CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

They call me the inimitable and the incomparable, and the sprightly and whimsical...I wonder if I am.

Max Beerbohm

SELF-CARICATURE
The personal essay was almost a lost art after Charles Lamb. Due to the rise of the novel in the later Victorian era, it became an unfashionable literary form. It was practiced only by a few like Thackeray or Stevenson. The increased pace of journalism at the turn of the century gave it further a setback. It became a matter of the editorials and the columns. For its survival, it had to meet the double challenge. It suffered, until it met, in Max Beerbohm, the essayist who championed its cause in the nineties. He, too, wrote his occasional pieces in the periodicals of the day. But he maintained its identity as well as sanctity. In fact, Max is responsible in reinstating its old glory in the twentieth century. Having introduced to it the lasting charm of good writing, he saved it from the perils of journalism. Having written painstakingly, he made it as respectable and serviceable a medium as any other literary form in our times.

Max brought to the essay, consciously and purely, an interesting personality. According to Virginia Woolf, "This presence, which haunted the essay fitfully from the time of Montaigne, had been in exile since the death of Charles Lamb", until Max welcomed it home by the means of an exact and beautiful style. It is rather futile to look up for a 'new idea' or a 'message' in Max's essays. In a real sense, they are bellerophon — they aim at entertaining. In the name of the subject-matter, they reveal the essayist's unique frame of mind. It was a

1. Modern Essay, p. 46
mind nurtured in the calm and quiet surroundings of a decent Victorian home, enriched by the readings of Thackeray and Edward Lear and the avant-garde, and matured in the idyllic atmosphere of the aesthetic Oxford of Pater and Wilde. When Max took up writing, he was almost "a finished personality." His essays, thus, benefitted greatly from his rare intellect, wisdom and sense, serenity and sentimentality. To this was added the satiric, but, on the whole, an amiable temperament. It is obvious, too, that Max's writings form a homogeneous body of work. May be an essay, or a review, or a portrait, it is imbued with his consistent viewpoint, the qualities of head and heart, and it produces the effect of an unmistakable artistic taste. Therefore, his prose-writings are treated as the parts of his activity as an essayist. On the whole, they express a typical English individuality, characteristic of a transitional period like the Edwardian.

Max volunteered himself to writing in a decade noted for hectic literary activity. He started his career as "a mere minor sparkler" among his illustrious contemporaries - Wilde and Beardsley, Shaw and Wells, Henley and Kipling, and Chesterton and Belloc. The latter were great enthusiasts who had denounced, one way or the other, the Victorian values. Each of them had his own say: each vied with the other in proposing a solution of his own for the problems on the social and the personal levels. In contrast, Max exercised the essayist's right not to offer any blueprints to salvation. He took simply the post of a 'detached observer' who watched the busy scene with keen interest. He behaved as 'Our Lady's Juggler' who concentrated on his own art of the essay. His pleasure lay in interpreting, recording, and criticising things, as they struck him. And in communicating the pleasures of his own
mind, the essay served him as an apt medium.

Max opened his writing account with 'A Defence of Cosmetics' and closed it with 'Laughter'. They appear, respectively, in The Works of Max Beerbohm and And Even Now. To be precise, they are the creations of "the young coxcomb" and "the old self" - rather they signify the two ends of his "mental growth"1 - a distinct growth from the satirist of the nineties to the humorist of the early decades of this century. But Max's essays reveal, from start to finish, the same man, despite the profound change in his spirit and tone. Max's case may aptly be presented in the words of David Cecil:

In his graceful, well-bred way he was one of the Edwardian showmen, as much a public personality as Shaw or Wilde. The difference between him and them was that they had platforms, stood for socialism or for aestheticism, Max stood for Max, for his uncommitted self, his idiosyncratic self. 2

However, Max's uncommitted, idiosyncratic self was a fair blend of the qualities old and new. He was a smart Edwardian so far as he was an aesthete, a dandy, and a lover of the individual freedom; he was a decent Victorian so far as he was of a conservative bent, a Tory, an aristocrat, and, to some extent, of a Philistine standpoint.

From the early writings, one learns of his sympathy with the Edwardian reaction against the Victorian solemnity and sobriety, but one learns, too, of his disillusionment of Peter's philosophy that led to the 'fin de siecle' tragedy. Though he was an aesthete, he had no share in the immoral overtones of his period. That he was a moralist, and that he judged an action from

1. 'Preface' to The Works of Max Beerbohm (First Edn.) p. xiv
2. David Cecil: op.cit., p. 177
its moral worth, is evident from "Diminuendo" and "The Happy Hypocrite".

