CHAPTER - V

FINAL ASSESSMENT

The first half of the nineteenth century records the triumph of Romanticism in literature and of democracy in government; and the two movements are so closely associated, in so many nations and in so many periods of history, that one wonders if there be not some relation of cause and effect between them. It reflects all that is spontaneous and unaffected in nature and in man, and be free to follow its own fancy in its own way. Lamb is associated with this age.

Lamb and Wordsworth had two widely different views of the romantic movement; the latter shows the influence of nature and solitude, the former of society. Lamb was a life-long friend of Coleridge, and an admirer and defender of the poetic creed of Wordsworth. Wordsworth was content to be with nature and bringing an occasional moral lesson to society. Lamb was born and lived in the midst of the London streets. The city crowd, with its pleasures and occupations, its endless little comedies and tragedies, alone interested him. According to his own account, when he stopped in the crowded street tears would trickle down his eyes, -- tears of pure pleasure at the abundance of so much good life; and when he wrote, he simply interpreted that crowded human life of joy and sorrow, as Wordsworth interpreted the woods and waters, without any desire to change or to reform them. Of all our English essayists he is the most lovable; because of his
delicate, old-fashioned style and humour, but more because of
that cheery and heroic struggle against misfortune which shines
like a subdued light in all his writings.

The life of Charles Lamb was not eventful. He sought no
adventures and was strangely indifferent to the events of the
tumultuous age in which he lived. When he left school the French
Revolution was beginning and all through his early manhood England
remained at war with France. Great deeds were done in which his
countrymen proved their worth. But Lamb remained oblivious of
all these things and never so much as hinted at them in anything
he wrote.

No literary man was ever more loved and honoured by a rare
circle of friends; and all who knew him bear witness to the
simplicity and goodness ingrained in his personality. To
evaluate the chapter - Lamb, the Man, Lamb called himself as a
Rusty Boyman. He had to perform the role of a grown up man when
he was fresh coming from his schooling. Lamb - a person as such
was humble, simple and affectionate.

Lamb's earliest literary efforts were four sonnets contrib-
uted to Coleridge's Poems on Various Subjects, published in
1796. Two years later he published along with his friend, Charles
Lloyd, a small volume called Blank Verse which included The Old
Familiar Faces and several of his best known pieces. In the same
year (1798) was published his first prose work, Rosamund Grey, a
story begun in the simple manner of Wordsworth's poems but
continued more in the style of Mackenzie's novel Julie de Roubigne.
which Lamb had been reading. In an experiment with irregular blank verse Lamb produced a drama. **John Woodvil**, which tried to recapture the Elizabethan spirit of tragedy just as in 1796 he had joined with James White, an old school fellow, in recapturing the spirit of comedy in *Falstaff's Letters*. **John Woodvil** was published in 1802 at Lamb's own expense, while he lived a life overpowered by poverty moving about from one lodging to another, and met with no public favour. Between 1800 and 1805 he wrote nothing remarkable except paragraphs and epigrams to newspapers. His period of productivity began in 1805 when he wrote *Mr. H.*, a farce that was produced at Drury Lane in December, 1806, but proved a failure. So far his literary ventures had not yielded much either in money or fame, but in 1807 he undertook to write for Godwin's *Juvenile Library* and, with the collaboration of his sister, contributed the now famous *Tales from Shakespeare*, *The Adventures of Ulysses*, *Mrs. Leicester's School* and *Poetry for children*. The fineness of Lamb's critical gift suggested in the wordings of Shakespeare's plots attracted attention and he was requested to bring out *Specimens from English Dramatic Poets*, with critical comments, a task for which no other English writer of the period possessed comparable qualifications. The critical comments, as soon as published, brought Lamb the reputation of being one of the most subtle and penetrating critics of the drama. His reading of the Elizabethan literature was extensive and *Specimens* did a great deal to revive the fame of the many half forgotten dramatists grouped about Shakespeare and his critical comments, besides drawing attention to their
qualities, emphasised the point of view of the new school of romantic criticism of the earlier day. Three years after the publication of the Specimens his critical powers were further exhibited in a series of contributions to Leigh Hunt's magazine, The Reflector (1810), of which the best were the essays On the Genius of Hogarth and On Shakespeare's Tragedies, provoked by the errors of popular estimates and written in the light of noble enthusiasm.

