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CHARLES LAMB, THE ROMANTIC HUMOURIST

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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have done me the honour of inviting me, in Blake's phrase, 'to pipe a song about a Lamb'. When I received this, to me, most gratifying invitation, I was faced with the familiar dilemma of finding a subject on which I should dare to address a gathering of learned lovers of Lamb. Lamb's vast reading did not extend far into the Middle Ages (his review of Godwin's Chaucer was either never written or never published)¹; and his inability to get sustained enjoyment from music is memorialized for ever in 'A Chapter on Ears' (He compared 'empty *instrumental music*' to 'the vague gestures of an inexplicable rambling mime')². The two subjects to which I might have brought a contribution were thus ground crumbling under my feet. I have only one, as it were 'spiritual', qualification for speaking of Lamb; I too am an Old Blue. And, even though the Christ's Hospital of James Boyer, Mr Perry and Matthew Field was not precisely the same as the Christ's Hospital of Flecker, Macnutt, 'Teddy' Edwards and Buck, to have belonged to that same 'religious, royal and ancient foundation' creates a sense of loyalty - one might almost say, of fellow-feeling.

It is this feeling, I suppose, which is instinctively affronted by the tenor of so much writing about Lamb over the last 150 years. And one may be equally offended by the hagiographical 'Gentle St. Charles' tradition and by the dismissive 'eternal immaturity' school which reacted against it. So since I am in no sense a scholar in this period, my address has arisen from the need I felt to discover whether my instinctive schoolboy loyalty was misplaced - loyalty, in effect, To the Sanity of True Genius. I have called my talk 'Charles Lamb, the Romantic Humourist'.

'Humour' is one of many words which have suffered impoverishment over the last two centuries. From being a term denoting a whole temperament ('a bold and courageous humour,' 1654) it is now seldom used except to denote a light comicality of expression. 'Humourist' has fared no better and is in a fair way to become obsolete, or at least out of common use. In the early nineteenth century, however, the word still had two of the three main senses with which the OED credits it: '1. A person subject to "humours"; ...a fantastical or whimsical person.

2. A facetious or comical person; a wag; a humourous talker, actor or writer...'

It was quite in the tradition of the familiar essay for the writer to conform to both these definitions. Addison, who is sometimes favourably contrasted with Lamb, as a serious and responsible moralist, writes in a

Spectator paper (no.477): 'I am...looked upon as an Humorist in Gardening. I have several Acres about my House, which I call my Garden, and which a Skillful Gardener would not know what to call.'³ Here he sets himself forward as some kind of an eccentric in horticultural matters. Addison would certainly have recognized Lamb as a traditional humourist both in himself (that is, in his public personality) and in his writings. In fact, Addison's genealogy of Humour in *Spectator* no.35 makes a perfectly apt introduction to Lamb's role as an essayist:

TRUTH was the Founder of the Family, and the Father of GOOD SENSE. GOOD SENSE was the Father of WIT, who married a Lady of Collateral Line called MIRTH, by whom he had Issue HUMOUR. HUMOUR therefore being the youngest of this Illustrious Family, and descended from Parents of such different Dispositions, is very various and unequal in his Temper; sometimes you see him putting on grave Looks and a solemn Habit, sometimes airy in his Behaviour and fantastick in his Dress: Insomuch that at different times he appears as serious as a Judge, and as jocular as a *Merry-Andrew*. But as he has a great deal of the Mother in his Constitution, whatever Mood he is in, he never fails to make his Company laugh.⁴

Charles Lamb was amongst other things a humourist in the traditional sense. He was, moreover, a *romantic* humourist; and the paradox of the romantic humourist is that he employs both a form (the familiar essay) and a voice (that of the detached commentator) for ends more subjective than earlier humourists envisaged - at least in the eighteenth century.

By way of preliminary we need to consider briefly in what sense Lamb presents *Elia* as a 'romantic humourist'. Recent writers on Lamb have tended to insist on the separateness of Lamb and '*Elia*'. Thus, Robert Frank in a recent, stimulating book, *Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!*:-

Praz, Thompson, and even many good friends of *Elia* have, I believe, been gulled by Lamb. They describe qualities in the character of *Elia* and attribute them to Lamb without distinguishing between *Elia* and his creator. They fall victim to Lamb's pretences without understanding their significance.⁵

Frank then goes on to quote Edmund Blunden's amusing version of the popular characterization of Lamb -

...fobbed off as a contemporary of Wordsworth and of Keats who liked roast pig, puns, dogs'-eared books, whist, artificial language, writing for magazines, quotations and parodies; who disliked churches, Goethe, the Lake District, philosophy, punctuality, Shelley's voice, sanity, Scots, Jews and schoolmasters. If it is so, it is not surprising; for nobody has been more ingenious in professing unimportance than Lamb except Lear's Fool.⁶

Frank concludes -

A man, in short, whose likes and dislikes showed his lack of intelligence, taste and wit. To read *Elia* as a disguised Charles Lamb is to be unaware of a number of facts of Lamb's life and too dependent on the essays for an estimate of the man.

I believe that Robert Frank is oversimplifying the process of distortion (that Lamb suffers from a distorted image, I do not dispute for a moment), attributing to a misreading of the *Elia* essays the various current warped

portraits of their creator. My own view is that the distinction between the man, Charles Lamb, and the essayist, 'Elia' has been exaggerated. Maybe the plain autobiographical reading was too naive; but the insistence that 'Elia is a deliberate creation, in many significant ways unlike Lamb' now seems to me in danger of becoming over-sophisticated.⁷

Of course, 'Elia' is in some sense a role; Lamb so presents it himself. At the end of 'The Southsea House' he says, rather coyly -

Reader, what if I have been but playing with thee all this while - peradventure the very *names*, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic...⁸

And elsewhere he says that if he treads 'out of the way' of the reader's sympathy he will 'retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia'.⁹ And, above all, we have his attempt in the Preface to *The Last Essays of Elia* to kill off the 'character' of Elia -

To say truth, it is time he were gone. The humour of the thing, if there were ever much in it, was pretty well exhausted; and a two years' and a half existence has been a tolerable duration for a phantom.¹⁰

But the 'phantom' and his 'phantom' life are really extraordinarily like what we know, from the letters and other sources, Lamb and *his* life to have been. They share everything that matters and differ only in superficialities. For instance, they agree in being 'singular' characters, bachelors, devoted to London, old places, old books and a single female relative; they differ in that Lamb was a privileged local schoolboy at Christ's Hospital, Elia was poor, friendless and far from home; in that Charles had a sister called Mary, and Elia a cousin called Bridget. And so on. Any attempt to make out Elia as an essentially different character from Lamb is, I think, doomed to failure - different, that is, from Lamb's *social* personality, the personality that all his friends and acquaintances knew. Elia is, perhaps, in all obvious aspects Lamb's social self (already a role to be played) raised to a higher level of intensity; he is Lamb's public dramatization of himself, consciously projected and described by the playwright. Elia is Lamb the humourist, with his eccentricities and quirks, all slightly touched up, slightly coloured and given some additional latitude in the treatment of historical facts.

Elia is then, a role firmly and deeply related to the dramatic author of it, Charles Lamb. The question now arises - why should Lamb wish to adopt a mask so transparent and close-fitting that no one could possibly be deceived by it? and why does he from time to time, though by no means consistently, draw emphatic attention to it? Two obvious reasons suggest themselves. First, the deception even if transparent is a way of freeing himself from responsibility for the totality of his own being. There are whole areas of Lamb's interior life of which we hear little or nothing in the public essays, not much more in the letters, and which clearly did not emerge when he played the witty and convivial fool with his friends:- his working relationships and experiences; his sexual feelings, complicated as these must have been by his lifelong dedication of himself to his sister Mary; the history of his religious opinions, the long process of falling away from orthodox Christian pieties; his own mental strains and sufferings (one does not spend six weeks 'Very agreeably in a madhouse at Hoxton' without scars, surely - without subsequent anxieties?).

