

“The Incomparable Max”:
A Study of Sir Max Beerbohm’s Concept of Identity and
of His Relationship with Britain’s Fin-de-Siècle Culture

by

Astrid Phillips

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Abstract

Sir Henry Maximilian Beerbohm, better known as Max Beerbohm, was born in London in 1872. By the time he was in his twenties, a new artistic and literary movement called "Decadence" was growing in popularity, and Beerbohm immediately made a splash within it as a talented caricaturist and writer. He befriended assorted notorious Decadents such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, and made notable contributions within this creative arena.

When studying Beerbohm's work, I found it useful to explore in particular the nature of identity within Beerbohm's art and writing, and then to use the results of this exploration to evaluate his role within Britain's "fin-de-siècle" (or "end of the century") culture, which included Decadents as well as their detractors. This approach reveals two primary components of Beerbohm's view of identity -- surface and depth -- with a correlation between the two being necessary for avoiding an identity crisis. I define "surface" within the context of this thesis as image (such as a person's appearance) or even as physical sensation; "depth", on the other hand, pertains here to a person's moral character, and sometimes even to conduct which reveals their true nature. By observing the interaction of surface and depth with each other in multiple works by Beerbohm, I determined that they reveal a distinctly anti-Decadent sentiment on Beerbohm's part, even during his years of contribution to the movement.

Beerbohm's philosophy of identity revealed to him within the space of only a few years that Decadence took great interest in surface, particularly in image and artifice, while entirely ignoring the importance of depth. As this became clearer to Beerbohm, he began his shift away from the movement towards a greater embracing of depth in conjunction with a Decadent wit. In such works as his caricature of Oscar Wilde in 1894, "A Defence of Cosmetics" from that year as well, and *The Happy Hypocrite* three years later, Beerbohm's emphasis upon depth becomes more and more significant. At the same time, he still employed aspects of the Decadent sensibility provided that they did not overwhelm the depth which he conveyed.

By the time Beerbohm wrote *Zuleika Dobson*, he was still adhering to his philosophy of identity, although with the understanding that incorporating Decadent elements would not necessarily damage this philosophy. As he shows in *The Happy Hypocrite*, an applied surface is meaningless if it does not have strong depth to back it up, and this insistence points to a refinement of Beerbohm's philosophy of identity. This refinement is the concept that depth comes first and surface second, although surface is an important element to develop as well.

Applying all of the abovementioned information to *Zuleika Dobson*, and then including the possibility that the novel could be a parable of British fin-de-siècle culture according to Beerbohm, the possibility soon becomes clear that Beerbohm actively tried to avoid Decadents as well as their critics. He sought, instead, to pursue his own creative voice, even if it meant turning his back on what British society had accomplished thus far, and took with himself only the elements of the past which he felt were necessary for enriching his creations as an artist and as a writer.

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Short Titles

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Introduction

Sir Henry Maximilian Beerbohm, better known as Max Beerbohm, was born in London on August 24, 1872. From the time he was a child he showed great talent for writing and caricature, and this precocious talent later enabled him to contribute to a significant literary movement when he was barely twenty-one years old. He was attending Oxford University in 1890 when he made the lucky acquaintance of a young talent scout named William Rothstein, who sought to publicize the emerging authors of the day. When Beerbohm learned that Rothstein was creating a magazine to champion the ideals of a new, Parisian cultural movement known publicly as Decadence, he could not resist submitting his work which Rothstein had admired. Thus the notorious *Yellow Book* was born, allowing Beerbohm (and many other writers and artists) entrance into a movement which sought to inspire public outcry and was championed by such well-known figures as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. Two years after this entrance into the world of Decadence, Beerbohm published a set of caricatures in the popular magazine *The Strand*, which gave him relatively impressive visibility since his works appeared within the same issues as the popular *Sherlock Holmes* stories. Shortly after the turn of the century, he even succeeded George Bernard Shaw as a theatre reviewer for the prestigious *Saturday Review*. Beerbohm ultimately published voluminous amounts of his written work, including poetry, essays, and novels; he also exhibited caricatures for most of his life, finally passing away on May 20, 1956 after a long and fruitful career.

When studying Beerbohm's work, I found it useful to explore in particular the nature of identity within Beerbohm's art and writing, and then to use the results of this exploration to evaluate his role within Britain's "fin-de-siècle" (or "end of the century") culture, which included Decadents as well as their detractors. This approach reveals two primary components

of Beerbohm's view of identity -- surface and depth -- with a correlation between the two being necessary, in Beerbohm's view, for avoiding an identity crisis. I define "surface" within the context of this thesis as image (such as a person's appearance) or even as physical sensation; "depth", on the other hand, pertains here to a person's moral character, and sometimes even to conduct which reveals their true nature. By observing the interaction of surface and depth with each other in multiple works by Beerbohm, I determined that they reveal a distinctly anti-Decadent sentiment on Beerbohm's part, even during his years of contribution to the movement.

I further suggest that Beerbohm's novel *Zuleika Dobson*, published in 1911, is the culmination of Beerbohm's exploration of identity, and that it is a parody of the cultural rift between Decadents and their critics. Moreover, it may well be a confirmation of Beerbohm's thought that Britain at the last turn of the century was culturally laughable, with its two main camps of thought each taking itself far too seriously. What emerges at the end of my study is a very peculiar portrait indeed of Beerbohm: he appears anti-Decadent when he was most strongly affiliated with the movement, and reproaches both of the dominant philosophies of the British fin-de-siècle more than ten years into the twentieth century, ultimately divorcing himself from a milieu in which he formerly had been extremely active.

The Character of Decadence

Before speaking any further about Beerbohm's exploration of surface-depth duality, and how such exploration culturally defined him, it may help to better understand the then-prevailing culture of Decadence as well as the general fin-de-siècle culture within Britain. The two were certainly not the same -- Decadence was a vigorous cultural movement that attracted much attention, participation, and criticism; the fin-de-siècle culture was a mixture of various

movements at the time that centered mostly around the foci of Decadence and the culture of its critics. Decadence elicited a great deal of criticism from some who considered themselves the guardians of national good taste and strong moral fiber, resulting in reactions ranging from printed vitriolic criticism to well-publicized lawsuits.

Simple “decadence,” as opposed to the capitalized “Decadence,” is about excessive sensuality to the point of moral (and possibly even physical) degeneration. According to John Reed, who studies the role of intellectual trends within the arts of the past and present, the concern about decadence stems from a perceived threat to national and cultural stability. This concern was triggered in Beerbohm’s time by “Germany, a youngster among European nations, [who] administered an appalling blow to French pride and self-confidence by its incredibly swift military victory in 1870 Pessimism spread, and words like *decadence* and *degeneration* were in the air” (*DS*, 2). It did not take long for the pessimism to spread beyond continental Europe and into Britain, who kept a close eye on the latest in French culture and was therefore susceptible to all of France’s prevailing societal fears. In both France and England,

[t]he invasion literature so popular at this time indicates a national mood of anxiety coupled with misgivings about national vigor. In addition to its concern over military, cultural, and financial ‘decadence,’ Edwardian England was alarmed by the prospect of actual physical degeneration of its citizens. (*DS*, 3)

Indeed, what is particularly fascinating about this prevailing fear was its basis upon the misconception that the threat was solely from the outside. For such an ‘attack’ of degeneration against a nation to be at all successful, there must already be a moral or physical weakness present in the assaulted population for degeneration from the outside to set in at all. Such weakness, which could be caused by pessimism and a subsequent sense of hopelessness, was

described as “a cheap core fantastically adorned” (Adams xi), with a person’s outer adornment taking precedence over a rich internal foundation of strength, faith, passion, and even morality.

