

TODD AVERY

A MANDARIN FOR THE MASSES
Lytton Strachey's Jesus Complex

One evening early in 1927, a cold rain fell on London and glazed the iron railings of Gordon Square with a hint of danger. Wrapped in a long wool muffler and a beautifully tailored herringbone overcoat that hung to his feet, a tall, thin, bearded, bespectacled, forty-six-year-old nocturne in brown slipped out of his rooms and onto the sidewalks of Bloomsbury. Lytton Strachey was on a most *alluring* adventure. His destination: Brunswick Square, and a rendezvous with a handsome, young, wavy-haired *littérateur* named Roger Senhouse, the Dearest Snake with the melting smile and dark grey eyes (Lytton Strachey letter to Roger Senhouse, November 6, 1926, Berg Coll.; Holroyd 546).

Strachey, a member of England's intellectual aristocracy, was the improbable scion of a respected nineteenth-century imperialist family and claimed a distant entitlement to the Scottish throne. Tonight, uninterested in such profane puissance, he would gift his lover's ears with gilded jewels and, in Voltaire's phrase, kiss the tips of his wings (Lytton Strachey letter to Roger Senhouse, January 20, 1926, Berg Coll.). Strachey's privileged Victorian background had provoked, in the form of increasingly "sophisticated deviations" (Holroyd 581), his vigorous reaction against the social respectability and moral conventionality of his class. Ever since discovering Gibbon, Voltaire, and Plato as an adolescent, he had been theatrically flouting established authority, while wielding his own with sardonic glee. At turn-of-the-century Cambridge University, he had exerted a legendary influence on intellectual life from a high perch within the élite Cambridge Conversazione Society. There, among his fellow Apostles, he had celebrated anarchic freedom from moral restraint; under the philosophical influence of G. E. Moore's celebration of beauty

and friendship, he had promoted the democracy of ethical judgment and earned thereby a sinister sort of prestige. Even now, twenty years on, the more artistic students there continued to pay homage to this otherworldly figure, imitating his famous shriek, the Strachey voice, and affecting his notorious languor. He was an aesthete and a dandy, a renowned practitioner of a Mandarin literary style, a revolutionary biographer, a conscientious objector and active anti-conscriptionist during the First World War. He had fashioned himself into a relentless scourge of those calcified Victorian values which stubbornly *would* linger into the new century, retarding the advent of a New Age—an age of Paganism, wit, and flesh, of the abolition of prudery and the very idea of "unnatural" human desires (Strachey, *Letters* 22, 44). His friend John Maynard Keynes had likened him to Mephistophiles; his foe D. H. Lawrence found him nauseating; Beatrice Webb thought him and his friends in the Bloomsbury Group quite wicked (Holroyd 126, 333, 92).

Tonight he felt delightfully and devilishly wicked indeed—and a little bit queasy, too. As the rain prickled the skin of his face, his hands trembled moist in their gloves, his chest tightened, and his quickening breath puffed little clouds that misted his thick lenses in their small tortoise-shell frames. He crossed Russell Square, which sparkled like some enchanted forest, and looped up around Tavistock Place towards his destination. Over the past year he had playfully addressed many letters there:

Deliver this to SENHOUSE (Roger)
 I prithee postman debonair!
 He is the handsome upstairs lodger
 At number 14 BRUNSWICK SQUARE. (Holroyd 578)

He climbed the steps to the front door, removed the precious key from his coat pocket, and let himself in to this Paradise. He paused for a moment; a question from Shakespeare rose to his mind: "How many actions most ridiculous hast thou been drawn to by thy fantasy?" (*As You Like It* 2.4.30-1). As he pushed the heavy door shut behind him, he turned and saw the first flakes of snow falling on an unusually cold and wet February evening.

But if it was chilly outside, things indoors were about to heat up. The day before, writing one of those letters from his home in rural Wiltshire, Strachey had announced his simple intention to arrive tonight at seven o'clock. It is hard to think of a tamer announcement than that. But it is difficult to imagine a less ordinary promise than the one that followed, to this Providential creature with the melting smile and dark grey eyes. "If I find," he had written, "a guillotine set up on the top landing—or a pillory with nails and knife complete—I shall bow to my fate" (February 2, 1927, Berg Coll.).

