

THE CHARLES LAMB BULLETIN
The Journal of the Charles Lamb Society

NEW SERIES No.9

JANUARY 1975

THE AUTHENTIC VOICE: LAMB AND THE FAMILIAR LETTER

The third annual Ernest Crowsley Memorial Lecture, given to the Society by Professor R A Foakes on 5 October 1974

It is an honour to be invited to give a lecture in memory of Ernest Crowsley, who played so large a part in establishing a society concerned with one of London's great figures, Charles Lamb. My concern is with Lamb's letters. In making arrangements for this talk I have been engaged in a certain amount of correspondence which, like most exchanges by letter now, has been of a routine kind. We tend to think of dashing off necessary or business letters, rather than of composing a good letter, one that might conceivably be read as literature. Even the letter as a means of ordinary exchange between friends and relatives has, I suppose, become an adjunct of the telephone; it is as easy to speak as to write, and there is no need for correspondence simply to make contact, or keep in touch, issue an invitation, or report family news. The coming of the railway, and other means of rapid transport, may be seen in retrospect to mark the decline of what became known in the 18th century as 'familiar' letters, or letters containing informal exchanges between private citizens. The exchange of letters of this kind was initially dependent on the development of the post office and of a regular service of delivery, which was established gradually between 1720 - when Ralph Allen of Bath, who had literary connections with Pope and Fielding and provided hints for Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, initiated a system of cross-posts between smaller towns and villages in England - and 1784, when the first mail-coach ran between London and Bristol. The growth of a daily delivery of mail took place at a time when travel was still slow and expensive for the individual, with infrequent coach services between many important centres; even with the speeding up of coach services by the late 18th century, it could still take days to travel from London to, say, Newcastle or Liverpool, with the expense of meals or overnight stops, and various kinds of discomfort, as illustrated in the letters Coleridge wrote en route from London to Liverpool in February, 1812. He learnt from the conversation of other passengers that the coach was known as the 'lousy Liverpool', and that the journey would take from Monday afternoon until early on Thursday morning. He mailed a letter from Slough, and wrote again from Birmingham, having spent an hour at Oxford, where the coach was followed by a mob of boys crying 'lazy Liverpool, lousy Liverpool', saying

truly the Coach deserves it's honours - Two *such* wretches were forced in on me all night, half drunk, and their Cloathes crusted over with dirt...Two large *ticks*...I have found on me - & I had taken the precaution to put my bank notes into by breast-plate, but not liking money to lie so near my heart...I therefore put the money into my watch-fob. And sure enough in the night, while dozing, I felt a hand at my small Cloathes - & starting up, the *handy* gentleman said, he was afraid I was cold, and so was only putting

up the straw round my Legs. Kind Creature!

He goes on to describe the activities of the lice on his body, dramatising them as 'Scrubmocreepi' and 'Sclawmicraulo', in an entertaining if somewhat horrifying account of the completion of a journey which in the end brought him to Liverpool at noon on the Thursday, after three miserable days.

The detailed account Coleridge gives of his journey in this long letter characterises a feature of many letters of the period before the introduction of postage stamps; for when the recipient had to pay for the letter he received, it encouraged the writer to make his letter worthwhile. So it was common in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for people to write long letters, and to devote much more time to correspondence than anyone is likely to need to do now. The period between 1720 and 1840 or so may be regarded, I think, as the golden age of the familiar letter. It has been claimed that the great age for such letters was the 18th century, the age of Pope, Swift, Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu, of Chesterfield, Stone, Gray and Dr Johnson. There survive many splendid letters of this period, which appear rather more designed than the best letters of the Romantics, appealing more to good taste, as if setting down on paper a form of polite conversation. They certainly may be said to avoid being confessional, and reveal the writer rather through what Irvin Ehrenpreis has called 'the apparently unprejudiced discussion of things apparently outside oneself'. An appearance of spontaneity is the result of careful artistry, and social affairs, or the analysis of character are likely to form a good part of the subject-matter. The letter has links in this with the novel, and many novels were, of course, written in the form of letters.

The received idea of the 18th century letter may be found expressed in the volume of *Epistles, Elegant Familiar & Instructive*, gathered by Vicesimus Knox and published as a supplement to *Elegant Extracts*, 'intended for the Improvement of *Young Persons, and for General Entertainment*', in 1791. In reading the letters of great men, says the preface, we may 'imagine ourselves engaged in conversation' with them, and find in them 'powerful examples, in recommending the useful and ornamental virtues'. Letter-writing is a necessary art, for 'no gentleman can avoid showing himself in this kind of writing', and the anthology is designed to teach its readers to 'form a style', and appeal is made to Seneca and to Locke as authorities. Young people are to be instructed to express plain sense and, the preface goes on,

As to the proper form or composition of letters, it is so plain and obvious, that it may seem unnecessary to observe that they should consist of a short and unartificial preface to introduce the subject; of a perspicuous and easy narrative in stating it; and of a brief conclusion, in terms of civility or of affection.

Such a prescription, as if all letters could be neatly divided, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts, points to a way of regarding the composition of letters as a formal art, and of letters themselves as concerned with a 'subject' which should be expressed in a 'perspicuous' narrative. This reflects an 18th century attitude, and the collection that is printed in nearly 800 pages provides a remarkable range of letters, including a generous selection from Cicero and Pliny, and 350 pages of letters by writers of the period from Pope to Dr Johnson, ending with letters by Dr Johnson written as recently as 1784.