Max's essays display, on the whole, his great wisdom and sense. Like his contemporaries, he held no extreme views. "Every virtue", for him, "...is a mean between the two extremes."

Amidst the quest for the novel and the new, he disclosed a strikingly conservative bent. Like the decadents, he did not forgo "the influence of tradition and start with a clean slate", for he thought, "tradition was always a safer guide to truth than the talk of men."\(^1\) No doubt, he, too, revolted from the crease Victorianism, but it was a revolt "from the present to the past",\(^2\) from the unsettled conditions of his own period to the settled ones of the preceding periods. The essays in More, Yet Again, and Mainly On The Air testify to the truth of the statement. They give proofs of his attachment to the eighteenth century morals and manners and the aesthetic past of London. They disclose his love of the grand old ways, and of a life free from the taint of the industrial advancement. [p. 113] Jackson finds his pages replete with the deeper appreciation of the fine tradition of culture. He regards his as 'the representative viewpoint of our century', as Horace's, Addison's, or Lamb's was in theirs.

From these essays Max emerges as the social historian and the social critic of his period. In fact, the Edwardian era was a period too unsettled to provide the calm and tranquil setting Max loved. It was "an Era that was in its social manifestations very like to the Second Empire in France."\(^3\) Consequently, the excesses

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1. *The Works*, p. 115
2. *Mainly On The Air*, p. 130
of his period, such as pretensions, and snobbery, the fashionable craze, rise of women and vogue for children, humbug and vulgarity, were incompatible with his own point of view, and evoked his sharp criticism.

The conditions of life in the post-world war I period made Max even more uneasy. He was quite allergic to modernity and its ingredients – commercialisation, mechanisation, speed, mass-media of communication, and so on. Neither did they appeal to his aesthetic sense, nor did they seem to contribute to the development of an individual. He loved "the freedom to sit cosily and lead my own life. Tranquillity, independence, quiet fun. Books. Pipes." In short, he found the leisurely ways foreign to the modern life.

The critics, like Page Campbell, treat Max's views as "old-fashioned", and acknowledge him as "an interesting link with the past." However, Max admitted: "I may be old-fashioned but I am right." That Max's point of view is strictly individual, is quite evident from his outlook on life. He held that life is a riddle as ever. He was keenly aware of our mutability, and of misery, pain, sorrow, failure, and unhappiness to be the inevitable human lot. But they did not depress him, for he saw much in life to count on, to remain cheerful. Contrary to the modern consciousness of hopelessness and frustration and waste, he was a 'monist' and sceptic whose ideals were Henry James and Maeterlinck. Max's scepticism resulted in a distrust of the "messages":

Our Dylan and D'Annunzio and Bernard Shaw and Gorkie - let us harken to them and revel in them. But let us mix up all their "messages" together.

1. A Variety of Things, p. 251
2. Around Theatres II, p. 3
and strike an average and not suppose that we are appreciably one whit nearer to the truth of things. 1

He was of the view that the safest guides to a happy life were "the humdrum old-faith and, thereby, humdrum old-wisdom." It need not be stressed that Max was least convinced of the uptodate philosophies and movements of the time. His essays register his scorn at Marinetti's Futurism, Suffragist Movement, Freud's Psychoanalysis, and at the intelligentsia — represented by Dostoevsky, D.H. Lawrence, and others. He derided, too, the institutional personalities, such as the Prince-Regent, Shaw, Wells, or Kipling, for their seriousness about personal views. He retorted: "Only the insane take themselves quite seriously." 2 On the whole, the essays bear the unmistakable signs of a refined taste. From them one may safely develop the view, in the words of N.L. Clay:

To understand Max you must know the difference between people and persons...in one sense, he is Nature's (and England's) not-to-be-repeated felicitous accidents. 3

The view is strengthened by the essays in And Even Now. The greater pleasure awaits one in them, since they reveal the delicate shades of the writer's personality — a personality "carefully toned down to the finesse of moderation." 4 Like Charles Lamb, Max selects only those aspects of his personality which serve his aesthetic end. From these essays, one gets glimpses of Max's mellowed spirit — equipped with a child-like vivacity and youthful imagination. The essayist appears not only as a cynical philosopher and a humanist, but as the connoisseur of human character, too. He

1. Max Beerbohm: Quoted in David Cecil's Max, p.180
2. The Works, p. 124
3. N.L. Clay: op. cit., p. xii
4. A.K. Toole: op. cit., p. 195
paints the character, either of a contemporary, or of a man of letters, in all its subtlety that seems amusing to the eye. He draws each character in sly humour and subtle irony. The characters seem to be playing their due parts in the "one-man show" of which Max himself is "the protagonist." On the whole, And Even Now represents Max's 'genuine self' — a fair blend of aestheticism and comedy.