Another reason for the mask of Elia is well defined by Robert Frank:

The adoption of the forms of autobiography, reminiscence, confession and the lyric posed difficulties for the romantics. By attributing the essays to someone who is humble, amiable and frank /I would simply say 'to someone other than himself', Lamb could avoid many of the difficulties accompanying the expression of the romantic ego. "I have sickened on the modern rhodomontade & Byronism, and your plain Quakerish Beauty has captivated me," he writes to Bernard Barton.¹¹

In short, Lamb wants to have it both ways. He writes in the person of Elia because Elia's personality is close enough to his own to enable him to reflect directly on the private experiences which are the real subject of the essays. But at the same time he wants a certain detachment - a detachment from the full complexity of, in particular, his moral being. This is, of course, the very thing for which sterner critics have reproved him: it is seen amongst other things as a manifest indulgence - of himself, and of his middle-class audience, his ideal shopkeeper. It is a limitation, certainly; as De Quincey observed, Lamb is not a genius of the first rank because he works in a narrow range. But self-imposed limitation is not a sign of moral obliquity and may be the pre-condition of creative achievement.

The comedian, in particular, always imposes limitations on himself and on the responses of his audience. Indeed, it is a characteristic of comedy in all, or most, of its manifestations to detach itself from certain moral implications, to evade the moral logic of events. This is as true of Shakespearean comedy, or of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, as it is of the medieval fabliau. It is the privilege and necessity of the 'humorist' (the 'fantastical or whimsical person') to enjoy a similar detachment. Lamb's classic defence of Restoration comedy, in 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', is relevant; it states the case for 'middle emotions', for a neutral ground of experience free from moral concern:

The artificial Comedy, or Comedy of manners, is quite extinct on our stage... The times cannot bear them.¹²

And why? Not, he says, because of an occasional immoral or licentious remark. But because

the business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test. We screw everything up to that. Idle gallantry in a fiction, a dream, the passing pageant of an evening, startles us in the same way as the alarming indications of profligacy in a son or ward in real life should startle a parent or guardian... In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout of precaution against the breeze and sunshine.¹³

And, Lamb continues, in words that seem to resound beyond the immediate context,

I confess for myself that (with no great delinquencies to answer for) I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience, - not to live always in the precincts of the law-courts, - but now and then, for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions - to get into recesses, whither the hunter cannot follow me -

.....Secret shades
Of woody Ida's inmost grove,
While yet there was no fear of Jove.

I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and the more healthy for it.¹⁴

This freedom from moral pressure is coupled in Lamb's mind and in the quasi-dramatic personality, the *alter ego* of Elia, with other freedoms - freedom from historical fact and present-day reality; from logical sequence and the rigour of sustained argument; from social and stylistic decorum. The essays of Elia at their best are concerned not so much with presenting a fully rounded character as a frame of mind - a frame of mind which embodies these comic freedoms, the freedoms of the humourist.

Walter Pater has a phrase in his classic essay on Lamb which shrewdly establishes the connection which surely existed in Lamb's mind between theatrical experience and the experiences he wished to create as an essayist; he speaks of 'this lover of the stage significantly welcoming a little touch of the artificiality of play to sweeten the intercourse of actual life'.¹⁵ I'm not sure I accept the implied limitations of the stated aim; but that Lamb welcomed 'the artificiality of play' is incontrovertible and important. This welcome is a symptom of his awareness that art is not simply a transcription of life and that illusion has a place as well as reality.

Lamb is a 'player' in the old *and* in the modern sense. As Elia he plays with reality, and with ideas, and with words. There are dangers, of course, in all three of these plays, ploys, games, as we shall see. Reality may dissolve into fantasy, recollected feelings into sentimentality; ideas may be fogged over and blurred in mere muddle-headedness; and word-play degenerate into superficial inconsequence. The danger of 'playing' the Fool is that sometimes you may *merely*, he could merely, 'play the fool'.

The 'All Fools' Day' essay itself is not, to my mind, one of his best. There's something factitious, too self-consciously stagey in the way he summons up the fools of the past: 'Good master Empedocles, you are welcome ... Gebir, my old free-mason, and prince of plasterers at Babel... Mister Adams.- 'odso, I honour your coat - pray do us the favour to read to us that sermon, which you lent to Mistress Slipslop...' and so on. But it ends with revealing passage:

I love a *Fool* - as naturally as if I were of kith and kin to him. When a child, with child-like apprehensions, that dived not below the surface of the matter, I read those *Parables* - not guessing at their involved wisdom - I had more yearning towards that simple architect, that built his house upon the sand, than I entertained for his more cautious neighbour.¹⁶

It is not an accident that it is the Child that loves the Fool; it was the child-Lamb who first perceived and praised folly. The Child and the Fool both enjoy freedoms denied to the grown-up, to the sage and decorous counsellor. They enjoy freedom from decorums - decorums of behaviour, thought and language. The Fool Elia enjoys the moral indecorum of preferring the Foolish to the Wise Virgins, the man who built his house upon the sand to the one who had solid foundations.

Not surprisingly many of Lamb's most moving essays present us with a child's-eye view of the world. Others present us with children - chimney sweepers, schoolboys or dream-children. 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple' contains a moving plea that we should *not* put away childish things. Elia laments that

The artificial fountains of the metropolis are...fast vanishing. Most of them are dried up, or bricked over. Yet, where one is left, as in that little green nook behind the South Sea House, what a freshness it gives to the dreary pile! Four little winged marble boys used to play their virgin fancies, spouting out ever fresh streams from their innocent-wanton lips, in the square of Lincoln's-inn, when I was no bigger than they were figured. They are gone, and the spring choked up. The fashion, they tell me, is gone by, and these things are esteemed childish. Why not then gratify children, by letting them stand?...They are awakening images to them at least. Why must everything smack of man, and mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and the best some of the child's heart left, to respond to its earliest enchantments?¹⁷

'The imagination of a boy is healthy', wrote Keats. Lamb's writings confirm this. It seems strange to me that Lamb should so often be accused of living in the past (taken too much at his own word, indeed - 'He did not conform to the march of time, but was dragged along in the procession').¹⁸ It is true that 'the impressions of infancy had burnt into him', but this is one of the great new Romantic themes; and Lamb is in the most august company in celebrating the 'fair seed-time' that his soul enjoyed as a child. Lamb is truly a writer of the new age.

It is possible, I suppose, though it should not be easy, to be misled by his towny temperament into separating him from his friends, Wordsworth and Coleridge ("I must confess that I am not romance-bit about *Nature*...").¹⁹ But as Pater said, he 'felt the genius of places', and the Inner Temple was as important imaginatively to Lamb as the "wild secluded scene" to Wordsworth. Lamb knew, and could articulate, moments of imaginative ecstasy; but to him it was not 'the sounding cataract' that 'haunted /him/ like a passion: the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood'; it was the Temple - 'Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountain...' In the opening pages of 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple' Lamb's poet's imagination releases (for me, at least) the full potency of such traditional, indeed archetypal images as the fountain and the sundial:

What an antique air had the now almost effaced sun-dials, with their moral inscriptions, seeming coevals with that Time which they measured, and to take their revelations of its flight immediately from heaven, holding correspondence with the fountain of light! How would the dark line steal imperceptibly on, watched by the eye of childhood, eager to detect its movement, never caught, nice as an evanescent cloud, or the first arrests of sleep!

Ah! yet doth beauty like a dial-hand
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived!