In fact, Dr Johnson's letters do not fit easily into the prescription of

the Preface, and although this goes on to say that 'common sense' will give better directions for writing a letter than 'didactic observations', the matter is by no means so simple, as is shown by the conclusion to the volume, an essay 'On Letter Writing' by Dr Johnson himself. He starts by saying that the qualities most frequently required in a letter are 'ease and simplicity, an even flow of unlaboured diction, and an artless arrangement of obvious sentiments' - but soon notes that that doesn't take one far, since 'ease' is improper when the importance of the subject or the dignity of the recipient 'exacts reverence'; and wherever we are anxious to please, we are afraid to trust first thoughts, and 'endeavour to recommend our opinion by studied ornaments, accuracy of method, and elegance of style'. Thus there is reason for the letter-writer to adapt his style to the occasion. So is the letter to be 'artless' and 'unstudied', or is it to be carefully and artfully geared to the occasion and to the recipient? Having recommended both courses, Dr Johnson in the end seems to settle for art, for he goes on to observe that where letters are written not for business or information, but to preserve love or esteem in the minds of those absent, to keep in touch as we would say, then a display of the writer's abilities, 'points of conceit', unexpected sallies, and artful compliment' is necessary. The reason he gives is best quoted in his own words:

Trifles always require exuberance of ornament; the building which has no strength can be valued only for the grace of its decorations. The pebble must be polished with care, which hopes to be valued as a diamond; and words ought surely to be laboured, when they are intended to stand for things.

So he concludes; letters are small things, 'trifles', or 'pebbles', which must be decorated or polished if they are to be valued.

In the end then, Dr Johnson recommends polish, art, labour, in the most trivial letters. Yet his own letters show, at times, labour and a self-conscious enjoyment even in his own artistry, as when he writes to Mrs Thrale, 'Now you think yourself the first writer in the world of a letter about nothing. Can you write such a letter as this? So miscellaneous, with such a disdain of regularity, like Shakespeare's works; such graceful negligence of transition, like the ancient enthusiasts. The pure voice of nature and of friendship'; at other times he says 'I must make my letter from what I feel'. Playfully he might speak of his soul as laid open in a letter, but elsewhere, as in the life of Pope, he argues that it was useless to seek in letters for the characters of men: 'There is indeed no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse.' He was at odds with himself about the nature of letters; do they offer a laying bare of the soul, or a deliberate artistry of concealment? What is the proper relation of feeling to art in the letter? If Dr Johnson could not provide the answer, he at least raised some central questions, which are intimately bound up with a further question - for whom is the author of letters writing? The volume of *Elegant Extracts* might encourage the 'young person' who used it to think they were writing for posterity. Dr Johnson recognises the possibility that the writer may be expressing himself, and the possibility that the writer may be devising his letter in terms of the recipient, and finds no comfortable middle ground.

I doubt whether the matter has in fact been taken much further. Letters may take so many forms, and be so various in style and structure that it is not easy to generalise. It would seem to me, however, that the notion of the

best kind of letter as one that is not so preoccupied with self as to become confessional, nor so concerned with general issues as to read like an essay, has some usefulness as at least setting limits. At the same time, and in spite of Dr Johnson's warning in his *Life of Pope*, we are accustomed to look for a revelation of the writer, at any rate in the letters written by the Romantics and later writers, in which the personal prevails over what is objective, and to find what the first Earl of Birkenhead (F E Smith) called the 'authentic voice', in his introduction to an anthology of English letters. This is heard at its best, in my view, in the finest letters of the Romantic period, which are no longer troubled by the didactic element in the 18th century concept of the letter, but are yet written by men and women who grew up in touch with a tradition which stressed the importance of good letter-writing, and who lived in a period when it was still possible to know most, if not all, the men of letters of the day. So especially in the letters of Keats, or Coleridge, or Lamb, which seem to me the best of the period, we hear not only the 'authentic voice' of the writer, but through him gain entrance, so to speak, to the cultured and fascinating circle of their acquaintance.

Now the authentic voice is not a single note; the good letter writer is bound to adjust his manner to the recipient. Lamb writes, in the early years at any rate, in a much more formal vein to the somewhat humourless Wordsworth than he does to Manning or Coleridge, with whom he could freely joke. Also the letter reflects the feeling of the moment, or at any rate the mood of the day, and it ought not to surprise us that Lamb can almost wish his sister Mary dead at one time, and yet in a well-known letter to Dorothy Wordsworth praise her fulsomely:

She is older, and wiser, and better, than me, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness. She would share life and death, heaven and hell, with me. She lives but for me. And I know I have been wasting and teasing her life for five years past incessantly with my cursed drinking and ways of going on.

In a fit of self-disgust Lamb is rather overdoing it, as he seems to recognise in saying later in this letter, 'I write rather what *answers* to my feelings (which are sometimes sharp enough) than express my present ones.' This acknowledgement that he is writing what he ought or would like to feel, rather than what he does feel, saves this letter from self-pity, but only just. Still, the authentic voice includes both this element of self-abasement before Mary, and the element of hatred for one who, through her fits of madness, was at the same time such a clog to him.

Lamb is perhaps best known as an essayist, and the essay might be taken as marking the limit in one direction for the letter. However much the essay pretends to claim intimacy with the reader, and speaks to him in the first person, it has a design upon him and its voice is really a public one. To my mind, Lamb in his letters is more 'authentic' and more interesting than in his essays, and I can best illustrate this comparing his *Dissertation upon Roast Pig*, published in September 1822, with the letters on eating pig written to Coleridge in March, and to Mr and Mrs Collier in January 1823. The title of the essay alludes comically to the notion of a philosophic treatise, and it begins with the splendidly narrated story of the origin of roast pig as if this were an instance of the way 'the most useful and seemingly the most obvious arts make their way among mankind.' The humour of the tale of Bo-bo and Ho-ti regularly burning down houses

Lamb wished to conceal this in his public persona; in the letters, however, he concedes that he is piglike, an 'old hog', a sensual man, and in consequence these letters speak more fully, and more strongly.

