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‘Sweet is thy sunny hair’:
An Unpublished Charles Lamb Poem

By FELICITY JAMES

‘Sweet is thy sunny hair’, c. 1796¹

Sweet is thy sunny hair,
O Nymph, divinely fair,
With whose loose locks, as they stray
On the pinions of the wind,
I were well content to play
All the live-long Summer’s day
Under some tall wood’s shade
In mild oblivion laid,
Nor heed the busier scenes I left behind.

Yet not thy sunny hair,
O Nymph, divinely fair,
Nor cheek of delicate hue,
Nor eye of loveliest blue,
Nor voice of melody,
O’er my fond heart could so prevail
As did the soul of sympathy,
That beam’d a meek and modest grace
Of pensive softness o’er thy face,
When thy heart bled to hear the tale
Of Julia, and the silent secret moan
The love-lorn maiden pour’d for Savillon.

Ah! too, like him, far, far I go
From all my heart holds dear,
With sorrowing steps and slow,
And many a starting tear.
Yet could I hope, that thou wouldst not forget,
The love-sick youth, that sighs his soul away
[*All journeying on*] his weary way
[*Then might I leave*] with less regret
Each [*open lawn*], or shadowy grove,
Each [*sunny field*], or green-wood shade,
Where with my Anna I have stray’d,
Far, far to wander from the maid I love.

C.L.

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THIS POEM FORMS PART OF the Robert H. Taylor collection of the Firestone Library, Princeton. It is a fair copy, written on one leaf, and apart from some illegibility on the second sheet, indicated by my italics, it is in good condition. Although its existence is noted by Rosenbaum, it remains, so far as I can trace, unpublished, a surprising omission. Some extremely close parallels with the sonnets perhaps account for the work never having been published by Lamb as a separate entity, yet it has a particular interest of its own, offering another insight into Lamb's early allegiances – literary and romantic.

This, alone of the early poems, refers directly to a contemporary novel; the 'tale of Julia', Henry Mackenzie's 1777 *Julia de Roubigné*, a popular English interpretation of Rousseau, to which Lamb was to return in his own novel, *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret*.² Here, the reading scene of 'Sweet is thy sunny hair' is directly echoed; it is over a copy of *Julia de Roubigné* that the young Rosamund Gray and Allan Clare fall in love, allowing the text to voice their desire. Mackenzie's fragmentary, epistolic romance revolves around the separation of lovers, forced to choose between familial obligations and their true desires, a theme which seems to have had particular resonance for Lamb.³ In the later novel, he transforms the scene of shared reading into a much deeper exploration of the sympathetic bond; nevertheless, even in its derivative nature, this poem acts as an early intimation of the importance the link between reading and friendship will assume in Lamb's work.

'Sweet is thy sunny hair' has immediate links with the sonnets of late 1795 and early 1796, when Lamb, living with his family in 7 Little Queen Street, Holborn, returned again and again to the image of the 'fair-hair'd maid' whose acquaintance he may have made while visiting his grandmother in Widford some years previously. 'Anna' is identified, of course, with Ann Simmons, from Blenheims near Blakesware, whom Lamb may have met when in Hertfordshire in 1792.⁴ By the time she appears as 'the fair Alice W—n' of the *Essays of Elia*, she has become a wistful, muted presence, her 'bright yellow H—shire hair, and eye of watchet hue' the symbol of lost innocence.

In the early poems, however, despite remaining uncharacterised, her image recurs with more insistence, often linked with banishment or exile from the Edenic ideal. 'Anna' is the 'fair hair'd maid' of 'When last I roved these winding wood-walks green', who has vanished from the 'pathways shady-sweet', leaving only her image behind. In 'Was it some sweet device of Faery', first published in *Poems on Various Subjects*, 1796, attention is again drawn to her hair, although here it is the wind, rather than the daring lover, which is responsible for its disarray. More important than any sexual attraction, however, is the companionship and sympathy she affords – as in 'Sweet is thy sunny hair'. In this she seems to be a composite figure of ideal friendship, a blend of Coleridge and Mary, perhaps. The way in which these early love poems repeatedly mourn the broken relationship perhaps points to Lamb's anxiety over these other, closer friendships, at a difficult period in his life.⁵

Just as in his friendships, shared reading plays an important part in his portraits of his relationship with Anna. 'Sweet is thy sunny hair' finds a close counterpart in the sonnet 'Methinks how dainty sweet it were,

² In Mackenzie's novel, the ruined father of Julia de Roubigné wishes her to marry the noble Montauban and restore the family fortune, despite her attachment to her childhood love, Savillon.

³ Thinking that Savillon is already wed, Julia does finally submit to her father's will. Savillon returns, unmarried, from the plantations where he has been reforming the treatment of slaves, and assures Julia of his faithfulness. Despite her sorrow, Julia remains true to her husband, Montauban, but he does not trust her. In the overheated Shakespearian denouement, Montauban, incensed by jealousy, poisons her; on discovering her innocence, he swallows laudanum.

⁴ E.V. Lucas gives a sympathetic account of the relationship in his *Life* (London: Methuen, 1905, 1920, 2 vols.) I, 98; Reginald L. Hine explores the Hertfordshire context especially fully in *Charles Lamb and his Hertfordshire* (London: J.M. Dent, 1949).

⁵ See letter to Coleridge, May 27, 1796; *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols. (Cornell University Press, 1975) I, 5 – hereafter, Marris, vol #, page #. At the beginning of 1796, Lamb had just spent six weeks in the asylum at Hoxton; the sonnet he wrote there to his sister repeatedly refers to the 'mighty debt' he felt he owed Mary at this time. There is a similar feeling of unworthiness in his letters to Coleridge, which apologise for the 'small merit' of his poetry, thank him for his friendship, and continually look forward to a time when they will be reunited.

reclined'. Here, too, the lovers are embowered, far from 'busier scenes', and they occupy themselves by reading 'some tender tale / Of faithful vows repaid by cruel scorn' – quite possibly Mackenzie. The return to this idea of intellectual sympathy allows us another insight into Lamb's relationship with Anna, especially interesting in light of the 1799 letter from Southey, cited by Winifred Courtney:

I went to the India House. Among other things Lamb told me that he dined last week 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?⁶

That 'stupid girl' points to, as Courtney suggests, a painful, perhaps bitter association for Lamb, which bemuses the more straightforward Southey. The way in which he returns to the idea of shared reading suggests that it forms an important part in his idealised relationship; something which the real Anna could not, perhaps, fulfil.⁷

That 'Sweet is thy sunny hair' contains multiple images and themes of Lamb's early sonnets, suggesting an early date of composition, perhaps late 1795 or early 1796. The survival of so many of the poems which are sent to Coleridge after March 1796 supports this; Lamb may never have considered it for publication once he had borrowed its images for his more mature sonnets. The way in which it recalls Bowles's sonnets of yearning and wandering looks back to the time Coleridge and Lamb had spent together in London in the winter of 1794, when Lamb recalls Coleridge 'repeating one of Bowles's sweetest sonnets in your sweet manner, while we two were indulging sympathy, a solitary luxury, by the fireside at the Salutation'.⁸ Lamb's lost love had, clearly, been a topic of conversation here, since, as he writes to Coleridge in June 1796:

When you left London, I felt a dismal **void** in my heart, I found myself cut off at one & the same time from two most dear to me.⁹

The poem may owe its beginnings to this period in Lamb's life, a time when discussion of books seemed to go along with discussion of love and friendship, the two bound together by the term 'sympathy'.

Despite its (understandable?) rejection from later publications and some undoubted technical clumsiness, 'Sweet is thy sunny hair' works as an early demonstration of the ways in which the reading relationship sustains and comforts Lamb. As the poet makes his way 'with sorrowing steps and slow', he is sustained by the sympathy which reading Mackenzie's novel has allowed him to experience. These are ideas which will come into sharp focus as another relationship – Lamb's friendship with Coleridge – matures and the two take up differing positions on the nature of novel-reading and response. It is perhaps only in his relationship with Coleridge, rather than in his disappointed Hertfordshire love affair, that Lamb finds a fellow reader able to respond with the 'soul of sympathy' he seeks.