This abandonment of inner-strength and self-confidence was a common feature of the fin-de-siècle mentality, although it was not the only feature; there were those who fought desperately to preserve inner-strength and self-confidence (both of which would constitute ‘depth’), rather than abandoning such traits casually or with relish. As the writer and playwright Oscar Wilde gained notoriety for his rejection of traditional cultural values, his critics perceived him as a personification of what was wrong within Britain at the time and did everything in their power to take his cultural validity away. Jonathan Dollimore, who analyzes societal reactions to sexual trends, states that “[o]ne of the many reasons why people were terrified by Wilde was because of a perceived connection between his aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression He was attacked by the press (in the words of one editorial) for subverting the ‘wholesome, manly simple ideals of English life” (*SD*, 67). People clung desperately to these ideals, hoping that they would be enough for braving potential future threats of decay both physical and moral. The result was a cultural *mêlée* which Wilde and many other artists and writers continually fueled.

In fact, Wilde and his supporters made a point of proudly fighting back at every step of the cultural brawl. As Dollimore further states, “. . . Wilde attacked . . . notions of identity as subjective depth which manifest themselves in these newspaper reports as wholesomeness, right reason, seriousness, etc . . . ” (*SD*, 68). Wilde and his circle of friends and associates had discovered within themselves “a contempt for traditional views of custom and morality” (Nordau 5), mainly by observing how easily an established way of life could be upset and devalued; their critics could only try to defend virtues which appeared to be dying out in the face of a new century, and hope that their idealistic message would finally rekindle its lost popularity.

Meanwhile, these cultural rebels who focused mass hysteria into an art form dubbed themselves “Decadents”, and their critics wholeheartedly agreed. Reed notes that this group created a literature and an artistic style imbued with “certain ‘symptoms’ [which] are persistently associated with cultural decay, such as . . . sadomasochism, diabolism . . . and exoticism” (*DS*, 7), continuing with the assertion that “[e]ven though a Decadent work of art may parasitically alter a traditional form, it does not reject form. In fact it exalts it” (*DS*, 10). Thus we see the shift in focus within Britain from a unified cultural identity to a cultural identity with its depth divorced from surface. To the Decadents, depth had lost its importance, and surface was all that could be counted upon for pleasure.

Building upon the idea that Decadence is less about depth and more about surface, Norberto Bobbio states that the Decadents even went so far as to glorify the total nonexistence of depth within those willing to be the vanguards of a new British culture. This glorification signifies that

the final result [of Decadence] is the triumph of the motif – a permanent characteristic of decadentism – of human singularity cast into the world without security, ensnared in its situation as in a prison, invoking the transcendence of its own nothingness, which is never realized, or savoured at a bitter cost.” (Bobbio 16).

Indeed, this inner “nothingness” becomes a badge of honor, proof that the person experiencing it is a true Decadent who is sharply aware of the British tradition of moral values, and therefore considers himself refined for narrowly averting such an old-fashioned, emotional, internal mess. After all, surface is the only quality which can be counted on in a Decadent’s opinion, and as long as he maintains his superficiality with the smug knowledge that he is bravely flouting the norm and adopting a cynicism fit for a new era, then he can in fact enjoy his own nothingness.

As Bobbio makes readily apparent, the true difference between those who were “decadent” and those who were “Decadent” is that the Decadents went beyond the decadents’ fascination with the degeneration of depth and decided that it was best to have absolutely no depth at all.

One could view this shift of focus from depth to surface as a coping mechanism for the fear of the unknown, be the ‘unknown’ a conquering country or an impending century. By turning reality into an abstraction, the Decadent allows himself to indulge in a denial of the negative aspects of reality, focusing strictly on its pleasing properties when transposed into art. Reed compares the Decadent’s self-presentation to the work of a Decadent artist by saying that

The elaborate and heady manner of Decadent art resembles a Beardsley drawing: intricately composed of grotesque figures and artificial designs abstracted from nature but, when examined carefully, often focusing upon a void of white or black – all of experience reduced to design, but a design that is, in itself, compelling. (*DS*, 11)

Abstraction from nature implies that the person doing the abstraction seeks a human surface ideal which humanity’s crude depths could never match, with the abstracted version emerging victorious; depth-supporters considered this practice fearsome at the time, yet it provided images that are riveting in their ‘purified’ form. Practitioners of this crispness of presentation are well aware of its depth-oriented origins, and on occasion may even consciously acknowledge their inspiration by parodying these beginnings, but the artistic presentation still provides just enough of a unique aesthetic draw to qualify itself as a precedent in its own right. One may also note that the emphasis in Decadent art, as in the case of Decadent self-presentation, is upon a fundamental void, without there being a satisfying center. In Beardsley’s illustrations for Wilde’s play *Salomé*, as in the case of “The Climax,” the viewer is fascinated by the swirl of line



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*.

The Climax, by Aubrey Beardsley. Reprinted here from *DS*, 166.

and form yet cannot find a point within the picture at which his eye may rest comfortably. The voids suggested by the solid patches of black and white are too striking and swirl too easily into each other, so the potential emphasis on content is lost.

Reed continues with his definition of Decadence by listing additional features of its style.

He suggests that

a remote cultural period may be contrasted or identified with a future or ideal condition.

A spiritual theme may be rendered in gross physical images. Because Decadent style is

highly self-conscious, its unresolved tensions may include a degree of self-mockery,

often with autobiographical overtones Almost always paintings and engravings in

this style depict scenes of longing aspiration, frustration or despair. Scenes of impending

or actual destruction are coupled with suggestions of ideal reconciliation either in the

realm of the spirit or through the ultimate reconciliation of death. (DS, 185)

What emerges in this further presentation of the Decadent style is (among other significant traits)

the Decadent's drive to devote himself entirely to the cause of fruitless gain, which is fruitless

because the desired person, item or even abstract sensation to be gained stands at an unattainable

distance. A Decadent would put himself through such frustration of aspiration because he is

painfully aware of his lack of depth, and therefore feels obligated to indulge his surface instead

through sensual experience; unfortunately for him, however, his inner void will always remain

unfulfilled since he always chooses an unattainable object of desire (DS, 15-16).

Thus, the definition of a Decadent comes down to one who is proud of his lack of depth,

and engages in actions that echo this pride. He revels in the pure sensual joy of refinement and

abstraction of nature, human and otherwise, since he has shifted his attention from building up

his character to better focusing upon the delights that indulging the surface can offer. A Decadent also self-consciously indulges his surface by chasing unattainable objects of desire, in an effort to distract himself from his lack of depth, only to end up immersing himself in a self-perpetuating awareness of inner emptiness.

