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THE BREEZE OF SUNSHINE: A Study of Lamb's Essay "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century"

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In his essay "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," Charles Lamb attempted to revive the interest of his contemporaries in the drama of Congreve, Wycherley, and Sheridan. Because nineteenth-century British audiences appeared to him to have lost touch with the comic principles of that genre, Lamb redefines its assumptions and explains the relationship of comedy of manners to the world of daily life. Much of the essay is an initiation of the reader into a dreamy, paradoxical realm where ordinary laws and dogma are inoperative.

Lamb was uniquely qualified to write such an essay. He had attended plays since he was six years old and had thus seen late eighteenth-century productions of artificial comedy. He collected Elizabethan folios and had edited *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*. Some of his best friends were actors. Lamb himself had written two dramas (albeit unsuccessful), a tragedy and a farce. In 1822 he submitted various dramatic essays to the *London Magazine*. After cutting and revision, these appeared in *The Essays of Elia* under the titles "On Some of the Old Actors," "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," and "On the Acting of Munden." As Walter E Houghton has remarked, "His subject was not theories of comedy but acting ....But in describing the players, he was drawn on to describe the plays."

In this study, I will examine several themes and related motifs of "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" in the context of other dramatic criticism in *The Essays of Elia* and *The Last Essays of Elia*. The topic of the first section is the dichotomy that Lamb establishes in the article between the literalism and dogmatism of minds chained to everyday reality and the relativism of the mind attuned to imaginative art. By means of this dichotomy, he criticizes the mental set of his contemporaries. The second section concentrates on the relativity in space and time characteristic of high comedy. Section three examines Lamb's fascination with the paradoxical nature of Congreve's and Sheridan's dramatic world and his use of oxymoron to portray this realm for the reader. Artificial comedy's relationship to "nature" is the theme of the final portion of this study.

I *Lamb's Absolutist/Relativist Dichotomy and His Critique of the Nineteenth Century*

Toward the end of the *Elia* essay, "On Some of the Old Actors," Lamb establishes a dichotomy between the "absolute," "strict," "downright concretion" of nineteenth-century theater and the "dreamy," "playful," "specious combinations" of artificial comedy. This contrast becomes the subject of the subsequent article, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century." These essays concern specific cases of the general principles stated earlier in the section about "the Caledonian mind" in "Imperfect Sympathies."

There is an implicit critique of the nineteenth-century public in the dichotomy which Lamb outlines. He labels his era an "age of seriousness" and associates it with literal-mindedness, over-active morality, a propensity to judge everything by rigid laws. In contrast, the eighteenth century possessed unatrophied "pleasurable faculties" and could appreciate the dreamlike, paradoxical realm of artificial comedy where everything is relative. Augustan characters embodied a "comic idea" where contemporary drama demanded "a real person". Lamb is seriously concerned about his fellow theatergoers' inability to respond to the temporary amoral chaos created by Congreve, Wycherley, and Sheridan in their comedies of manners. Public taste demanded that a rigidly "natural" style of acting be employed for all productions. In "Stage Illusion," Lamb rebukes Emery for comic portrayals executed in an unnecessarily lifelike manner. "/C/omedy is not this unbending thing; for this reason, that the same degree of credibility is not required of it as to serious scenes.../T/he teller of a mirthful tale has latitude allowed him. We are content with less than absolute truth. 'Tis the same with dramatic illusion." What Lamb desires in a sympathetic audience is a "willing suspension of disapprobation.'"

Bertram Jessup, in his essay "The Mind of Elia" (Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 15 No. 2), attempts to assign Elia a place in philosophic tradition. Citing passages from "Imperfect Sympathies" and related essays, he pronounces Lamb to be "firmly in the tradition of British empiricism, a relativist and anti-absolutist." Jessup identifies a "moral aestheticism" in the Elian essays, an outlook "which accepts in principle everything, even the socially ugly and the privately sore, as possibly interesting... /T/he real and important is unique and individual rather than general and universal." Pater is also delighted by Lamb's "delicate intellectual epicureanism."

Elia develops the absolutist/relativist dichotomy in the first paragraph of "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," moving rapidly from simple exposition to figurative elaboration. Many of the tropes are aimed at the nineteenth-century public and present a very unflatering portrait of the literalist. The most prominent metaphor is that of judicial procedure. The contemporary audience feels compelled to serve as judges and prosecuting attorneys for the ethics of each actor. "We try him in our courts, from which there is no appeal to the *dramatis personae*, his peers." Such a public "live/s/ always in the precincts of the law-courts," employing "the standard of police," and cannot free the imagination to explore other levels of reality. Lamb terms these spectators "the Catos of the pit." Over-extended laws, instead of protecting the realm of comedy, have the opposite effect: "The privileges of the place are taken away by law." An obsession with meting out reward and punishment leads the audience to "indict our very dreams."

A second set of tropes concerns neuroses and insanity. Englishmen's strict adhesion to morality has resulted in a paranoic fear of "images, or names, or wrong. We bark like foolish dogs at shadows. We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder; and fear a painted pustule." Their madness is analogous to that of Don Quixote, who went to battle against evil Moorish puppets. The obsession of the legalistic, dogmatic mind is "to screw everything up to" the moral test. The image of screwing suggests the public's need to anchor all new impressions to past experience in the real world. The phrase also has connotations of torture (*Oxford English Dictionary*, definition #2). Lamb is implying that the absolutist mind

tortures the world of imaginative art until it seems to conform to everyday patterns.