What a dead thing is a clock, with its ponderous embowelments of lead and brass, its pert or solemn dulness of communication, compared with the simple altar-like structure, and silent heart-language of the old dial! It stood as the garden god of Christian gardens. Why is it

almost every where vanished?...It spoke of moderate labours, of pleasures not protracted after sunset, of temperance, and good-hours. It was the primitive clock, the horologe of the first world. Adam could scarce have missed it in Paradise.²⁰

Just as the memories of his own childhood release imaginative force so does the spectacle of children. In the essay, 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers', the two are combined. It opens in Elia's verbally fantastic vein:

I like to meet a sweep - understand me - not a grown sweep - old chimney-sweepers are by no means attractive - but one of those tender novices, blooming through their first nigritude, the maternal washings not quite effaced from the cheek.²¹

'Blooming through their first nigritude' gives one a foretaste, stylistically, of what is to come. And, indeed, the essay is in this respect a test-case for the reader of Lamb. But something comes through the contorted and fantastic verbal foliage - a sense of the hardship certainly, but also of the mirth and adventure of the boy-sweep's life.

When a child, what a mysterious pleasure it was to witness their operation! to see a chit no bigger than one's-self enter, one knew not by what process, into what seemed the *fauces Averni* - to pursue him in imagination, as he went sounding on through so many dark stifling caverns, horrid shades! - to shudder with the idea that 'now, surely, he must be lost for ever!' - to revive at hearing his feeble shout of discovered daylight - and then (O fulness of delight) running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in safety, the brandished weapon of his art victorious like some flag waved over a conquered citadel!...²²

The gleefulness is renewed in the account of the sweeps' delight in *Salooop*, a kind of tea made from 'sassafras'; in the evocation of London life in the early-morning hours; in the anecdote of his own discomfiture at falling down and the young sweep's mischief-less delight. Again, in the story of the sooty boy who showed his innate gentility by falling asleep in a state-bed at Arundel Castle; and finally in the description of the annual feast of chimney-sweepers in Smithfield, given by his friend Jem White.

JAMES WHITE is extinct, and with him these suppers have long ceased. He carried away with him half the fun of the world when he died - of my world at least.²³

The Child distorts reality in his imagination, unconsciously. The Fool does the same, deliberately; he loves to play with the absurd. And the wise fool makes sense of his folly. 'Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist' seems to me an admirable example of Lamb's meaningful absurdity.

'A clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game.' This was the celebrated *wish* of old Sarah Battle (now with God) who, next to her devotions, loved a good game at whist.²⁴

Later,

A grave simplicity was what she chiefly admired in her favourite game. There was nothing silly in it, like the nob in cribbage - nothing superfluous. No *flushes* that most irrational of all pleas that a reasonable being can set up... She even wished that whist were more simple than it is; and, in my mind,

would have stripped it of some appendages, which, in the state of human frailty, may be venially, and even commendably allowed of. She saw no reason for the deciding of the trump by the turn of the card. Why not one suit always trumps? Why two colours, when the mark of the suits would have sufficiently distinguished them without it?²⁵

Mrs Battle is obviously a caricature, a playful simplification and projection of real personality for a purpose - though the purpose is more Dickensian and oblique (or supererogatory) than Jonsonian and didactic, but these are her pedigree. The whole essay, the end excepted, is relatively direct and consistent in style, positive and forceful. There is, however, one contrasting passage, midway, where Elia rejoins to the passage just quoted with its advocacy of simplicity ('Why two colours, when the mark of the suits would have sufficiently distinguished them without it?') as follows:

"But the eye, my dear Madam, is agreeably refreshed with the variety. Man is not a creature of pure reason - he must have his senses delightfully appealed to. We see it in Roman Catholic countries, where the music and the paintings draw in many to worship, whom your quaker spirit of unsensualizing would have kept out. - You, yourself, have a pretty collection of paintings - but confess to me, whether, walking in your gallery at Sandham, among those clear Vandykes, or among the Paul Potters in the ante-room, you ever felt your bosom glow with an elegant delight, at all comparable to *that* you have it in your power to experience most evenings over a well-arranged assortment of the court cards? - the pretty antic habits, like heralds in a procession - the gay triumph-assuring scarlets - the contrasting deadly-killing sables - the hoary majesty of spades' - Pam in all his glory! -"²⁶

Lamb argues that 'the game might go on very well, picture-less. But the *beauty* of cards would be extinguished for ever. Stripped of all that is imaginative in them, they must degenerate into mere gambling.'

Dramatic distortion as it is, the 'speaking mask' of Sarah Battle has considerable force.²⁷ In the most general terms the essay opposes eighteenth-century values of 'solidity', reason, and good sense to the 'romantic' values of beauty, imagination, 'playing for nothing', playing *for love*. When Mrs Battle defends the idea of play it is for utilitarian ends - 'man is a gaming animal. He must be always trying to get the better in something or other: - ... this passion can scarcely be more safely expended than upon a game of cards'... 'in truth a mere drama'. To this, Lamb opposes the Romantic and non-utilitarian - the 'idle folly' of playing for its own sake.²⁸

If wonder and fear are especially the province of the Child, absurdity - meaningful absurdity - is the province of the Clown or Fool. But 'absurdity' is perhaps too positive a word to describe the second freedom which I have noted above - freedom from logical sequence and the rigour of sustained argument. It was certainly not true that Lamb could not think straight; rather, that he did not wish to. He valued certain kinds of *discontinuity* more highly than continuity, at least of an intellectual kind. 'Remove those logical forms, waiter, that no gentleman break the tender shins of his apprehension stumbling across them' ('All Fools' Day').²⁹

The essay 'Imperfect Sympathies' contains that well-known passage in which Elia describes 'an order of imperfect intellects', including the Lamb-Elia intellect, 'which in its constitution is essentially anti-Caledonian'.

The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to, have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess fairly) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of Truth. She presents no full front to them - a feature or side-face at the most. Hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they pretend to. They beat up a little game peradventure - and leave it to knottier heads, more robust constitutions, to run it down. The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting; waxing, and again waning. Their conversation is accordingly. They will throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth. They cannot speak always as if they were on their oath - but must be understood, speaking or writing, with some abatement. They seldom wait to mature a proposition, but e'en bring it to market in the green ear. They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development. They are no systematizers, and would but err more by attempting it. Their minds, as I said before, are suggestive merely.³⁰

This attitude of mind gains some warrant from fashionable views about associationism, the free play of the mind, its swift darting from one thing to another without apparent causal connection, and is near akin to Keats's, 'I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning - and yet it must be.'³¹ It also fits in with what Lamb himself says in the projected and withdrawn Preface to *Elia* (1823) about talk. His ideal reader

will take these Papers, as they were meant; not understanding everything perversely in its absolute and literal sense, but giving fair construction, as to an after-dinner conversation; allowing for the rashness and necessary incompleteness of first thoughts...

The Essays want no Preface /he goes on/: they are *all Preface*. A Preface is nothing but a talk with the reader and they do nothing else.³²

Few of the essays develop along a single logical line. Rather, they dart about, hover, return (or not) to a fixed point. Thus, 'Oxford in the Vacation'. I summarize:

You'll see, Reader, that this essay is signed 'Elia', like my last about the clerks of the Southsea House. You probably think I'm a clerk too. I partly admit it. I spend 'the forepart of the day' looking at raw cottons and the like. It increases one's appetite for books, and one takes a few jottings home too. / Not that I couldn't think of improvements to this routine. We used to have saints' days as holidays. I honoured all the saints then; now I'm little better than one of the profane. But I 'wade out of my depths'. I'm just plain Elia, not Selden, though I *am* sitting in the shadow of the Bodleian at the moment.

In Oxford I 'play the gentleman, enact the student'. I dream I am everything from sizar to 'seraphic doctor'. In the vacation the walks are one's own. The halls, founders, kitchens, seem to adopt me. I revel in 'the spits which have cooked for Chaucer' / 'Antiquity, thou wondrous charm...!'; but antiquity is a complex idea; the old was not always old. What were the dark ages? Odd images come to the mind of a

'palpable obscure'.