Although Decadence does pride itself upon an inner void, it was not created within a cultural void; a few movements within the nineteenth century gave some of their flavor to the Decadent culture of emptiness and superficiality, while others provided a cultural foundation that the Decadents saw fit to violate. One movement that inspired the Decadent backlash was Romanticism, which focused primarily upon depth rather than upon surface, thus providing a cultural sentiment which the Decadents could gleefully twist into a new phenomenon. One may want to bear in mind that the greatest allure of Romanticism for the Decadents is how easily it could be shredded in the face of a fin-de-siècle culture, since its focus is quite wholesome in its regard for character and did not allow for the then-newly prevailing distrust of human depth within Britain. While “[t]he Romantic expends internal energy outward, the Decadent feeds an inner vacuum The Romantic seeks a union with nature; the Decadent tries to fashion nature into an ornamentation of the self [Decadents aim to] shape their very beings, to *create* them” (DS, 16). The goals of the Romantics certainly do not seem to apply to those confronted with the potentially violent unknown of the twentieth century suggested by the violence which had occurred at the time with Germany and other European nations. Building upon the Romantic movement, Decadents praised -- and practiced -- evacuating the passionate nature of Romanticism from their personal depths, mainly by focusing only upon the relatively reliable concept of image and discrediting the potential of human nature. Thus, it becomes apparent that

“[i]f Decadence is a late version of Romanticism, it is also a reversal of much that Romanticism stood for” (*DS*, 11).

Reed makes it clear, however, that Decadence did not build upon or reject only one movement of the century for coping with a new century. Victorianism, which immediately developed from Romanticism, “was a removal of Romanticism from heath to parlor...a taming, not a rejection of Romantic aspirations” (*DS*, 12). Already, British culture was heading more in the direction of Decadence with its shift away from the passionate moral focus and staunch idealism of Romanticism. Victorianism occurred at the same time as the Industrial Revolution, which also provided a great deal of uncertainty amongst the masses regarding the devaluation of human depth -- this applied especially to manual laborers being replaced by machines -- so there are stronger parallels to be made between Victorianism and Decadence than between Romanticism and Decadence.

Later, about “midway through the nineteenth century, Aestheticism emerged as a distinct attitude, of which Pre-Raphaelitism was an early manifestation” (*DS*, 12). Aestheticism, unlike Victorianism, was less about mass production and more about appreciation of art for art’s sake. This focus upon visual motif without a corresponding focus on content brought the British cultural atmosphere closer still to the point of Decadence. The sensual experience, rather than product manufacture, became the point of existence for Aesthetes, who regarded the movement as providing full license to indulge in abject hedonism. Thus we arrive at the dawn of Decadence, and shall now shift our focus to Beerbohm.

Beerbohm's Beginnings Within Decadence

If it had not been for a talent scout named William Rothenstein, who first began the Decadent *Yellow Book* magazine, Beerbohm would have probably never been a part of the Decadent movement. According to Lord David Cecil, who was commissioned to write Beerbohm's biography by Beerbohm himself, "[g]etting to know Will Rothenstein proved to be one of the most important events in Max's whole career" (*Max*, 92). This was for two reasons. First, Rothenstein was willing to publish Beerbohm's works side by side with works by better-known writers and artists of the time and thus bring him greater recognition by association. Secondly, he immediately introduced Beerbohm to the best-known Decadents of the period. As Lord Cecil asserts, "they were the most discussed; so much so that, along with Oscar Wilde, they have come to be considered [the fin-de-siècle's] representatives" (*Max*, 92). Beerbohm began spending more and more time with the best-known of the Decadents, and was so impressed with their surface affectations that he allowed himself to be influenced by them. Lord Cecil adds that "he cultivated also their flippancy, their taste for the precious and artificial and nonsensical, their pose of amused self-admiration, their impish pleasure in shocking" (*Max*, 58).

Beerbohm had grown up when Aestheticism was still in the ascendant, beginning his education at Oxford in 1890, so his view of the "dandy" (one who pays extra attention to his appearance) did not then have all the negativity that it grew to have after he left Oxford University. According to Beerbohm researcher Bruce McElderry "[f]rom boyhood Max dressed as a dandy, and he affected the pose of the dilettante, the amateur in every pursuit, the man whose taste it is the business of others to please" (*MB*: 16). After having such a desire to be one of the cultured people who were always elegantly turned out, Beerbohm was very impressed

with the opportunity to finally mingle with those about whom he had already heard a great deal through the British press.

Shortly after Beerbohm met Wilde, who was initially affiliated with the Aesthetic movement and not Decadence, Wilde took a decidedly Decadent swing culturally with his latest publication to date; needless to say, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), a decadent story of a man obsessed with evil, created a sensation.” (MB, 27) Beerbohm, as easily impressed as he was by the dandy culture, admitted frequently throughout his life that much of his writing style evolved with Wilde in mind, and Beerbohm indeed did seem to take an increased interest in the Decadent theme of identity. He began contributing Decadence-oriented works to *The Yellow Book* in 1894, which had the Decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley as its art editor to give it its uniquely overstylized feel. It did not take long before Beerbohm and Beardsley became good friends (Max, 95), and even Wilde quickly grew enamored of Beerbohm’s promising talent as a university undergraduate student. A good friend of Beerbohm’s, Samuel Behrman, tells of how “[a]t Oxford, Max wrote an essay on Oscar Wilde, which had been accepted by a magazine called the *Anglo-American*. Wilde was delighted. ‘No other undergraduate could have written it,’ he said. ‘You must take up literature. You have a style like a silver dagger’” (PM, 48). With such ringing acclaim from a notable writer, it is no wonder that Beerbohm conceived a great interest in Wilde.

This interest gradually grew into sympathy, as Wilde became more steadily persecuted by the press for his moral beliefs and sexual practices. Beerbohm made a point of attending Wilde’s second court case, where he was moved by Wilde’s defense of his sexuality. Beerbohm had also taken up a correspondence with a friend of Wilde’s named Reggie Turner, and when Turner was in mainland Europe during the case Beerbohm reported to him that

'Oscar was quite superb. His speech about the Love that dare not tell his name was simply wonderful, and carried the whole court right away, quite a tremendous burst of applause.' . . . On the news of Wilde's death, late in 1900, Beerbohm wrote to Turner: 'I am, as you may imagine, very sorry indeed; and am thinking very much about Oscar, who was such an influence and in interest in my life.' (*MB*, 29)

Still, even when surrounded with practitioners of Decadence (as well as decadence), Beerbohm managed to maintain their level of elegance and irony in his own life without losing sight of his depth, thus bridging the gap between Decadence and a fulfilling inner life. McElderry concurs, saying "He was one of the most sophisticated men of his time, superior to most popular enthusiasms" (*MB*, 149) – indeed, Beerbohm had better things to do with his time than blatant self-indulgence, such as reading, writing, drawing, and learning about people's different foibles for future caricaturing purposes. Beerbohm was so self-aware, and he had so much respect for maintaining his depth, he once admitted that "I had a contempt for professional beauties and aesthetes...because though I looked like one of them, I was tremendously clever'" (*Max*, 15). This was certainly said with at least a tinge of irony, which was typically Decadent, yet Beerbohm willfully set himself apart from the rest of the culture by admitting to his contempt for their idiocy in losing sight of their personal depth.

It is here that we first see a rift of ideology between Beerbohm and the Decadents, although rather than suggesting personal doubt on Beerbohm's part, his experience within the movement appears to have solidified his faith in the necessity of having both depth and surface for a fulfilling self-image. He had insisted upon socializing with the dandy figures he had respected for most of his childhood, and much of that respect for their image lingered, so his newfound awareness of their hollow charm could have very easily inspired a personal

ambivalence within him. Instead, this schism of ideology strengthened Beerbohm's personal convictions, and he managed to assert a resolved identity which included impressive depth. It is telling that "[t]hough Max delighted in Oscar, he was not, even at twenty-one, subjugated by him. Years later he was once asked to compare Wilde and Shaw. He much preferred Wilde as a companion, he said, but Shaw had the better character" (*Max*, 70). Depth never lost its importance to Beerbohm, and it ultimately forced him to acknowledge in adulthood his antipathy towards a movement that he had enthusiastically joined in his youth.