So again, both the essay and the letter to Coleridge include versions of the story of the cake presented to him on his way to school by his aunt, and in turn given away by him to a beggar; and the differences are all to the credit of the letter. In the essay the cake she gives him is one made by her, and the whole episode is made somewhat sentimental by the emphasis put on her joy in mixing it and having it baked for him; in the letter, the cake is a bought one, his aunt figures only incidentally and is not dramatised at all, so that the stress is laid rather on the unfeeling nature of his action in giving the cake away, as opposed to her kindness. It is useful to compare the climactic passages:

a) from the *Dissertation upon Roast Pig*

I burst into tears, thinking how ungrateful I had been to my good aunt, to go and give her good gift away to a stranger, that I had never seen before, and who might be a bad man for aught I knew; and then I thought of the pleasure my aunt would be taking in thinking that I - I myself, and not another - would eat her nice cake - and what should I say to her the next time I saw her - how naughty I was to part with her pretty present - and the odour of that spicy cake came back upon my recollection, and the pleasure and the curiosity I had taken in seeing her make it, and her joy when she sent it to the oven, and how disappointed she would feel that I had never had a bit of it in my mouth at last - and I blamed my impertinent spirit of almsgiving, and out-of-place hypocrisy of goodness; and above all I wished never to see the face again of that insidious, good-for-nothing, old grey impostor.

b) from the letter to Coleridge

I walked on a little in all the pride of an Evangelical peacock, when of a sudden my old aunt's kindness crossed me - the sum it was to her - the pleasure she had a right to expect that I - not the old impostor - should take in eating her cake - the cursed ingratitude by which, under the colour of a Christian virtue, I had frustrated her cherished purpose. I sobbed, wept, and took it to heart so grievously, that I think I never suffered the like - and I was right. It was a piece of unfeeling hypocrisy, and proved a lesson to me ever after. The cake has long been masticated, consigned to the dunghill with the ashes of that unseasonable pauper.

Where the essay tends to make us notice her niceness and his naughtiness, and is mainly concerned with sentiment, the letter cuts through to the deeper moral implications of the boy's pride and ingratitude, and his suffering, which was a moral suffering, as he learned through it the meaning of hypocrisy - 'it proved a lesson to me ever after'; there is nothing of this in the essay.

In other words, I find an honesty and a degree of moral insight in the letter which are lacking in the essay; here, as so often, Lamb is at his best in his familiar letters. He is, of course, known for his humour and high spirits in many letters, but what makes these so delightful is the sense of perfect tact in relation to the occasion and the recipient, as when he wrote to William Godwin in December, 1800, to apologise for not bringing Mary to dinner:

Dear Sir, - I send this speedily after the heels of Cooper (O! the dainty expression) to say that Mary is obliged to stay at home on Sunday to receive a female friend, from whom I am equally glad to escape. So that we shall be by ourselves. I write, because it may make *some* difference in your marketing, &c.

C L

I am sorry to put you to the expense of twopence postage. But I calculate thus: if Mary comes she will

eat Beef 2 plates	4d.	
<i>Batter Pudding</i> , 1 do.	2d.	
Beer, a pint,	2d.	
Wine, 3 glasses,	11d.	I drink no wine!
Chesnuts, after dinner,	2d.	
Tea and supper at moderate calculation	9d.	
	<hr/>	
	2s.6d.	
From which deduct	2d.	postage
	<hr/>	
	2s.4d.	

You are a clear gainer by her not coming.

Godwin liked to think that men acted according to reason, and must be persuaded by a rational demonstration; what more appropriate method could Lamb have chosen than the witty one of proving arithmetically that Godwin would gain by Mary's absence, in spite of having to pay postage on the letter? There are many other letters that show Lamb in as happy a vein, like the charming and pithy letter to his mathematical friend Thomas Manning written in July 1805, in which he amusingly projects a dramatic image of himself falling asleep as he finishes writing it. It could have been a complaining letter, or at any rate a letter wholly absorbed with Lamb's own self and his problems, but by dramatising himself, he achieves an appropriate comic distancing, and so insulates his reader against too strong an involvement:

Dear Archimedes, - Things have gone on badly with thy ungeometrical friend; but they are on the turn. My old housekeeper has shown signs of convalescence, and will shortly resume the power of the keys, so I shan't be cheated of my tea and liquors. Wind in the west, which promotes tranquillity. Have leasure now to anticipate seeing thee again. Have been taking leave of tobacco in a rhyming address. Had thought *that vein* had long since closed up. But the L--d opened Sara's bag after years of unproduction. Find I can rhyme and reason too. Think of studying mathematics, to restrain the fire of my genius, which G D recommends. Have frequent bleedings at the nose, which shows plethoric. Maybe shall try the sea myself, that great scene of wonders. Got incredibly sober and regular; shave oftener, and hum a tune, to signify cheerfulness and gallantry.

Suddenly disposed to sleep, having taken a quart of pease with bacon and stout. Will not refuse Nature, who has done such things for me!

Nurse! don't call me unless Mr Manning comes. - What! the gentleman in spectacles? - Yes.

Dormit

C L

Saturday, Hot Noon.

The letter is peculiarly for Manning, as its neat allusions to him as a mathematician make clear; the graceful references to Mary's convalescence after what had been a bad attack of her recurrent illness, matched to an image, half-serious, half-comic, of himself in, so to speak, a state of mental convalescence after bidding farewell to tobacco, establish a mood of recovery from the discomfort of the opening ('Things have gone badly...'), which comes to a climax at the end, with 'Nurse! don't call me unless Mr Manning comes', implying that Manning will be the first visitor he would be willing to see.

Some of Lamb's most incisive critical remarks, serious and comic, are to be found in the letters; in the one just quoted Lamb glancingly alludes to George Dyer (G D), and elsewhere he said all that needs to be said about Dyer as poet and critic, when writing to Coleridge in 1800:

Now I am on the subject of poetry, I must announce to you, who, doubtless, in your remote part of the Island, have not heard tidings of so great a blessing, that GEORGE DYER hath prepar'd two ponderous volumes full of poetry and criticism. They impend over the town, and are threatened to fall in the winter. The first volume contains every sort of poetry except personal satire, which George, in his truly original prospectus, renounceth for ever, whimsically foisting the intention in between the price of his book and the proposed number of subscribers. (If I can I will get you a copy of his *handbill*.) He has tried his *vein* in every species besides - the Spenserian, Thomsonian, Masonic, and Akensidish more especially. The second volume is all criticism; wherein he demonstrates to the entire satisfaction of the literary world, in a way that must silence all reply for ever, that the Pastoral was introduced by Theocritus, and polished by Virgil and Pope; that Gray and Mason (who always hunt in couples in George's brain) have a good deal of poetical fire and true lyric genius - that Cowley was ruined by excess of wit (a warning to all moderns) - that Charles Lloyd, Charles Lamb and William Wordsworth, in later days, have struck the true chords of poesy. O George, George, with a head uniformly wrong, and a heart uniformly right, that I had power and might equal to my wishes! - then I would call the Gentry of thy native Island, and they should come in troops, flocking at the sound of thy Prospectus Trumpet, and crowding who shall be the first to stand in thy List of Subscribers. I can only put twelve shillings into thy pocket (which, I will answer for them, will not stick there long), out of a pocket almost as bare as thine. Is it not a pity so much fine writing should be erased? But, to tell the truth, I began to scent that I was getting into that sort of style which Longinus and Dionysius Halicarnassus aptly call 'the affected'.