What Lytton Strachey found on the upstairs landing outside Roger Senhouse's door that cold February evening in Brunswick Square, we will never know. Strachey and Senhouse—who would become a well-respected publisher and translator—inhabited, like their friend Virginia Woolf, a highly literate, communicative, articulate, letter-writing world (Woolf, "Sketch" 65). But even in such a world, time, with its natural power of selection, has a way of concealing even the most sensational facts. However, time occasionally parts its curtain. Often it reveals happenings that, suggesting nothing beyond themselves, remain dead facts. But sometimes it offers tantalizing glimpses of obscure privacies. And occasionally these privacies transcend their intimate origins and speak down the years with a symbolic voice. This evening constitutes one of those rare events. It was followed by others like it. And it marked a turning point in a process that would culminate, three and a half years later, in a decadent, perverse, suggestive, and very naughty act. In the summer of 1930, Lytton Strachey had himself crucified. And loved it.

This climax in Strachey's comedy begs for interpretation. So too does the entire adult life leading up to it. It is far beyond the limitations of word-count to tell here the whole story of Lytton Strachey's development as an ethical thinker as it relates to his perennial interest in and engagement with religious discourse—an aspect of his thinking that has never really been noticed, let alone explored in any detail. What I would like to do is to sketch the rough contours of a new way of thinking about Lytton Strachey as an ethical and social thinker who found a

highly unusual type of performance through which to express some fundamental moral and political convictions.

We do not know, and maybe we should never know—that is a genuine question of the ethics of life-writing—exactly what the famous middle-aged author and the young literary man got up to behind closed doors on a cold Wednesday night in February ninety years ago in the Bloomsbury district of central London. Whatever happened, happened in a building that no longer exists, on a city block that was demolished by Marchmont Properties and Sir Robert McAlpine to make way for a complex of reinforced concrete flats, restaurants, and shops. To none of these would one address an envelope as delightfully as Lytton Strachey addressed his to Roger Senhouse. Whatever happened, happened, too, under oppressive and threatening social and legal conditions that have in many ways faded more thoroughly than the black ink that still shines brightly with human passions and energies and puzzlements from the carefully catalogued pages of note paper placed in acid-free heavy cardboard folders and secreted away at the end of the day in the vaults of archives in London and New York regulated precisely for temperature, humidity, and light.

Some things we can know as confidently as anything. It is almost entirely certain that Roger Senhouse neither beheaded Lytton Strachey that night, nor subjected him to the humiliation of cropping—an auricular insult that thrilled the Elizabethans and, given his fetish for ears—he regularly sends kisses to Senhouse's lollipops or "lolls"¹—drew Strachey's fascinated attention. Photographs, and a single twelve-second film clip, taken at various times over the next five years, until his death in early 1932, provide abundant evidence of his continuing to live, with his head very definitely attached to his body, and his unscarred ears firmly affixed to the sides of his head.

¹ On occasion, Strachey would include abbreviated closing salutations, whose words may be inferred contextually: "A[ll] m[y] l[ove] t[o] m[y] A[ngel] a[nd] m[y] k[isses] t[o] t[he] l[ollipops] (February 17, 1929, Berg Coll.); "A h[undred] k[isses] t[o] t[he] l[olls], a[nd] t[o] t[he] b[alls], a[nd] a[ll] m[y] l[ove] t[o] m[y] b[lessed] a[ngel]" (August 24, 1930, Berg Coll.).