Ironically, Lamb's essay has been condemned on moral grounds by various contemporary and twentieth-century critics. Ainger's remarks are typical: "Lamb does not convince us of the sincerity of his reasoning, and probably he did not convince himself. He loved paradox; and he loved, moreover, to find some soul of goodness in things evil...He was too fond of paradox, too much at the mercy of his emotions or the mood of the hour, to be a safe guide always." Houghton summarizes the objections in his article "Lamb's Criticism of Restoration Comedy" and remarks, "A thesis more exposed to attack can scarcely be imagined, for it denies, or it seems to deny, that this comedy bears any relation to an actual society existing at the Restoration, or indeed to any society at any time anywhere else; and that it ever raises the moral question at all." Houghton defends Lamb against such criticism by pointing out that the author's statements are made while contrasting the modern play and acting style with the drama and staging appropriate for comedy of manners. "At every point, this basic comparison is in the front of Lamb's mind, always qualifying the meaning of such terms as 'unrealize' or 'realization' by the implied 'in contrast with'...Lamb / / never called the world of Wycherley and Congreve "unreal," or a fiction, or a dream, or a fairyland - except in comparison with the drama of common life." The thesis is qualified by Houghton's assertion, "Lamb is concentrating...on his own reaction." This is ostensibly true of most of the Elian essays. However, in many of the articles, as is implied in "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," the author's mind is presented as more sophisticated and open than that of a "Caledonian" literalist and is thus a model for the reactions of a sympathetic reader. Houghton finally assigns the "amorality" to the spectator's reaction. "Lamb is denying the existence of a moral code *in its natural emotional field*. Once the immoral word or act is pulled up by the roots and left but half alive in the cold atmosphere of wit, it no longer touches the affections."

In summary, the dichotomy established in the essay between "Caledonian" absolutism and Elian relativism implies that the sensibilities of the literalist nineteenth-century audience are flawed. The laws and morality of daily life are imposed upon artificial comedy with disastrous results. Instead of being entertained, the spectator sits in judgment over the antics of fictitious characters, afraid to abandon himself to another level of reality.

II High Comedy's Relativity in Space and Time

Lamb views the fear and anxiety manifested by the English public as evidence of the cowardice of the unimaginative. The conscience, that serves so well in real life, is a "coward afraid to enter the fanciful realm of artificial comedy. Such fear and cowardice are acute when the literal-minded spectator finds that the stage curtain has opened to reveal a world in which the laws and ethics of day-to-day life are inoperable, Familiar boundaries are trespassed; acts float in an atmosphere of moral relativity. One feels compelled to condemn the amoral comic chaos.

These forces result in a strange masochism: the public refuses to seek pleasure outside of the restrictions and burdens of everyday life, even when this pleasure is offered by a harmless comedy. By demanding that the theater imitate the "pressure of reality," we spectators "must live our

toilsome lives twice over, as it was the mournful privilege of Ulysses to descend twice to the shades." Because of the nineteenth-century audience's imaginative cowardice, it requires "the painful necessities of shame and blame," villains who "must shock and give horror," and suffering which makes one "uncomfortable," rejecting a momentary escape on the wings of high comedy. An over-active conscience thus becomes a "hunter." and a healthy mind must "get into recesses" to avoid its persecution, to obtain "a little transitory ease." Ironically, Lamb feels that such "realistic" drama will result in a conscience that is "dulled" and "blunted" from overuse, from "eternal tormenting unappeasable vigilance."

Lamb himself is fascinated by the shapeless realm of fancy and tries to persuade the sceptical reader of its virtues. He compares the level of reality in comedy of manners to that of a "dream," a "shadow," "phantoms," or "fairyland." The "shape" of such drama has only an oblique relationship to real life, and thus allows one to escape from its burdens and restrictions.

Lamb contrasts the limitless nature of artificial comedy with the fixed boundaries placed by law, ethics, and religion on the real world. Eighteenth-century comedy goes "beyond the diocese of the strict conscience" and the "precincts of the law-courts." Real life is a "cage," a prison which keeps its inmates in "shackles": a mind is kept healthy by interludes of escape. As is evident from the above examples, spatial imagery is interwoven with the argument. High comedy generates a realm where space and time are flexible and relative. Lamb calls this kingdom "an Atlantis," "The Utopia of gallantry," "the impertinent Goshen." Its inhabitants are "a chaotic people" who have no institutions or duties hallowed by tradition. The two or three hours devoted to the drama serve as a "Saturnalia," a period of joyous revelry. Comic time is measured in "dream-while/s/." The cumulative effect of the suspension of normal space-time forces is gaiety and buoyancy.

Thus, Lamb offers the reader a release from the pressures of real life provided that he or she can suspend the masochistic conscience for the duration of a comedy of manners. Imaginative drama can stretch the dimensions of space and time, yielding a sensation of freedom. The release from normal atmospheric pressure stimulates joyousness and buoyancy.

III Lamb's Portrayal of the Comic Paradox

Because it is difficult to define this floating, relativistic genre, Lamb playfully twists his critical language to detach it from its normal context. Paradoxical figures of speech abound. I am reminded of Ainger's assessment of the author's style and sensitivity: "That Lamb was a poet is at the root of his greatness as a critic."

Paradoxes help to dislocate an ordinary frame of reference. This is necessary before the realm of artificial comedy can be entered. Lamb gradually initiates the reader, who is travelling from "Christendom into the land - what shall I call it? - of cuckoldry - the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom. It is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is."

Lamb emphasizes the irrelevance of traditional antonyms in defining the sphere of comedy. The dramatic character is suspended on "neutral ground" somewhere "between vice and virtue; or which in fact /is/ indifferent to

neither...that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning - the sanctuary and quiet Alsatia of hunted casuistry." Just as Alsatia sheltered London debtors from arrest, comedy of manners protects drama from being labeled as virtue or as vice.

Oxymora prevent this labeling by reminding the reader of the oblique way in which artificial comedy intersects the lines of reality. Perhaps the best example of such paradoxes is Lamb's portrayal of drama as a "breeze of sunshine" which the moralistic paranoid seeks to protect himself from by "wrap/ping/...up in a great blanket surtout of precaution." Elia intensifies the irony by associating overzealous morality with "coldness" and danger, in contrast to the harmless, sunny comedy.