From the critical essays, Max emerges as the 'temperamental critic' whose criticism is in the nature of "the emotion recollected in tranquillity." He is an aesthete of the Wildean order. But his aestheticism tends from Wilde's "crude aestheticism" to Henry James's "finer aestheticism — moral as well as literary." It is evident from his interpretation of the theory of 'art for art's sake' as 'art for artist's sake'. He laid equal stress on the beauty of thought and the beauty of style — essential for the exquisite art. He was a great admirer of the genuine art, a jealous guard of the artistic standards, and a severe critic of the cheap art.

From these essays, one learns of his courage of opinion, stress on personality in literature, humanity, and an acute critical intellect. Through them, he conveys:

The critic's aim should be to encourage every writer to do what he can do best, what is most natural to him; not to implore him to persist in tasks which... he will never accomplish. To every artist that form of art to which his own talent is best suited should seem the highest form of art. It is curious how often the artist is ignorant of his own true bent. How many charming talents have been spoiled by the instilled desire to do "important" work; some people are born to lift heavy weights. Some are born to juggle with golden balls. The lifters are far more numerous in England than are the jugglers.

1. David Cecil: op.cit., p.12
2. Ibid., p.192
Max has also attempted other forms of prose-writing—tale, parody, burlesque novel, and caricatures in prose. But he is an essayist from first to last. These writings are the essayist’s experiments in fantasy and sly humour. In them, Max’s caricaturing and writing instincts have joined hands. They too express the writer’s individuality—his moralism, for instance, in The Happy Hypocrite; hatred for war in The Dreadful Dragon of Hay Hill; loathing for mechanical civilisation in others. In Zaliska Dobson—the burlesque novel on Oxford—Max satirises the cult of dandyism, expresses aversion to the ‘masculine woman’, and seems to illustrate what would happen if superior Ithecan woman was come to life. Lastly, in Seven Men, Max laughs a subtle laugh at human vanity. He not only exposes the fallibility of human nature, but ridicules, too, the grievous affectations of his own age. Max’s outstanding achievement is that he has revived the art of ‘Character-writing’ in our times. He is in fact the modern equivalent of Hall, Lever, and Fuller—the seventeenth-century ‘Character Writers’.

The thematic study of Max’s writings reveals that he commanded a very small milieu: he was mainly occupied with the life and literature of the Edwardian age. He was mainly interested in the men of letters and theatre and books. R. Lynd rightly observes that he is “the lord of a pot rather than of a large garden”, and that he has seen life through the mirror of literature. It is evident, too, that though he came to the bustling literary scene of London with the decadents, he belonged to the main stream of English life, not to the brief interruption—characterised as the English Decadence. N. L. Clay aptly observes:

And he not written such a man might be little more than a link with the vanished England. The mind of

1. *Essays on Life and Literature*, p. 152
Max Beerbohm was more exquisite than his dress — a rare mind giving rare pleasure. Readers who appreciate what he offers can come to say to his shade: “Thanks for everything”. 1

The words ‘rare mind giving rare pleasure’ contain the gist of Max’s ‘intention’ in writing. He explains: “to instruct is a dreary function. I should have liked to thrill, to draw moisture to the eyes.” 2 He recognised his own bent, and wrote to create aesthetic pleasure. Wilde thought of wedding aestheticism with comedy; Max put it to execution. He is, therefore, an aesthete and a humorist.

Max’s humour is his own. It owes nothing to any other writer’s humour. It is an individual’s refined and delicate sense. It is neither a stereotyped thing, nor an added ingredient, but a natural flow of spirit behind the pen. Max’s humour has spontaneity as well as variety. The smiles won by Max come from both — the qualities of head and heart. His satire and wit are as much the means of the comic-writer as his pure humour is.