But the libraries are the most solacing thing of all. A 'dormitory' of 'old souls'. I don't want to handle the books, still less the manuscripts. / I met G/eorge/ D/yer/ by the way, a real bookworm. He lives in Clifford's Inn but is always coming to Oxford. He tells me he has been engaged on a history of Oxford and Cambridge for years - without much encouragement from the dons. Dyer started when we met. Not surprising - he is short sighted and absent-minded, Anecdote about his absent-mindedness. But he is alive in his spiritual world. He's delightful in any place. But he prefers the ancient Universities to the fashionable spas, Bath, Buxton etc. He is a marvellous guide to have with you - like the Interpreter at Bunyan's House Beautiful.³³

'Oxford in the Vacation' falls into three main sections: the presentation of himself as a day-time clerk and evening author; the fantasy, or day-dream, of himself as an Oxford resident; the characterisation of George Dyer. There is no logical development in the essay and the connections, or links, between the sections appear adventitious - imaginatively right rather than logically necessary. The essay has however a strong, and obvious, thematic unity. Lamb's imagination dwells on certain recurrent ideas or (perhaps a better word because less intellectual) recurrent *yearnings* - for leisure to write, for a studious environment, for a present which is redolent of the past. In this essay the juxtapositions are not startling and there is little sense of the grotesque or absurd. The intellectual 'flights' are rather whimsical than otherwise, 'whimsy' indicating a lighter disengagement from good sense and real consequence than either absurd or grotesque. (To call a writer whimsical in these days is commonly to damn him. But whimsy is, after all, only one species of mind (and word?) play. It is simply the most playful form of irony, 'that dangerous figure' which Lamb so much loved.) However this may be, Lamb's discontinuities are positive in this essay, and elsewhere when he is writing at his best. He aims at truth, like children and 'fools' do, but, like them, not by 'consequitive' reason.

I have spoken about Lamb's 'play' with reality (his dramatic fictions) and, more briefly, about his 'play' with logic (his mastery of the art of inconsequence). The final aspect of Lamb the humourist which I should like to consider is the play with words. Verbal dexterity, linguistic absurdity, is part of the traditional equipment of the Fool. One can see that this particular play, this freedom from the restraints of stylistic decorum in the traditional sense, is all of a piece with the other kinds of play which I have mentioned. And yet there can be no single feature which is more off-putting to the present-day reader of Lamb's essays than this very thing. I find it singularly problematic.

We may start with Lamb's own disarming admission, attributed to 'a friend of the late Elia', - 'Crude they are, I grant you - a sort of unlicked, incondite things - villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases', and its defence - 'They had not been *his*, had they been other than such; and better it is that a writer should be natural in a self-pleasing quaintness, than to affect a naturalness (so called) that should be strange to him.'³⁴ And with this we can set Hazlitt's praise of Lamb's style - praise the more impressive because it comes in the middle of an essay, 'On Familiar Style', which plainly states a plain case for plain language ('I hate any thing that occupies more space than it is worth. I hate to see a load of band-boxes go along the street, and I hate

to see a parcel of big words without any thing in them').³⁵ What Hazlitt says of Lamb is:

Mr. Lamb is the only imitator of old English style I can read with pleasure; and he is so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of his authors that the idea of imitation is almost done away. There is an inward unctious, a marrowy vein both in the thought and feeling, an intuition, deep and lively, of his subject, that carries off any quaintness or awkwardness arising from an antiquated style and dress. The matter is completely his own, though the manner is assumed.³⁶

The first thing to be said is, of course, that whatever else they are, the essays of Elia are not 'crude', not 'unlicked, incondite things'. The evidence for careful manuscript revision has been meticulously assembled by George Barnett;³⁷ and, as Lamb himself wrote, to Southey, 'I am as slow as a Fleming painter when I compose anything.'³⁸ That some of the essays are 'pranked', if not 'villainously pranked', in an affected array of antique modes and phrases' is certainly true. But on this there is more to be said.

One of the paradoxes of Lamb's personal character is that on the one hand he was singular, eccentric, markedly individual, 'droll', 'extravagant', and on the other, to quote Hazlitt, 'There was no fuss or cant about him: nor were his sweets or his sour ever diluted with one particle of affectation.'³⁹ The paradox holds to some degree for his essay style - that is, even when he is at his quaintest, most outrageously singular, there is nothing self-important, nothing pretentiously inflated, about the way he writes, the impression he conveys. Once again, the key is *play*. Like a child, he plays with words, rhythms and sounds; like a Fool he plays with their senses, in puns and etymologies; and like the bookish humourist he is, he dresses himself in the styles, tricks of phrase, coinages, mannerisms of his favourite authors. Self-importance, cant, pretentious affectation are not the Fool's vices; they are rather his targets in others. But here Lamb departs, perhaps, from the Fool's traditional role in so far as the personalities he depicts are seldom gayed and even seldomer attacked with any sharpness.

Lamb, of course, plays with many styles and does not always distinguish them. The element of pure pastiche comes through, to me, especially clearly in his use of the character-writers of the seventeenth-century. The first paragraph of the essay 'Poor Relations', indeed, with its interminable list of parallels and clauses in apposition, recalls rather Burton, of the *Anatomy*, another of Lamb's favourites. But, after that, Elia settles down to a solid stretch of witty antitheses in the manner of Earle or Butler.

He entereth smiling, and - embarrassed. He holdeth out his hand to you to shake, and - draweth it back again. He casually looketh in about dinner time - when the table is full. He offereth to go away, seeing you have company - but is induced to stay. He filleth a chair, and your visiter's two children are accommodated at a side table.⁴⁰

Although the pastiche is well done, it does not seem particularly worth doing. It does not in this instance release anything in Lamb - rather the opposite. The whole passage remains like its model cold and external.

A whole book has been written about Lamb's debt to Sir Thomas Browne.

Unlike the 'character'-writers, whose actual techniques could be borrowed, pastiche-wise, and applied to the same ends - the depiction of a type, Sir Thomas Browne does not lend himself to *radical* imitation. But what Lamb admired in, and copies from, Browne was a new range of phraseology, vocabulary and cadence. I think Hazlitt is wrong when he says that Lamb was 'thoroughly imbued with the *spirit* of his authors' (my italics). There is little sign in Lamb's writings and reported comments that he had much knowledge or much understanding of the philosophical and political dilemmas of the early seventeenth century. He was rather more like a boy browsing through a book, *Literary Costumes throughout the Ages*. The 'beautiful obliquities' of Sir Thomas Browne (which Charles had to forgive Mary for not being able to admire) were for him primarily, we may suspect, ear-teasing sonorities and exotic lexical flowers. Lamb is, it is true, reported as saying that *Urn Burial* was a 'stately labyrinth of doubt and withering speculation'. But this really makes my point: Browne's doubts may be labyrinthine, but 'withering' is hardly the word for his intellectual connoisseurship. Another comment (which is suspected to have originated from Lamb) gives a better clue to his further interest in Browne -

He delighted to live in the conjectural world, and lived in it so long, that conjectures and things impossible to be known, assumed the place of realities and things knowable. 41

Browne, to Lamb, was an author who played not only with language but with ideas, with conjectures. Perhaps it was the notion of an almost self-contained verbal structure - the mind's own 'self-delighting' - which intrigued Lamb. There may be substantial truth in Hazlitt's remark that Lamb read for days in dusty old tomes for the style's sake and to save himself from the pain of thought.

To Lamb, moreover, Browne was a mysterious author, to be coupled with the impenetrable Fulke Greville -

The reason why I pitch upon these two authors is, that their writings are riddles, and they themselves the most mysterious of personages. They resemble the soothsayers of old, who dealt in dark hints and doubtful oracles ... my friends, whose repose I should be tempted to disturb, (were it in my power), are implicit, inextricable, inscrutable. 42

A riddle is a hallowed form of word-game.