Though wittily and effectively mocking the pretentious yet commonplace quality of George Dyer's *Poems*, published that year, Lamb is characteristically generous towards the man himself, whose good nature and kindness he often praised. Lamb's perceptiveness appears at its best in his remarks on Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* in a letter to Wordsworth in 1801. It was perhaps natural that Lamb should be rather lukewarm in his response to Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads* not, as is sometimes said, because Wordsworth had not shown much enthusiasm for Lamb's play *John Woodvil*, but rather because Lamb's taste was for the curious and fantastic (he refers to Robert Burton, whose *Anatomy of Melancholy* he loved, as 'that fantastic old great man'). Just as Lamb was later to write

a notable appreciation of the neglected William Blake in a letter to Bernard Barton, praising his 'marvellous strange pictures, visions of his brain', so he was among the first to recognise the power and greatness of Coleridge's poem, which had been savagely dismissed in some reviews, and which Wordsworth himself regarded as an obstacle to the success of *Lyrical Ballads*, planning in 1799 to omit it from any reprint of these: by contrast, Lamb found it compelling:

I am sorry that Coleridge has christened his *Ancient Marinere* 'a poet's Reverie' - it is as bad as Bottom the Weaver's declaration that he is not a Lion, but only a scenical representation of a Lion. What new idea is gained by this Title but one subversive of all credit, which the tale should force upon us, of its truth. For me, I was never so affected with any human Tale. After first reading it, I was totally possessed with it for many days - I dislike all the miraculous part of it, but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery dragged me along like Tom Piper's magic whistle. I totally differ from your idea that the Marinere should have had a character and profession. This is a Beauty in Gulliver's Travels, where the mind is kept in a placid state of little wonderments; but the Ancient Marinere undergoes such Trials, as overwhelm and bury all individuality or memory of what he was, like the state of a man in a Bad dream, one terrible peculiarity of which is: that all consciousness of personality is gone. Your other observation is I think as well a little unfounded: the Marinere from being conversant in supernatural events *has* acquired a supernatural and strange cast of *phrase*, eye, appearance, &c., which frighten the wedding guest. You will excuse my remarks because I am hurt and vexed that you should think it necessary, with a prose apology, to open the eyes of dead men that cannot see.

Wordsworth had, of course, printed in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* his remarks commenting on the 'great defects' of Coleridge's poem, notably that the mariner lacks a 'distinct character', but Lamb saw at once that the figure is symbolic, and does not need character or profession. It is a sharp perception indeed of the young Charles Lamb to have recognised the significance of the ancient mariner's condition as one in which 'all consciousness of personality is gone'.

It would be easy to go on citing Lamb's letters to illustrate other kinds of felicity, as in his celebrations of living in London, the delicacy of his moving letter of proposal to Fanny Kelly, or the sheer fun of his many delightful letters sent to Thomas Manning in China or India; like the fanciful letter of Christmas 1815 in which he announced the deaths of many of their mutual friends: 'Coleridge is just dead, having lived just long enough to close the eyes of Wordsworth...Poor Col., but two days before he died he wrote to a bookseller, proposing an epic poem on the "Wanderings of Cain", in twenty-four books. It is said he has left behind him more than forty thousand treatises in criticism, metaphysics, and divinity, but few of them in a state of completion.' So Lamb amusingly bridged, while drawing attention to, the great gap in space and time between him and Manning. It provided matter for an essay, on 'Distant Correspondents', written in the form of a letter, ostensibly to Barron Field, in which Lamb says something about his concept of a letter. He complains that the usual topics of letters, 'news, sentiment, and puns' all lose their savour in a transmission that takes a long time; he likes to think of a letter rather as sent for delivery the next day: 'One drops a packet in Lombard Street, and in twenty

four hours a friend in Cumberland gets it as fresh as if it came in ice. It is only like whispering through a long trumpet.' This is one of Lamb's great gifts as a writer of letters, this freshness, which he need not have feared would disappear because of delays in space or time. Some earlier writers, like Horace Walpole, share this power, but Lamb had also a gift for finding just the right note of humour or irony in a letter to qualify its subjectivity, and he loved puns as a means to achieve the right tone, to deal, as he put it, with 'subjects serious in themselves, but treated after my fashion, non-seriously.'

Most earlier letters seem forced by comparison with the best letters of the Romantics, and those of Lamb especially glow with freshness and informality. He was the author of no masterpiece, and his best published works, his essays, cultivate deliberately charming foibles and quirks. In them he weaves his reveries and fantasies around a persona half himself, half fictitious, and designed for public attention. The man was better than the essays, and in the letters he could be himself, though almost always adapting his mood and manner perfectly to the occasion and the recipient. At his best he is among the finest letter-writers in English, and the best of his age, less attitudinizing than Keats, less liable to be seduced into saying what he thinks his reader wants to hear than Coleridge. The undercurrent of his own troubles, notably his excesses, his drudgery at the office, and the illnesses of Mary, is felt, but kept in check; about these, as about everything he touches on, he seems able to strike an exact note of comic distancing mingled with seriousness, and so achieve a fine balance between subjective or personal concerns, and attention to the affairs of others. This, combined with a true engagement in sympathy with his friends, and an apparently effortless spontaneity, make the best of his letters superb.