Lamb, however, wrote only a few critical essays, and by modern readers he has been more commonly known for his Specimens of the Elizabethan dramatists, itself an impressive work of critical intelligence. In such a work Lamb could present himself simply as an editor, captioner and noticeable commentator. In collaborating with his sister on the Tales from Shakespeare, he knew that his sister's would be children and their demands would be strictly absurd. In all this there appears the conscious attitude of the original who elects to become a secondary man. The strength and keenness of Lamb's tone, then, comes from the strength of his self-doubt. When, by his own account, he wrote a play, Mr. H., which failed to take, he joined the audience in hissing it from the stage on the first night.

"On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century", he appreciates the great comic actors for their ability to detach themselves from a part. They abstracted the theatrical presence of a character from its moral reality, with the result that the audience saw a character without wanting to see through it.
This Lamb takes to be the whole secret of comedy.

"Translated into real life", he observes, Congreve's and Wycherley's characters would be intolerably wicked. "But we do them wrong in so translating them. No such effects are produced in their world. When we are among them, we are amongst a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our usages."¹

Thus on the one hand, the coherence of literary works is seen to be greater than the coherence of life; the rules we require for the enforcement of order in the latter realm are therefore useless in the former. On the other hand, the persons whom we meet in comedy are "chaotic" in inimitable ways: this is so patent that no danger can be foreseen to life by the infection of their example. When we go to the theatre, we go to another life.

The liberality of this judgement applies to a single category only, which Lamb sees as representing a place of "perfect freedom." On The Tragedies of Shakespeare, Lamb says, unfit these plays for any representation at all. With its claim that performance is an enemy of reading, the essay presupposes that reading is the sole form of attention by which we feel a community of purpose with an author's imaginings. Lamb recalls what our language itself seems to show, that the texture of words is something more than the report of intonations. The inferiority of acting to reading is further confirmed by his observation that dramatic speeches of any sort can move an audience
as much as Shakespeare's given the right choice of the tactics by the performer. It may be conceded that the very structure of Lamb's argument is having two contrary views. If the changeable artificialities of performance establish the integrity of the text alone, the existence of the text itself remains a constant temptation to performance. Still, with a curious singlemindedness, his essay makes an attack on spectacle as a means of enchantment. What it defends is not a therapy of moral education through nature, but a return to the act of reading as a way of thinking and imagining.

Thoroughly characteristic of Lamb is to write a praise-worthy paper on "The Sanity of True Genius", suggested by Dryden's famous line as to "great wit" being nearly allied to madness. It aims to disprove this, and to show that, on the contrary, the greatest wits "will ever be found to be the sanest writers." He illustrates this by the use that Shakespeare and others make of the supernatural persons and situations in their writings:

Caliban, the Witches, are as true to the laws of their own nature (ours with a difference) as Othello, Hamlet, and Macbeth. Herein the great and the little wits are differed; that if the latter wander ever so little from nature or actual existence, they lose themselves, and their readers.²

Lamb gives a marvellous semblance of paradox, which is felt to be true. Lamb proceeds to declare that in Spenser's Episode
of the "Cave of Mammon", where the Money-God, and his daughter Ambition and Pilate washing his hands - the most discordant persons and situations - are introduced, the controlling power of the poet's sanity makes the whole more actually consistent, than the characters and situations of every-day life in the latest novel from the Minerva Press. It is a proof, he says:

... of that hidden sanity which still guides the poet in his wildest seeming aberrations.  

Lamb wrote so decisively that no detached sentence could have conveyed this outstriking argument. His higher imagination plays in true criticism.

That Lamb was a poet is at the root of his greatness as a critic; and his own judgements of poetry show the same sanity to which he points in his poetical brethren. He is never so impulsive or discursive that he fails to show how accurate is his judgement on all points connected with the poet's art.