Max’s humour ranges from impish to mellow: it moves from pungent irony to mild irony, from parody to burlesque, from sly humour to fantastic humour, from nonsense to practical joke, and from irony to self-criticism.

In the early writings Max raised ‘the reflective laughter’ from his satire and wit. His satire had its source in his distaste for excess, extravagance, humbug, and vulgarity prevalent in his own society. They jarred with his moral standpoint and the refined, delicate taste. Since he did not want to preach, or to amend the morals, he expressed his reaction in the subtlest form of irony.

1. H.L. Clay: op.cit., p. xii
2. Mainly On The Air, p. 33
and the gentlest shrugs of protest. His good-natured wit and the sense of mirth provide his satire a lightness of touch. His satire is restrained befitting from his sense and wisdom, sympathy and amiability. It is, therefore, amusing rather than hurting.

Max's skill in satire comes to full fruition in parody. In *A Christmas Garland*, Max has parodied the seventeen modern prose styles. Parodying the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the writers, Max burlesques their thought. He, thus, catches their souls and lays them threadbare. The parodies include Hardy, Meredith, Henry James, Shaw and others. Max's admirable use of parody has given it a respectable place as a literary form in modern times.

Max's pure humour raises 'spontaneous laughter'. It observes the principle of fine contrast, for it springs from the solid basis of his seriousness. In order to produce the desired effect, he maintains a perfect harmony between his seriousness and comic perception. To be precise, Max laughs Meredith's "the richer laugh of mind and heart."

Max's pure humour has three broad patterns: sly humour, fantastic humour, and humour in self-criticism. Max's sly humour operates on the incongruity in character. *And Even Now* and *Seven Men* provide its best examples. "Kolniyatsch", the mad Slav poet, makes him laugh as much as the ageing poet Swinburne. Much Gostes has been drawn as subtly as Hilary Halkby and others. One revels at each turn in his subtle but mild irony.

Max's fantastic humour operates upon the serious emotions, such as love, fame, failure, and death. They have been dealt with from the humorist's inverted angle. In *Juliette Robson*, the
undergraduates commit suicide on account of their unrequited love. It seems that the humorist is keenly aware of love's contaminating power. Death is an integral part of the comic designs in *Seven Men*. Each of the men dies dramatically leaving a comic impression rather than the sad one. It is only in the essay 'William and Mary', that death leaves the humorist in an awkward and melancholic mood. Like Lamb, the essayist is very human and sentimental. With the exception of 'William and Mary', Max is the humorist on the sunny side. R. Lynd wittily remarks if Max were to write Shakespeare's plays again, the results will be unbelievable; ... he would make Hamlet a man who lacked the will to write the last chapter of a masterpiece, and Othello an author who murdered his wife because her books sold better than his, and King Lear a tedious old epic poet who perpetually recited his own verse till his daughters were able to endure it no longer and locked him out for the night. 1

The most important variety of Max's humour is humour in self-criticism. Since he was fairly introspective, he was equipped with a great self-knowledge. He could very well discern his own absurdity, limitations, and eccentricities. Max's thrusts at himself are quite relishing, since they have been made impartially.

Max is an outstanding twentieth-century humorist. The properties of his humour - self-criticism, humanity, and sentimentality, rank him with the great humorists like Chaucer, Lamb, and Thackeray. "His work", in the words of David Cecil, "is the finest, richest expression of comedy in all the twentieth-century literature." 2 Some critics - E. Wilson and L. Kromenberger, find faults with him, detect some defects in his humour, but these

1. R. Lynd: *op.cit.*, p. 152
2. D. Cecil: 'Introduction' to *The Godley Head Dearbhla*, p. 17
defects are lost among the virtues. In fact, Max's humour is to be enjoyed, not analysed or dissected.  

Max bridged up the gap between aestheticism and comedy by the means of an exquisite style. But his technique involves the utmost care in the matter of the 'form' of the essays and the manner in them. Max is a classicist in the matter of form. Each of his essays is an 'organic whole' having a beginning, a middle, and an end. As a consequence, they possess a "life-like quality." Due to their compactness, G. Goethe compares them to the "sonnets."

Max's style is highly individual. It is marked for precision, lucidity, subtlety, and distinction. In other words, it is an incisive style - "dedicated to the technique of trifle, to the explication of a pleasant ego." Sterne introduced it first to his novels; Max perfected it in his essays. Like any genuine style, Max's style has a voice of its own. It is the voice of an extremely interesting individual who chats about himself and others and the pleasures of life in golden ease, light, clear, and delicate. It is, further, the voice of the smiling cynical philosopher who muses on the general scheme of things, and communicates his own pleasure to the reader in such a way that, for a moment, he is "shut in."