But if the exact “what happened” remains elusive, the accident of archival discovery gives us some clues by making us privy to at least some of the written conversation that passed between Strachey and Senhouse over the ensuing days and weeks. Letters, never published, in the Strachey and Senhouse papers in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, show that two days after their encounter, Strachey told Senhouse, rather cryptically, “I am still far from normal in every region. Certain sensations distinctly remain, which I find fascinating. [...] Really, an experience I wouldn’t have missed!” (February 4, 1927). A few days later, he reveals more. He is glad to know that Senhouse has “been feeling well,” and reassures him, “As for my health, it’s astonishing—But [...] certain marks are still visible!” (February 9, 1927). Senhouse replies by telling Strachey he is “glad you are so well,” and playfully asks, “what if your cheeks are still engraved when you die, will any one guess?” (February 10, 1927). On February 25, Strachey begs Senhouse’s forgiveness for having failed to ask permission to attend a party at the home of a mutual friend, and suggests that his deserved “mental chastisement might be transferred to one of a more fundamental nature—which would be, in more ways than one, a score for me all around.” A week later, on March 1, Strachey celebrates his forty-seventh birthday; on the fourth of the month he writes to thank Senhouse “for my lovely treat. [...] I don’t remember ever having had a better birthday.—I am still something of a Bengal tiger in certain regions! Hum, hum!”

It seems clear from these letters that the “highest spirits” that animate Strachey’s letters to Senhouse and made him hum during this period resulted from an emotionally and sexually stimulating experiment in flagellation—and probably in caning. If there remained any doubt, then Strachey’s letter of April 3 puts it to rest. During a party the previous night at Ham Spray House, Strachey’s Wiltshire home, one of his guests approached him directly on arrival and suggestively asked, “A propos of pain and pleasure making a difference to one’s sense of time, ‘The intervals between the strokes when one’s being beaten—I don’t know whether you’ve ever been beaten [...]’ I vaguely smiled, & the conversation passed on.” Strachey closes this coy smile of a let-

ter with "[s]ome piercing darts of love from your faithful Zebra." These letters, and others in the Berg Collection, record more than an isolated encounter or two. They record two men's reflections on the earliest in a series of encounters that mark a burgeoning commitment to SM fantasy and role-play. They also record the beginnings of a process of shared sexual exploration that would culminate three and a half years later in an event that Strachey would experience as a richly symbolic moment of ecstatic self-transcendence. This is how he thanked Senhouse for their evening together:

Such a very extraordinary night! The physical symptoms quite outweighed the mental and spiritual ones. [...] First there was the clearly defined pain of the cut [...] and then the much vaguer after-pangs of crucifixion—curious stiffnesses moving about over my arms and torso—very odd—and at the same time so warm and comfortable—the circulation [...] fairly humming—and vitality bulking large [...] where it usually does—all through the night, so it seemed. But now these excitements have calmed down—the cut has quite healed up and only hurts when touched, and some faint numbnesses occasionally flit through my hands—voilà tout, just bringing to the memory some supreme high-lights of sensation. [...] What blessedness!

You were a perfect angel last night. (Strachey, *Letters* 625).

The crucifixion of Lytton Strachey by Roger Senhouse in the cool, dull, thunderstormy summer of 1930, together with these early flagellations and further experiments in sexual role-play over the intervening years, helps us better to understand Lytton Strachey's life. I do not mean by this something so simply vulgar as that the previously unpublished Strachey-Senhouse correspondence offers us unprecedentedly detailed access to Strachey's (and Senhouse's, and Bloomsbury's) sexual and emotional life. The value of this correspondence hardly consists in the mere revelation of unorthodox intimacies. However, just as, in the life of Jesus, the crucifixion occupies only a brief narrative space but carries immense symbolic significance, so too the crucifixion of Lytton Strachey occupies but a moment in a life and yet resonates with symbolic value. Moreover, there is good reason to assume that neither Strachey nor Senhouse would balk at the prospect of the interpretation of their intimacies. Neither Strachey nor

his brother and literary executor James nor Senhouse destroyed these letters. Indeed, Senhouse himself sold them to the New York Public Library. And Strachey more than once expressed, in his letters, the desire that his entire correspondence with all its sensational revelations be read in a more tolerant future. These facts suggest their tacit permission publicly to reveal and, more importantly, to make meaning of intimate practices that, at the time, few would have wished known (but that in a world of often exhibitionistic electronic social media will no doubt seem much less shocking). When examined using interpretive frameworks that have been developed over the almost fifty years since Michael Holroyd published his unsurpassably detailed record of Strachey's life, the letters between Strachey and Senhouse, as well as other recent (and much less intimate, but equally interesting) archival discoveries among Strachey's previously unpublished writings, reveal the contents and contours—the social, political, ideological, ethical, and spiritual contents, and the aesthetic texture—of his radically non-normal, intensely queer life.