About the old ones, the classics of our literature, it was not to be taken for granted as to what his opinion in any case would be. For example, he was a great admirer of Smollett, and was with great difficulty inclined to admit the superiority of Fielding. For him to enjoy a work of humour, it must have human flavour. And that work must have humanity ingrained in it. Humour, without pity or tenderness, only repels him. These are the obvious limitations of Lamb as a critic. Where his heart was, there his judgement was sound. As it is, Lamb's
contribution to that end is of the rarest value. Lamb did more than recall attention to certain forgotten writers. It was Lamb who poured light from himself upon them, not only elevating every charm and deepening every truth, but making even their eccentricities beautiful and lovable. In doing so he has associated his name for ever with theirs. When we think of the sweetest names - Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Cowley then the thought of Lamb will never be far off.

The folios especially won his heart. He was once seen kissing one containing Chapman's "Translation of Homer" before he put it back on the shelf. He would have kissed it even more affectionately had it contained Bishop Taylor's Holy Living or Sir Thomas Browne's Urne-Burial or Richard Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. Lamb was ever delighted in the neglected and supposedly odd and obscure authors of two hundred years earlier. For him their obscurity and oddness added attraction. His reading of all these works made his conviction more stern that human life is in its nature inexplicably strange.

The Essays of Elia were of various kinds; they include reminiscences, character-sketches, fantasies, literary appreciation; but they all had the similarity to express the author's private and personal reactions. It was Lamb's inspiration to record such reactions. That particular impulse awakened his sleeping creative genius to activity. Earlier he had made efforts in the forms of Drama and stories but in vain. Their
he could express himself indirectly not directly. The Essays of Elia is primarily a portrait of its supposed author. In this book his views are included to give it a shape of portrait - more living and strange.

A very significant question arises whether Essays of Elia project a portrait of Charles Lamb or not. To this Lamb himself said:

Let no one receive these narrations of Elia for true records. They are in truth but shadows of fact - verisimilitudes not verities - or sitting but upon the remote edges and outskirts of history.

Lamb's aim is to create a work of art. The portrait's subject is a man he titles Elia. The personality of Elia could not be fully identified with that of Lamb. Though the elements of which Elia is constituted were picked up from Charles' own personality. The subject of the essays is picked up from Lamb's experience but Lamb changes them with artistic beauty and glamour. This fact can be very well verified by his essay "Christ's Hospital". It can be said that whole Elia is not without Lamb. But Lamb in his most characteristic fashion is there with his feeling and liking for personalities and places, especially for London, his love for dwelling in the past, his personal liking for book-reading and theatre going. Elia consisted of such memories - he takes joy in recalling his youth and childhood, describing people and incidents. After
this period, Lamb had a mature imagination and projection of sentimental or amused reminiscences.

Lamb portrays himself in the essays like "My Relations". While assessing Lamb his art of characterization is discovered, especially, when he deals with the members of his family. He renders their minutest details like Chaucer does in Prologue. The other main characteristic is that of mixing of humour with pathos in order to have an effect of sweetness. This is a difficult task but Lamb achieved his goal, for example in his essay "Christ's Hospital" in which he writes about Coleridge:

> O the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early homestead! The yearnings which I used to have towards it in those unfledged years! How, in my dreams, would my native town (far in the West) come back, with its Church, and trees, and faces! How I would wake weeping, and in the anguish of my heart exclaim upon sweet Calne in Wiltshire.5

Much has been written and with good reason, about the humour of Lamb, his power of infinite jest, his exquisite sense of style. It may be well to begin, for once, by insisting upon his wisdom as the greatest of all his qualities; it has been dulled, partly by his own habit of hiding it by a jest, and partly by a misconception by contemporaries. Though Hazlitt in Table Talk calls Lamb the most sensible as well as the wittiest of men, there is sometimes a trace of condescension in the reference of Lamb's friends by him. Lamb himself justly
complained of Coleridge for the phrase "gentle-hearted Charles", and said roundly that he would rather be called "drunken dog". Lamb was one of the wisest men of his time. No one but a man endowed with the very genius of common sense could have been so uniformly right. Taste alone will not do, for taste is apt to have a bias. Lamb's liking was for the quaint and the antique. "The Old and the New School-Master" is the work of a man who has looked upon life with the shrewdest and most penetrating eye. There is a sound philosophy of life in "Old China", and excellent principles of education are laid down in "Recollections of Christ Hospital".

