, and having created an array of characters, du Maurier
assumed the novelist's role again by endowing his people with speech. He wrote his own captions for
the drawings, and these captions are basically of two kinds: the conversational passage -- usually a
dialogue, or the more elaborate third-person observation by the artist himself. The thousands of lines of
dialogue and narration that du Maurier wrote over the years provided him invaluable practice for the
novels he was to write later. In fact, the dialogue under the drawings is occasionally more succinct and dramatic than that in his novels. The drawings are seldom humorous in themselves. His stately and beautiful people could be saying practically anything; the captions are therefore necessary to explain the situation and to trigger the humor. Rarely the joker, du Maurier sought in his captions to elicit from his reader a knowing smile, rather than a laugh. His drawings are best viewed and read with the expectation one brings to the novels of Jane Austen, Trollope, or Thackeray. Temperamentally and artistically, du Maurier belongs with the cast of novelists who delight in the in-door drama of witty conversation, social manoeuvrings, the deftly articulated snub, and the artful though oftentimes foolish exhibition of one's sense of superiority.

Consistent with the dualism that has been noted about his life and with the theme of dualism that runs through his three novels, his drawings reveal a similar division, in this case, between his public and private worlds. The greatest number of his drawings depicts London's fashionable society, but he also did many that are based upon his own family. Tender, sometimes sentimental, they disclose another side of the artist, one seen again in the delightful opening chapters of Peter Ibbetson. Obsessed with the past, du Maurier's Hampstead drawings suggest a quaint, unchanging beauty unlike anything else in Punch. His private world is seen again in the drawings that depict nightmarish figures, grotesque distortions of reality that in a different guise haunt the pages of Peter Ibbetson and Trilby years later.

Both of these worlds, the public and the private, exhibit du Maurier's masterful creation of character and dialogue. First to be examined will be the society pictures that feature the aesthetes, the nouveau riche, clergymen, servants, and liberated women. Herein lies an intensely focused world like that of his novels but which, unlike them, is seen through the eyes of a satirist. Second, the drawings based upon his private life will be discussed, and these present a world that is serious, idealistic, and sometimes frightening.

Du Maurier, George. 'The Illustration of Books from the Serious Artist's Point of View. — II.' Magazine of Art. September, 1890.