Bearing in mind, however, that personal unity of identity was of great importance to Beerbohm, he most likely would have viewed himself as something of a hypocrite in his twenties. He may have had the surface of a dandy, which would have outwardly identified him as a Decadent, but when he made

a moral judgement, it [was] according to the honourable and scrupulous standards to which he had been brought up. His school-fellows had called him a freak. They were right. One of the freakish things about him was that under all his dandyism and irony and sophistication there turned out to be so much left of the considerate and conscientious little boy who had felt bound to own up when he broke a piece of the family china. (*Max*, 63)

This observation of Lord Cecil's is intriguing, and prompts the question of why Beerbohm felt compelled in his youth to maintain a surface that was divorced from his depth. Perhaps he still felt obligated to explore his earlier need to be outwardly elegant, and joining the Decadents was the best way he knew of at the time for acknowledging this interest. It is also possible that Beerbohm subscribed to the Decadent way of life out of the Decadent fear of the future, which in his case may have been the uncertainty of post-college life. With such uncertainty looming in,

relishing the sensual indulgences of the surface may have been his best idea of a good time at that point in his life.

What may well be most remarkable about this identity crisis of Beerbohm's earlier days was his ability to step beyond himself and unify the surfaces and depths of other people in his artwork, such as he did for Henry James. Cecil relates how, immediately after Beerbohm published a caricature of Henry James which James liked immensely, this perspicacity paid off "[a]t a party . . . [when] an admirer asked Henry James his opinion on some question. 'Ask that young man,' he said, pointing to Max who was a guest at the same gathering, 'he is in full possession of my innermost thoughts'" (*Max*, 317). Even if Lord Cecil does call Beerbohm a "freak" for his unmatched surface and depth in youth, at least Beerbohm had an impressive enough depth to be able to perceive – and depict – the depth of others in his artwork. This depth was remarkable enough to eclipse his seemingly frivolous surface whenever Beerbohm made his impression upon others.

Defining Beerbohm's Concept and Usage of Identity

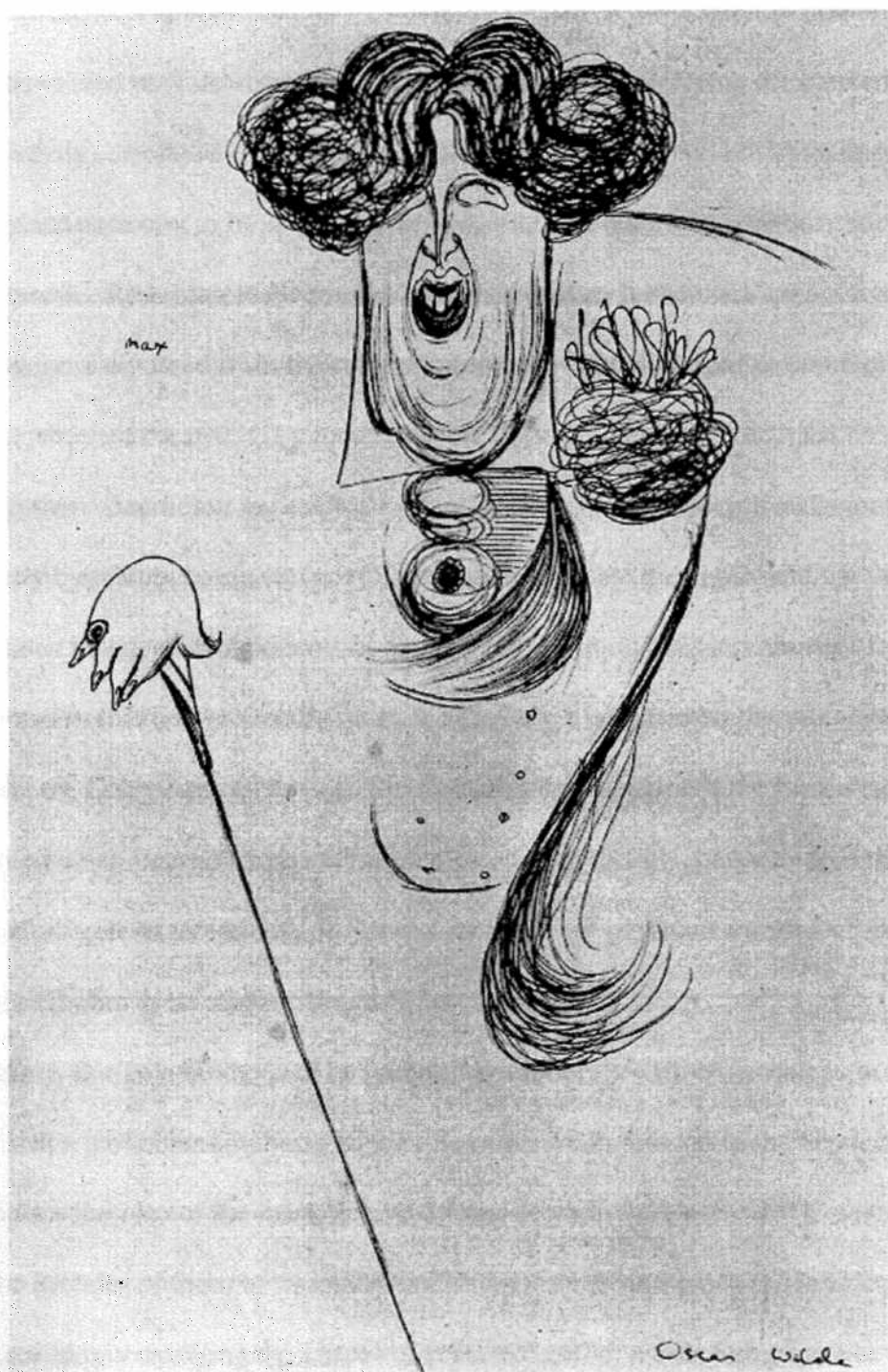
Beerbohm's work has two especially notable characteristics: his wit, and his fascination with human identity. Beerbohm's concept of identity, in turn, can also be viewed as comprised of two components -- namely, of surface and depth. Beerbohm was particularly intrigued with the relationship existing between these two elements of identity, frequently applying his wit to exaggerating a person's image (or surface) in a caricature or essay to visually clarify aspects of that person's depth. Beerbohm sometimes reached beyond the bounds of charity to attain a surface depiction which better indicated his perception of the depth within the hapless victim of his artistry; but no matter how extreme his surfaces, Beerbohm always made sure that they

remained tied to the true nature of their corresponding depths. Ira Grushow confirms that, in fact,

even the sketchiest of these drawings does not fail to communicate a sense of personality through the distortion of physical detail. In what is probably Max's first professional caricature, the one of Oscar Wilde done in 1894 . . . there is nothing approaching a firm outline, yet the drawing exudes a distinct notion of porcine elegance, of a style of life that is at once fascinating and repellent. (Grushow 63)

When this particular caricature is examined further, we find that the surface portrayed here by Beerbohm aligns itself perfectly with Beerbohm's perception of Wilde's depth at the time he drew the caricature. Just as Wilde appears repellent, sinking under layers of his own fat and ridiculously bedecked with frills and gaudy jewels, so too did Beerbohm consider him "gross not in body only – he did become that – but in relations with people. He brushed people aside; he felt he was beyond the ordinary human courtesies that you owe people even if they are, in your opinion, beneath you" (*PM*, 48). Thus, the caricature of Wilde becomes an amusing portrait, especially to those who knew Wilde well enough personally to immediately recognize the depth apparent in his depicted surface.