To be able to comprehend and do justice to that, which is widely different from ourselves, is one of the things most difficult to achieve. Lamb's own words in "Imperfect Sympathies" show how great for him the achievement was, how impossible it was for any but a mind most richly endowed with good sense, an eye most penetrating to detect reality:

I love Quaker ways, and quaker worship. I venerate the Quaker principles. It does me good for the rest of the day when I meet any of their people in my path. When I am ruffled or disturbed by any occurrence, the sight or quiet voice of a Quaker acts upon me as a ventilator, lightening the air, and taking off a load from the bosom. But I cannot like the Quakers (as Desdemona would say) 'to live with them'.... I must have books, pictures, theatres, chitchat,
He was temperate in his meals and diversions, but always kept a little on this side of abstemiousness.⁹

A man may, however, be most sagacious and yet fail to win love, as Lamb won and still retains it. The secret of that is the mobility of nature which the facts of Lamb's life so eloquently reveal.

To sum up Lamb's childhood, boyhood and Rusty boy-manhood, it may be concluded that his life revolved around terrible events and he always faced the difficulties and realities of life and tried his best to overcome them. Brown very rightly depicts the whole picture thus:

Among the tantalizing "ifs" of literature is what Charles Lamb might have been like as a man and writer if, in a fit of madness, his sister Mary had not slain their mother when he was only twenty-one. The "gentle Elia" the world loves was the product of ungentle and terrible events. He was the step child of a calamity as bloody as any to be found in the most blood stained Elizabethan dramas of which Lamb was later to become a champion. To a tragic extent Lamb's life, hence Elia's character, was carved out for him by the case knife which poor deluded Mary drove straight and deep into their mother's heart.¹⁰

For the next thirty-eight years Lamb lived as a brave, and happy prisoner of the happenings of that fatal afternoon when
Mary killed her mother. He played the part of a tragic hero and we pity him more because he was without self-pity. Moreover, he assumed full responsibility for Mary and devoted his life to her. It is because of this complete devotion to her that age too early started showing its mark on Lamb and ultimately overpowered him. That is also the reason of Lamb's depicting himself as a smoky and eccentric oldish fellow, settled in both his habits and his singleness, whose youth had come to an abrupt end. Without Mary, Charles's "Dream-Children" might have been real. He might not have waited so many years to propose to Fanny Kelly, the actress and Fanny might even have accepted him.

Then the present, not the past, might have been his delight. Retrospection would not have become his shelter. He would not have to refer himself as "boy-man". The texture, the range, the very tone and temper of his work would have been different.

The devotion of Lamb and Mary for each other could be a subject of envy for any modern brother and sister. Their love for each other was honest and lasting. No brother and sister in history are more inseparably linked. To Lamb their life as an old bachelor and a maid was just like double singleness.

Although Charles had to go through great sorrow, he was not discontented. He correctly referred to himself and Mary as shorn Lambs. He had inculcated the habit of living with sorrow and started taking it as a routine work of a clerk at the East India House. He meant what he said in his essay "New-Year's Eve", in a form of confession:
I am in love with this green earth; the
face of town and country; the unspeakable
rural solitudes, and the sweet security
of streets.\footnote{11}

The joy William Wordsworth found in a daffodil, Lamb derived
from a chimney-sweep. He was for human nature and the hum of
city streets. These two delighted him utterly.

Lamb was so possessed by his city of London and portraying
himself that he had not reflected in his essays the great events
of turbulent years. He lived through England’s wars as if
Europe were at peace. He himself admits that he was deaf to
the noises which kept Europe awake and therefore he could not
make present times present to him, which perhaps justifies his
not being interested in public affairs of his times.

Though not much interested in others’ affairs, yet he had
a great capability of making others laugh. But nature of Lamb’s
laughter was keen. Through this keenness and manner of enjoying
he detected frailty. These amused details are the foundation
for his fantasy and the basis of his reveries.

Lamb was known for his prejudices - his likes and dislikes.
He was a passionate man and his prejudices were his substitutes
for passion. It was in them that he lived, and because of them,
in part, he lives for us.

Lamb was most autobiographical of authors. To read him
on any subject is to read about him. The reader establishes a
sense of daily intimacy with Lamb. In the same vein Brown writes in his introduction:

In his copy Lamb could not more escape from himself than in his living he could leave Mary. Yet self-centered in the ordinary sense he was not. The world, for the conceited man, starts and ends with himself. For Elia, Charles Lamb was merely the point of departure to the world around him. Although with him the first person singular was a favourite pronoun, as he used it, it somehow managed to seem printed with a small "I".