What exactly do these writings reveal? Why do they matter? In brief, they matter precisely because they illuminate a process of ethical development—an ethical journey and a commitment to the good—that formed the core concern of Lytton Strachey's life and writings. In a variety of social settings and historical and cultural contexts, and with a vigorous and persistent ethical commitment, Lytton Strachey devoted his life to the cause of civilization, as he and many of his friends in and around the Bloomsbury Group understood that term—friends like E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, David Garnett, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Central to this cause was Bloomsbury's embrace of sexual unorthodoxy, and, just as importantly, their commitment to freedom of speech, in private and in public. Strachey was a catalyst to its development in the years that Virginia Woolf called Old Bloomsbury, in a single moment that, whether it actually happened or not, has acquired mythical status in histories of the Group. In this moment, Strachey established not sexual freedom as such but freedom of sexual speech as a core element of the Bloomsbury ethos. One spring day in 1907 or thereabouts he stood in the doorway of the sitting room at 46

Gordon Square. Pointing to a stain on Virginia's sister Vanessa Stephen's dress, he shrieked the one-word question that toppled any lingering Victorian reticence in matters of sexuality among the original Bloomsburians: "Semen?" (Woolf, "Old Bloomsbury" 195).

In Virginia Woolf's opinion, Strachey's doorway interrogation was so important to the development of Bloomsbury because of the link it established between speech and action. To be able to talk freely about formerly taboo subjects encouraged the imaginative appreciation of new, fresh, alternative ways of living in the real world. Moreover, it encouraged the living of these ways. After Strachey asked his question, Woolf recalled, "there was nothing that one could not say, nothing that one could not do, at 46 Gordon Square. It was, I think, a great advance in civilization." She goes on to speak specifically of "the loves of buggers" as a favored topic of conversation among her queer young male friends and the Stephen sisters who together composed the nucleus of Bloomsbury. But what she says on this topic applies equally well to a great many kinds of intimate practices. "The fact," she writes, "that they can be mentioned openly leads to the fact that no one minds if they are practiced privately. Thus many customs and beliefs were revised" (196).

In his life and in his writings, Lytton Strachey was a determined reviser. Around this same time, in a paper he delivered at Cambridge to an exclusive discussion society and suggestively titled, "Will it come right in the end?" Strachey pushes Woolf's point further. Although Woolf would help to transform feminist thinking in the early twentieth century by detailing many of the complex and mutually constitutive relations between public and private life—she is often, and rightly, regarded as a writer who popularized the idea that "the personal is the political"—her understanding here of practice remains private: "no one minds if they are practiced privately"—"at 46 Gordon Square." Strachey, by contrast, vigorously encouraged the public practice of conventionally frowned-upon activities. In "Will it come right in the end?" Strachey takes this encouragement to an extreme limit, and states one of his fundamental ethical convictions, linking freedom of speech and of sexual practice to the advancement

of civilization. A healthy society, Strachey believed, required total freedom of speech in literature, and broad freedom of choice and action in sexual matters; such freedoms, he thought, composed the *sine qua non* of civilization. And so, he thought, “the only hope of our ever getting a really beautiful and vigorous and charming civilization is to allow the whole world to fuck and bugger and abuse themselves in public, and generally misbehave to their hearts’ content” (80).