Finally, though I am not sure that we have advanced much beyond Dr Johnson in our ideas about the art of writing letters, what I have said about Lamb's may suggest some further points, and I might end with one more thought, that Lamb so often achieves a sense not only of flow, making one want to read the letter as a continuous whole, but also of shapeliness - the right length for the occasion and the matter; and this is all the greater an achievement when it is recalled that so many were written while he was enduring constant interruptions in the East India Office. But he felt confident enough to bet Wordsworth that he could not spot the break in a letter of April 1816, and indeed Lamb boasted with some reason when he wrote:

Interruptions, if I try to write a letter even, I have dreadful. Just now, within 4 lines I was called off for ten minutes to consult dusty old books for the settlement of obsolete Errors. I hold you a guinea you don't find the Chasm where I left off, so excellently the wounded sense closed again and was healed.

It is hard to imagine Wordsworth accepting any kind of bet, but this is one he would surely have lost.

CHARLES LAMB AND THE RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW

Claude A Prance

In a short autobiographical sketch written in 1827 Charles Lamb claimed that in his *Specimens of English Dramatic Writers who lived about the time*

of *Shakespeare*, first published in 1808, he was the first to draw public attention to the old English dramatists. No doubt his claim is justified and we know from his other writings that his interest in English literature of the previous two and a half centuries was considerably wider. He might be supposed, therefore, to have read with care and even eagerness a periodical which provided excellent criticism upon and extracts from curious, valuable and scarce old books, mainly of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet he does not refer to *The Retrospective Review* in any of his works, and there seems to be only one reference to it in his letters. This came in a letter to Edward Moxon in 1831, three years after the Second Series of the *Review* had ceased, and is a mere request to Moxon to return to Talfourd certain volumes of it which Lamb had borrowed.

Henry Southern, who became editor of *The London Magazine* in 1825, when Lamb was still a contributor, had founded *The Retrospective Review* in 1820; by 1828, when the Second Series ceased, fourteen volumes had been published. Southern was the sole editor until 1826 when, probably owing to his other commitments, he took as joint editor Nicholas Harris Nicolas, the antiquary. During the magazine's life many valuable articles appeared which could hardly have escaped Lamb's notice, for they often dealt with his favourite authors. There were articles on Sir Thomas Browne, Thomas Fuller, James Howell, Izaak Walton, Ben Johnson, Quarles, Wither, De Foe, Sir Philip Sidney and an important series on the early English drama.

He must also have heard his friends comment on the publication. T N Talfourd, J Hamilton Reynolds, B W Procter and P G Patmore were all contributors to the *Review*, as also were Hartley Coleridge, Charles Wentworth Dilke and, of course, Henry Southern himself. Crabb Robinson certainly read it and while in February 1824 he criticizes it, he lists it in his *Diary* in December first among the books he has read during the year.

Possibly the absence of recorded comment by Lamb may have been because he preferred to read the original works themselves, when he could get them, rather than extracts or criticism of the books by others.

If Lamb did not comment on the *Review* himself, some of the contributors certainly referred to him in it in eulogistic terms. T N Talfourd who wrote the first article in the first number on "Thomas Rymer and Tragedy" had much praise for *John Woodvil*.

The old English feeling of tender beauty has at last begun to revive. Lamb's *John Woodvil*, despised by the critics, and for a while neglected by the people, awakened those gentle pulses of deep joy which had long forgotten to beat. Here first, after a long interval, instead of the pompous swelling of inane declamation, the music of humanity was heard in its sweetest tones. The air of freshness breathed over its forest scenes, the delicate grace of its images, its nice disclosure of consolations and venerablenesses in the nature of man, and the exquisite beauty of its catastrophe, where the stony remorse of the hero is melted into child-like tears, as he kneels on the little hassock where he had often kneeled in infancy, are truly Shakespearian.

Perhaps the critic thought he had been a little over enthusiastic for not unfairly, he finishes his reference with

Yet this piece, with all its delicacies in the reading, wants that striking scenic effect, without which a tragedy cannot succeed on the stage.

Talfourd also wrote the review of Colley Cibber's *Apology for his Life* and in a footnote maintains that Lamb's *Essay on the Tragedies of Shakespeare* is "a piece, which combines more of profound thought with more of deep feeling and exquisite beauty, than any criticism with which we are acquainted."

In the second volume the writer of an essay on the early English Drama, who may have been either Southern or Dilke, quotes a long passage from Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* and follows it with the comment "This passage is given in Mr Charles Lamb's excellent book of dramatic specimens, and, on that account, we should not have extracted it, had we really been able to find any thing else of equal merit as a specimen of this far-famed tragedy." This is surely a confirmation of the excellence of Lamb's taste in choosing the passage for his *Specimens*.

The longest reference to Lamb comes again from Talfourd, who in his review of Wallace's *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature and Providence* has much to say on the "Progress of Literature". The Lamb paragraph reads:

Charles Lamb is as original as either of these, /i.e. Wordsworth and Coleridge/ within the smaller circle he has chosen. We know not of any writer, living or dead, to whom we can fitly liken him. The exceeding delicacy of his fancy, the keenness of his perceptions of truth and beauty, the sweetness and the wisdom of his humour, and the fine interchange and sportive combination of all these, so frequent in his works, are entirely and peculiarly his own. As it has been said of Swift, that his better genius was his spleen, it may be asserted of Lamb, that his kindliness is his inspiration. With how nice an eye does he detect the least hitherto unnoticed indication of goodness, and with how true and gentle a touch does he bring it out to do good to our natures! How new and strange do some of his more fantastical ebullitions seem, yet how invariable do they come home to the very core, and smile at the heart! He makes the majesties of imagination seem familiar, and gives to familiar things a pathetic beauty or a venerable air. Instead of finding that every thing in his writings is made the most of, we always feel that the tide of sentiment and of thought is pent in, and that the airy and variegated bubbles spring up from a far depth in the placid waters. The loveliness of his thought looks, in the quaintness of his style, like a modest beauty, laced-in and attired in a dress of the superb fashion of the elder time. His versification is not greatly inferior to that of Coleridge, and it is, in all its best qualities, unlike that of any other poet. His heroic couplets are alternately sweet, terse, and majestic; and his octo-syllabic measures have a freshness and completeness, which mark them the pure Ionic of verse.

It is interesting to note that the *C L S Bulletin* No. 18 (February 1937) printed this passage as a Supplement. Again Talfourd perhaps claims too much in his comparison of Lamb's poetry with that of Coleridge, but most of what he says of Lamb is still true and we still do not know of any writer, living or dead, to whom we can fitly liken him. Later in the same essay Talfourd, when commenting on women writers, refers to "the gentle wisdom, the holy sympathy with the holiest childhood, and the sweet imaginings, of the author of Mrs Leicester's School."