Lamb was too unpretentious to pretend to be omniscient. He was poignantly aware that few people are able to speak for themselves, much less for others. Speaking of and through himself was his way of speaking for all.12

He speaks for others through himself. In the beginning of the essays he prefers to present his picture and in the development/course of the essay he speaks for others. This aspect is very well reflected in his essays but especially in "Christ's Hospital", where he describes Coleridge's loneliness in this manner: "I was a poor friendless boy. My parents, and those who should care for me, were far away ..."13 and so on.

This way of writing shows how feelingly Lamb could write for others also. He had the capability of understanding the joys and sorrows of others:
He knew his own voice contained the echoes of other voices. In this way he chose to write, intertwining with his identity griefs and affections which were not his own, "making himself many, or reducing many unto himself."

Since truth to Lamb was as personal as everything else, facts enjoyed no immunity from his prankishness. It diverted him to distort them when, as Elia, he wrote of his friends, his family, or himself. His life of mystification was one of the abidingly boyish aspects of his character. It pleased him in his essays to mislead his readers by false scents; to write Oxford when he meant Cambridge; to make Bridget his cousin, not his sister; to merge Coleridge's boyhood with his own or to paint himself as a hopeless drunkard when, as a matter of fact, he was a man who, though he loved to down a drink, was seldom downed by drinking.14

The subject of his essays were - his family, his youth, his London, the places he had visited, or the characters he had known and he had given a detailed account. It remained always his endeavour to delight his readers. He never wanted to inflict pain through his writings; as he himself said, he left that for heaven.

No record of Lamb's literary career during the twenty-eight years preceding the Essays of Elia can leave out a reference to
his everyday life to which all his writings are so obviously related. The full significance of what he says, the humorous or pathetic references, can only be understood by knowing the manner of his life and the company he kept. Lamb often expresses a hatred for office work, and, if he had had only himself to consider, might have given up his assured salary for the precarious existence of an author.

The most tragic thing in his life was his failure to realize how empty his life would be without the ledgers and the desk against which his spirit so often rose. While the routine drudgery of his clerkship continued, he spent his leisure in study. Literature was his solace. It is a remarkable fact that all his writings were the product of his evening employment and recreation. His heavy responsibilities required his clerical salary to be supplemented. Old bachelor and maid, they shut themselves away from social life that was needed to relieve the tension of their anxieties.

In the early years Coleridge was the only sustaining and stimulating company. But as his circumstances improved, Lamb became the centre of the best literary circle of the time. He had the gift for friendship and attracted the most diverse literary men to himself. His supper parties were attended by the keenest critics and the most distinctly creative men of letters. The flow of wit that occurred on such occasions has been described by Hazlitt in his essay, "On the Conversation of Authors". About Lamb, Hazlitt has written that he was the most
delightful and exciting and the most witty and sensible among the men. He always made the best pun and the best remark. His serious conversation, like his serious writing, was his best. No one ever stammered out such fine, piquant, deep, eloquent things in half a dozen sentences as he does. His jests melt like tears, and he probes a question with a play upon words.

Hazlitt very beautifully depicts the whole personality of Lamb in his The Spirit of the Age thus:

We have known him almost from a child. and we must say he appears to us the same boy-poet that he ever was. He has been cradled in song, and rocked in it as in a dream, forgetful of himself and of the world.15

These words of Hazlitt picture the writer of the Essays of Elia which appeared from 1820 to 1825 in the London Magazine and were reprinted in book form, the first series in 1823 and the second, The Last Essays of Elia, in 1833. Lamb is depicted as the gentle egoist and commentator in life at home, living his life and delivering, without a trace of vanity of dogmatism, his witty and tender observation of men and things. So many of the essays are confessions of personal prejudice, others are records of memories or pictures of his moods. Whatever the subject, the way of approach is always personal. Whether he writes of "Old China", "Imperfect Sympathies", "Poor Relations", "Dream Children", the charm is always that of his odd but lovable personality communicated and suggested by that style which could not be def
Lamb's retirement from service, so eagerly looked forward to, was, in a sense, the prelude to his death. He had left London and taken a cottage at Islington in 1823. On retirement he sank into a state of monotony far more unbearable than the routine of office. His life, from now onwards, was rather colourless. He himself became tired of too much leisure. He moved from one habitation to another, tried to get back to London, spent a good deal of his time in long walks through the country; but spirit seemed to have departed from the world. His thoughts were now often of death. And ultimately his death came in.