Strachey’s formulation is provocative. It was intended to be shocking to his fellow Apostles, all-male members of an élite, long-standing, illustrious, and secret intellectual society over which he had established in recent years a preponderant influence. His statement is also, of course, hyperbolic. Lytton Strachey neither fucked nor buggered nor masturbated nor flogged nor had himself pilloried or crucified in public any more than most of us. For the most part, like Woolf, he kept his privates private. There were good practical and self-preserving reasons for his doing so. In the 1920s, the threat of punishment for buggery, or for what English law called “gross indecency”—the law that had sentenced Oscar Wilde to two years of hard labor three decades earlier—remained a potent threat to English homosexuals, even if its actual application was rare. It would remain such a threat until the late 1960s. Moreover, as Strachey surely understood, while any civilization worthy of the name requires a great deal of public and private freedom, it is questionable whether an unchecked public licentiousness necessarily serves the cause of civilization. The extremity of his formulation suggests as much. It is perhaps a fine line that separates civilized bawdiness from flagrant vulgarity, but it is a line nevertheless. Would Lytton Strachey have twerked? If we could reconstitute his ashes and bring him back to life, one imagines him looking around and, with T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, exclaiming, “‘That is not it at all, that is not what I meant at all,’ when I spoke of genuine beauty, vigor, and charm in public life.”

In his very next sentence, after encouraging misbehavior, Strachey admits that he is simplifying, to produce an effect. However, he also goes on to say he is “pretty sure that the main outlines are correct,” and that a healthier, saner, more beautiful and vigorous

civilization does not require "an entire change in the nature of man; all he needs is honesty, wisdom, courage, and good taste, in order to put the whole business on a satisfactory basis. But when he has done that, the world will be singularly changed" (81). It is not a stretch to believe that Strachey might well harbor various misgivings about the crudities of much mass culture today—which has never been especially guilty of "good taste"—just as he to all intents and purposes ignored it during his lifetime, preferring James Boswell to the BBC, Lodowick Muggleton to music halls, Madame de Lieven to the movies. (The exception that proves the rule: he was entranced by Sarah Bernhardt. But who wasn't?) If we could somehow revivify him today, though, his urgent insistence on freedom for all, in speech and in sexuality, as the basis for a more decent and just society would certainly speak loudly and sound familiar to anyone struggling to achieve public approval and legal sanction for "alternative" or non-"normal" intimate activities. If by democracy we understand broad and equal participation in matters that concern citizenship, then to conceive of fucking and bugging and joyously misbehaving as indispensable prerequisites of civilization, and to extend the privilege of sharing in that civilization to "the whole world," is to think in radically democratic terms. It is to imagine, in a way that remains eminently relevant today, the simultaneously personal and political, biological and cultural arena of sexuality, with its blurry lines and perforated walls, as a workshop of democratic civilization.

Lytton Strachey was a provocative and polarizing celebrity in his time who continues to speak to ethical, aesthetic, social, cultural, and political issues that occupy our own. Strachey was an ethical aesthete, and by that phrase I mean that he was a lover of beauty and of artistic craft who derided art's moral presumptions but used art, and celebrated its capacity, to encourage the pursuit of good lives outside of conventional or rigid moral norms—outside, in fact, the very idea of normalcy. In other words, contradiction and opposition were at the heart of his writing and of his way of being in the world. Paul Levy, in his introduction to Strachey's letters, portrays him as an irreconcilably contradictory figure. Strachey was, Levy writes, a bundle of oppositions and sometimes irreducible tensions:

He was a political radical who was born into the ruling class, a member of the intellectual aristocracy who cherished his contacts with the aristocracy of blood, a democrat who did not always trust the people, and one of the original champagne socialists. He was a cynic capable of sentimentality, a sceptic who believed in love. He thought war was the greatest evil, closely followed by religion. He was an open homosexual whose affair with a woman painter was one of the most poignant love stories of the twentieth century. (ix)

In addition, despite Strachey's lifelong struggles with ill-health and

his unrelenting care for his own comfort, he played the victim in a sado-masochistic relationship with his last male lover. His sex life appeared to friends largely to be fantasy, but he bore scars that proved otherwise. Though physically unprepossessing, etiolated and always too thin, he was a dominating figure, capable of manipulating strong and fit men and women to get his way. But he got his deepest joy from being the passive recipient of pain. (ix)