Thus a moral code emerges from his work which indicates that Beerbohm had a strong sense of artistic bounds apparently unrelated to the Decadent movement, and that apparently superseded even the importance of wit in his artistic expression. This code concerns the ultimate effect of alterations in and separation of the duality of surface and soul, and can be expressed as the following: if the surface of a person is presented, say, as the image of a caricature, and it is subjectively warped to present a purer presentation of its subject's depth according to the whim of the caricaturist, the result is then a source of delight (and is therefore 'good' in Beerbohm's



Oscar Wilde (1894, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

*Oscar Wilde (1894), by Sir Max Beerbohm. Reprinted here from J. G. Reiwald, *Max Beerbohm; Collected Verse* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1994) 11.*

eyes) since it presents a unified identity. Even when one steps away from Beerbohm's concept of identity, the viewer may determine for themselves that, indeed, seeing the caricatured victim (usually a celebrity) displayed on the page as little more than a pinned scientific specimen, with its façade molded perfectly to fit -- and thus reveal -- its true nature, is generally enough to induce amusement. Returning to Beerbohm's code, however, it becomes apparent that if the surface is somehow divorced from the subject's depth and therefore fails to communicate the truth of the depth, then the result is a monstrous breakdown of identity and must be resolved or avoided altogether. Beerbohm appears concerned, above all, with seeking and capturing the truth of identity by manipulating surface to better communicate the depth, and the threat of division between identity's components of surface and depth inspires a prominent fear within his work. What makes this fear especially interesting is how it emphasizes the moral gulf between Beerbohm and the Decadents; when one explores the general nature of the Decadent movement which prevailed when Beerbohm began his public career in the arts, one may find that the duality of the two natures echoes the duality of Beerbohm's concept of identity, with Decadence as surface and Beerbohm as its missing depth.

Certainly, this psychology can be found in Beerbohm's writing as well as in his caricatures, with a particular emphasis on the role of masks in relation to the depth of their wearers. He uses the idea of the mask divorced from depth in "A Defense of Cosmetics", presenting the insanity of thought which ensues. It appears to be a piece of Decadent writing at first glance, seemingly extolling the virtues of surface/depth division, but is so over the top that it cannot be anything else but parody. As for *The Happy Hypocrite*, the title character Lord George Hell begins as a unified identity of nastiness, with an evil countenance to match his equally evil depth. He experiences great anxiety, however, when he meets his true love and

immediately aspires to possessing noble depth – and scares his beloved away with his evil countenance which she cannot trust. Lord Hell finds true happiness and a sense of fulfillment, however, when his face finally molds to the shape of a permanent, handsome mask that he wears, and his depth improves at the same time, granting Lord Hell the relief of a unified identity and the glory of true love. Since this story presents a final unification of identity and “A Defence of Cosmetics” does not, *Hypocrite* shows personal growth on Beerbohm’s part in his development of his personal rule of identity by 1897, only three years after the publication of “Defence.”

What is perhaps Beerbohm’s most significant statement of the horror of identity separation, however, is his novel *Zuleika Dobson* (with “Zuleika” pronounced “Zu-LEE-ka”). Beerbohm’s philosophy of identity recurs often throughout the work in different ways, but the most telling example of all is one which does not initially appear to be a surface/depth rift. The title character presents a striking contrast to a young housekeeper in the story named Katie, and what emerges in this contrast is the realization that Zuleika is the epitome of surface with little emphasis on depth, and that Katie is the epitome of depth with little emphasis on her surface. With such a generalized view of the two characters, Beerbohm allows for the interpretation that Zuleika represents the horrors of surface-oriented Decadence, and that Katie represents the depth-proclaiming silliness of the critics of Decadence who made up a significant portion of the fin-de-siècle culture in Britain. The fact that Zuleika is both seductive and repulsive, and that Katie is both endearing and pathetic, indicates Beerbohm’s cultural neutrality; he finally accomplishes his shift from personal ambiguity in his college years to a unified, confident identity which totally rejects the values within Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.

A Defence of Cosmetics

Written in 1894, "A Defence of Cosmetics" was the first article Beerbohm ever submitted to the Decadent *Yellow Book*. It is rife with splits in surface-depth duality which in turn point out Beerbohm's great uneasiness within the Decadent movement. Appearing very Decadent by exalting surface over depth, and by using a flippant tone which nearly verges on the flirtatious, Beerbohm calls for the public's renunciation of its prejudice against cosmetics worn by women. He initially appeals to the human inclination towards all things which are visually appealing, insisting "indeed, there is charm in every period, and only fools and flutterplates do not seek reverently for what is charming in their own day" (*YB*, 65). Rather than focusing on the virtues of natural charm, which reveal depth, Beerbohm opts for the more Decadent path of supporting the image of grotesque artificial ornamentation which conceals the true surface of the cosmetics' wearer and in turn conceals their depth. He begins with the relatively tame suggestion that "it is the times that can perfect us, not we the times, and so let all of us wisely acquiesce" (*YB*, 65). Yet he later seems to quickly warm again to Decadence by using a degenerate scenario for his support: "At Rome, in the keenest time of her degradingolade, when there was gambling even in the holy temples, great ladies...did not scruple to squander all they had upon unguents from Arabia" (*YB*, 65-66). Gambling in a temple is truly shocking to the critics of Decadence, so using such an example as a persuasive device is the reader's first clue that Beerbohm's pro-Decadent stance may be ironic.

Tempering his claims somewhat, Beerbohm swings away briefly from such observations of human subterfuge by stating "Surely it is laudable, this wish to make fair the ugly and overtop fairness" (*YB*, 67), but he then returns to his earlier-stated view of cosmetics as a positive force within the terms of Decadence:

And truly, of all the good things that will happen with the full renaissance of cosmetics, one of the best is that surface will finally be severed from soul....Too long has the face been degraded from its rank as a thing of beauty to a mere vulgar index of character or emotion And the use of cosmetics, the masking of the face, will change this. We shall gaze at a woman merely because she is beautiful, not stare into her face anxiously, as into the face of a barometer. (*YB*, 71)

Given Beerbohm's stance on the issue of surface-depth unification, it is quite surprising to see him degrade a face as "a mere vulgar index of character or emotion," although this may well be his cynical, caricaturist side making a joke. The point worthiest of note, however, is Beerbohm's assertion that severing surface from depth would be a laudable cultural advance, since his caricaturist's sensitivity to the connection between surface and depth could never allow for a true belief in any of the above-quoted statements. Instead, he seems to be having fun with his audience by pretending to deliver a convincing argument for something he does not actually believe; even more intriguing is the fact that he appears to be undermining a precept of Decadence in a distinctly Decadent publication. He does sound like a true Decadent in his witticisms, though, flippantly referring to peering into a woman's face as into that of a barometer and thus introducing a bizarre objectification with an entertaining level of ridiculousness. Still, the article jangles; Beerbohm appears to believe somewhat in what he is saying, to the extent that he supports improvement upon nature to a degree -- yet he cannot help but attack the thoughtlessness of the Decadents in their zeal to focus purely upon surface and thus neglect the true beauty of a face with a corresponding depth.