The good actor incorporates these paradoxes into his depiction of character. Lamb praises John Kemble for capturing "/t/he relaxing levities of tragedy." The spectator should respond to what appears on stage with "middle emotions" instead of moral indignation or supercilious dismissal of the pageant. The comic "breeze of sunshine" fans a corresponding "sunshine of...mirth" in the audience.

IV Artificial Comedy's Relationship to "Nature"

In this final section, I will discuss Lamb's treatment of the art/nature opposition. Philosophers and critics have argued for centuries over the extent to which a work of art should imitate nature or reproduce daily life. Sylvan Barnet (PMLA Vol.69 No.5) reviews pre-Lambian dramatic theory. The neoclassical unities of time, place, and action "insisted upon the necessity of literal delusion." Samuel Johnson and others stressed the agility of the reader's or spectator's imagination, while "deny/ing/ that the spectator is literally deluded (by imagination or by reason) into believing he is watching a reality and not a play."

Lamb discusses various aspects of the question in "On Some of the Old Actors." He praises Mrs Jordan's speeches as approaching "nature's own rhetoric" and Mr Bensley's portrayals as being "totally destitute of trick and artifice." However, an "absolute sense of reality" is not required in artificial comedy. The high comedy of Congreve and Sheridan defies "strict *metaphrases* of nature" and requires different skills from the actor. The spectator does not have to be convinced of the reality of each representation but must merely enter the region of "half-belief."

"On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" insists upon the dichotomy between real life and the sphere of high comedy. The strictures of morality, the claims of duty, and the laws governing family relationships have no place in this chaotic dramatic realm. Lamb's use of the term "artificial" hints at the dichotomy. Comedy of manners is artificial not only in the sense that affected behavior is being satirized but also in its basic opposition of what is natural with what is made up or fictitious (cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary*, definitions ## 1, 3, 4).

Daniel J Mulcahy believes that Lamb sets up a dialectic between the poles of reality and imagination.

> Lamb wished to call the attention of his readers to the imaginative aspects of life, particularly the appreciation of beauty and the sense of the mind's creative powers. At the same time, he recognized the existence of other elements that lacked beauty and restricted the mind's freedom. This dual awareness on his part led him to treat the universe as comprising two planes: one of reality, the other of imaginative (or

aesthetic) experience.

The essay on artificial comedy is clearly within the bounds of the second plane. However, Houghton's caution that Lamb is contrasting two kinds of drama and making relative statements must be kept in mind.

Elia praises "/t/he highly artificial manner" of Palmer's representation of Joseph Surface. The hypocritical schemer became the hero of *School for Scandal* when Palmer took the role. Part of the "artificiality" of the acting results from what the twentieth-century would call "alienation," the shattering of the illusion of reality and the prevention of a "sympathetic understanding" or Aristotelian empathy (this vocabulary is Brecht's). According to Lamb, Palmer and King played both to the other characters and to the audience. He describes Palmer as Joseph Surface: he "was twice an actor in this exquisite part. He was playing to you all the while that he was playing upon Sir Peter and his lady." In the later essay "Stage Illusion," Lamb advocates a similar style of comic portrayal in which the actor "without absolutely appealing to an audience...keeps up a tacit understanding with them; and makes them, unconsciously to themselves, a party in the scene."

Barnet's discussion of the art/life issue in "Charles Lamb's Contribution to the Theory of Dramatic Illusion" is very useful. He argues that Lamb's dramatic theory is more sophisticated than he has been given credit for, citing passages like the above. He summarizes the author's viewpoint: "Comedy is not merely a realistic imitation of life, and the comic actor, far from losing himself in the role, must, by deliberately unrealistic acting, convey to the audience a sense of his own detachment from the part."

Despite the "artificial" element of comedy of manners, Lamb implies that it has organic life. This paradox fits in with the reality/imagination dialectic described by Mulcahy. In "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," Elia speaks of the Augustan dramatic character as if it were an exotic plant, which defies any attempt to transplant it into a nineteenth-century moralistic production. "The atmosphere will blight it, it cannot live here." A few pages later, the metaphor is continued: "/A/ffection's depth and wedded faith are not of the growth of that soil." In a similar organic trope, the *dramatis personae* of *School for Scandal* are compared to exotic or delicate animals. Lamb again criticizes the imposition of the code of daily life on the dreamy world of theater, insisting that the characters have their own laws of growth.

> Crabtree, and Sir Benjamin - those poor snakes that live but in the sunshine of your mirth - must be ripened by this hot-bed process of realization into asps or amphisbaenas; and Mrs. Candour - O! frightful! become a hooded serpent. Oh who that remembers Parsons and Dodd - the wasp and butterfly of the School for Scandal...would forego the true scenic delight - the escape from life - the oblivion of consequences.

Conclusion

"On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" distinguishes between two sensibilities, that of the absolutist and that of the relativist. Lamb fears that his "serious" age has drifted into an overly literal and moralistic pattern of thought, valuing art only when it reproduces the situations of daily life. In contrast, the eighteenth century seemed to him to be more flexible and relaxed. It could appreciate the kingdom of comedy, where dream and paradox reign. Lamb himself sympathized with the older,

relativistic perspective. He portrays the contemporary absolutist as a neurotic with a compulsion to judge everything, even imaginative art, by rigid laws derived from ordinary experience. New images and the appearance of moral chaos on stage create paranoia because they threaten the walled city of dogma.

The nineteenth-century spectator tends toward masochistic behavior. Refusing to be entertained by the pleasurable comedy, the public demands the harsh pressures of reality and its pain and toil. Lamb interprets this attitude as imaginative cowardice, and fears that it will, ironically, blunt the over-active conscience.

Once the atmospheric pressure of reality is reduced by the drama, the normal boundaries of space and time become irrelevant, as they are in dreams or fairyland. All fences and walls erected by law, ethics, and religion must crumble for a "dream-while" or comedy of manners cannot flourish. Lamb believes that the temporary escape of the audience from harsh reality is a healthy exercise resulting in a feeling of gaiety.