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⁶ Winifred Courtney, in her *Young Charles Lamb*, and in the *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 9, 1975, 14-15; from Southey, *New Letters*, ed. Kenneth Curry (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965, 2 vols.) I, 190.

⁷ It is also interesting to note that in the poignant letter of proposal sent to Fanny Kelly in 1819, Lamb mentions, as a humorous incentive, the 'book-knowledge', 'that inconsiderable particular' he and Mary are prepared to offer as their share in the marriage. Kelly, too, like the earlier Anna, is distinguished by her 'pensive face', and 'thoughtful eye', indicative of her ready sympathy.

⁸ Marris, I, 78.

⁹ Marris, I, 18.

Lamb's the Moralist¹

By MICHAEL JOHN KOOY

I. Lamb's moral iconoclasm

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER of Lamb's *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1808), an adaptation of Chapman's translation of the *Odyssey* and his best book for children, Ulysses and his companions meet the Cyclops with a humble request for hospitality. Their conversation is short:

[The Cyclops] replied nothing, but griping two of the nearest of them, as if they had been no more than children, he dashed their brains out against the earth, and (shocking to relate) tore in pieces their limbs, and devoured them, yet warm and trembling, making a lion's meal of them, lapping the blood . . .²

The author of such a shocking scene as this (and there are many more), Lamb was no conventional moralist. Even his liberal publisher, William Godwin, balked at the violence, fearing that readers, particularly girls, would object. He wrote to Lamb pleading for restraint:

We live in squeamish days. Amidst the beauties of your manuscript, of which no man can think more highly than I do, what will the squeamish say to such expressions as these? "devoured their limbs, yet warm & trembling, lapping the blood." p. 10, or to the giant's vomit, p. 14, or to the minute & shocking description of the extinguishing the giant's eye, in the page following. You I dare say have no formed plan of excluding the female sex from among your readers, & I, as a bookseller, must consider that, if you have, you exclude one half of the human species.³

Godwin's objections, though primarily commercial, reflected the moral temper of contemporary middle class readers. But if making the book more sellable meant pulling the teeth that gave his story its bite, Lamb would have none of it. "[The passages] are lively images of *shocking* things. If you want a book which is not occasionally to *shock*, you should not have thought of a Tale which was so full of Anthropophagi & monsters," he replied curtly. "I will not alter them if the penalty should be that you & all the London Booksellers should refuse it."⁴ Godwin did not, in the end, refuse. But their friendship was damaged by this exchange and in the end Godwin was proved right: *The Adventures of Ulysses* was among the least commercially successful of Lamb's works.

I will have more to say about children's literature in a moment (without the nasty bits, I hasten to add) but I mention the shocking episode of the Cyclops now in order to make clear that if Lamb was a moralist, as I hope to show by the end of this essay, he was not a moralist

¹ This essay is based on a paper given at the Charles Lamb Society meeting in London on 5 April 2003. I'd like to thank my hosts, Mary Wedd, Nick Powell and Cecilia Powell, for kindly inviting me, and to those who attended for the lively discussion. I'd also like to thank Roy Park, who first prompted many of the reflections developed in this essay.

² *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 6 vols. (London: Methuen, 1912), 3: 244. Hereafter *Lamb Works*.

³ William Godwin to CL, 10 March 1808, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975-8), 2: 278. Hereafter *Lamb Letters*.

⁴ CL to William Godwin, March ?10 1808, *Lamb Letters*, 2: 279.

in any sense that his contemporaries would recognize. Nor, I hasten to add, was he a moralist in the sense that we would normally use the term, that is, someone who engages in systematic reasoning about moral philosophy. Not only because Lamb was temperamentally unsuited to this kind of work (he would rather, like his admired Sir Thomas Brown, give up the hunt for 'the *truth of the fact*' in order to dwell on 'those hidden affinities and poetical analogies, – those *essential verities* in the application of strange fable'⁵); but also because he was so clearly *wary* of platitudes. I can only point here to one instance. In a poem by Southey, called 'The Victory', the poet describes a wretched character and then makes this pious appeal to God: 'Be thou her comforter, who art the widow's friend.' Lamb calls this 'common place'. 'This is to convert Religious into mediocre feelings,' he complained to Southey, 'which should burn & glow & tremble'.⁶ Lying behind Lamb's rebuke is the conviction that as soon as you find yourself thinking in abstract terms about the concrete life of moral relations you've already abandoned whatever purchase you might have had on the subject and might as well say anything at all, so much good will it do you. In this sense Lamb stands in the tradition of Rousseau, for whom intellection was an enemy to goodness. This is what lies at the heart of Walter Pater's appreciation of Lamb, as expressed in his essay of 1878. Lamb was a humourist – blithe, modest, though sometimes given to gloom and bitterness, whose inimitable value as an essayist lay in the fact that he was not concerned with 'ideas of practice – religious, moral, political', with 'the turning of the tides of the great world,'⁷ and so was better to observe the everyday, to attend (like Baudelaire, in fact) to the occasional and the accidental.

This is fine so far as it goes, but I haven't mentioned yet the most interesting reason why Lamb is not a moralist, at least in the usual sense of the term: not because he's temperamentally unsuited to the task or because he thinks in particulars rather than universals, but because he is an iconoclast. And it's this aspect of his work I'd like to focus on. To put it briefly, Lamb is, I think, suspicious that moralists really care nothing about morality at all, but instead use the discourse of morality to make others miserable, and themselves slightly less so. This skeptical view of morality as a code of right and wrong (not good and evil), constructed by some to exert power over others, Lamb shares with the greatest of nineteenth-century German skeptics, Friedrich Nietzsche. Lamb, as Nietzsche would for a later generation, exposes the 'bad faith' of the moralists not by taking issue with their morality, but by showing their selfish, though unacknowledged, motivation. Nietzsche's iconoclasm is evident in works like *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in which he traces the origin of current ideas of 'good' and 'evil' to the triumph of the slave mentality over the master morality, and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), in which he exposes the hollowness of cherished beliefs. Nietzsche's main contention is that people label things good or evil not because these things are inherently so, but because they are *good or bad for them*. This iconoclasm is evident across Lamb's work, in his mockery of cant, his descriptions of false modesty, his exposure of self-deception. And perhaps most clearly in 'Popular Fallacies', in *Last Essays of Elia*. Let me mention one example, No. VI 'That Enough is as Good as a Feast':

Not a man, woman, or child in ten miles round Guildhall, who really believes this saying. The inventor of it did not believe it himself. It was made in revenge by somebody, who was disappointed of a regale. It is a vile cold-scrag-of-mutton

⁵ 'Specimens from the Writings of Fuller, the Church Historian', *Lamb Works*, 1: 135n.

⁶ CL to Robert Southey, 15 March 1799, *Lamb Letters*, 1: 163.

⁷ Walter Pater, 'Charles Lamb', *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 108-9.

sophism; a lie palmed upon the palate, which knows better things. . . . we verily believe [this] to have been the invention of some cunning borrower, who had designs upon the purse of his wealthier neighbour, which he could only hope to carry by force of these verbal jugglings. Translate any one of these sayings out of the artful metonymy which envelops it, and the trick is apparent. Goodly legs and shoulders of mutton, exhilarating cordials, books, pictures, the opportunities of seeing foreign countries, independence, heart's ease, a man's own time to himself, are not *muck* . . .⁸

'It was made in revenge . . .': Lamb's view that moral sayings like these are the product of a resentful mind, the attempt of the weak to overpower the strong, anticipates Nietzsche's view that *ressentiment* (or grudge-laden resentment) stands behind most of our common notions of what is moral. Even the emphasis on appetite, independence and enjoyment ('heart's ease') looks forward to Nietzsche. Above all, though, the *tone* of the essay prefigures Nietzsche, specifically Lamb's indignation at the way moralists have hoodwinked the rest of us into feeling that plenty was a sin. I'd like to call this Lamb's moral iconoclasm: a suspicion of the moralists' wisdom, and a willingness to expose their selfish motives.