Volume III of the *Review* has an interesting essay on "Translations of Homer" and the writer takes the opportunity to quote from the *Dramatic Specimens*

part of Lamb's footnote to *Byron's Tragedy* by George Chapman. It is here that Lamb says Chapman's Homer "is not so properly a translation, as the stories of Achilles and Ulysses re-written."

The same volume has a review of Phillip Stubbes's *The Anatomie of Abuses*, London 1585, black letter (the third edition). All contributions to *The Retrospective Review* were anonymous, and we have no evidence that Charles Lamb ever wrote for it. Nevertheless, the first paragraph of that essay has something of Elia's own style, although we should hesitate to claim the whole for him since the excellence is not maintained. Yet part of the beginning may be worth reprinting:

Alas, poor Stubbes! How would it have tortured thy querulous spirit, couldst thou have anticipated that thy writings would, one day, be valued as a record of the pomps and vanities which thou didst so boldly and perseveringly denounce; that thy book should be laid under contribution by the remorseless antiquary; thy anathemas be pressed into the service of the vain historian of church-ales and may-games, of ruffs and farthingales; and thy pious effusions be dismembered to grace the margins of "profane stage-plays and enterludes." To such base uses have thy labours been applied, and so powerful is the contagion of bad example, that even we (with shame and sorrow we speak of it) recur with equal, if not greater relish, to thy descriptions of the frivolities of the day, than to thy moral precepts, thy fearful examples, or thy climaxes of execration.

In Volume VIII which appeared in 1823 the series on the English Drama reviews Thomas Middleton and the writer has this: "With regard to the witches themselves, an eminent critic (Mr Charles Lamb) has shewn the difference between Shakespeare's witches and those of Middleton; and he has awarded the palm, perhaps deservedly, in favour of the creations of Shakespeare." To this is added a long footnote: "For the sake of the reader, who may be unacquainted with that delightful volume, the *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets*, by Charles Lamb, we transcribe the author's note upon this subject." Then follows the whole of Lamb's note to Middleton's *The Witch*.

The final reference to Charles Lamb appears in a volume in 1825 in an essay on Burgmann's *Account of the Conversion of Solomon Deutsch to Christianity*, a work translated from the Dutch and first appearing in English in 1771. Since the reviewer expresses himself disappointed in this work he introduces, by way of parenthesis, a discussion on Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, particularly the character of Barabbas. In this he claims that Lamb has mistaken the character in his note to the play in the *Dramatic Specimens*, when he says "Barabbas is a mere monster, brought in with a large painted nose, to please the rabble." The anonymous reviewer maintains that there is full as much humanity in Barabbas as in Shylock and he points out that Abigail never deserted her father until "he deserted himself, made mad with wrongs", whereas Shylock's daughter fled from his house at the first opportunity. Nevertheless, praise is given to Lamb as "the very best of living dramatic critics."

Although essays in *The Retrospective Review* dealt almost solely with the seventeenth and eighteenth century literature, it will be seen that sometimes the contributors slipped in references to their contemporaries. Talfourd, in particular, in his review of Wallace's *Prospects of Mankind* has paragraphs devoted to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Barry Cornwall,

Byron, Scott, Southey, Campbell, Moore, Crabbe and Leigh Hunt, as well as references to Montgomery, Rogers, Wilson, Bowles, Hogg, Lloyd, Reynolds, Keats, Shelley and some others. In four of the five contributions known to be by Talfourd he has references to Charles Lamb.

As sets of *The Retrospective Review* are scarce, it has been thought that the fore-going quotations concerning Charles Lamb may be of interest to lovers of his work. It is a pity that this most interesting periodical, which contains such excellent criticism as well as extracts from scarce books, is so little known, although reference is made to it in some histories of English literature. In Lamb's day T F Dibdin drew on it extensively in his *Library Companion* and acknowledged his debt. Of later comments perhaps the two best are to be found in Professor Saintsbury's *History of Criticism*, and Professor Ian Jack's *English Literature 1815-1832*, both of which give *The Review* high commendation. It is interesting to note that the periodical is often listed as a source for criticism of authors in *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*.

CHARLES LAMB AND ANN SIMMONS

Winifred F Courtney

Lamb is usually supposed to have seen no more - at least in youth - of his "Anna", "Alice", or Ann Simmons after 1794, though she appeared in his writings thereafter. W C Hazlitt in *Charles and Mary Lamb: Their Poems, Letters, and Remains* (London, 1874), p. 152, quotes a letter of Southey of Whit-Monday, 1799, in which he hopes to see Lamb in London but does not know where to find him on the holiday. Southey's *New Letters* (ed. by Kenneth Curry, New York and London, 1965, Vol. I, p. 190) show that Southey found him at his office the following Thursday - Whit-Monday, 1799, was May 13. Southey writes to his wife that evening, May 16:

...I went to the India House. Among other things Lamb told me that he dined last week twice with his Anna - who is married, and he laughed and said she was a stupid girl. There is something quite unnatural in Lamb's levity. If he never loved her why did he publish those sonnets? if he did why talk of it with bravado laughter, or why talk of it at all? My opinions are for the world but my feelings are to myself. I would proclaim the one under the gallows, but shrink from the indulgence of the other in presence of my nearest friends. This is not generally the case, and therefore is the world so full of aimiable people who are rogues. Lamb loves to laugh at every thing - he speaks of every body in a joke except Bishop Taylor...

To Lamb these encounters were probably far from a joke in actual fact. Southey's understanding of his queerer friends was never acute, though he was a very engaging young man and often a tolerant one. But here he is lonely and upset because Edith has not written him; he is therefore inclined to be fretful. One can deduce all manner of things about Lamb and Ann (unwisely except as conjecture) from this brief account, especially when added to Hazlitt's memory as reported by his grandson (*op. cit.*, p. 180):

...But she afterwards married Mr Bartrum, the pawnbroker /and silversmith, Canon Ainger reminds us/, of Princes Street, Coventry Street; and Lamb was seen by Hazlitt, subsequently to his Alice becoming Mrs Bartrum, to wander up and down outside the shop, in the

hope of catching a glimpse of the object of his passion...