To aid the reader to abandon ordinary criteria for judgment, Lamb employs the oxymoronic figures of speech usually found in lyric poetry. These violent contrasts disorient the readers and serve to initiate them into a different sphere and a new way of thinking in which high comedy can be understood as "a breeze of sunshine" and responded to with mirth.

Lamb praises realistic acting for the dramas in which it is appropriate, such as tragedies and Shakespearean comedies; however, he discourages lifelike portrayals of Congreve's and Sheridan's *dramatis personae*. The actor in an artificial comedy should play not only to the other characters but also to the audience, thus shattering the illusion of reality. Lamb's theory of acting anticipates Brecht's concept of "alienation," though the two men had different goals in mind. Brecht wanted to involve the audience in the dramatic action and to offer people hope for changing their lives and their society. He viewed the experience of catharsis as passive and sought to avoid the effect through "alienation," distancing the public from the players. However, Lamb praised the phenomenon because it removes eighteenth-century comedy from the domain of moral judgment by preventing an identification of art with reality. To him, comedy of manners was a live organism which, like a plant, needs a sympathetic soil to grow in. Alienation helps to create this sympathetic environment.

Ernest Bernbaum, in his *Guide Through the Romantic Movement* (1930) terms Lamb "a laughing philosopher" and assesses his impact on contemporary thought. The author

> supplemented Wordsworth's message by disclosing how one's life could come into contact with ideal values in the city as well as in the country; how urban life might mean something finer than an alternation of toil and frivolity; and how, even to the poor in purse, there were open sources of abiding satisfaction in the human scene, in friendships, and in the pleasures of literature, drama, and the fine arts.

Pater stresses Lamb's subjectivity. "/W/ith him, as with Montaigne, the desire of self-portraiture is...the real motive in writing at all - a desire closely connected with that intimacy, that modern subjectivity, which may be called the *Montaignesque* element in literature.

Perhaps most impõrtant for the twentieth-century reader is Lamb's

appreciation of the variety of experience and the need to sort it all with sensitivity. The modern public, like his contemporaries, also tends toward absolutism and mouthing of dogma (though not only Christian catechisms now) Lamb anticipates Arnold's exhortation to "see things as they really are" rather than imposing irrelevant criteria upon them. Lamb's discussion of the artificial comedy serves as an example of how to approach any phenomenon without crushing it under the weight of traditional laws. Only the sympathetic quester in search of truth is allowed to experience essences, to feel "the breeze of sunshine."

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ROLE-PLAYING IN LAMB'S LETTERS

Ralph M Wardle

Lamb's letters are a biographer's delight. Working with the letters of any literary figure has obvious advantages: writers are not only highly articulate but also so afflicted with the disease *cacoethes scribendi* that they cannot resist jotting down their transitory thoughts for their friends when they have no hope of realizing even a penny a line for their pains. Lamb's letters have an additional advantage in the sense of humor which so often enlivens them. People lucky enough to receive them took care to preserve them, and, considering that he never achieved widespread fame in his own time, a surprising number survive - nearly a thousand in E V Lucas's three-volume collection and more now appearing in the six volumes which Professor Edwin Marrs is preparing. They serve as an invaluable index to Lamb's thinking from 1796, the year of his majority, until 1834, the year

of his death.

Authors raised in the Augustan tradition produced carefully crafted, but usually rather impersonal, letters; they offered observations on events happening about them rather than revelations of (and thus insights into) themselves: as Lord David Cecil puts it in *Two Quiet Lives*, their letters were seldom "unbuttoned." By Lamb's time, however, self-revelation was in vogue, and he often expressed in letters to friends thoughts which an eighteenth-century gentleman would have hesitated to confide to a private journal. Yet even in so uninhibited era as the present most of us have our mental buttons or zippers which we tend to keep at least partially fastened, and so did Lamb. He had his reticences; he even created "roles" or "played games" to nuture or preserve his self-esteem - nowhere more clearly than in one of his earliest surviving letters, addressed to Coleridge in 1796 and enclosing four sonnets, three of them written to commemorate his unrequited love for "Anna," who can almost certainly be identified with Ann Simmons of Blenheims.

Consider the circumstances: Lamb had risen to the rank of *Deputy* Grecian at Christ's Hospital, then in effect had been turned out to make a living as best he could; he was twenty-one years old now, serving his time as a clerk in the East India House and, from his meagre earnings, helping to support his ageing parents. Coleridge had been the star pupil at Christ's Hospital, "the *inspired charity-boy*"; he had been named a full-fledged Grecian and qualified for admission to Jesus College, Cambridge. To be sure, his career there had been spotty, and he had come up to London without a degree. But he was free of all family responsibilities, free to read and think and talk, overflowing with fanciful theories which left Lamb gasping for breath. Meanwhile he was suffering from a disappointment in love - and on that score Lamb could emulate him.

He went through all the approved motions, but not very convincingly; at least for me the sonnets about Anna never ring true. Lamb, as I see him, was simply not a passionate man, and no mouthing of sentimental bromides could make him sound like love's martyr. Recall his later affairs of the heart - an antiseptic lot, surely. There was Hester Savory, the Quaker girl who lived down the street from him in Pentonville in 1800: he wrote a poem in her praise, he declared that he was in love with her, but he added that he had never spoken to her. Nineteen years later there was Fanny Kelly, the winsome actress to whom, out of a clear sky, he wrote a proposal suggesting that a nice like girl like her would be well advised to flee the wicked world of the theater and settle down to a quiet middle-aged existence with him - and his sister Mary. He implied that he hardly expected her to accept, and when she wrote back that she begged to be excused, he hastened to suggest (all three letters were written within a single day) that they must not let this little contretemps mar their friendship. Finally there was his affection for young Emma Isola, thirty years his junior, which was certainly only paternal, however much he may have regretted her marriage. - No, Lamb was a man of little passion, straight or kinky. Any biographer aspiring to hit the best-seller list by postulating an incestuous relationship with Mary or homosexual ties with some of his young disciples will find, I fear, no evidence to prove his point. Nor is there any evidence to suggest a passionate attachment to Ann Simmons; in fact his lines on his grandmother's death show more genuine feeling than any of the sonnets about Anna. In the letter to Coleridge enclosing those sonnets he dispassionately listed the "plagiarisms,"

conscious and unconscious, that he had detected in them. Three years later he laughingly told Southey that Ann was a stupid girl - and two years after that, in a letter to Wordsworth, he wrote: "I have no passion (or have had none since I was in love, and then it was the spurious engendering of poetry & books) to groves and vallies." His syntax is a bit confusing here, but presumably he was talking about his lack of passion for nature. However, the statement could doubtless be applied as well to his feeling for Anna; it too was the spurious engendering of poetry and books - with Samuel Taylor Coleridge acting as pandar.