Reed chooses to interpret this work as a purely parodic piece on the ills of Decadence, stating that “[Max Beerbohm’s] essays mocked Decadent obsessions and were so clever that readers did not always recognize them as parodies, as with ‘A Defence of Cosmetics’” (*DS*, 63). This view seems slightly narrow, however, since it does not allow for Beerbohm’s mild support of refined surface – after all, Beerbohm was a confirmed dandy who took as much care in his surface as any Decadent. On the other end of the spectrum, such magazines as *Punch* reacted vehemently against Beerbohm’s article, falling into the pitfall of misunderstanding that Reed mentions. One *Punch* staff member contributed a poem to the then-latest *Punch* issue entitled “Ars Cosmetica,” which is a commentary on Beerbohm’s blindness for being able to look at the artificiality of cosmetics without feeling ill. Lord Cecil cannot resist remarking that “an effusion as this shows us how very earnest the nineteenth century was. Its author – and Max’s other critics too – could not conceive that he did not mean what he said: they thought he was seriously attempting to undermine man’s natural reverence for God’s handiwork” (*Max*, 99).

This mix of reactions to Beerbohm’s work helps to cloak his intentions in a shroud of ambiguity, with no one stance emerging victorious, but knowing Beerbohm’s sentiments outside of his article helps greatly in clarifying his philosophy of identity. As it so happens, Beerbohm was very much against any wearing of cosmetics. He once said to Lord Cecil that

he thought the natural complexion of the English girl particularly pretty. ‘It was a delicate rose pink...and rouge would only have blemished it. In those days, the houses were very irregularly heated; . . . The ladies moved room to room, and their complexion had to guess the next temperature they would encounter’. (*Max*, 100)

It is very curious indeed that Beerbohm felt this way, yet managed to convince even the editors of *Punch* that he honestly believed the Decadent joke he was making. Without having

determined his approach to identity, one cannot readily tell if Beerbohm's article was a Decadent-style joke, or a joke at the expense of Decadence, and perhaps Beerbohm creates the ambiguity on purpose as a way to mask a real discomfort with his irreconcilable support of Decadence and depth.

It is quite remarkable that Lord Cecil, although Beerbohm's authorized biographer, does not appear to have clarified Beerbohm's view of identity. He says only that "[i]n truth, his own attitude was ambiguous. No doubt he was burlesquing the aesthetic style: no doubt he did not in reality admire rouged cheeks. On the other hand, in a broader sense, he was against Nature unadorned: he did stand for artifice and civilization and the conscious cultivation of style" (*Max*, 101). He sounds almost as dumbfounded as the editors of *Punch*, although a bit more open to the possibility that Beerbohm was making a joke at everybody's expense and cannot be taken entirely seriously.

Bearing all of these views in mind, one may perceive that, at this point in his life, Beerbohm was indulging in Decadent glee at addling so many brains with his wit, but that he was also very much for a unification of image and essence. He examines here his precise position between a world of foppish fantasy and his true inclination towards a harmony of identity, but does not determine it yet. It is not until three years later, in fact, that Beerbohm finally makes clear his true stance on the issue of identity.

The Happy Hypocrite

"The Happy Hypocrite" was written in April of 1897, and it is a welcome departure from the ambiguity of "A Defense of Cosmetics." In this case, there is a Decadent divorce of surface and depth as well but the two components are reunited at the end of the story.

The main character, Lord George Hell, is an unethical, immoral, generally horrid man with a face to match who falls in love with a beautiful, child-like actress named Jenny Mere.

Unfortunately for the incorrigible Lord George, Miss Mere insists to his face “I can never be your wife....I can never be the wife of any man whose face is not saintly. Your face, my Lord, mirrors, it may be, true love for me, but it is even as a mirror long tarnished by the reflexion of this world’s vanity” (*HH*, 24). Lord George had been happily living with a unified identity up until this point, and now that his depth is yearning to transform itself, he newly experiences a state of anxiety caused by his surface, which lags behind in its development. Since he is consumed with true love for the first time in his life and feels compelled to have Jenny reciprocate the sentiment, Lord George decides to buy a mask that will make him look like a saint and resolves to wear it for the rest of his life (*HH*, 40-41).

It is at this point in the story that the reader follows Lord George into a new stage of anxiety; he has taken a step towards reunification of his identity in Beerbohm’s terms, but it is a forced step which serves mainly to emphasize just how wide the gulf still is between his fundamentally immoral depth and his apparently noble surface. Even Lord George’s intentions are hopelessly muddled – he appears noble for wanting to prove his true love for Jenny, but he also appears as immoral as ever for deceiving Jenny. Lord George does rebuff his old Italian lover La Gambogi, who serves as a reminder of his recent immoral past and still manages to recognize him, and he then decides to escape by himself to the countryside (*HH*, 41-48). There, he bumps into Jenny Mere, who falls in love with him at first sight without knowing that he is Lord George Hell; they get married that evening, and move into a cozy shack in the woods (*HH*, 48-61). They live together for a few years, Lord George never removes his mask, his depth

grows nobler every day, and all else goes well – until the day La Gambogi drops by the shack to reveal to Jenny the truth of Lord George’s surface (*HH*, 72-78).

She had torn away the mask....George stood motionless. La Gambogi stared up into his face, and her dark flush died swiftly away. For there, staring back at her, was the man she had unmasked, but lo! His face was even as his mask had been. Line for line, feature for feature, it was the same. ‘Twas a saint’s face. (*HH*, 78)

This is a case where the divorce of surface from depth (with Lord George masking his face to disguise the signs of his evil soul) is monstrous, since it means that he is deceiving his wife Jenny, yet this split in identity is necessary for Lord George to regenerate a surface to match his evolved depth. The story also brings up the question of whether it was the altered surface which helped the depth improve, or vice versa. The point is moot, however, since what matters in this story is the final reunification of Lord George’s identity. He improves inside and out, and proves to Jenny beyond a shadow of a doubt that his love for her transcends superficiality.

It also appears that the moral of the story is not ‘if one forces a surface or depth upon oneself, one will naturally assume that surface or depth after a period of time’; instead, it may well be a matter of actively encouraging oneself to grow a better surface or depth regardless of whether or not one is lucky to have props to help oneself in the process. Lord Cecil states that “by assuming a virtue, Lord George had in fact become virtuous” (*Max*, 151), which is incorrect, since if Lord George had not wanted to become saintly in the first place, no mask in the world could have changed him. In addition, Lord Cecil insists that “In *The Happy Hypocrite* . . . he [Max Beerbohm] goes so far as to recommend the mask as a moral instrument.” (*Max*, 151) But when Beerbohm was asked directly about the meaning of the mask, he replied

‘you have to live up to the mask, you know. Lord George lived up to his mask. His love for Jenny made it possible for him to do it....’ And a little later, smiling, he added, ‘If you live up to a good mask long enough, don’t you know, perhaps it will become first nature to you instead of second or third.’ This is the moral of the story. (*Max*, 151)

So, as in the case of Beerbohm’s caricatures and “The Defence of Cosmetics”, depth is a significant force which is necessary to activate a surface and properly cement the bond between the two. A mere application of surface to depth will not necessarily spark a reunification of identity, although it still serves as a necessary component. This story marks a striking transition from ambiguity to clarity of Beerbohm’s concept of identity – one can see in Beerbohm a much stronger idea of how identity forms, and how the components must interact for the most complete unification. The message is fairly simple, but it is a definite development that shows that Decadent irony for the sake of irony does not mean nearly as much to Beerbohm at this point as it once did.