I must pause here for a moment to own up to another reason why I've used Nietzsche, a philosopher who postdates Lamb, rather than a satirist like Jonathan Swift, who antedates him, in order to describe Lamb's iconoclasm. After all, Lamb's sarcasm and raillery, though gentler and often funnier than Swift's, stands in the Swiftian tradition of British satire. But I suspect that since Pater, we've tended to underestimate Lamb as a thinker. Pater's essay, with its emphasis on Lamb as a slightly quirky humourist, reluctant to generalize and loathe to philosophize, unwittingly makes him out to be more of a dilettante than he was, and shortchanges him when it comes to 'big issues' by setting up the expectation that he deals only in 'caressing littleness, that littleness in which there is much of the whole woeful heart of things'.⁹ This is damning with faint praise. By modeling Lamb's moral iconoclasm on Nietzsche's, I think we get a fuller sense of its coherence and relevance, both in the context of moral debate in his own day and in ours.

Apart from the 'Popular Fallacies', the most frequent area where Lamb's moral iconoclasm figures is in debates about the way literature and morality relate to one another. I'd like to follow Lamb's contribution to these debates in the rest of this essay, beginning with his critique of the moralism and didacticism in the poetry, children's literature and stage productions of his own day. Lamb's iconoclasm isn't only destructive, however, and in subsequent sections I'll examine a number of ways in which Lamb suggests art does serve a moral function, though one that is unlikely to please the moralist.

II. Lamb's critique of didacticism

In a justly famous letter to Wordsworth written in January 1801, Lamb expresses with characteristic perspicuity and generosity his opinion of the 2nd edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, newly arrived on his desk. In it Wordsworth had included a new poem, 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', which, to recall, begins with a moving description of a beggar who makes routine visits to village and country homes, receiving charity, 'sometimes in money, but mostly in provisions'. The poet then interrupts the description and turns to address his readers directly:

But deem not this man useless. – Statesmen! ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye

⁸ 'Popular Fallacies', *Last Essays of Elia*, *Lamb Works*, 2: 290-1.

⁹ *Appreciations*, 110.

Who have a broom still ready in your hands
 To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
 Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
 Your talents, power, and wisdom, deem him not
 A burthen of the earth.¹⁰

Of which Lamb writes:

it appears to me a fault in the Beggar, that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct and like a lecture: they dont slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter. – An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told, I will teach you how to think upon this subject. This fault, if I am right, is in a ten thousandth worse degree to be found in Sterne and many many novelists & modern poets, who continually put a sign post up to shew where you are to feel. They set out with assuming their readers to be stupid. Very different Robinson Crusoe, the Vicar of Wakefield, Roderick Random, and other beautiful bare narratives. – There is implied an unwritten compact between Author and reader; I will tell you a story, and I suppose you will understand it. – Modern Novels ‘St. Leons’ and the like are full of such flowers as these ‘Let not my reader suppose’ – ‘Imagine, if you can’ – modest!¹¹

Lamb employs a clever trick here in criticizing the poetry of a friend without causing offence: name the fault (the lecturing) and then say it's far worse in someone else (Sterne, Godwin). Lamb's observation of the poem is just; he's put his finger on the same weakness that other, far harsher critics, from Francis Jeffrey onward, would lay to Wordsworth's charge. But is Lamb making any general claims about literature and the way it functions? I think he is. First, there's the objection to didacticism: it is not the fault only of Wordsworth but of many contemporary writers, too. For Lamb, didacticism is symptomatic of a wider cultural phenomenon, namely a determination on the part of authors to prescribe the feelings of the readers (they ‘put a sign post up to shew where you are to feel’) and, even worse perhaps, a willingness on the part of readers to put up with this kind of writing. Secondly, the ‘unwritten compact between Author and reader’ that Lamb alludes to. What is the ‘compact’? The author tells the story, which he or she pretends to be factually true but of course is not (that's why preaching or teaching in a work is so inappropriate); and the reader understands it in a similar spirit, not as reality but *as if* it is reality. For Lamb, the experience of a story, novel or poem is unique in that it offers momentary release from the moral constraint that governs our activities in the world of everyday life. But this experience is only possible if the ‘compact’ between reader and writer is maintained.

Of course, it's not just Wordsworth's problem. Lamb's critique of didacticism includes contemporary children's literature, as he famously made plain in his letter of 23 October 1802 to Coleridge:

Knowledge insignificant & vapid as Mrs. B's books convey, it seems, must come to a child in the *shape of knowledge*, & his empty noodle must be turned with conceit of his own powers, when he has learnt, that a Horse is an Animal, & Billy is better than a Horse, & such like: instead of that beautiful Interest in wild tales, which make the

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 230-1, ll. 67-73.

¹¹ CL to William Wordsworth, 30 January 1801, *Lamb Letters*, 1: 265-6.

child a man, while all the time he suspected himself to be no bigger than a child. Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of Children than with Men. – : Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with Tales and old wives fables in childhood, you had been crammed with Geography and Natural History?¹²

Lamb's dismissal of the work of Anna Letitia Barbauld here is hardly fair, not least because her *Lessons for Children* contains glimpses of precisely the sort of macabre humour that Lamb enjoyed. Here, for instance, is one of my favourites. Barbauld's narrator is addressing a young child called Charles:

Can Pierrot, your dog, read? No. Will you teach him? Take the pin and point to the words. – No – he will not learn. I never saw a little dog or cat learn to read. But little boys can learn. If you do not learn, Charles, you are not good for half so much as puss. You had better be drowned.¹³

Drowned, for not knowing how to read? This is nearly as good as the alarming violence in Lamb's *Adventures of Ulysses*: a combination of surprise and astounding cruelty. Additionally, though it's true that her works for children, notably *Hymns in Prose* (1781) and, with her brother John Aikin, *Evenings at Home* (1792), are lyrical in tone, domestic in setting, and very tame in terms of content, they nevertheless express a perspective on the world that is neither safe nor predictable. Given a classical education by her father, a dissenting minister at Warrington Academy, Barbauld spent most of her adult life running an extremely successful primary school (many of her pupils became lawyers, business leaders and MPs), an experience which led to her being one of the great educationalists of the age.¹⁴ Her works for children are not only among the first to address a young audience directly, with a lyrical simplicity that recalls Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, they also contain hints of her own radical politics (in *Evenings at Home*, for instance, Barbauld describes battle as murder) and her nonconformist religion (notably the absence of religious dogma); above all, they seek to instruct children in independent thinking, based on empirical observation. As for the moralism, Anne K. Mellor has argued persuasively that women writers like Barbauld saw themselves as 'matrons' for whom literature unquestionably possessed a social and political function. This naturally involved them in 'selecting the appropriate books for young people to read at different stages of their growth, warning against licentious literature, and correcting the aesthetic taste of their charges'.¹⁵ As for Mrs. Trimmer, whom Lamb also refers to, she was everything Barbauld was not: high church Anglican and Tory. But as Laura Mandell has recently argued, even she treated her child readers with greater respect for their independent judgment than critics like Lamb allowed.¹⁶

Lamb's attack on Barbauld in 1802 was repeated by Coleridge and Southey and they have been quoted so often since that they were in large part responsible for the decline in

¹² CL to Coleridge, 23 October 1802, *Lamb Letters*, 2: 81-2.

¹³ Anna Letitia Barbauld, *Lessons for Children*, quoted in Laura Mandell, 'Johnson's lessons for Men: Producing the Professional Woman Writer', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 33 (2002) 110.

¹⁴ In addition to Mandell, see William McCarthy, 'The Celebrated Academy at Palgrave: A Documentary History of Anna Letitia Barbauld's School', *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 8 (1997): 279-392; and Penny Mahon, 'In Sermon and Story: Contrasting Anti-War Rhetoric in the Works of Anna Barbauld and Amelie Opie', *Women's Writing*, 7 (2000) 23-8.

¹⁵ Anne K. Mellor, 'A Criticism of Their Own: Romantic Women Literary Critics', in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 34.

¹⁶ Mandell, 108-12.