In the matter of style, Max was ever a man of exquisite taste. The "exquisite polish (the Limae labour)" of the essays discloses his fastidiousness of the artistic taste. In fact, he was the child of his own age - "the born stylist" in the line of

1. N.L. Clay: op.cit., p. xii
2. A.R. Tussi: op.cit., p. 191
Peter, Wilde, Whistler and Logan Pearesall Smith. He was "cursed with an acute literary conscience", he could never lower down his standards. Though, with the advancing years, he toned down his early 'preciosity' and developed a 'naturalness' of manner, he could never give up his fastidiousness.

It is perhaps the reason that he could never take to journalism, though he had been working for twelve years as a journalist on The Saturday Review. He contradicted Shaw and others who thought that nothing that is not journalism will live as literature. He observed: "What distinguishes literature from journalism is not vigour or sharpness of expression: it is beauty of expression." As a consequence, he introduced to the essay an inimitable, faultless style in an age when the essay was built round sharp epigrams and brilliant phrases, irrespective of the fact that they were ineffective. His style depends on "an elastic subtlety of phrase", which gives it the quality of incisiveness. Max's style is easily distinguishable from the styles of his contemporaries - Wilde, Shaw, Chesterton and Yeats. Their styles borrowed much from journalism, consequently, much of their stuff is dated, while, as S. Wilson puts it:

...Max Beerbohm's prose has endured since it never asserts itself - except in the comic eminence of 'Yellow Book' preciosity - one can always forget it and find it fresh. 2

In order to write effectively, Max exploited all the linguistic resources, and arranged his words, with the help of the set rules of punctuation, into a pattern of prose noted for its conversational grace. His prose has the spontaneity of the

1. Quoted in S.C. Roberts: 'Max Beerbohm': op.cit., p. 119
2. 'A Miscellany of Max Beerbohm', p. 58
French prose: it is "the prose cherished as prose too seldom is in English, as an art in itself."¹ Along with Churchill, he is one of the makers of the modern English prose, who have shown the way how "the living English" can be written.

Max is the direct descendant of Lamb in the field of the personal essay. But he never wrote like him, and can easily be distinguished from Robert Lynd and J.V. Lucas - Lamb's imitators. If Max attacked the dead stuff in literature, he did not spare the writers who were not themselves:

It is a natural wish of every writer to be liked by his readers. But how exasperating, how detestable, the writer is who touts for our affection...Many essayists have made themselves quite impossible through their determination to remind us of Charles Lamb...²

Max's wisdom and sense and the oblique manner of criticism earned him from Shaw the epithet - "the incomparable Max."³ The phrase sticks, as Max justifies it. Whatever he wrote, he wrote with perfection and distinction. Though he works on a small scale, has not the capacity of Dickens and Thackeray, he is, on his own ground, unequalled.

Max has to be admired for the very real modesty about his own work. He admitted himself neither to be 'incomparable', nor a 'genius', nor to have any 'ambition'. He simply had some modest wishes - "to lead my own life, to pass muster." He confessed:

My gifts are small, I've used them very well and discreetly, the result is that I've made a charming little reputation. ⁴

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1. A.K. Twell: op.cit., p. 198
2. Yet Again, p. 267
3. cf. Max and Will: op.cit., p. 7
4. cf. S.H. Behrman: op.cit., p. 17
However, it is not an impossible statement from a humorist. None can deny the truth of A.C. Ward's observation:

He holds a high place among the twentieth-century essayists; he is completely original, whereas the others carried on the tradition of the early nineteenth-century periodical essayists. He is a creative critic of literature and life, with a generous streak of special genius; a philosophic jester bursting bubbles of snobbery and pretense with wit and irony and satire. 1

Notwithstanding that Max's reputation has fluctuated strangely throughout the first-half of this century, he has been read and re-read and enjoyed. Now with the revived interest in Beardsley and the nineties, he may command more favour. Max spoke of Lytton Strachey that he was read only by a few, but "it is always by the devotion of a few only that good books become classics." 2 His own, though not in tune with the spirit of the modern literature, have become classics.

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1. Twentieth-Century Literature, p. 205
2. Mainly On The Air, p. 192