Such role-playing was harmless, of course, and perfectly understandable in the light of Lamb's attitude toward Coleridge. So too is another role, linked to it, which appears in the letters describing his six-week stay in a madhouse. "I look back upon it at times with a gloomy kind of Envy," he wrote. "For while it lasted I had many many hours of pure happiness. Dream not Coleridge, of having tasted all the grandeur and wildness of Fancy, till you have gone mad. All now seems to me vapid; comparatively so." A strange reaction, surely! What could have prompted it? He might possibly have been making light of the experience lest Coleridge be alienated from him. But...well, I'm only an armchair psychologist, but I am tempted to diagnose Lamb's role here - the game he was playing - as oneupmanship. He would never be a Grecian or a Cantabrigian; Coleridge had preempted those honors once and for all. But he had one experience to his credit now that Coleridge could not match. Granted, he may have convinced himself sincerely that his hallucinations (imagining at one point, supposedly, that he was Young Norval of Home's *Douglas*) enriched his life far more than any number of long evenings with the old folks at home. But against the background of what we know about conditions in madhouses at the time, I cannot accept his statement as literal truth. I suspect, rather, that he was playing a role again, trying to make himself more "interesting," to use a favorite word of eighteenth-century sentimentalists.

Three months later, however, when he wrote to tell Coleridge of the "day of horrors" when Mary stabbed their mother, he was, inevitably, in a sombre mood. Now as never before, he needed a role, a pattern to sustain him through the grim tasks of burying his mother, nursing his father and Aunt Hetty, and committing his sister to a madhouse. Understandably he chose the role of martyr, and he handled it with dignity. Yet is it too cynical to suggest that, at the same time, he found some satisfaction again in having achieved a peak of experience which Coleridge would probably never reach? And was his renunciation of poetry a symbolic withdrawal from further competition in a contest in which Coleridge refused to regard him as a serious rival? Earlier in the year Coleridge had brought out a volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*, in which he had included four sonnets by Lamb. Much to Lamb's annoyance he had made several revisions, and when in June, 1796, he was planning a new volume, Lamb urged him to "spare my ewe lambs" - that is, print his sonnets this time exactly as he had written them.

On September 27, 1796, five days after the day of horrors, he wrote again. "...mention nothing of poetry," he pleaded. "I have destroyed every vintage of past vanities of that kind. Do as you please, but if you publish, publish mine (I give you free leave) without name or initial, and never send me book." But the renunciation was short-lived. Six weeks later he sent Coleridge some "Fragments" which, he said, "I want printed to get rid of 'em; for while they stick bur-like to my memory, they tempt me to go on with the idle trade of versifying, which I long - most sincerely I speak it

- I long to leave off, for it is unprofitable to my soul." Once again he bade farewell to his art: "Take my sonnets once for all, and do not suppose any re-amendments, or mention them again in any shape to me, I charge you ...And pray admit or reject these fragments, as you like or dislike them, without ceremony. Call 'em Sketches, Fragments, or what you will, but do not entitle any of my *things* Love Sonnets, as I told you to call 'em..." Yet six days later he asked that the title page of his section of the new volume be headed: "Poems, Chiefly Love Sonnets by Charles Lamb, of the India House." And he enclosed copy for a dedication to his sister, explaining: "This is the pomp and paraphernalia of parting, with which I take my leave of a passion which has reigned so royally (so long) within me; thus, with its trappings of laureatship, I fling it off, pleased and satisfied with myself that the weakness troubles me no longer." Yet presently he was writing to complain that Coleridge was planning to omit one of the poems he had planned to include in the volume. "I would gladly sacrifice /it/," Lamb told him, "but my portion of the volume is so ridiculously little, that in honest truth I can't spare /it/." And three days later he submitted two more poems and suggested some revisions for his earlier contributions, adding: "At length I have done with verse making." Five days after that, when Coleridge protested his decision to write no more verse, Lamb replied: "At present I have not leisure to make verses, nor anything approaching to a fondness for the exercise." But now he had his fingers crossed. "In the ignorant present time," he continued, "who can answer for the future man? 'At lovers' perjuries Jove laughs' - and poets have sometimes a disingenuous way of forswearing their occupation." And soon he who had told Coleridge not to send him a copy of the forthcoming volume was writing "... send me 3 or 4, at all events not more than 6 copies."

Nor was this the last time that Lamb forswore his occupation. Years later, after the success of *Elia*, he complained that his work for the *London Magazine* had "become in verity a sad task" - that he kept writing only because he could not "resist the Bookseller's importunity." Again he was on the defensive: he longed to be a major poet like Coleridge or Wordsworth, and the critics had labeled him a minor journalist, a lightweight. And when, in his last years, he was reduced to writing - and, in a weak moment, consenting to publish in a deluxe edition - polite verse for young ladies' albums or annual gift-books, he vowed over and over again that he would never write another - yet continued to turn them out on demand.