Barbauld's posthumous reputation, which only now is recovering.¹⁷ Besides, Barbauld herself appreciated Lamb's works¹⁸ and later in life they met and liked each other. But while we can now understand more fully the reasons why Lamb and Coleridge ridiculed Barbauld (misinformation about her work and the suspicion that she had written bad reviews of their work) and can admit that the remarks were unfair, we shouldn't forget that in other respects Lamb was absolutely right. For while at one level Lamb is making an unjustified attack on Barbauld, on another he's making an astute diagnosis and critique of contemporary culture. For the moralism and didacticism in children's literature are symptomatic of an imaginative failure that's evident, according to Lamb, across contemporary culture. It's not the fault, in other words, of a few authors, but of the readers that buy and read their books, the theatre goers who attend their plays.

Lamb's critique of didacticism and moralism in literature clearly implies what for him good books for children should be, as George L. Barnet has shown.¹⁹ But it also suggests a particular understanding of the way art and morality relate, one which has not, in my view, received the critical attention it deserves. I'd like now to focus on a cluster of three essays which, though separated by years and publishing history, are thematically linked in important ways: 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth' (1811); 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century' (1822); and 'On Stage Illusion' (1825). I'll deal with the essays in turn, but what I'd like to draw attention to primarily is three strands in Lamb's aesthetics: sympathy, art as 'play', and finally aesthetic illusion. Taken together, these essays offer a coherent account of how art, without being didactic, can have a fruitful bearing on moral life.

III. Lamb and sympathy

Lamb's essay 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', published in *The Reflector* in 1811 and reprinted in his *Works* in 1818, is a stinging attack on moral-minded contemporaries who objected to Hogarth's prints on the grounds that they were not only vulgar in subject matter but immoral in their depiction of scenes of vice and depravity. These attitudes are summed up, for Lamb, in the opinion of James Barry, Professor of Painting to the Royal Academy, whose sour assessment of Hogarth Lamb quotes at length, and then rebuts thus:

there is scarce one of his [Hogarth's] pieces where vice is most strongly satirised, in which some figure is not introduced upon which the moral eye may rest satisfied; a face that indicates goodness, or perhaps mere good humouredness and carelessness of mind (negation of evil) only, yet enough to give a relaxation to the frowning brow of satire, and keep the general air from tainting. Take the mild, supplicating posture of patient Poverty in the poor woman that is persuading the pawnbroker to accept her clothes in pledge, in the plate of *Gin Lane*, for an instance. A little does it, a little of the *good* nature overpowers a world of *bad*. One cordial honest laugh of a Tom Jones absolutely clears the atmosphere that was reeking with the black putrefying breathings of a hypocrite Blifil.... But of the severer class of Hogarth's performances, enough, I

¹⁷ See Lisa Vargo, 'The Case of Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "To Mr C(olerid)ge"', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 102 (April 1998) 55-63.

¹⁸ See, e.g., *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. Lucy Aikin (London: Longman, 1825), 2: 110.

¹⁹ George L. Barnet, "'That Cursed Barbauld Crew' or Charles Lamb and Children's Literature," *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 25 (1979) 1-18. See also: Joseph E. Riehl, *Charles Lamb's Children's Literature* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1980); Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Winifred F. Courtney, 'Mrs. Leicester's School as Children's Literature', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 47-8 (1984) 164-9.

trust, has been said to show that they do not merely shock and repulse; that there is in them the 'scorn of vice' and the 'pity' too; something to touch the heart, and keep alive the sense of moral beauty; the 'lacrymae rerum,' and the sorrowing by which the heart is made better.²⁰

Odd as it may seem, for all his moral iconoclasm, Lamb seems very interested in the *moral content* of Hogarth's work. It's plain in this passage and elsewhere, as David Chandler has pointed out.²¹ And this does seem to involve him in a contradiction: on the one hand objecting to moralistic readings of Hogarth (such as James Barry's), on the other hand defending his own *moral* appreciation of his work. But I think there are at least three ways the defense works without contradicting itself, for Lamb sees Hogarth's work as morally 'instructive' only in narrow, quite particular ways. First, goodness is not imaged alone, but only in dynamic relationship with a 'world of *bad*', and only in moderation ('a little does it'); secondly, one cannot abstract from Hogarth's images a single moral meaning – this, Lamb implies, is what his moral-minded critics find so frustrating about it. Instead, the work offers a training in feeling: 'things to touch the heart, and dispose the mind to a meditative tenderness' (95) and 'the general feeling which remains, after the individual faces have ceased to act sensibly on his mind, [is] a *kindly one in favour of his species*' (99). Finally – and here again Lamb reminds one of Nietzsche – the total absence in Hogarth's work of the moralist's rhetoric of perfection. Hogarth's imperfect reality awakens in spectators a willingness to affirm life: 'they bring us acquainted with the every-day human face ... and prevent that disgust at common life, that taedium quotidianarum formarum, which an unrestricted passion for ideal forms and beauties is in danger of producing', Lamb writes (101).²² I think Lamb's ability to confront moralists like James Barry on their own ground is the reason for the essay's strength and another instance of his iconoclasm.

It would be wrong, then, to think of Lamb's defense of Hogarth as moralistic, but it is moral, for Lamb is writing in the tradition of the eighteenth-century philosophy of sympathy, such as expressed in Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759). Smith argued that morality does not consist in obedience to a moral code but in the exercise of the sympathetic imagination. Smith takes the example of a man stretched upon the rack: though we cannot physically feel his pain, we imagine it and can accordingly feel for him. Lamb's contribution to the tradition of sympathy is to suggest, by way of Hogarth, how an *aesthetic* representation of suffering awakens our sympathy for others. This was, after all, the moral purpose of his novella *Rosamund Gray* (1798), a harrowing story of loss, equal to any of Wordsworth's, which invites sympathy for the oppressed and wronged *without telling us how to express that sympathy*. It was a view Lamb shared with Coleridge, who once said that the purpose of the poet was 'to cultivate and predispose the heart of the Reader.'²³ I hasten to add that though

²⁰ 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', *Lamb Works* 1: 98.

²¹ David Chandler, 'A Sign's Progress: Lamb on Hogarth', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 94 (1996) 50-63. Bill Rudick, 'Artist or Novelist? Lamb, Hazlitt and the Nineteenth-Century Response to Hogarth', *CLB*, 61 (1988) 145-55.

²² For a discussion of this aspect of Lamb's essay, see Elinor Shaffer, 'Illusion and Imagination: Derrida's Parergon and Coleridge's Aid to Reflection: Revisionary Readings in Kantian Aesthetics', in *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Walter Paper (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990) 138-57.

²³ *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (London and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980-2001), 2: 355-6.

this tradition goes back to the eighteenth century, it's still with us, evident particularly in the return to ethics in literary criticism and theory.²⁴

IV. Lamb and 'play'

A more radical argument against moral-minded critical responses to art – this is the second of my three strands – appears in the later essay, 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', first published as the second of three essays in a series called 'The Old Actors', in *London Magazine* in 1822 and republished in *Elia* (1823). Here Lamb is more explicit than in the Hogarth essay for the reasons why moral-minded criticism fails. The topic is the fact that Restoration comedy, such as written by William Congreve and George Farquhar, is no longer played on the London stage. Why not? Because, he says:

The times cannot bear them. ... The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test. ... We have been spoiled with – not sentimental comedy – but a tyrant far more pernicious to our pleasures which has succeeded to it, the exclusive and all devouring drama of common life; where the moral point is every thing; where, instead of the fictitious half-believed personages of the stage (the phantoms of old comedy) we recognise ourselves, our brothers, aunts, kinsfolk, allies, patrons, enemies... We carry our fire-side concerns to the theatre with us. We do not go thither, like our ancestors, to escape from the pressure of reality, so much as to confirm our experience of it . . . All that neutral ground of character, which stood between vice and virtue; or which in fact was indifferent to neither, where neither properly was called in question; that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning ... is broken up and disfranchised, as injurious to the interests of society.²⁵

Moralism thrives because of a failure of imagination. Lamb suggests this occurs in two ways. First, contemporary audiences fail to make the distinction between real life and the *representation* of real life; the characters on stage become real people and are treated accordingly. Secondly, this failure of imagination occurs as audiences see only themselves in the *dramatis personae*: they are perceived through the lens of their own experience ('We carry our fire-side concerns to the theatre with us'). As Hartley Coleridge once remarked in a letter of 1840, Lamb's essay was not so much a defense of Congreve and Farquhar as 'an apology for the audiences who applauded and himself who delighted in their plays.'²⁶ An apology, though, that also functioned as an indictment of a culture's failure of imagination.