The kind of passage in which Lamb 'uses' Sir Thomas Browne most effectively is one like the following from 'Blakesmoor in H-Shire':

What, else, were the families of the great to us? What pleasure should we take in their tedious genealogies, or their capitulatory brass monuments? What to us the uninterrupted current of their bloods, if our own did not answer within us to a cognate and correspondent elevation? 43

In the essay this passage mediates between the initial simple statement of the argument - 'To have the feeling of gentility it is not enough to have been born gentle' - and the grandiloquent apostrophe to the 'Scutcheon' and to the great house.

Or wherefore, else, O tattered and diminished 'Scutcheon that hung upon the time-worn walls of thy princely stairs, BLAKESMOOR! have

I in childhood so oft stood poring upon thy mystic characters - thy emblematic supporters with their prophetic 'Resurgam' - till, every dreg of peasantry purging off, I received into myself Very Gentility? Thou wert first in my morning eyes; and of nights, hast detained my steps from bedward, till it was but a step from gazing at thee to dreaming on thee.

Elsewhere Lamb imitates Browne's tautologies, his parallelisms, his allusiveness:

... the birth of a New Year is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.⁴⁴

and apes Browne's magnificent understatements;

this intolerable disclination to dying

One aspect of Lamb's literary heritage and training that one would wish to know more about is his knowledge of traditional rhetoric. It is obvious that as much as anything in his verbal games he enjoys playing with the figures and colours of rhetoric, and the 'high style' to which they are appropriate. Whether these derive directly from his own reading of classical texts at Christ's Hospital, from a formal academic training in rhetoric, or from the imitation of his favourite old authors, like for instance Sir Philip Sidney, it is hard to tell. The passage just quoted from 'Blakesmoor' is a good example of rhetorical devices used seriously - rhetorical question, apostrophe, chiasmus, and doubtless others.

However this may be, stylistic play, a luxuriant inventiveness of phrase, word-coinage, syntactical experiment, were a constant feature of his writing. Sometimes the deliberate absurdity is carried too far, as in the mounting periphrases of 'A Chapter on Ears':

I have no ear.-

Mistake me not, reader, - nor imagine that I am by nature destitute of those exterior twin appendages, hanging ornaments, and (architecturally speaking) handsome volutes to the human capital. Better my mother had never born me. - I am, I think, rather delicately than copiously provided with those conduits; and I feel no disposition to envy the mule for his plenty, or the mole for her exactness, in those ingenious labyrinthine inlets - those indispensable side-intelligencers.⁴⁵

This mood of riotous inanity does not continue throughout - and, although Lamb does not have much of interest to say about the experience of music in the unmusical, he hits off some good phrases, such as 'the measured malice of music'.

The real stylistic problem arises when Lamb has something substantial to offer us. In 'The Superannuated Man', he takes farewell of his colleagues, the clerks of the East India House. Going back to visit them after his retirement,

..my heart smote me. I had violently broken the bands betwixt us. It was at least not courteous. I shall be sometime before I get quite reconciled to the separation. Farewell, old cronies, yet not for long, for again and again I will come among ye, if I shall have your leave. Farewell, Ch/ambers/, dry, sarcastic and friendly! Do /dwell /, mild, slow to move and gentlemanly! Pl/umley/, officious to do, and to volunteer,

good services! - and thou, thou dreary pile, fit mansion for a Gresham or a Whittington of old, stately House of Merchants; with thy labyrinthine passages, and light-excluding, pent-up offices, where candles for one half the year supplied the place of the sun's light; unhealthy contributor to my weal, stern fosterer of my living, farewell! In thee remain, and not in the obscure collection of some wandering bookseller, my 'works'! There let them rest, as I do from my labours, piled on thy massy shelves, more MSS. in folio than ever Aquinas left, and full as useful! My mantle I bequeath among ye.⁴⁶

The playful assumption of 'high style' for this valediction which comes at the close of the first part of this originally two-part essay (London Magazine, 1825) is obviously appropriate. It deals with the paradox of Lamb's feeling: the retirement of a senior clerk in a merchant house is not a world-shaking event, but to Lamb it was momentous. So in a mock-heroic style, which is fully self-conscious and indeed *self*-mocking, he lifts the valediction above the level of every day by devices of vocabulary (Biblical archaisms, archaic second-person 'thou', periphrases), by image (the schoolman and 'prophet' bequeaths his mantle), by the rhetorical device of apostrophe, and above all through rhythm (no space here for the analysis of the subtly contrived rise and fall of this paragraph). The ironic under-tone, which lets the sadness, the puzzlement, of his feelings through, is an integral part of the whole. Lamb is not deceived by his own rhetoric.

Equally telling is the light periodical-essay pastiche, eighteenth-century style, of the end of this same whole essay:

I am no longer ***** , clerk to the Firm of &c.
 I am Retired Leisure. I am to be met with in trim gardens.
 I am already come to be known by my vacant face and careless gesture, perambulating at no fixed pace, nor with any settled purpose. I walk about; not *to* and *from*. They tell me a certain *cum dignitate* air, that has been buried so long with my other good parts, has begun to shoot forth in my person. I grow into gentility perceptibly. When I take up a newspaper, it is to read the state of the opera. *Opus operatum est*. I have done all that I came into this world to do, I have worked task-work, and have the rest of the day to myself.⁴⁷

The punning paradox of 'opera' and *opus* (artistic play and 'taskwork') is pure Lamb - and one of his better puns. But the evocation of 'Retired Leisure' in 'trim gardens', combined with the ironic self-flattery, nicely uses pastiche to evoke a particular mood of gentlemanly ease. I am reminded of Yeats's use of eighteenth-century pastiche in 'Ancestral Houses'.

O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
 Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
 And Childhood a delight for every sense
 But take our greatness with our violence?⁴⁸

Lamb's interest in past authors, archaic styles, has often been described as bookish, a sort of literary escapism, leading him to avoid present-day idiom and to indulge in what Hazlitt not referring to Lamb calls 'the windy impertinence of ingenuity self-begotten'. Such criticism seems to

me mistaken. Granted that Lamb's sense of past literature, our own Elizabethan and Jacobean authors for instance, was to some degree circumscribed, he was still probably in advance of his friends and contemporaries (Coleridge always excepted). How many of them could have anticipated T S Eliot on Andrew Marvell? Lamb points out that 'all his serious poetry was.... of a witty delicacy'. Like many creative minds before and since, Lamb *used* past literature. A part of his interest (his absorption, if a less conscious term is appropriate) is in what they could do for him. They could, and did, do a great deal. They suggested modes of release through stylistic play from the constrictions of the essay style as Lamb inherited it. Their model, however understood, set Lamb free to develop in his best essays a creative inventiveness in the use of words and rhythms which may properly be called 'poetic'. Hazlitt and De Quincey have their virtues, have great virtues - oratorical force and persuasive fluency, architectonic powers which Lamb cannot compass. But neither, I think, has his imaginative flexibility or his richly delicate use of words.

I end with a passage from 'Oxford in the Vacation' which seems to me to need and to reward the same kind of attention as one commonly gives to poetry:

What a place to be in is an old library! It seems as though all the souls of all the writers, that have bequeathed their labours to these Bodleians, were reposing here, as in some dormitory, or middle state. I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding sheets. I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage; and the odour of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard. 49

What gives this paragraph its richness of evocation is principally the triple strand of imagery which runs through it. The library *is* a library, with books in it; and the books have leaves and give off a musty odour. But the library is also a place of repose for dead authors, whose souls are asleep - the 'middle state' suggests a purgatory, before some joyful awakening? 'Winding sheets' (?binding sheets) is a pun, almost a double-pun. And 'shade' suggests a classical underworld in addition to a Christian limbo. Finally, the library is a paradise garden, where Elia walks, tranquilly inhaling the scent of the leaves - which he must not handle because they are next to the 'scintial apples', the fruit of the forbidden tree, of knowledge. 'Shade' and 'foliage' have double meanings here.