No dead man in the whole field of English Literature, is better loved than Charles Lamb. Lamb's essays depict charm, sweetness, humanity and above all they consisted of beauty which is rarely found in literature. As an essayist he seemed never to take himself seriously; his assertive humour, resting on his gravity as much as on his deep human sympathy, prevented his being taken too seriously by others. Although his understanding of things was poetic and his humanity kept him magically near all suffering, yet he was saved from thinking of himself tragically by his fine sense of play. Without affection or callousness he put on banter, began punning, made grotesque comparisons and altogether in a fantastic wantonness of spirit construed the stuff of misery into a joyous scene in the great comedy of life. No man of genius, who has lived through life like Lamb, can arrive at forty-five without learning many hard lessons.

Not only was he purged of the vanity of youth but, having
been softened in spirit toward all men, he began early to be
gently detached from the world and grew philosophic in temper
and mellow in judgement. In the quietness of his own seclusion
Lamb wove his dream of life; in the company of friends who loved
him dearly he stammered confidences of wisdom playfully, without
ever raising his voice in swelling words about the inhumanity of
man to man or the cruel disparities of the human lot or the hope
of recompense. Lamb’s width of his charity, his fine sense of
human affection etc. all tend to prove that, inspite of indiffer-
ence to creeds or dogmas or churches, a more religious-minded
man, he left his mark on English Literature.

Lamb’s habit of pondering deeply on their writings reacted
on his language and vocabulary and gave to his speech the same
far-away cadence in the voice, the same tempered, peaceful and
almost happy sadness. His style became a curious compound of
elements drawn from the language of his favourite authors,
giving to it a certain rareness of phrasing and a charming
quaintness of flavour. The borrowed and bookish elements are
fused into a style so completely new and individual that its
remote origin is seldom betrayed. In passing through Lamb’s
temperament these elements were harmonized with the cast of his
peculiar mind and impressed with his personality. The odd turns
of expression, the flashes of felicitous epithets, the airily
flitting allusive images, the frequent parentheses, the deli-
cately designed pauses that emphasise, and the bewildering blend
of quotations suggesting a richness of literary experience are
all means which Lamb employed to play at literature with a child's love of fun and frolic. Everything about his style is an index of his pathos and sensitive, flashing humour which lead the reader to think of him less as a writer of books and more as an intensely human and kindly man with whom it is great comfort to be in communion. Lamb was the man who brought about an imaginative treatment of English prose in exchange for the formality and solidity of much eighteenth century writing.

Lamb was buried in Edmonton Churchyard on 3 January, 1835. The tombstone bears the following inscription composed by the Rev. H. F. Cary:

Farewell, dear friend; that smile,
that harmless mirth,
No more shall gladden our domestic hearth;
That rising tear, with pain forbid to flow,
Better than words, no more assuage our woe;
That hand outstretched, from small but well-
eared store,
Yield succour to the destitute no more:
Yet art thou not all lost; thro' many an age,
With sterling sense and humour shall thy page
Win many an English bosom, pleased to see
That old and happier vein revived in thee.
This for our earth; and if with friends we share,
Our joys in heaven, we hope to meet thee there.\(^{16}\)

Cary very rightly said in his inscription that he would conquer many an English bosom. There is a beautiful amalgamation of old and happy state revived in him. His essays are simply literary -
taking his readers to the past, a dreamy kind of atmosphere is evolved in his essays which gives rise to the romantic element in his essays.

To sum up, owing to Lamb's portraiture of self in his essays he is considered to be the prince among the English Essayists. A befitting tribute to Charles Lamb could be paid in the words of Antony for Brutus in *Julius Caesar*:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world.

"This was a man!"17
NOTES

2. Ibid., p.271.
3. Ibid., p.273.
6. Ibid., p.91.
8. Ibid., p.219.
9. Ibid., p.220.