Meanwhile he had developed another role: that of martyr to the demands of his duties at India House. To be sure, his was a tedious job, and at first it paid only a pittance. But eventually it yielded the rather handsome income of £730 per year, although the work was seldom heavy: he put in overtime on occasion, but the regular hours were 10.00 am to 4.00 pm, and he enjoyed an incredible number of holidays. On at least one occasion he lamented that he had too little to do: that he was obliged to stretch out over six hours the tasks he could accomplish in two. In the meantime he often arrived late for work or left early, he helped himself to pens and paper, he used the Company franks for his and his friends' letters, and, in a moment of candour, he estimated that his "want of neatness in making up Accots." cost the Company probably £100 per year. Lamb had a pretty good thing going for himself; and it proved to be a real bonanza when, at the age of fifty (mind you), desiring more time for research and writing, as it were, he retired on a pension of £450 per year. (Few pension plans would do as well, comparatively speaking, for anyone retiring to-day at sixty-five!) Of course Lamb knew perfectly well the advantages of his position;

in fact he acknowledged them when his friend Bernard Barton wrote that he was considering retiring from his bank job to devote more time to writing. "Keep to your Bank, and the Bank will keep you...," Lamb advised. "I bless every star, that Providence, not seeing good to make me independent, has seen it next good to settle me upon the stable foundation of Leadenhall." And presently: "Henceforth I retract all my fond complaints of mercantile employment, look upon them as Lovers' quarrels. I was but half in earnest. Welcome, dead timber of a desk, that makes me live. A little grumbling is a wholesome medicine for the spleen, but in my inner heart do I approve and embrace this our close but unharassing way of life."

That was in January, 1823. Two years later it occurred to him that a suitably cushioned retirement would be preferable to any job known to man. So he adopted a different role, that of invalid. He was aided by two supporting players who collaborated in what Lamb termed "a friendly lie." The strategy was carefully planned: he applied for a pension on grounds of ill health and was examined by the physicians Gilman and Tuthill, who, as he told Sara Hutchinson, "furnished me with certificates of wasted health and sore spirits, not much more than the truth, I promise you" - although he told Thomas Manning that he had been pronounced "*non*-capacitated (I cannot write it *in*-) for business. O joyous imbecility!" How much Lamb may have contributed to the act in the way of moans and groans it would ill become me to speculate.

Of course this was not a new role; he had been playing the invalid for years - probably with some justification, frail as he was in physique and plagued by tormenting worries. But the very vagueness of his ailments raises questions, even discounting the fact that physicians' diagnoses in those days were often hazy. Over and over again Lamb complained of being "poorly and nervous" or "unwell," even "in misery," with no account of his symptoms. When he attempted to identify them, they were at best puzzling: now he is suffering from a "swelled cheek and rheumatism" with a "headache in the middle," now his head is "very queerish"; and of course, like many of his generation, he struggled against the bugbear of "nervous fever." They all add up to a classic case of hypochondria, or at best, neurasthenia. Lamb never disavowed his ailments as he did his complaints about his duties at India House. But on one occasion, when Emma Isola was visiting her aunt in Cambridge, he sent her a disturbing account of his sister Mary's health: she was "very poorly indeed," he reported; suffering from "a very dangerous cough, which...has been succeeded by a depression in her spirits, which is almost insupportable to her"; she has "just been crying, & saying she shall not live to see you again, & that she shall leave me a forlorn creature." - "Your coming might be of great use to her ...," he entreated. Then he made a copy of the letter and sent it to Emma's friend Maria Friar. Mary was in no real danger, he told her; but "all the facts are true, or as near true as can be when one wishes to express ones self more strongly rather than less." He himself was nervous, he added; his hand was unsteady. But when Crabb Robinson spent the night at Enfield a week later, he found both Lamb and Mary "in excellent state - not in high health but, which is better, quiet and cheerful." Lamb, especially, was "very chatty and altogether as I could wish."

Apparently he could overstate another person's ill health when he needed support. - "When he needed support"; that is perhaps the key to most of Lamb's role-playing after his day of horrors: his threats to renounce poetry, his complaints about his arduous duties at India House or his

wretched health. It probably explains too his ambivalent attitude toward visitors: there seem always to have been too many or too few. As long as he and Mary remained in London, they seemed never to have a moment's peace; as soon as they took refuge in the country, he longed for company. During the early weeks of 1828, soon after they moved to Enfield, he wrote little but appeals for friends to come see him: Talfourd, Moxon, Thomas Hood and his wife, Cowden Clarke (who was invited to bring "the Novellian Circle" with him), Crabb Robinson, Fanny Kelly and her sister Mrs Bryan, the Thomas Allsops, Leigh Hunt, Henry Francis Cary, George Darley, and Allan Cunningham were all urged to visit. By Easter (in early April) Lamb was complaining that he had entertained "all the world and his wife here in the last week or two, they seem to have come I know not whence." But by early May he was inviting Allsop, Cowden Clarke, William Hone, the Hoods, Fanny Kelly (who had spent several days there at Eastertime), Charles Ryle and his wife, and Walter Wilson to come see him. He needed the companionship, the attention, that friends could supply - and not only friends but strangers, nuisance callers. Ten years earlier, in a letter to Mrs Wordsworth written while he was still living in London, he had grumbled about the "set of amateurs of the Belle Lettres...who come to me as a sort of rendezvous, putting questions of criticism, of British Institutions, Lalla Rookh &c., what Coleridge said at the lecture last night." Then, having vented his spleen, he confessed: "I would not that I know of have it otherwise."