But as I've mentioned already, Lamb's critique is not wholly negative. As well as pointing out the imaginative weakness in the culture, he also suggests how this might be reversed. There's a hint of such a suggestion in the passage just cited, in the reference to the theatre as being *neutral* ('that neutral ground of character, which stood between vice and virtue . . . that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning'), a place, in other words, in which art appears as 'play'. Jane Aaron, in her fine book on Lamb, *A Double Singleness*, has explored the way 'play' figures in Lamb's *Elia* essays, largely in

²⁴ For a brief survey of such developments, see Lawrence Buell, 'Ethics and Literary Study', *PMLA*, 114 (1999), v-xi. See also *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001) and *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁵ 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', in *Lamb Works*, 2: 161-2.

²⁶ *Letters of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. G. E. Griggs and E. L. Griggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 236.

terms of irony (from Friedrich Schlegel) or evasion; both are strategies that Elia adopts in order to avoid commitment.²⁷ But what about the relationship between 'play' and ethics?

Now 'play' appears, on the face of it, to be a form of aestheticism, in which art is divorced from the seriousness of moral life. As Oscar Wilde put it in the Preface to *Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'²⁸ But with Lamb things are more complicated. I'd like to suggest that, for Lamb, experiencing art as 'play', that is, as separate from the world of moral obligation ('that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning'), is conditional upon oneself returning to that world at a later time. In other words, the very fact that one abandons moral thinking for a time – during the reading of a novel or poem, for instance, or during the watching of a play – changes one's self-awareness and self-understanding, even one's moral commitment, in the time after one has exited the theatre or stopped reading the novel.

Now the modern philosophical articulation of this idea – in brief, that art is an escape from cognitive and moral reflection, and so an experience of freedom analogous to moral freedom – goes back to the German thinker Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and his essay *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795-6). It's worth summarizing his argument briefly. Schiller's essay begins with a diagnosis of the central problem of early industrial capitalism: the increasing specialization demanded of the workforce and the concomitant decrease in opportunity for workers, particularly in manufacturing, to be creative in their work. This is disastrous for individuals and for communities since, as Schiller asserts, 'man is only fully human when he is at play'.²⁹ Now Schiller doesn't propose a practical solution to this economic and social problem, but he does suggest in what direction we should direct our thoughts to find one. Drawing on Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, he says that each of us is characterized by two drives: a drive towards the ideal and abstract, called the 'form drive' (*Formtrieb*), and a drive towards physical well-being (*Stofftrieb*). Schiller then posits a third drive between these two, the 'play drive' (*Spieltrieb*), which is the urge towards creative interaction with the environment and with others, without either reflecting earnestly on our moral values on the one hand, or seeking to preserve or improve our physical condition on the other. The 'play drive' is not directed to any specific goal; it is the expression of an abundance of life, contained within rules, of course, but within rules that are purely conventional. Now one way to satisfy this 'play drive' is by the sort of games children might play (and a tradition in psychoanalysis explores this more fully). Another way, the one Schiller is particularly interested in, is in art. The primary reason why art is 'play' in Schiller's sense is because in art we don't have an interest in the aesthetic object itself; our pleasure is caused by its form, not its content (here Schiller follows Kant). But how is art as 'play' morally beneficial? Now here Schiller makes an innovative move. The experience of art is morally beneficial in *indirect* ways: it habituates us to regarding ourselves with disinterestedness, and so opens up the possibility of altruism; it also, and this is Schiller's main point, affords us an experience of absolute freedom, analogous to the freedom we have as moral agents, but crucially different, too, since the things that happen in the aesthetic sphere – in books or on stage – have no moral consequences in the real world. It constitutes, then, a momentary release from the earnestness of moral life, a kind of unburdening, the indirect benefit of which comes later when we return to moral relations. This is 'aesthetic education'. One final point: nowhere does Schiller suggest that characters or

²⁷ Aaron, *Double Singleness*, 166-206.

²⁸ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (London: Oxford University Press), xxxiii.

²⁹ Letter 15, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. L. A. Willoughby and Elizabeth M. Wilkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

actions in art can or should be considered moral examples for us to follow in everyday life. Everything in his essay seeks to undermine this moralistic view. In fact, he sets out explicitly a condition for aesthetic education: we have to recognize art as ontologically separate from the world of everyday experience. Art offers the appearances of things, not the things themselves. (Schiller calls this aspect 'illusion' or *Schein*).

Schiller's idea of 'play' has been the subject of some severe critiques. Marxists like Terry Eagleton don't accept his notion of disinterestedness, which they see as strictly ideological. And critics in the hermeneutic tradition, such as Hans Georg Gadamer, criticize Schiller for denigrating the cognitive element in aesthetic experience.³⁰ These are powerful critiques but none has, it seems to me, convincingly refuted Schiller's most original claim, which is that 'play' is an essential aspect of being human. The idea continues to resonate today, without acknowledgement, in the humanist tradition of literary criticism and theory.³¹

Where is Lamb in all of this? As I've argued elsewhere, Schiller's ideas came to Britain primarily through Coleridge, who integrated them into his own aesthetics, notably his notion of the imagination as indirectly educative.³² Lamb shared these views, and though no doubt he picked up ideas from conversation with Coleridge, what's interesting is not their *derivation*, but Lamb's *articulation* of them, which is quite his own.

Let me return to the essay I quoted from earlier, 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century'. At one point in the essay Lamb gives an excellent phenomenological description of exactly the sort of thing Schiller's getting at in his essay on *Aesthetic Education*: that play is basically a-moral, and so constitutes an escape from moral consciousness:

I confess for myself that . . . I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience, – not to live always in the precincts of the law-courts, – but now and then, for a dream-whim or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions – . . . I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it. I wear my shackles more contentedly for having respired the breath of an imaginary freedom. . . . I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's . . . comedies. I am the gayer at least for it; and I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairy-land. . . . The Fainalls and the Mirabels, the Dorimants and the Lady Touchwoods, in their own sphere, do not offend my moral sense; in fact they do not appeal to it at all. . . . It is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is. No good person can be justly offended as a spectator, because no good person suffers on the stage.³³

'To imagine a world with no meddling description': is this only a childish fantasy on Lamb's part, a longing to extend into adulthood the freedom from constraint that one enjoys as a child? Lamb's advocacy of aesthetic play resists such a reductive interpretation, for after all there's no doubt that Lamb must return to 'my cage and my restraint'. The point is that he

³⁰ See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979). For a summary of the reception of Schiller's essay, see Lesley Sharpe, *Schiller's Aesthetic Essays: Two Centuries of Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995).

³¹ See, e.g., Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

³² Coleridge, *Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (Basingstoke: Pgrave, 2002).

³³ 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', *Lamb Works*, 2: 162-3.

feels different about it, having been momentarily outside. Here the absence of moral judgement (since none is demanded, as 'no good person suffers on the stage') and consequently the free play of imagination, indirectly brings about refreshment and 'health'.

This runs parallel to Schiller's argument in his *Aesthetic Letters*. By allowing us to observe fictitious people in fictitious circumstances, the aesthetic accustoms us to the freedom prerequisite to moral action, but does not determine what that action itself should be.³⁴ The aesthetic teaches us what we might do, not what we ought to do. By virtue of its independence from moral action, the aesthetic can influence that action, but only indirectly. 'Poetry never performs a specific function in us,' Schiller once wrote. 'Its scope is the whole of human nature and only insofar as it affects one's general character can it determine particular effects.'³⁵ Which is also Lamb's claim: if in art 'the truth of things were fairly represented, the relative duties might be safely trusted to themselves, and moral philosophy lose the name of science.'³⁶

V. Lamb and illusion

The redemptive economy of a-moral aesthetic experience that I've just been describing depends for Lamb (as for Schiller) on a pact between the artist and the audience: that the artist won't tell the readers or audience what to think or feel, instead leaving them (as Lamb suggests Congreve does) to draw their own conclusions; and that the audience won't treat the aesthetic object literally (as Lamb says most contemporary audiences do). Now the failure of readers and audiences to adopt the necessary aesthetic distance is a theme in both the essays we've looked at so far. It's also explicitly addressed in a third, 'On Stage Illusion', published in *London Magazine* in 1825, and included in *The Last Essays of Elia* in 1833. This, then, is the third strand of Lamb's thinking on the way art and morality relate: the necessity of recognizing the artificiality of the aesthetic object.