This kind of writing is a quite remarkable imaginative achievement. It has all the ingredients of seventeenth-century wit-writing - the double and triple meanings - and yet one wouldn't call it 'witty'. There is no sense here of intellectual display; Lamb is not parading his cleverness, or even using it, our sense of it, as part of his effect. But it is in passages like these that Lamb reaps the harvest of many years of 'play' - play with realities, play with ideas, play with words. This was his release from bondage.

NOTES

p 113 Note 1 E V Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb* (6th. Edn., London, 1914), 244

- p 113 Note 2 E V Lucas, ed., *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, vol.ii: *Elia and the Last Essays of Elia* (London, 1903), 40
- 114 3 Addison, ed. Donald F Bond (Oxford 1965), iv. 188
4 *ibid.* i.146
5 Robert O Frank, *Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!* (Oregon, 1976), 21-22
6 Edmund Blunden, *Charles Lamb and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge 1933), 4
- 115 7 The view is confirmed by Ian Jack, *NOHEL: 1815-32*, ch.x 'Lamb', especially p.289
8 *Works* (see note 2 above), ii.7
9 'New Year's Eve', *Works*, ii
10 *Works*, ii.251
- 116 11 Frank, 26
12 *Works*, ii.141
13 *Works*, ii.141-2
- 117 14 *Works*, ii.142. The images in this passage are particularly interesting - 'diocese' and 'cage', for obvious reasons; and 'precincts of the law-courts' with its submerged reference to home, The Temple.
15 'Charles Lamb' in *Appreciations* (1889), edition of 1904, p.117
16 *Works*, ii.44
- 118 17 *Works*, ii.84-5
18 Preface to Last Essays, *Works*, ii.153
19 Letter to Manning, 28 Nov 1800. E V Lucas, ed., *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb* (London, 1903) edn.of 1912, i. 197
- 119 20 *Works*, ii.83
21 *Works*, ii.108
22 *Works*, ii.109
23 *Works*, ii.114
24 *Works*, ii.32
- 120 25 *Works*, ii.34
26 *Works*, ii.34
26a Dr John Beer has kindly pointed out that Lamb's echo of Burke's 'the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever' is particularly subtle and appropriate because it invokes the romanticism of the arch-conservative.

- p 120 Note 27 The phrase is Lamb's own, from a deleted parenthesis in the essay as first printed. See *Works*, ii.334, note to page 37, line 1.
- 28 This 'idle folly' is sentimentalized at the end of the essay into a dreamy idyll ('Bridget and I should be ever playing', etc.)
- 29 *Works*, ii.43
- 121 30 *Works*, ii.59
- 31 Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 Nov.1817
- 32 *Works*, ii. 299-300
- 122 33 See *Works*, ii 7ff.
- 34 *Works* ii.151
- 123 35 P P Howe, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* (1930-34) viii. 244
- 36 *ibid.* viii.245
- 37 G L Barnett, *Charles Lamb: the Evolution of Elia* (1964)
- 38 *Letters* (see note 19 above), i. 125
- 39 *Works of Hazlitt*, xii.36
- 40 *Works*, ii.158
- 124 41 See Lucas, *Life*, 209, on Lamb's assistance to his acquaintance George Burnett with his *Specimens of English Prose-Writers to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*
- 42 *Works of Hazlitt*, xvii.124
- 43 *Works*, ii.156
- 125 44 *Works*, ii.27
- 45 *Works*, ii.38
- 126 46 *Works*, ii.197
- 47 *Works*, ii. 198-9
- 48 *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Macmillan-Reprinted 1967) 226
- 127 49 *Works*, ii.10

BOOK REVIEWS

Kathleen Coburn: *In Pursuit of Coleridge* London: Bodley Head £4.50

Miss Coburn is one of our oldest friends and a Vice-President of the Society. Her autobiography, just published, has been reviewed for *The Times* by Mr Brian Alderson: we think this review so apt that we reproduce it below with the permission of Mr Alderson and *The Times*.

It has not been the best of years for the Oxford University Press. A month or two ago Elisabeth Murray revealed parsimony and compromise in the matter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and now Kathleen Coburn shows the Press turning its back on what has proved to be one of the most moving and majestic contributions to literary scholarship of the century: the text of and commentary on the Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

When the youthful Miss Coburn ("a very young, very starry-eyed, very ebullient bore" she calls herself at one point) went down to see Kenneth Sisam of the Clarendon Press in 1936 with a proposal to edit the notebooks from the original copies "he threw back his head and laughed. 'How did you, pray, a young chit like you...manage to get *that* stuff! Don't you know that England is full of old grey-beards who've been wanting to get their hands on that for decades? Tell me *How?*'"

It is clear he was not going to take her very seriously. After all was not Mr Stephen Potter planning with the Press a four-volume edition of transcripts of the notebooks (perhaps with the help of G. Odoreida), and who could believe in the scholarly potential of "a colonial and all that -and, if I may say so, not meaning to be rude, a young woman, too"? Thus, primarily on the advice of E.K. Chambers ("who was writing his notoriously wrong-headed biography of Coleridge at that time") the Delegates rejected Miss Coburn's proposal on financial grounds - and such a rejection it seems is absolute and eternal. The project faltered, the war supervened - but Miss Coburn, who was tenacious as well as starry-eyed (and who, incidentally, is never a bore), held to her purpose, and once the war was over she set about reviving plans for publication. In 1957 the first "volume" - one book of original Coleridge, and one book of commentary - appeared, and Miss Coburn and Routledge and the Bollingen Foundation had every reason to congratulate themselves on "a success that exceeded all expectations".

The *Notebooks*, which have now reached their third "volume", bear on their dedication page the names of Geoffrey, Third Baron Coleridge, and his wife Jessie, and they are, finally, the answer to Kenneth Sisam's amused but anguished "*How?*" and are the fulcrum to Miss Coburn's book. Lord Coleridge was a "brusque, dry, caustic" man until you got to know him. (He reminds one of a notebook remark by STC himself: "A kindhearted man obliged to give a refusal, or the like, that will give great pain, finds relief in doing it roughly and fiercely".) His wife was always kind and full of encouragement. These two people were not "scholarly" or "literary" and their close guardianship of the Coleridge notebooks has been, as much as anything, through a decent wish to keep their domestic privacy.

Through her very youth, and her female-ness, and her colonial-ness - and, indeed, through a knowledge of beef cattle - Kathleen Coburn established first a friendship and then a deeply affectionate bond with

Lord and Lady Coleridge, so that her work on the notebooks became part of a natural pattern rather than an intrusive assault. (Finally she persuaded the Baron to sell the notebooks to the Pilgrim Trust for the British Museum - a transaction from which that institution emerges with little credit, as it does even less when its Manuscript Department refused to buy further Coleridge notebooks owned by another branch of the family.) From its coverage of such dealings as these, and from its rewarding account of editing Coleridge during the years when he emerged as a hot property for academic research, Miss Coburn's book may seem to be aimed at an audience of Coleridgians. But the candour and approachableness of her discussions on these matters is matched by her warmth in describing the daily events of a life ruled by an over-riding passion. Her accounts of her life in Canada - especially on her summer island - and her descriptions of travel, whether to Ottery St Mary or to Mount Aetna, are given with an ingenuous delight. What an enviable life - and what a roster of achievement for a colonial woman fallen among English greybeards.

There is one point that should be made in relation to the review: work on the publication of the Coleridge notebooks was entirely financed by the Bollingen Foundation, and nearly all production initiatives were taken by Miss Coburn and her friends and fellow-scholars. Princeton University Press (in the U S) and Routledge (in the U K) acted merely as publishing agents and deserve little credit for the project - even a debit if you take into account that they have allowed Volume II to go out of print, and that Routledge have advanced the price of Volume I, without going into a second impression, from the original £3.75 to £27.00.