Long years ago when I studied history in school, we were required to learn the *immediate* cause - of the Fall of Rome or the rise of Cromwell or the outbreak of the American Revolution - and the *ultimate* cause. The immediate causes of Lamb's complaints are clear enough; the ultimate cause, I suspect, is not far to seek. For although he asked for support, for sympathy, because of his tedious job or his poor health or his loneliness or his lack of time to himself, he *needed* that kind of reinforcement because of the intolerable burden he bore for thirty-eight long years. Did he play roles? Does the casual reader of his letters, lured by his delightful nonsense for Thomas Manning's edification or his gossip for the Wordsworths', find himself repelled by the plaintive strain that recurs so often when one attempts to read *all* the letters? Surely Lamb is to be forgiven. He accepted unhesitatingly a responsibility that most brothers would have shirked (as indeed *John* Lamb did). And on that score he was mute. To be sure, he told friends of his anguish when Mary suffered an attack - and of his loneliness when she was "away from home" for months at a time. And once, in a letter to Coleridge in 1800, he wrote poignantly, "I almost wish that Mary were dead." But that, certainly, was because he wanted to spare her, not himself. Five days later he told Thomas Manning: "...I feel my daily and hourly prop has fallen from me. I totter and stagger from weakness, for nobody can supply her place to me." And twenty-one years afterwards, in "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," he wrote that he had been "her care in foolish manhood."

No, Charles Lamb needs no apology; he was a hero in the grand classical mold: a man of invincible courage, unfailing loyalty, for which he asked no praise. Inevitably he needed some sort of solace, the kind of solace that all human beings need to withstand the rigors of day-to-day living. But when he sought it in alcohol, the effects were brief and left him ashamed; when he sought it in writing, he met usually with condescension. Hence the roles he assumed, the games he played, the cries of the heart, as they really were, which were, I believe, but disguised appeals for

support to enable that spindle-legged little body to sustain the weight a cruel fate had allotted him.

CHARLES LAMB'S FRIEND CHARLES ELTON

Berta Lawrence

The roar of the M5 now reaches the walled, secluded gardens where the Somerset manor-house Clevedon Court has stood under a sheltering hill since 1320. The fine south porch, the house's main entrance, faces the motorway and low-lying Nailsea Moor with its slow rivers Land Yeo and Ken and protective sea-wall. Curiously the ancient parish church of St Andrew on a slope of Wain's Hill - a mark conspicuous to seamen out in the Severn Sea that sends very high tides dashing against Clevedon cliffs - stands two miles westward, near the estuary. It was the church of the tiny fishing village, with its Salt House and salt-marshes, where Coleridge rented from Sir Abraham Elton his honeymoon cottage in 1795, the cottage described in its tranquil environment in *Lines Written on leaving a Place of Retirement*. That village developed into a seaside resort, and a flood of traffic now sweeps along Old Church Road, past Myrtle Cottage where Coleridge could hear the sea's low murmur. Not a hint now of his scented beanfields!

The Court, formerly home of de Clevedons and Wakes, passed in 1709 into the ownership of the Eltons, a family of prosperous and enterprising Bristol merchants. To them the Court owes various changes: demolitions, additions and embellishments that include the terraced gardens. The Elton line threw up men of great individuality and of diversified talents. Not least among them was Charles Elton, Charles Lamb's friend and contemporary, the sixth baronet. (He did not inherit the title in Lamb's lifetime.) At one time a soldier, he was a man of high culture, a classical scholar, poet and translator who sought the company of painters and men of letters and gave the former considerable patronage, especially those of the so-called Bristol school.

Visitors to Clevedon Court, now owned by the National Trust, see among its many paintings several portraits that members of this group made of beautiful Sarah Smith, Charles Elton's wife, who was daughter of a Bristol merchant, a Unitarian. Elton's bigoted and eccentric parson-father, the Rev. Sir Abraham Elton who loathed Dissenters, drove furiously to Bristol to forbid his son's marriage. Arriving too late he cut off all communication with Charles until Charles renounced his Unitarian faith many years after. This love-match produced thirteen children of whom eight were daughters. Tragedy struck it in 1819 when the two eldest boys were drowned together off Birnbeck island at Weston-super-Mare. The tide came rushing sharply in; a girl called a warning and the bathers ran towards the island; the younger dropped his seaweeds, shells and pebbles and "rashly plunged" to pick them up. His brother sprang back "amid the rushing salt sea wave", refusing to leave him. Elton's long poem "The Brothers" commemorated the tragedy. It was much admired by his contemporaries and John Clare in his Journal recorded reading "Elton"s new poem" in 1824 when it was published.

A memorial tablet in the south transept of St Andrew's church records that "In the family vault underneath are deposited the mortal remains of Abraham aged 14 and Charles aged 13, the Eldest Sons of Charles Abraham and Sarah Elton.

'They were lovely and pleasant in their lives,
and in their death they were not divided'

A white marble tablet in this same chapel commemorates another tragic event that affected Charles Elton's family. Its black lettering informs us that it was raised "to the Memory of Arthur Henry Hallam, eldest son of Henry Hallam Esq and of Julia Maria his wife, Daughter of Sir Abraham Elton Bart. of Clevedon Court, who was snatched away to sudden death at Vienna on September 15th 1833. In the 23rd year of his age."

Charles Elton's sister Julia had married Henry Hallam the distinguished historian. Their son Arthur was the friend and Cambridge companion of Tennyson and the subject of Tennyson's great elegy *In Memorian*, worked on for years but not published until 1850, the year when Tennyson on his honeymoon, made a pilgrimage, "a kind of consecration", to Arthur Hallam's grave and stayed with Charles Elton at Clevedon Court. The elegy's references to Hallam's ashes lying in English earth from which violets would spring are examples of poetic licence, but literally true are the lines

"The Danube to the Severn gave
The darkened heart that beat no more.
They laid him by the pleasant shore
And in the hearing of the wave."

And one of the loveliest sections of *In Memoriam* (LXVI) speaks of Clevedon church as

"thy place of rest
By that broad water of the west"

and calls up an image of the white marble tablet glimmering "in the dark church like a ghost" as the grey light of dawn replaced darkness.