Briefly, Lamb's point about illusion is that while we expect actors to represent tragic or comic passions as naturalistically as possible, a residual difference between the actual passion and its representation must remain or else we can't possibly take pleasure in it:

Spleen, irritability – the pitiable infirmities of old men, which produce only pain to behold in the realities, counterfeited upon a stage, divert not altogether for the comic appendages to them, but in part from an inner conviction that they are *being acted* before us; that a likeness only is going on, and not the thing itself. They please by being done under the life, or beside it; not *to the life*. When Gatty acts an old man, is he angry indeed? or only a pleasant counterfeit, just enough of a likeness to recognise, without pressing upon us the uneasy sense of reality?³⁷

In other words, the aesthetic object must contain markers to warn us as spectators or readers that it is not to be confused with the thing being represented. And we must be able to identify and interpret those markers in order for us to have an aesthetic experience. In this respect, Lamb's discussion of 'illusion' is identical to Coleridge's notion of 'imitation', which 'implies & demands *difference*'.³⁸ In other words, we admit that the aesthetic object is not real, and yet we knowingly, momentarily, treat it as if it were (Coleridge famously called this

³⁴ See, e.g., letters 19.6, 21.4 and 23.3, in *Aesthetic Letters*, 130-1, 146-7, 160-1.

³⁵ 'On the Pathetic', *Essays, Aesthetical and Philosophical*, trans. anon. (London: Bohn, 1884), 166.

³⁶ *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, new ed. (London: Bohn, 1854).

³⁷ 'Stage Illusion', *Lamb Works*, 2: 186.

³⁸ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), 3: 501.

act of pretending 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'³⁹). Now, as I've argued already, Lamb's point is that didactic writers and moral-minded critics do not acknowledge the artificiality of art, its 'illusion', and so fail to recognize art's redemptive purpose.

But recognizing art's separateness from the real is harder than you think, not least because it must be learned. Lamb explores this most clearly in an unexpected place: *Mrs. Leicester's School*, the collection of ten stories that he and his sister Mary wrote together and published in Godwin's series, the Juvenile Library, in 1809. Lamb contributed three stories: 'Witch Aunt', 'First Going to Church' and 'Sea Voyage', and perhaps a fourth, 'Young Mahometan', according to Henry Crabb Robinson. In tone and subject matter the stories are certainly different than Barbauld's or Trimmer's (though less so than one might think). Ten young girls are at the school and each introduces herself to the others by telling a story from her childhood. The adventures recounted all occur in a domestic setting (no bloody encounters with the cyclops here) but they're neither sentimental or moralistic. Interestingly, several of the girls come from homes where one parent is absent and many experience loss, neglect or the death of a family member. Critics have praised the collection for its realism (notably the accurate child psychology) and for its representation of children possessing powers of intelligence and imagination that most of the adults lack.

Let me recall a few of the stories. In the 'Witch Aunt', Maria Howe, without the knowledge of her parents, stumbles on Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, in which she sees the illustration of the witch of Endor summoning up the spirit of Samuel. Plagued by the image during the hours of darkness, she begins to imagine, and then actually to perceive, her aunt in the shape of that witch (as we know from Lamb's 'Night Fears', in *Elia*, this was partly autobiographical). It's only when she's sent to live with relatives, and has companions of her own age, that she loses this imaginary horror. In 'The Young Mahometan', Margaret Green discovers a library in her large house and, again without supervision, begins reading a book called *Mahometism Explained*. Margaret is mesmerized by the book's descriptions of Islam and she decides to convert. But the stress of the conversion, and the need to keep it secret, weakens her health and she falls desperately ill. She nearly dies before the truth of the matter comes out; a doctor treats her away from home and she returns cured of her fit of imagination. In 'The Sailor Uncle', a story by Mary, a different kind of misreading takes place. Elizabeth Villiers, whose mother died when she was just a baby, visits her mother's tomb regularly with her father. He teaches her to read using the letters carved on the tombstone and so the girl paradoxically associates these solemn words (which bring tears to her father's eyes) with her own happiness. It's only when her uncle comes and she learns 'that my mother's death was a heavy affliction' that she can read the tombstone aright, as a record of loss and grief.

Joseph E. Riehl has said of one of these stories that 'superficially [it] may seem to show the evils of unsupervised reading, but it actually shows the ill effects of solitary neglect and over-zealous censorship'.⁴⁰ I'm not sure. Certainly Lamb abhorred the sort of censorship Trimmer and others advised. But it seems to me that what the stories powerfully demonstrate is the inability of children to distinguish between fiction and reality. In the first two stories I mentioned, the girls in question read amiss because instead of adopting an *aesthetic* attitude to the illustrations in Stackhouse's *History of the Bible* or to the descriptions in *Mahometism Explained*, they read them *literally*, with disastrous consequences. In the third story the

³⁹ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2: 16.

⁴⁰ *Charles Lamb's Children's Literature*, 107.

reverse is the case: Elizabeth mistakenly reads the tombstone *aesthetically*, as words separated from their referents, and so fails to acknowledge the reality of death. While misreading undeniably has entertaining consequences (as in Lamb's 'Night Fears'), it nevertheless indicates a serious perceptual error, often accompanied by emotional or physical illness. I think these stories demonstrate the need for instruction in how and when it is appropriate, indeed necessary, to read aesthetically, the need, in other words, for aesthetic education.

Let me draw to a conclusion. The children in Charles and Mary's stories make exactly the same mistakes that the moralists do in dismissing Hogarth or Congreve, that is, failing to distinguish between reality and representation. In fact, I suspect Lamb is suggesting that there's something childlike in their inability to make that crucial distinction. While in nearly all other respects the child is the crucible for those many Romantic values that Lamb shares with Coleridge and Wordsworth, such as imagination, lack of inhibition, and so on, the child's frequent inability to discriminate between the real and the imaginary, though sometimes regarded as charming, is nevertheless deeply problematic. It leads to forms of madness to which, of course, Lamb and his sister were no strangers. And the only way to reassert the vital distinction between the thing and its aesthetic representation is through the intervention of a sane adult sensibility, as occurs in the stories in *Mrs. Leicester's School*. Or to put this another way, the only reason why we can enjoy the Cyclops' gory feasting on Ulysses's men is that though we know it didn't happen, we can pretend it did.

Lamb's remarks on the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral are occasional but coherent. I've tried to identify a number of strands in his thinking, such as the role of art in awakening sympathy, the amoral experience of art as 'play' and the view that unless one takes the proper measure of art, the imagination is likely to run away with you. These strands don't make Lamb into a moral philosopher. But they are suggestive, even profound, reflections on the reasons why we read books, see plays and enjoy poetry.

University of Warwick

‘The Immortal Dinner’ Again

By JOHN BARNARD

This talk was given at the Society’s annual lunch on 14 February 2004.

HAYDON’S ‘IMMORTAL DINNER’, which took place on 28 December 1817, will be well known to all of you. Penelope Hallett-Hughes published a whole book on the occasion four years ago,¹ and Sarah Burton included a re-enactment of the dinner in her double biography last year.² However, I want to use the angle provided by Keats’s account of this dinner and of an earlier one to consider the source of the evident contradictions in Haydon’s successive versions of the story. Haydon’s problem was how best to include Lamb’s ‘tipsey’ behaviour in his narrative. And that draws attention to the social dynamics governing the different stages of the occasion, which included dinner and supper, with tea in between. It further prompts the question—how did the occasion appear to the unfortunate Stamp Comptroller, John Kingston?