How might it be possible to reconcile, or at least to account for and to respect, these many contradictions, without presuming to reduce them to a single, inflexible cause? "Human beings, no doubt," Strachey writes in *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928), "would cease to be human beings unless they were inconsistent" (9). Moreover, what relationship obtains between Strachey's scars, the tiger marks and zebra stripes inflicted by Senhouse on his hands and buttocks, on the one hand—and, on the other hand, his deeply spiritual disdain for religion, his democratic highbrowism, his belief in the ethical value, and even obligation, of art, and his conviction that he was putting his artistic talents to use for noble ethical and political ends? To put it more directly, what is the link between Strachey's sexuality and his politics?

The answer to this question is to be found in Strachey's perennial concern with fundamental questions of ethics, together with his equally steady if more ambivalent interest in and use of religious discourse as a language in which to express his ethical ideals. In the state of sexual anarchy that he calls up, however playfully, as a condition of civilization, he insists that "the world will be singularly changed" ("Will" 81). What exactly might one discover in this unknown land? Imaginatively, Strachey "seem[s]

to dwell" there "among new braveries and absurdities and fascinations, to come smiling into surprising paradises, and to experience serenely God knows how many extraordinary loves" (81). For Strachey, the experiencing of such loves amounts to the highest type of spiritual experience and constitutes the very nature and purpose of civilization.

This paradise does not, of course, exist on any map. Rather, it exists in the minds of individuals and in the shared consciousness of communities, and it occupies "some curious unrecognized tract of territory somewhere between morals and aesthetics, where the values depend on a queer intermixture of both—on such things as good taste and a kind of intellectual elegance and vigour on one side and vulgarity and a sort of silliness and insignificance on the other" (79). This formulation echoes and resonates with fundamental ethical and aesthetic claims of Strachey's late-Victorian predecessors in the art for art's sake movement, and specifically those of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater. It restates, for example, Wilde's understanding of the occasional congruity between crime and culture. For Strachey, there is no intrinsic incongruity between libertinage and civilization. For to be a libertine, to embrace a type of anarchy in sexual ethics, is finally, he writes in "Will it come right in the end?" to "give [...] copulation a fair chance." How to give that chance? "To do that," he says in language at once ethical, aesthetic, sexual, and religious, "one must conjure up a whole world of strange excitements, gradually beginning and mysteriously deepening, one must imagine the shock and the pressure of bodies, and realize the revelation of an alien mind, one must find oneself familiar with miracles and, assuming an amazing triumph, swim in glory through a palpitating universe of heavenly and unimaginable lust" (79-80). The goal of this conjuring is to release, celebrate, justify, and, above all, to consecrate and, by consecrating, to redeem "an immense number of lascivious wholes which are really valuable in themselves" but "which have been crushed out of existence" (80).

In addition to his echo of Wilde, Strachey's appeal to the "queer intermixture" to be found in his utopian *terra incognita* also depends upon an ideological and ethical contrariness that he shares even more strongly with Pater, who located the spirit of the Re-

naissance in its “antinomianism.” “One of the strongest characteristics,” Pater writes in his study of Aucassin and Nicolette:

[...] of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination, of that assertion of the liberty of the heart in the middle age, which I have termed a mediaeval Renaissance, was its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the age. In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal; and their love became a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion. [...] of a spirit of freedom, in which law has passed away. (16-17)

The only real difference between Strachey’s overt formulation of a new ethical and social ideal in “Will it come right in the end?” and elsewhere, and Pater’s tacit formulation in *The Renaissance*, is one not of substance but of degree: Strachey is markedly more explicit in his description of “the pleasures of the senses.” But the spirit is fundamentally the same. Pater, Wilde, and Strachey all distrusted ideas, theories, and systems that demanded the sacrifice of experience to abstract moral codes or conventions; they all, also, understood ethics in spiritual, if not conventionally religious, terms. Wilde’s deeply ethical fairy tales, for example, vibrate with religious impulse and spiritual purpose, as do his reflections on Jesus and Saint Francis of Assisi in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” and *De Profundis*, his long prison-letter written in chains.