Charles Elton was a professional writer contributing to various periodicals. He wrote for the London Magazine from its earliest days and counted among his friends its editor John Taylor, several contributors and their associates, notably John Clare, Coleridge, Southey and Charles Lamb who was the most highly-paid. A painting in the State Room at Clevedon Court portrays in a curious conglomeration numerous people who moved inside Charles Elton's orbit. This is *The Travellers' Breakfast* or *The Stage Coach Breakfast* by the Bristol artist Edward Villiers Rippingille. In addition to Elton's wife Sarah, his widely-smiling self and a number of pretty Elton children all dressed for travelling and taking breakfast at an inn, we can distinguish Rippingille, Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and Lamb. Apart from dark handsome Southey in his red waistcoat, the portraits of writers are not flattering. Grey-haired Wordsworth sits next to a fat red-nosed Coleridge and is sniffing a dubious boiled egg held out to him by Coleridge. Dorothy, so delightful in youth, is a plain elderly woman in a black bonnet and blue bodice. Lamb in white stockings and a long black coat, offers the bill on a salver to Rippingille who is being helped to pull his boots on. It is a strange composition; some of the subjects can scarcely have sat for it. It was exhibited in London in 1824.

That year Elton met several of these friends in London on various occasions. For Lamb the year opened miserably after a lengthy cold. "Life is weary of me. My day is gone into twilight and I don't think it worth the expense of candles" he wrote in January. John Clare came to London for some weeks, was joined by Rippingille, "the rattling Rippingille, a pleasant fellow over

the bottle" and as in 1819 did a round of playhouses and inns with him. They visited the Royal Academy. Charles Elton joined them in a visit to a fashionable French phrenologist. In the August number of the London Magazine Elton wrote his *Idler's Epistle to John Clare* - "What thou hast been the world may see". On July 4th there was a tea-party at Lamb's house in Islington attended by Crabb Robinson, the Wordsworths' friend, who wrote in his informative Diary: "Clare the Shepherd Poet was there...but he was ill, and Elton the translator of the classics who looked more like a hunter than a poet."

That same month Charles Elton spent an evening in Islington with Lamb who almost immediately afterwards wrote his evocative and haunting essay on "Blakesmoor" the Hertfordshire house Blakesware known to and beloved by him in childhood when in a forlorn forsaken state it was still lovingly tended by Lamb's grandmother Field as caretaker. Elton is said to have suggested the writing of the essay which was published later in the year in the London Magazine. Without straining comparisons those familiar with beautiful Clevedon Court and its gardens easily notice characteristics similar to those of Lamb's lost and lamented "Blakesmoor" and likely to have been discussed by the two friends that summer night. Each house had a great array of family portraits; each had a "lofty Justice Hall with its chair of authority, highbacked and wickered, once terror of the luckless poacher" as Lamb wrote. There is a painting at Clevedon of an Elton administering summary justice as magistrate to a poacher brought before him in the Great Hall.

As for the gardens, there were a number of similarities. Elton described the Clevedon gardens in *The Brothers*: "the fruits espalier-trained", "the terraces and verdant slopes" rising up behind the house to "the boundary hill". Those garden-terraces - one of which, adorned with an Octagon summerhouse, is called the Pretty Terrace - were laid out on a bare slope in the 18th century and the barren hilltop above the slope planted with trees by Napoleonic prisoners. On the southern side of the house there is a fishpond, a survivor of three. Lamb's readers will recall "the sun-baked southern wall" and the peaches of Blakesmore fruit-garden which had tempted him as a boy; "the ampler pleasure-garden rising backwards from the house in triple terraces, the verdant quarters backward still" until they reached "the firry wilderness, the haunt of the squirrel". Blakesmoor too had its fishpond where the boy Lamb had watched darting dace "and here and there a great sulky pike".

There is not space here to mention the associations of Charles Elton with Thackeray who, unhappily married, had a long love-affair with Elton's married daughter Jane Brookfield. Clevedon Court is the Castlewood House of *Henry Esmond* that was partly written at the Court.

The National Trust issues a scholarly and interesting booklet on Clevedon Court, written by the late Sir Arthur and Lady Elton. This gives an account of the Thackeray connection as well as information on Charles Elton's link with the London Magazine circle.

LAMB IN THE LAKE DISTRICT

On Saturday 17th July three members of the C L S who were in the Lake District were happily invited to a meeting of the Cumbrian Literary Group, in Portinscale, to hear a talk by Mrs Kate Lindsay on Charles Lamb. The

speaker began by explaining how disappointed she was at the lukewarm recognition given to Lamb on the occasion of his bicentenary in 1975: this talk was her own contribution to try and redress the balance. She ran rapidly and clearly over the main incidents in the lives of Charles and Mary and quoted freely from Lamb's sayings and aphorisms, which evoked appreciative chuckles from her audience. But her main concern was to present a picture of Charles himself, rather than of his works, and in this she succeeded admirably. A very enjoyable meeting ended with a substantial "afternoon tea" and a stroll in the sunshine down to the shores of Derwentwater. Altogether an afternoon of which Elia would have approved.

R Barnard

LAMB IN THE SALE ROOM

Overshadowed by the sale of Byron's Beppo manuscript at £50,000 (plus the auctioneers' iniquitous 10% impost on the buyer), two manuscripts of essays by Elia were offered at Sotheby's sale on 22 June 1976. "My First Play", published in *The London Magazine* of December 1821, consisting of 2½ pages of large folio letter paper which were sent through the post to Taylor & Hessey and are now bound in crushed red levant morocco, fetched £2000+ (Mayfield). "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers", specially interesting because the MS shows several textual changes, was first published in *The London Magazine* of May 1822, fetched £6000+ (Seymour): it was bound similarly to "My First Play". The auctioneer's catalogue mentions that both manuscripts were written on paper from the same stock - no doubt the property of the East India Company.

At the same sale a letter to Lamb from Joseph Hume dated 11 January 1808 fetched £55+ (Mayfield). It was one of the series containing the hoax about Hazlitt's suicide and resurrection.

1976-77 MEETINGS

A list of London meetings will be circulated with this issue. Members should be beware of misinformation contained in the July Bulletin: the Crowsley Memorial Lecture will be given on Saturday 2 October at the Mary Ward Centre at 2.30 pm (and not at the Friends' International Centre at 2.45).

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