Hazlitt did not *meet* Lamb until around 1803 (Baker's *Hazlitt*, p. 153), nearly ten years after the young lovers had parted, and when Lamb was twenty-eight.

Whatever the meaning of the Southey account, I think those who have been inclined to dismiss the Ann Simmons episode as "puppy love" can do so no longer. Ann held a painful place in Charles's heart for at least a dozen years and perhaps fifteen or more - if she first took his fancy when he was fourteen, as he suggests at least three times in various writings. And she became, of course, part of his literary landscape - to "Dream Children" and beyond. In letters, while her memory still caused him pain, he tried to regard his feeling for her as a kind of unworthy bondage - whether because she had disappointed him in some way, or because she had rejected him, or because she was not the *intelligent* woman he needed, or because (willy-nilly) he still loved her hopelessly, or from a combination of these factors.

The questions raised are many. Was the first 1799 meeting at his instigation (he had lost his father the month before, and may have been moving even then to the new lodgings to which he would bring Mary), or at Ann's - perhaps because of his upset household? Otherwise why *twice* in one week? Was Bartrum or Bartram at home? Did *he* know of Ann as the subject of the published sonnets (and probably of *Rosamund Gray*)? And so on.

If the Southey account has been noticed elsewhere, I have not seen it. Charles Lamb always had a firm rein on what he told about himself, and he did not tell all.

RICHARD WORDSWORTH AS CHARLES LAMB

The Society was well represented at the first occasion of Richard Wordsworth's solo Lamb performance at the Stables Theatre, Hastings, on 28 September.

As the curtain rose Mr Wordsworth was discovered seated in a wing armchair and reading a book, in an attitude which very strongly brought to mind Daniel Maclise's drawing of his famous ancestor. The programme revolved around six of the *Elia* essays: A Bachelor's Complaint, Mrs Battle on Whist, Roast Pig, Modern Gallantry, Old China and The Superannuated Man. These were linked with explication and, charmingly, with anecdotes, extracts from Lamb's letters and so on.

What came over was not so much the fun, although that was there in abundance, as the innately serious and loving nature of the man - for all his faults and foibles. Anyone coming to Lamb for the first time must have been stimulated to explore further; those with an existing acquaintance must have felt it deepen into friendship.

Mr Wordsworth himself was impeccable - he *was* Lamb. And his sensitive and felicitous choice of material for the programme showed him to be a true *Elia*.



Gen. Haddon Sillman

A TRIBUTE TO MR H G SMITH

This is a success story, for the Yorkshire boy who gained a scholarship to Skipton Grammar School and began his working life as a booking clerk on the London Midland & Scottish Railway became, at 60, assistant to the Vice-President of that concern and in 1948 took over the editing of the Charles Lamb Society's Bulletin, and in so doing played a great part in spreading to many parts of the world, interest in Charles Lamb and the Society. He tells with a chuckle how it began, when sitting next to Mr Samuel Rich (the editor at that time) it was noticed that the lecture was being written by Mr Smith, in shorthand. At once he was asked to report the meetings, and this eventually led to his becoming the second editor, a position he held for 24 years.

It is fitting that a tribute to such a man should be written by his friends and admirers, and no apology is offered for using the words of others who have known him well and have appreciated his work.

In 1963, at his 80th Birthday Celebration held at the Bonnington Hotel on September 14th, he was presented with bound copies of the Bulletin (smuggled out to Mr Crowsley by his daughter). He used to take a volume from his bookcase read an article and say to himself "Did I write that? It's jolly good" and he confessed at the Celebration "I'm rather proud of the Bulletin" Of his work Professor Geoffrey Tillotson said "it was in the light of a religion that Mr Smith had been carrying on. He couldn't have carried on unless he was doing something in which he believed - the Charles Lamb Bulletin and the spirit of Lamb". In the album presented to Mr Smith, part of the inscription paid a further tribute "You have been indefatigable in ensuring the maintenance of a high standard for our journal". That the Bulletin was a valued part of the Society was indicated by Mr A F Bishop in his speech at the Celebration "He had recently met a man who had been a member of the Society for three years, but had never attended a meeting. But the Bulletin, he had said, conveyed such fine reports of the Society's activities that he considered his membership well worth while".

On the same occasion Mr Smith's modesty was stressed by Mr F Sandry who said that "he thought many members would have learned that afternoon for the first time who Mr Smith was. He never pushed himself forward; he had probably never been before on the platform, yet he was a great source of strength to the Society. The tasks of an editor were of an arduous nature; there was the continual pressure to get the journal out, and exacting proof-reading, etc., yet Mr Smith had said it had all been great fun". As Miss Phyllis Mann reminded us in 1972 when Mr Smith retired from the editorship, Professor Tillotson, in making the presentation in 1963, expressed the wish that Mr Smith might remain Editor "for many years to come". "Quietly, efficiently, faithfully he has fulfilled that wish", wrote Miss Mann, "with no sign of the strains that are inevitable during the various stages of a journal's progress".

A lecture given as part of a University Extension Course at Leeds opened up the world of Lamb's writings to Mr Smith. He listened entranced while the lecturer read one of Lamb's essays. In his 90th year, during an interview with a journalist Mr Smith stated "More than anything else Lamb gave me the beauty of his language". Ill-health obliged him to relinquish the post as editor, and a tribute was given by the Chairman Mr Sidney Hall "He has maintained the Bulletin on a consistently high literary standard, and at the same time ensured that it acted as a great link of friendship, not only

with those members who live in England, but also with our members in far away countries".

He died on September 27th, not long after his 91st birthday, alert and interested almost to the end in spite of many months of ill-health and failing eyesight. To visit him was always a tonic, for he had a sane and balanced outlook, a fund of good stories, and could even look back on service in France during the 1914 war with a certain relish, remembering meetings with old friends in most unlikely places.