Keats’s account is a mere eleven lines to the three and a half page versions in Haydon’s *Diary*, written immediately after the event, and that given in his much later *Autobiography*. The passage in Keats’s letter to his brothers, written eight days after the dinner, picks out just three moments—his talk with the young Joseph Ritchie, who had met Tom Keats in Paris, Lamb’s behaviour, and his own manner of drinking at supper. Here is what he says about Lamb:

Lamb got tipsey and blew up Kingston—proceeding so far as to take the Candle across the Room hold it to his face and show us wh-a-at-sor^t of fellow he-waas....³

Keats was a twenty-two year old poet, in the company of older and established men, and had only recently met Wordsworth. Wordsworth was forty-seven and Lamb forty-two. It’s significant that Keats picks out this detail for his brothers. I think his tone here is less judgemental than one of amused amazement at Lamb’s extraordinary behaviour. (This is what older writers get up to!) That he says Lamb ‘proceeded so far’ does, however, suggest that he thought that Lamb had gone too far. But perhaps more important is that the inebriated Lamb uses the candle to ‘show us’, the assembled company, ‘What sort of a fellow Kingston was’.

Keats had attended another dinner about two weeks previously, one which gives an idea of the kind of occasion Kingston would have been expecting:

I dined . . . with Horace Smith & met his two Brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois. . . .

Once again Keats found himself among older men. They were all, in one way or another, part of, or on the fringes of, London literary society. Horace Smith (thirty-eight years old), the wit and

¹ *The Immortal Dinner: A Famous Evening of Genius & Laughter in Literary London, 1817* (London: Viking, 2000).

² *A Double Life: A Biography of Charles and Mary Lamb* (London: Viking, 2003), pp. 289-93.

³ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), II. 198. (Hereafter, ‘*Letters*’.)

younger brother of James and Leonard, had probably met Keats at Hunt's Hampstead cottage in December 1816. Thomas Hill, a dry-salter, book-collector and *bon vivant* was fifty-seven, Kingston we have met, Edward Du Bois, wit and man of letters, was forty-three.

. . . they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment—These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter—They talked of Kean & his low company—Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me . . .⁴

Keats, by far the youngest man there, his first book published nine months previously, clearly felt condescended to and out of place. Hence his mocking account of Kingston at Haydon's party:

. . . I astonished Kingston at supper with a pertinacity in favour of drinking—keeping my two glasses at work in a knowing way. . . .⁵

Now, let me remind you of Haydon's retrospective overall summary of his sense of the 'immortal dinner' when he wrote his *Autobiography* in 1841:

It was indeed an immortal evening. Wordsworth's fine intonation as he quoted Milton and Virgil, Keats' eager inspired look, Lamb's quaint sparkle of *lambent* humour, so speeded the stream of conversation, that in my life I never passed a more delightful time. All our fun was in bounds. Not a word passed that an apostle might have listened to. It was a night worthy of the Elizabethan age [this, of course, picks up on the greenwood Shakespearean world celebrated by Keats and Hunt], and my solemn Jerusalem flashing by the flame of the fire, with Christ hanging over us like a vision, all made up a picture which will long glow upon

'that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude.'⁶

Two points to note: in his original diary entry the dinner had been no more than 'a very pleasant party'. 'It was indeed an immortal evening', seems to reflect anxiety on Haydon's part, an anxiety perhaps evident in the overly assertive, 'All our fun was in bounds.' Was it really 'in bounds' is a question which ought to be asked. It's not asked by Haydon, naturally enough, but nor is it asked by his or Lamb's biographers.

Haydon's account in the *Autobiography* has, of course, already included Lamb's 'tipsey' behaviour—indeed, it adds further details—but his benign summary can only be achieved by omitting all mention of Lamb's conduct and Kingston's presence.

⁴ *Letters*, I. 193.

⁵ *Letters*, I. 198.

⁶ *The Autobiography and Journals of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Malcolm Elwin (London: Macdonald, 1950), p. 319. (Hereafter, 'Autobiography'.)

Keats's preference for humour over wit, and for 'Kean & his low company' (or what we might call 'bohemian' I suppose) to the mannered fashionable society of Horace Smith matches Haydon's original description in the *Diary* of the atmosphere which characterised the 'immortal dinner':

There was not the restraint of refined company, nor the vulgar freedom of low [company], but a frank natural license, such as one sees in an act of Shakespeare, every man expressing his own natural emotions without fear.⁷

The first stage of Haydon's dinner, then, was marked by the 'frank natural licence' of Kean and Shakespeare, in which it was possible for Lamb to call Wordsworth 'you rascally Lake Poet' to his face, and to get 'excessively merry and witty'. (It is significant that Haydon later turns Lamb's performance into one which is '*exceedingly* merry and *exquisitely* witty'.) In general, Lamb behaved as his intimates expected him to, as a kind of holy fool. It is worth reminding you of the age structure of those present for the first phase of the party: Wordsworth (forty-seven), Lamb (forty-two), Haydon (thirty-one), Monkhouse (thirty-four), and Keats (twenty-two). The boisterous unbuttoned 'fun' (Haydon's word) enjoyed by this company was largely instigated by Lamb, and included declaiming poetry, as well as arguing and eating and drinking. Haydon notes (perhaps with relief) Wordsworth's paternally approving role in all this:

It was delightful to see the good Humour of Wordsworth in giving in to all our frolics without affectation and laughing as heartily as the best of us.⁸

This relaxed and convivial atmosphere, which depended on the assumption of temporary equality (more or less) between practising artists (with Monkhouse presumably looking on rather than contributing), continued until they retired from their 'simple' food and 'good' wine (which included Haydon's port⁹) to take tea in the next room.

However, that morning Kingston had asked Haydon, whom he did not know, if he could come to meet Wordsworth. He arrives after the three writers, along with Haydon and Monkhouse, are at tea. Lamb, already tipsy, is dozing. Landseer and young Ritchie are already there. In Haydon's diary entry, written straight afterwards, Kingston immediately introduces himself to Wordsworth as his official superior—'the moment he was introduced he let Wordsworth know *who* he officially was'. After attacking the official for putting out Wordsworth out of countenance, Haydon continues, as you will remember:

[Kingston] got into conversation with Wordsworth on Poetry, and just after he had been putting forth some of his silly stuff, Lamb, who had been dozing as usual, suddenly opened his mouth and said, 'What did you say, Sir?' 'Why, Sir,' said the Comptroller in his milk & water insipidity, 'I was saying &c., &c.' 'Do you say so, Sir?' 'Yes, Sir,' was the reply. 'Why then, Sir, I say, hiccup, you are—you are a silly fellow.' This operated

⁷ *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Willard Bissell Pope, 5 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), II. 175. (Hereafter, '*Diary*'.)

⁸ *Diary*, II. 173.

⁹ Not as Sarah Burton has it, Monkhouse's.

like thunder! The Comptroller knew nothing of his previous tipsiness & looked at him like a man bewildered.¹⁰

'Previous tipsiness' are Haydon's words: had Lamb really fully recovered his sobriety by this time? Surely not.

Wordsworth then expostulates with Lamb, who falls asleep again. Haydon, along with Keats and Ritchie, make 'agonizing attempts ... to suppress [their laughter]', as Lamb continues to bait Kingston—they are on Lamb's side:

. . . the smiling struggle of the Comptroller to take all in good part, without losing his dignity, made up a story of comic expressions totally unrivalled in Nature..... The Comptroller went on making his profound remarks, and when any thing very *deep* came forth, [Such as 'Pray, Sir, don't you think Milton a very *great genius*? This I really recollect. 1823.] Lamb roared out,

Diddle iddle don
My son John
Went to bed with his breeches on
One stocking off & one stocking on.
My son John.

The Comptroller laughed as if he marked it, & went on; every remark Lamb chorused with

Went to bed with his breeches on
Diddle iddle on.