B S

Robert D Frank: Don't Call Me Gentle Charles! An Essay on Lamb's *Essays of Elia* Oregon State University Press 1976 \$5.75

It seems to be a characteristic of literary criticism, as of party politics, that the pendulum swings violently one way and then as violently the other, so that the middle view, which is probably often nearest to the truth, rarely gets a hearing. If perhaps, as Dr Stevens has suggested, Robert Frank has swung a little too far in his separation of Lamb and Elia, nevertheless it has been a useful exercise to get back from naive identification of the two to a discussion of the function of the role of Elia in relation to the artistry of particular essays.

In his introductory first chapter, which he calls *The Creation of a Neutral World*, Professor Frank argues persuasively that the character of Elia is used by Lamb as a means of disarming the reader, of disabusing him of any expectation that he will be given factual information, topical controversy or moral improvement. The apparent contradiction between the unassuming, even spiritless, personality of Elia and the meticulous care with which the essays were written and revised, as well as the far from pacific way in which Lamb elsewhere "participated in the affairs of the day", is accounted for by his conscious "rhetorical method to create a context that will shape the reader's response", for his particular purposes in these Essays. By a deceptive and sometimes ironic modesty, "Elia underplays his achievement". For example, in the description of that anti-Caledonian "order of imperfect intellects", beneath an apparent self-denigration, he is presenting us with "an idea central to the romantic canon", that of "negative capability".

After touching in a general way on form, style and subject-matter, Frank sums up this chapter: "Lamb used the character of Elia, an amiable eccentric who claims to know very little, the unpretentious form of the essay, eccentricities of style, and a selection of humble objects and unpromising subjects to create the illusion that the essays are outside the fluctuations of reality". Here, as in the difficult question of the exact relationship between Elia and his creator, it is very easy to slip into over-simplification. In spite of his objection to "instructions" that are "too direct and like a lecture", Lamb can accept them when they "slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter", and perhaps this oblique method is one he uses himself at times in the *Essays of Elia*. True, Elia pleads for a view of Artificial Comedy whereby we are enabled to "escape from the pressure of reality" and "now and then, for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions"; but when Frank says that the *Essays of Elia* "provide momentary refuges from the world of choice and will", one wonders uneasily whether he is asserting that that is *all* that they do. Are they really always as escapist as that sounds? One prefers the implication of greater depth in his statement, "The essays of Elia are Lamb's spots of time, and the total body of his essays is his major romantic work."

However, when he ceases to tread the tight-rope of general diagnosis and turns to the examination in detail of particular essays, Robert Frank comes into his own and to a large extent allays the doubts raised by his Introduction. He deals in turn with seven essays: "Blakesmoor in H...shire", "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist", "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire", "The Superannuated Man", "New Year's Eve", and "Old China". The first two, dealt with in Chapter II, *The Growth of the Imagination*, are essays in which childhood memories related to particular buildings are used in a similar way. Frank relates Lamb's work usefully throughout the book to the work of Wordsworth and other writers of the period, while also tracing the structure of individual essays and Lamb's method in presenting his material. Here Frank acknowledges "that Elia does not retreat from reality; rather, he views reality imaginatively, drawing uncommon knowledge from common objects". The comparison is suggested between the use Lamb and Wordsworth made of memories of childhood, though in such different settings, and the similar function of the creative imagination in constructing from them works of art. Useful light is thrown on the themes of the essays by noticing the literary references and quotations Lamb makes, and the associations they bring with them.

In the next two essays, dealt with in Chapter III, *Complementary Modes of Experience*, the unifying device is character - of Mrs Battle and of Bridget Elia - but it is used by Lamb to explore far wider issues than would at first appear. Sentence structure and imagery are examined and the contributions that they, and the careful choice of vocabulary, make to the total effect Lamb wishes to produce. Frank neatly demonstrates how the subject of cards is used to illuminate the activity of the imagination, and the recognition of change and impending death in the visit to Mackery End is mitigated by the immortality conferred by that same imagination in the art-form of the essay itself.

In Chapter IV, *Time and Eternity*, Frank goes on to two essays in which, conversely, Lamb "delights in reality", "the acceptance of man as a fallen being" and "the sorrows and the joys unique to mankind, haunted by death,

the final fruit of its sins". In "The Superannuated Man", the *persona* of Elia is used, Frank says, almost in the manner of Browning's "My Last Duchess", being closer to the form of the dramatic monologue than "to the technique of the character, Elia's literary ancestor", and using irony in a similar but not identical way. "What he sees before his retirement as a state of bondage appears to us at the end of the essay as responsible for many of his pleasures in life." In giving us an account of his life before and after retirement, Elia is exploring the theme of time and eternity and finds that man's imprisonment in time is necessary to his meaningful existence as a living creature on this earth and is preferable to glimpses of an eternity reserved for him at death. In "New Year's Eve", too, death is an unwelcome prospect and life, however imperfect, is affirmed. Frank traces in this essay the progress of Elia's meditation, which is here the vehicle for Lamb's theme. "To accept time is to accept death. Yet time's passing brings our unique sorrows and joys. We are human because we die."

The book ends with a study of "Old China", in a chapter headed *To Teach and to Delight*. The form of this essay, Frank says, is used in a number of the *Essays of Elia* - "A domestic setting, an unassuming object, and a frame". Acknowledging a debt to Richard Haven, Frank compares the use of the teacup here to Keats's use of the Grecian Urn. Two worlds are juxtaposed, the world of experience and that of imagination, and the relationship between them alters as the essay proceeds. Transience and permanence, everyday life and art, nostalgia and realism, youth and age, these are all contrasted and then reconciled in this essay.

The short *Conclusion* to the book ends thus: "Lamb's art is successful not because it shares elements with the works of his contemporaries, but because it is the careful creation of true genius. It is an art that balances all the faculties - memory, feeling, understanding, and imagination". Professor Frank has demonstrated this in his analysis of particular essays, in the body of a book that lovers of Lamb will find both stimulating and illuminating, and often, as the brief quotations possible here have perhaps indicated, he pithily sums up the essence of Lamb's idiosyncratic subject-matter and artistic genius.

M W

We noted in the last Bulletin the publication of Mr Frank Ledwith's book *Ships Afloat in the City*, and perhaps a brief account of it may not come amiss.

In *Ships That Go Bump in the Night* Mr Ledwith produced an autobiographical volume and the present book, though partly reminiscential, gives us mainly a series of views and reflections on aspects of life and work in a marine mutual insurance association.

Mr Ledwith must have had a varied, even exciting life, and what he tells of it and of the people met during the course of it is endlessly fascinating. Information abounds, too, and I feel that I know something a little more about the principles of insurance than I did when I started reading the book. The whole volume, also, is informed with a freshness of moral tone which is to be welcomed in these rather off-white days. The author makes no secret of his adherence to Moral-Rearmament, and although we cannot all follow him in this direction, we can unreservedly welcome a

book in which might is not always right and in which people do sometimes hold all the aces but refrain from playing them because that would not be right. Mr Ledwith gives us a chapter on his schooldays at Christ's Hospital: perhaps that is where it all started.

B S

OBITUARIES

MR E C THOMAS

It is with much regret that we report the death of Mr E C Thomas in December 1977. He and his wife joined the Society in 1938, and they took a keen interest in the Society's activities, and were familiar figures at the lectures and visits. We send our sincere condolences to his son.

A H P

I do not know (though no doubt some CLS member could tell me) when or how Annette Park first met Lamb: a rapport which was to last for the rest of a long and active life, rich in many experiences of literature. But there is plenty of evidence that she was firing others with her enthusiasm some years before she helped to found the Charles Lamb Society in 1935. Literary societies are mysterious bodies, whose living strength is in their individuals. The fact that the CLS is thriving still, well over 40 years later, has much to do with such personalities as A H P.