He leaves behind a wealth of reminders to friends in many countries, in the Bulletins which have an intimacy and warmth that endear him to us all. He was a modest man, but it would please him to know that copies of his Bulletins are still being bought by Universities and Libraries. He will always be remembered in the years to come for his devoted work over 24 years to stimulate the Elian spirit of friendliness and extend the knowledge of Charles Lamb, his works and his friendships, to an ever widening circle.

F S Reeves

The funeral service was attended by Miss F Parsons, Miss F Reeves, and Mr A Cheyne.

OBITUARY

Miss Elizabeth Rutherford who died on August 20th had been a member of the Society for many years. Until arthritis prevented her, she attended the meetings and visits regularly, but latterly came only to the Birthday Luncheons. She maintained a keen and enthusiastic interest in the Society and its activities throughout her membership. We send our warmest sympathy to her sister, who will sadly miss the companionship she has enjoyed for many years.

F S R

BOOK REVIEWS

Kathleen Coburn: *THE SELF-CONSCIOUS IMAGINATION; A STUDY OF THE COLERIDGE NOTEBOOKS IN CELEBRATION OF THE BI-CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH 21 OCTOBER 1772*

Kathleen Coburn (ed.): *THE NOTEBOOKS OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, Volume 3 1808-1819 (two parts; text, notes) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973 £18.00)*

It ill becomes us to attempt to assess, let alone to criticise, any work published by Miss Coburn on Coleridge; and we do not attempt to do so. We must however record the appearance of these volumes and send her a message of goodwill as she goes on to tackle Volume 4 of the Notebooks (now, we are told, to be completed in five or six double volumes). This is a daunting task needing all the courage, learning, integrity and skill that we know her to possess.

Those who cannot buy the Notebooks will want to have the little volume containing the Ridell Memorial Lectures, delivered in February 1973, which illuminate a number of aspects of the Notebooks themselves.

John R Nabholz (ed.): PROSE OF THE BRITISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT (New York: Macmillan, 1974 ppxiv, 818)

Although, one imagines, this copious selection is aimed primarily at the student - a labour of faith, since latter-day students of English literature are reputed to be not notably well-read - it is also Professor Nabholz's hope that it will make apparent the richness and variety, in both form and content, of English Romantic prose which, he claims, is more than a necessary supplement to a study of the poetry of the period: "it is a challenging and rewarding discipline of its own".

Ranging from Blake to Keats it provides a valuable work of reference within its stated intention. Each author section is prefaced by an outline of the events of his life and a selected bibliography; and each excerpt has a brief but helpful critical introduction. Professor Nabholz is partial to Lamb, for not only does he give 14 and a bit Elia essays and two excerpts from the *Works* of 1818: he also prints a generous excerpt from De Quincey's essay which appeared in the November 1848 number of *The North British Review* as a review of Talfourd's *Final Memorials*.

This is a big book, being 24 x 18 cm in format and 832 pages long: it is also good value.

AN APOLOGY

In a note in the October issue referring to Sidney Blackmore's pamphlet *English Literary Associations* I very rashly stated that he was wrong to say that *Tintern Abbey* was written immediately after Wordsworth's Wye Valley "ramble". I cannot say what aberration led me by the nose, and I apologise to Mr Blackmore and to his publishers. *Tintern Abbey* was, of course, written in July 1798 and was published in *Lyrical Ballads* later that year.

B S

NOTES

We welcome Mr R Houston Wallace, who has kindly consented to fill the vacancy of Hon. Treasurer. The Society will be most grateful to him for having taken the job on, and we trust he will have a happy time with the CLS for many years to come. We can all make his job easier by paying promptly our subscriptions for 1975, which are now due. His address can be found on the back cover of this number.

Mrs Lawrence asks us to record, as we willingly do, our acknowledgments that the pictures accompanying her Southey article in the July Bulletin were published by permission of the Bristol Central Library, and that of Trim Street Chapel in the October Bulletin by permission of the Bath City Library.

Mr Prance points out that Cuthbert Southey referred to the binding of books for Southey's library in *The Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey* (vol. 6, page 17):

Another fancy of his was to have all those books of lesser value, which had become ragged and dirty, covered, or rather bound, in coloured cotton prints, for the sake of making them clean and respectable in their appearance, it being impossible to afford the cost of having so many put into better bindings.

Of this task his daughters, aided by any female friends who might be staying with them, were the performers; and not fewer than from 1200 to 1400 volumes were so bound by them at different times, filling completely one room which he designated as the Cottonian library. With this work he was much interested and amused, as the ladies would often suit the pattern to the contents, clothing a Quaker work or a book of sermons in sober drab, poetry in some flowery design, and sometimes contriving a sly piece of satire at the contents of some well-known author by their choice of its covering. One considerable convenience attended this eccentric mode of binding, - the book became as well known by its dress as by its contents and much more easily found.

Mr Prance tells us that Mrs Wordsworth is said to have been one of the helpers, and to have provided her own gown.

Members will be interested to hear that there will be a Charles Lamb exhibition to celebrate the bicentenary, and that it will be on view from 28 February to 18 May. Christ's Hospital will also be celebrating the bicentenary and have invited members for a visit on Saturday 15 February, during which we shall witness Richard Wordsworth's Lamb performance which is noticed on another page. It is also hoped to organise a London walk on Sunday 9 February, the veritable bicentenary day.

And of course the Society's own main celebration will be the Bicentenary Luncheon, which will take place at Simpson's-in-the-Strand on Saturday 8 February. Tickets will be £4.00 per person and orders and cheques should be sent to Florence Reeves as soon as possible. At the time of going to press it is not possible to name the speakers, but it is hoped that the celebration will be worthy of the occasion.

The Bulletin will also appear in bicentenary guise. In place of the normal April and July issues we shall have a special enlarged number to which the contributors will be: John Ades, George Barnett, Peter Brier, Kenneth Curry, Kathleen Coburn, Ralph Wardle, George Whalley and Carl Woodring. Extra copies will be available, and the price will be £1.00 post free.

With its eighth issue the New Series of the Bulletin completed its first volume. A small number of sets has been bound in dark blue buckram with gilt titling and copies can be obtained from Basil Savage at £6.00 per copy. Cheques should be sent with order and should be made payable to "The Charles Lamb Society".