There is no describing this scene adequately.¹¹

Haydon then reports the Comptroller's sense of the 'due awe' he is owed, his 'due contempt for those beneath him, and his 'astonishment at finding where he was come.' This version then hurries to an end, with Wordsworth 'softening' Kingston's feelings, while

. . . Lamb kept saying in the Painting [room], 'Who is that fellow? Let me go & hold the candle once more to his face—

My son John
Went to bed with his breeches on—

& these were the last words of C. Lamb. The door was closed upon him.¹²

¹⁰ *Diary*, II. 174-5. De Quincey's much later reported that Lamb used to wake himself from the 'brief slumber' which followed his drinking over dinner by singing out, 'with the most startling rapidity', 'Diddle, diddle, dumpkins' ('Final Memorials of Charles Lamb', anon. review of Talfourd's biography, *North British Review*, 10 November 1848, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen. ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000-2003), vol. XVI, ed. Robert Morris (2003), pp. 391-3). If this is true, then those who knew at the dinner will have known just how aggressively he was acting, and that he was playing up to his audience.

¹¹ *Diary*, II. 175.

¹² *Diary*, II. 175.

What interests me is that Keats's letter foregrounds Lamb's behaviour, whereas the *main* narrative of Haydon's first account altogether omits Lamb's holding the candle to Kingston's face, only squeezing it as a final grace note.

Judging by the story as it's been told so far, you might have thought that Kingston was a man acting with a good deal of restraint in the face of considerable provocation. That's the more so because we know that while Lamb may have been drunk, his actions were inspired by real animus. He gave his account of the affair in a letter to Wordsworth's wife on 18 February 1818:

Between us there is a great gulf, not of inexplicable moral antipathies and distances, I hope, as there seemed to be between me and that gentleman concerned in the Stamp Office, that I so strangely recoiled from at Haydon's party. I think I had an instinct that he was the head of an office. I hate all such people—accountants' deputy accountants.¹³

Lamb despised his job at the East India Office. His reaction to Kingston was a pathological enactment of his real feelings about officials. Lamb meant what he did and meant what he said. Of those present, at least Haydon and Keats, who had risked total commitment to their art, would have shared Lamb's antipathy to Kingston.

The further details added by Haydon in 1841 make matters even worse. I'll briefly gloss Haydon's words as I go, to point up the scene—perhaps I should also say that Lamb, that inveterate punster, cannot have been unaware that in another linguistic register the technical phrenological meaning of 'organs' carried a clear sexual meaning:

[1. First,] Keats and I hurried Lamb into the painting-room, shut the door, and gave way to inextinguishable laughter. [2. Then] Monkhouse followed and tried to get Lamb away. [3. Meanwhile] ... the comptroller was irreconcilable. We soothed and smiled, and asked him to supper. He stayed though his dignity was sorely affected [not surprisingly]. [4. Then, during supper] All the while until Monkhouse succeeded [in getting Lamb to leave], we [including Kingston, it should be added] could hear Lamb struggling in the painting-room, and calling at intervals: 'Who is that fellow? Allow me to see his organs once more.'¹⁴

That is, even as Kingston eats his supper, he, and everyone else, can hear the 'tipsey' Lamb next door begging to be allowed to continue his 'joke' at Kingston's expense.

But if Haydon's third account of the dinner in his letter to Wordsworth of 16 October 1842 is correct, getting Lamb out of the room involved physical coercion, though in this version Wordsworth takes the place of Keats:

Do you remember you and I and Monkhouse getting Lamb out the room *by force*, and putting on his great coat. . . .?¹⁵ (*Correspondence*, II. 54)

¹³ *The Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb*, introd. Saxe Commins (New York: Random House, 1935; 1963 ed.), p. 820.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, p. 319.

¹⁵ *Benjamin Robert Haydon: Correspondence and Table-Talk*, ed. Frederic Wordsworth Haydon, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), II. 54. (My italics.)

The 'immortal dinner' was surely, despite the long-standing tolerance of Lamb's friends towards his erratic behaviour, an evening which by most standards ended in social disaster.

But Haydon was committed to a positive interpretation. It is almost immediately afterwards that in his *Autobiography* Haydon moves, without any explanation, to his summation (the passage I quoted much earlier), 'It was indeed an immortal evening' in which 'all our fun was within bounds'.

Haydon does make one significant shift in the sequence of his later narrative. Originally, you will remember, Kingston makes known his role as Wordsworth's official superior as soon as they are introduced (this is the version adopted by Penelope Hughes-Hallett¹⁶): the effect is to put everyone in the room, except perhaps the deaf Landseer, on Lamb's side, so that Lamb's baiting of Kingston is done with their approval. In the later version Kingston's revelation of his position as comptroller is delayed until *after* he has had his not very successful literary conversation, *after* Lamb has undertaken his phrenological examination, and *after* Lamb has sung out 'Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John'.

As Haydon was clearly writing the later narrative with the diary passage in front of him, this deliberate change in the narrative (one followed by Sarah Burton¹⁷) makes Kingston seem more foolish, and means that Lamb was acting in ignorance of who Kingston was. At the same time, the change exonerates his guests from ganging up on Kingston the official. On the other hand, because Haydon also adds the details of the extreme difficulty they had in getting Lamb out of the room, he reveals the full embarrassment of the occasion.

Keats's letter places Lamb's aggressive taunting of Kingston centre-stage, and in doing so highlights the desperate attempts of Haydon's successive narratives to include the more outrageous parts of the story while still being able to claim 'that in my life I never passed a more delightful evening'. That's only something he can do by somehow making Lamb's behaviour in the second part of the evening appear 'exceedingly merry and exquisitely witty', as good 'fun', and as a 'frolic'. We can be certain that Kingston would have disagreed. But Keats, Wordsworth, Lamb and the others would have preferred to believe Haydon's final re-writing.

I'll end by returning very briefly to Keats, whose connections with Lamb are otherwise relatively casual and accidental, but who treasured, like everyone who knew him, his eccentric wit in unlikely circumstances.

¹⁶ *The Immortal Dinner*, p. 254. Hughes-Hallett's book exhibits the same fissure as Haydon's narrative. Her subtitle, 'A Famous Evening of Genius & Laughter in Literary London', echoes Haydon's overall interpretation of the dinner as famously enjoyable. Kingston's reaction is described twice, but quite differently. On p. 253 she writes: 'The pompous but evidently well-intentioned man was seized upon by Lamb, appropriately enough with Twelfth Night only a few days off, and translated into a Malvolio-like buffoon for the remainder of the evening, for similar reasons that the original Malvolio was *tormented*: a rising of *anarchical* feelings, among the younger members of the dinner *at least*, versus what they saw as the oppressive control of authority, personified by the comptroller.' (My italics). On p. 257 she writes: 'Kingston was himself bewildered by the bizarre treatment he received at Lamb's hands, and unable to understand what he had done to deserve such a reception; and in any case it must have been alarming to find himself in the *somewhat* overexcited company which now confronted him, having come prepared for a calm and dignified discussion on poetry with the revered Wordsworth. To find himself inappropriately dressed in formal evening clothes completed his *embarrassment*.' (My italics.) 'Torment' is somehow reduced to 'embarrassment'.

¹⁷ *A Double Life*, p. 292.

It's to Keats that we owe the preservation of two of Lamb's witticisms. The first is from a lost letter to George Keats, probably written after George and his wife had emigrated to America in the early summer of 1819, and has to do with yet another party. (Part of the joke in Keats's account, I think, is that the River Iser is actually a sluggish waterway.)

. . . [Keats] tells the story of having been to supper with several of his friends, among whom were Lamb and Campbell. When the party broke up, Keats and Campbell went down stairs to the street in advance. Scarcely had they reached the foot when they heard some one trip and fall. The stairway being dark, Campbell asked, 'What's that?' Lamb, who was the unlucky victim of the false step, while still falling replied, 'Iser, rolling rapidly.'¹⁸

The second is from 25 September 1819 in his journal letter to the George Keatses about their first child:

The though[t] of your little girl puts me in mind of a thing I hear a M^f Lamb say. A child in a[r]ms was passing by his chair toward the mother, in the nurses a[r]ms—Lamb took hold of the long clothes saying 'Where, god bless me, Where does it leave off?'¹⁹

And it is time for me to leave off this afternoon.

University of Leeds

¹⁸ First published *New York World*, 25 June 1877, *Letters*, II. 215n.

¹⁹ *Letters*, II. 214-15.