Ideologically, Beerbohm is much further away from Decadence in *The Happy Hypocrite* than he was even three years earlier, which may have been why he took offense when his friend J. G. Riewald asserted his belief that *The Happy Hypocrite* is simply a parody of Oscar Wilde’s writing style. Beerbohm was quite incensed by this, insisting to Riewald that

‘There is *no* parody of Oscar Wilde in *The Happy Hypocrite*: the thing was *influenced* by him. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must have been in my mind; the idea of the face changing must have been a memory of Dorian Gray in my mind....It was my intention to tell a fairy-story with a moral to it: that if a man wishes to become good he will become good The cadences of the writing were “Oscarish”, but there was

no parody.' Ignoring Max's protestations, I decided to print the passage as it stood"(Riewald 111).

It does seem that, while Wilde's influence may have been incorporated into Beerbohm's writing, the story did not recall the feel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at all. In *Gray*, which had been first published six years before *The Happy Hypocrite*, Dorian's identity is the total opposite of Lord George's identity: Lord George begins as an entirely gross individual, grows into a Decadent once he assumes a mask, and then grows saintly from the outside in. Dorian, on the other hand, begins innocent and grows Decadent, with the only reason for his saintly surface being a charmed portrait of himself which exhibits his aging and physical warping for him. Lord George unifies his identity, while Dorian experiences a divorce of his surface from his depth. Lord George is ultimately a positive figure, championing nobility, while Dorian is ultimately a negative figure who proves just how bad a life of abject hedonism can be. Of course, these opposites may sound like conscious inversions of one another, suggesting an urge on Beerbohm's part to revamp some of Wilde's ideas, but one cannot easily support the idea that *The Happy Hypocrite* is meant to be a parody. It does not have enough of Beerbohm's impish humor which we see in "A Defence of Cosmetics", and Beerbohm denied having any sort of direct connection in the story to *Dorian Gray*, so for the time being one may have to accept the idea that Beerbohm was trying to make an original statement about surface and depth in identity without having to walk in Wilde's footsteps. The inspiration may have been from Wilde, but Beerbohm's concept of identity within *The Happy Hypocrite* had evolved too far beyond Wilde's Decadence in *Dorian* to be considered entirely related.

Zuleika Dobson

By the time Beerbohm published *Zuleika Dobson* in 1911, he had fully come to terms with his concept of identity within his work. Beginning his career as a Decadent-appearing dandy with depth, satirizing a movement while seemingly inside it, Beerbohm grew into an artist and writer who recognized that noble depth is of paramount importance and that it must match its given surface for personal fulfillment. Once he moved away from Decadence by emphasizing depth in *Hypocrite*, Beerbohm proved once and for all in *Zuleika* that he considers Decadence an actively repulsive movement. One of the initially more noticeable ways he does so is by showing what evil occurs when the title character behaves Decadently, although Beerbohm's approach actually goes even deeper upon further examination.

In order to create a negative atmosphere of Decadence, Beerbohm makes sure that nobody in *Zuleika* manages to attain personal fulfillment, mainly by dwelling upon fruitless pursuit and the identity rift within the powerful Zuleika. The story begins with the title character visiting her grandfather at Oxford because he is a warden of one of the colleges on the campus (ZD, 7-8). Since Zuleika makes a striking impression with her dark hair and sparkling eyes, and because of her mystique from traveling the world as a conjuror, she captures the fancies of every boy on the Oxford campus throughout the story. The only student who attracts Zuleika's attention, however, is known simply as the Duke; since he appears to Zuleika as the only student seemingly immune to her charms, she decides that she loves him (ZD, 29-30). The Duke experiences great pain, however, when he later reciprocates Zuleika's attentions – and she immediately loses her love for him. She explains to him that “You were my idol You were so different from any man I had ever seen except in dreams. You did not make a fool of yourself now it is all over. The idol has come sliding down its pedestal to fawn and grovel with all

the other infatuates in the dust about my feet" (ZD, 59). The Duke is hereafter doomed to pursue Zuleika in vain, and he finally commits a splendid suicide which is conspicuously not in her honor while wearing his full costume as a knight of the Order of the Garter (the Order being an honor which had been bestowed upon him earlier by the British government in recognition of his wit and nobility) (ZD, 278-298). Every other male student follows suit, although they die with the conviction that they do indeed love Zuleika (ZD, 299). Meanwhile, Katie Batch -- the daughter of the Duke's housekeeper -- is unable to catch the Duke's eye until he has been spurned for the last time by Zuleika, yet Katie loves him unfailingly (ZD, 265-268). As for Zuleika, she is left to suffer the disappointment which comes to those who love perversely, never knowing the joy of attainment and seeking only that which she cannot have; namely, a husband who does not find her attractive. According to Reed, "A nineteenth-century edition of Webster's dictionary...[states] 'a *perverse* temper is really wicked; it likes or dislikes by the rule of contradiction to another's will'" (SD, 107), so her position as a figure of Decadent evil is further confirmed.

There is also the Decadence exuded by Zuleika, particularly since her surface does not match her depth. Zuleika is quite breathtaking in her bearing, if Beerbohm's description of her surface throughout the story can be trusted, yet her perverse depth may strike one as downright ugly, particularly when she inspires every boy at Oxford to follow the Duke's example and commit suicide for her. While vaguely amusing in its implied juvenility and extremism, the scene of mass suicide is primarily horrifying as an "abominable sink of death" (ZD, 299), and "[w]hat to her now the loves that she had inspired and played on? the lives lost for her? Little thought had [Zuleika] now of them" (ZD, 310). There is also the possibility that Zuleika could be considered aberrant, since she was always travelling: at the time, "[s]ocial and economic

dislocation was often refigured as the evil of aberrant movement" (*SD*, 119). Beerbohm had in fact confessed to William Rothenstein in their later years "that he had found it impossible to go on writing the book in London years ago . . . he says that 'there were moments when she [i.e., Zuleika] repelled me'." (Riewald, *Remembering Max Beerbohm*, 109). Even Zuleika's chosen profession is Decadent: conjuring is the art of misleading the eye, and it creates an illusory world where surface rarely matches depth.

Opposite this stunning monster is the pretty, noble Katie, whose components of identity are perfectly unified. She fails to captivate the Duke in the same fashion that Zuleika does, especially since her blonde hair and blue eyes do not promise Zuleika's exoticism, but Katie is later admired by him for her loyalty and wholesomeness. She makes a point of scrubbing the Duke's doorstep every day, "and there, standing on the doorstep whose whiteness was the symbol of her love, he – very lightly, it is true, and on the upmost confines of the brow, but quite perceptibly – had kissed her" after conceding defeat with his pursuit of Zuleika (*ZD*, 283). Unlike conjuring, scrubbing is honest work; the end result of a clean surface accurately reflects the depth of the effort and persistence required for effecting such an improvement. Moreover, while Zuleika leaves the scene of mass suicide without much thought to the carnage, thus revealing her lack of depth in her lack of emotion, Katie immediately mourns the Duke's passing by scrubbing his doorstep with black-leading in a very poignant example of how great her depth truly is (*ZD*, 309).