Besides being a Foundation Member, she was on the Council for 22 years (though she was, I suspect, too much *sui generis* to be a natural committee person), and was Vice-Chairman from 1956 to 1963. But her most personal achievement within the CLS was in her own field of theatrical production. It was she who initiated the CLS Drama Group in 1946, an original enterprise which she ran with her own rare verve and style until her move to Birmingham in 1964. The plays produced were (by the terms of the Charter, if that is the word) of three kinds: those written by Charles and/or Mary Lamb (such as *Mr. H*, *The Pawnbroker's Daughter*), those about the Lambs (such as *What a Lass* by Basil Francis, *Charles and Mary* by Joan Temple, *The Man without a Foe* by P Mann, *A Convivial Evening at C.L.'s* by Frank Hallam) and those he actually saw (*She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Maid and the Magpie*, *Lovers' Vows*, *Modern Antiques*, *Tom Thumb the Great*, and others). There were also theatre visits, play readings, and an annual supper with a guest of honour. For most of this period she was teaching (and producing plays) on the Essex edge of London; as a CLS member has pointed out, it was no small undertaking, even with the aid of loyal and willing helpers, to assemble and train the cast as well as find props, clothes, and premises for rehearsal and final show. But enjoyment was had by all, including the audiences. And the ventures had real value, in bringing the Lamb world near.

Her move to Birmingham did not at all end her connection with the CLS. She continued to come to as many meetings and functions as she was able, though increasing physical frailty began to make the journey a formidable enterprise. Yet - triumph indeed! - she managed to get to the Ernest Crowsley Memorial Lecture in October 1977. It was also the last month of her own life. As always she brought an air of curious distinction into the somewhat un-uplifting meeting room. I can see her vividly, with her fine mediaeval looks, her penetrating pale-blue gaze, hooded and distant when she wished to withdraw from a theme (she

had her obstinacies); and with some characteristic brilliant flash of colour: an orange or cornflower chiffon scarf worn wimple-fashion under a wide-brimmed hat... However fragile her limbs, her mind was unfailingly sharp and clear. Quick to appreciate, but a discerning critic, she listened at this last meeting like the connoisseur that she was.

I speak of her "mediaeval" looks, but Renaissance would be equally apt, especially in her younger days. If one saw her face in the National Portrait Gallery among the Tudor poets, or among the portrayed ancestors on the walls of some great ancient house or chateau, the comment would be - "but of course!". However the A H P that we know was born in the Yorkshire Dales, some 80 years ago. She valued her northern origin; it gave her a taste for austerer landscapes, crags and beckes, as opposed to the lush green of the south. Indeed, her own nature had its rocks and dark mysterious tarns under the bright enthusiasms. (Could not one say the same of Lamb?) The only child in a serious household, she found her undergraduate years at Oxford (St Hugh's) a golden time, in which friendship, literature, ideas, and a chance of discovering one's own gifts, were all part of the same delightful journey. Friendship, loyalty, the light touch in exchanging serious views and responses to art and literature - these were what so deeply appealed to her in Lamb. They were also what she felt were basic to the CLS.

Well, I know how I first came to Lamb. It was as a schoolgirl in what was then a remote and oddly old-fashioned Norfolk school - now no more. A H P's sojourn there was, I believe, fairly brief, but she dazzled those who responded to her, left them desolated when she departed, and her teaching stayed. The girl who timidly sat for university entrance (it was not a school accustomed to such ventures) a year or two after A H P's going, must have amused the examiners who, to her vast amazement, awarded her an Exhibition. She could quote at length not only quantities of minor Elizabethan prose and drama, but most of Charles Lamb's correspondence. CLS members will see the link.

I have had the chance to see a number of the many letters written to A H P's good friend Muriel Poulter (herself a gifted scholar) whose companionship and help alone made the activities of A H P's last years possible. In them the note of inspiration sounds again and again. "Her life was well spent," writes one; "she gave joy to many by lifting them out of the ordinary rut of daily life and giving them a glimpse of magic." "There was no one quite like her," writes another, "with her great aptitude for enjoyment, and for finding unique and lovely things to take pleasure in - her generosity and gaiety and sense of fun. She won't be forgotten". Yet another speaks of her "unusually rich, sensitive, profoundly spiritual personality, so marvellously laced with humour, wit - not to mention the practical art of cooking." Another reminds us, valuably, of her "complete absence of the generation gap." How true! But perhaps the most telling comment of all is in French. "Elle laisse a chacun le souvenir d'un être d'élite, sensible à la beauté des choses comme à la présence des gens...qui savait attraper au vol des nuances évanescentes et à peine perceptibles."

What concerns us, especially, here - her deep allegiance to Lamb - was a constant through all her outward and inward experiences. But it was not a static matter. Her response to things of the mind, to art and literature known or new, remained green and vital, as long as she lived herself. On the last afternoon of her life what was she doing? She was coaching a young man for the part of Becket in 'Murder in the Cathedral'. *Un etre*

d'élite... In the Greek theatre at Walthamstow where she taught for so many years, a plaque is being put up to her memory. One could say that the continuing life of the Lamb Society is in itself a form of memorial.

Naomi Lewis

NEWS

EXHIBITION

The Admiral Blake Museum, Bridgwater, Somerset, will display during the summer of 1978 an Exhibition of drawings and water-colours by John Chubb, Mayor of the town in 1788 and friend of the poet Coleridge. The Exhibition opens soon after Easter.

IN THE SALE-ROOM

In the autumn of last year appeared in Quaritch's Catalogue 978 the following item: LAMB, CHARLES. Autograph manuscript of his essay *My First Play*, with some revisions and deletions, signed "Elia" at the end. We understand that this manuscript was sold, alas! abroad, to a private customer, but probably eventually destined for a university library.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Charles Lamb Society will take place on Saturday, 6 May, at the Mary Ward Centre, 9, Tavistock Place, London, WC1, at 2.30 pm. Nominations are invited for the vacancies on the Council arising from those members retiring in accordance with the Society's rules. Nominations should be sent to the Hon. Secretary as soon as possible and not later than April 15th, after ensuring that the nominees are prepared to stand.

Since writing the above, we have been very sorry to hear that our Bulletin typist, Miss Stephenson, slipped and broke her wrist during "the great snow". Consequently, the Bulletin may be a little late and nominations may have to go in up to the end of the month. We wish Miss Stephenson a quick and painless recovery.

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 1978

In preparing his Financial Statement, the Hon. Treasurer needs your up-to-date subscriptions. If any members have not yet paid, may we please jog your memories?

BOOKS RECEIVED

The following books have been received and will be reviewed shortly:

Robert Southey: A Reference Guide by Kenneth Curry (G K Hall & Co.)

Sir Walter Scott's Annual Register by Kenneth Curry (University of Tennessee Press)

Charles Lamb and the Theatre by Wayne McKenna (Colin Smythe Ltd)

NEW MEMBERS

William Dawson and Sons, Cannon House, Folkestone, Kent
 Mr L Montgomery, Assistant Librarian, Worcester College, Oxford
 Mr A A Ross and Mrs M E Ross, Orchard House, Downside, Epsom, Surrey
 Professor P. Tatspaugh, 1901 Columbia Road, NW Apt. 703, Washington DC, USA
 Mr D E Wickham, 116 Parsonage, Manorway, Belvedere, Kent

On Friday, December 2nd 1977, a Service of Thanksgiving to mark the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Morris Rich was held at the South London Liberal Synagogue, at Streatham. A large gathering heard his son Dr Stanley Rich read a sermon written by his father in 1941, "Convenient - Why Not?", and Mrs C Hale, his daughter, read two of her father's sonnets.

Members of the early days of the Charles Lamb Society, of which Mr S M Rich was a founder, might care to be reminded of the first Editor of the Bulletin, and his priceless collection of books and cuttings so generously presented to the Society's Library by his son Dr Stanley Rich.

Contributions to the service were given by Rabbi Dr L Edgar and Rabbi Julia Neuberger.