Pater, too, in the very moment of his art for art’s sake manifesto, the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, where he most stridently asserts art’s independence from moral or other philosophical systems and habits of thought, refuses finally to disregard “religious [...] ideas,” inasmuch as they can be useful as spurs to observation and thought, “as points of view, instruments of criticism, [which] may help us to gather up what may otherwise pass unregarded by us” (120). So, too, Lytton Strachey, strident anti-evangelical, Mephistophilean modernist, scourge of Christianity in the line of Voltaire, assumed the mantle of rival evangel for a freer type of spirituality, a healthier, saner, and aesthetically more pleasing, and above all a more decent civilization than that which characterized his “barbarian age.” He was also writing,

he thought, at a historical moment of great possibility for sexual liberty and its attendant spiritual rewards. "The mists were lifting" in the early twentieth century, he thought, and, as he told Carrington, "It's queer how morality is breaking up in every direction" (*Letters* 303).

As a young man, Strachey already saw himself as a sort of priest, a prophet of a rather queer type. He told his "immoralist" friend John Maynard Keynes of his intention "to go into the wilderness, or the world, and preach an infinitude of sermons on one text—Embrace one another! It seems to me the grand solution" (*Letters* 74). The last few years of Strachey's life included a brief period when he entertained the idea of writing a biography of Jesus. By this time, given his decades-long hostility to organized religion in general and Christianity in particular, he had formed an improbable identification with the messianic preacher of the beatitudes and the enemy of scribes and Pharisees. This feeling of shared purpose, notwithstanding his categorical atheism and even despite his dubiousness about the quality of Jesus' ethical ideas, led Strachey to submit to an unusual, deeply loving embrace which resulted in his suffering visible stigmata in his hands and side and, more importantly, enjoying a feeling of ecstatic communion with his lover.²

Lytton Strachey's identification with Jesus—it would be too much, but it is certainly suggestive, to say his Jesus Complex—represents an opportunity to explore, with the help of new evidence and fresh eyes for the old, the centrality of religiously inflected ethical discourse not only to his own sense of creative and critical purpose, but also to the shaping of early twentieth-century life-writing and other aspects of modernist literature. It offers the chance to "go Strachey on Strachey"—to reconsider the shape of Strachey's life from a specific point of view, and to craft that life in a shape that it and his works invite. It also tacitly extends an invitation to think about the quality and continuing relevance of ethical ideas and ideals forged over the course of an adult life a century ago by a writer who was hypersensitive to the power of social, cultural, legal, aesthetic, moral, and religious

² For a fuller discussion of Lytton Strachey and Roger Senhouse's S/M crucifixion activities, see Avery.

conventions to deform vital impulses, disrupt intimacy, demolish democracy, and destroy lives in the name of a spurious normalcy.

Does such an effort as I am describing imply a return to the hagiographic impulse which characterized the early history of biography, which flared again in the nineteenth century, and which Strachey utterly discredited in his own full-length lives and miniature portraits? Not by any means. Lytton Strachey identified with Jesus, but he was no saint, and his ethical engagements were sometimes less democratic in impulse than one might wish. However, he was perennially interested in ethical questions, and this interest—and why it matters—can be understood better by examining a series of symbolic moments from his life and writings, each of them engaging with religious discourse. The effort to trace the development of a life in ethics through a series of such moments requires a fresh and largely sympathetic look with new eyes. On our own part it requires, to borrow a key term from the influential twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas—whose own thinking provocatively marries passionate religiosity to a deconstructive impulse—an ethically invested critical effort to see Lytton Strachey's face—the face that wrapped itself in a muffler against the rain and sleet on its way to that propitious rendezvous with Roger Senhouse and his cane in Brunswick Square one evening in February in the long, cold winter of 1927.

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