Given that Zuleika is Decadent as well as evil, and that Katie is her perfect opposite, and that Beerbohm used to attend Oxford and found himself drifting in his personal philosophy away from Decadence, there emerges the very real possibility that *Zuleika Dobson* is a parable for the fin-de-siècle culture of Britain according to Beerbohm's point of view. Pursuing this

interpretation, I find that Zuleika immediately emerges as the personification of Decadence, Katie as standing for the champions of wholesomeness who despised Decadence, the Duke as Beerbohm, and Oxford as a microcosm of Britain. In addition to having no depth, Zuleika also has an affiliation with France – by having a French maid named Mélisande. Katie states the critics' arguments quite well in her own terms when she meets Mélisande and has such disparaging thoughts as "Down with France!" (ZD, 218). Even the Duke offers an intriguing comparison to Beerbohm, since they both are seduced by the attraction of Decadence but ultimately find the lack of depth terrifying. Exploring the matter of Oxford a bit more reveals that it is a community comprised of students and faculty who span a great number of ages, as does the population of England, and while the students fall madly in love with the novelty of Zuleika the traditional faculty members appear immune to the conjurer's powers; this is much in the same way that many of those who supported Decadence were Beerbohm's contemporaries, while members of earlier generations were not nearly as involved. Additionally, the faculty could represent the traditions of Britain upon which critics of Decadence such as Katie counted on for support of the honest, non-glamorous lifestyle.

Taken all together, this information would point to Beerbohm's frustration and desired plunge out of British fin-de-siècle culture. If we take the story of *Zuleika* and apply it directly to Beerbohm's life, we find that the parallels are perfect: Beerbohm yielded initially to the seduction of Decadence, only to find that it offered little to satisfy the intellectual cravings of his depth. He could not subscribe to the point of view of the critics, however, since they lacked the style that he admired so much in the Decadents. The older, British traditions do not appear affected in Beerbohm's eyes, but they too are not entirely satisfying for purposes of entertainment. So, as befits one who cannot stand any aspect of culture popular at the time,

Beerbohm apparently champions avoidance of all established groups and for striking out on one's own. I do not believe that Beerbohm advocated suicide at all; rather, he uses the suicide of the Duke to represent escape and transition.

It is a shame that Lord Cecil does not consider the possibility of *Zuleika* being a parable, and chooses to focus merely upon its merits as a written version of a comic strip. He insists that "Max tells the story in such a way as to emphasize its preposterousness. The tone is consistently and impishly frivolous....They [the characters] have the same relation to the characters in a serious novel as the figures in Max's cartoons have to serious portraits." (*Max*, 312) There is a distinctly patronizing tone here towards Beerbohm's works, since there is no apparent accommodation on Lord Cecil's part for Beerbohm's potential for communicating the serious. On the other hand, Lord Cecil does admit that *Zuleika* is "inspired by a bit of his [Beerbohm's] own experience" (*Max*, 312), allowing for the possibility that Beerbohm saw fit to translate at least part of the seriousness within his life into entertaining literature. After all, "The hero, the Duke of Dorset, stands for that ideal of dandyism which was his [Beerbohm's] undergraduate ideal" (*Max*, 312). Ultimately, however, Lord Cecil and I must part ways in our evaluation of *Zuleika*; where I see a parable which reveals Beerbohm's true cultural reaction as it had progressed throughout his literary career up through 1911, Lord Cecil sees only an example of light entertainment. He insists that Beerbohm sought no other message to convey, since

[a]n author, he thought, had no business to go in for correcting or castigating. As a convinced aesthete, Max held it as a basic article of faith that the artist should work with no ulterior aim, but only to delight by the beauty of his creation. *Zuleika Dobson* is an extreme if light-hearted expression of the aesthetic point of view. (*Max*, 313)

This is grossly underestimating Beerbohm's capabilities, since it assumes that Beerbohm meant to focus strictly upon the delights of surface. Beerbohm showed himself to be very supportive of depth in his work, however, so Lord Cecil's proclamation labels Beerbohm incorrectly as a pure aesthete and entirely misses Beerbohm's concept of identity.

Still, Lord Cecil is not completely wrong when he says that Beerbohm still indulges in a fondness for the style of Decadence, if not its philosophy. Bearing in mind Reed's discussion of Decadence earlier within this thesis, *Zuleika* does have "A spiritual theme . . . rendered in gross physical images." Zuleika's and the Duke's emotions for each other are symbolized by the ever-changing color of their pearls, which Zuleika wears for earrings and the Duke wears for tie studs; these pearls have colors which range from pink and black to white, and seem to exchange colors with each other as the social situation changes (*ZD*, 57). Another of Reed's descriptions about Decadence, quoted earlier in this thesis as well, is "Scenes of impending or actual destruction are coupled with suggestions of ideal reconciliation either in the realm of the spirit or through the ultimate reconciliation of death." We see this when the river running through Oxford's campus teems with evidence of self-destruction, and the Duke reconciles himself to escaping the situation through death. So, while *Zuleika* may have depth which appears anti-Decadent in its nature, it may still count as a Decadent work since the imagery is Decadent – and does not match the message of the depth that is conveyed.

Conclusion

Beerbohm's view of identity as a surface-depth duality is certainly an identity relationship with only two components, but the interaction of the two is slightly more complex than it may appear to be at first sight. The relationship must begin with a basis of depth, which

in turn shapes the surface; surface cannot shape depth without depth playing an active role in shaping the surface as well. To Beerbohm's mind, it is quite clear that there is a necessary relationship between the two for personal fulfillment, and that a breakdown of this duality renders the possibility of fulfillment nearly nonexistent. Application of this philosophy to assorted works by Beerbohm reveals, in turn, a remarkable evolution on Beerbohm's part within less than twenty years which follows a path of development from Decadence to depth – but this path is not nearly as linear as one might think. Rather than confining an appreciation of Decadence to earlier works, Beerbohm includes elements of the movement within his later works as well, although always in conjunction with an increasing focus on depth.⁸ This combination would suggest that Beerbohm may have regarded Decadence potentially reconcilable with depth, provided that the depth was strong enough to temper the emptiness of Decadence in each case. Thus emerges a movement which is uniquely Beerbohm's: influenced by Decadence, this one-man movement supports the style of imagery associated with Decadence as long as it is paired with depth. Rather than fully negating the point of Decadence by filling in its moral void, the imagery maintains its vigor in "A Defence of Cosmetics", *The Happy Hypocrite*, and *Zuleika Dobson*, indicating Beerbohm's talent in fusing these two disparate items and presenting his readers with a new literary voice in the process.

Furthermore, Beerbohm's new approach to identity within literature does present *Zuleika Dobson* as a potentially striking parable which accurately charts Beerbohm's experiences within the culture of Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. We learn that he ultimately rejected fin-de-siècle philosophies, finding them all repellent, pathetic or just plain boring, opting instead to explore his own philosophy and remain true to that while ignoring the more popular practices within writing and art at the time. Beerbohm presents his proverbial 'suicide drowning' as

liberation from the then-prevailing cultures, and others may derive encouragement from such an act of freedom, which in turn was a necessary first step on the path to self-fulfillment.

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