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THE ROMANTIC ART OF CHARLES LAMB

BY RICHARD HAVEN

Although Charles Lamb has been the subject of many books and articles, there has been a surprising absence of real critical discussion of his essays as individual works of art. Stuart Tave wrote in his 1957 bibliography that " The refusal to criticize is a major tradition in the literature about Lamb," [1] and the situation has not altered in the last few years. Lamb deserves more than this. The value of the essays does not lie only in their reflection of an interesting and appealing personality, in their charm of style, or in their pleasant and erudite eccentricities. Lamb was doing in prose something akin to what others, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, were doing in poetry, and his essays at their best exhibit an equally careful and artful poetic structure. He deserves and can bear the same kind of serious critical attention that in recent years has been given to Romantic poetry, a poetry which has also at times suffered from the notion that it was too rare or too feeble a thing for any but biographical and historical criticism.

As examples of Lamb's art, I propose to examine two of his most familiar essays, " Old China," and " The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple." I do not suggest that these are " typical " in the sense that they exhibit all the characteristics of his technique. But they serve as particularly good examples of those characteristics which seem to have been most neglected, and of the relation which these bear to some important elements in Romantic poetry.

One of the distinguishing features of much ' romantic ' poetry as compared with the poetry of the preceding century is the replacement of an external 'public ' principle of structure by one that is internal and ' private.' The poet, that is, neither defines his private, unique, experience in terms of the general, the

[1] In *The English Romantic Poets and Essayists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. C. W. Houtchens and L. H. Houtchens (New York, 1957), p. 53.

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abstract, nor does he use the particular experience merely as a point of departure for a public discourse. He rather invites the reader to share a unique experience, and it is this which determines the form of his poem. We are presented not with a rationally ordered sequence, but with a psychologically ordered movement of consciousness.

Consider, for example, Coleridge's " Frost at Midnight," which presents us with the poet's reverie as he sits alone in his cottage at night, gazing at his fire over which flits that mysterious film known as a 'stranger.' As Humphrey House has pointed out,[2] the stages of the reverie are initiated and, so to speak, anchored by related concrete images from which the speaker's thoughts move and to which they return. From these images, fixed in time and space, his mind moves backward and forward in time, out in space, circling and returning. The result of this is to make the poem not an account of what was thought, but a rendering of the total experience of which the thinking was a part. It is not exposition but psychological drama.

The poem does not, however, present us simply with a slice of experience, a fragment of a stream of consciousness. It is completely self-contained, unified within itself. This is partly, of course, the result of the relationship between the different parts of the reverie, the contrast between the speaker's memories of his own past and his hopes for his son's future. But it is even more the result of the images forming the initial dramatic situation. These do more than provide points of initiation and return. The night, the cold, the fire, the child in his cradle—these are in themselves a unified group by virtue of their relationship in time and space. And they give to the poem an objective and physical as well as subjective and mental coherence. Moreover, this group of concrete images is not only related to the reverie in that they constitute a physical setting which contains the thought, and in that they provide the transitions between its different stages; they are also, in a Coleridgean sense, symbols of the thought. The opening and closing lines of the poem describe the still night:

> The Frost performs its secret ministry
> Unhelped by any wind . . .
> . . . .

[2] *Coleridge, The Clark Lectures 1951-52* (London, 1953), pp. 78-83.

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> Or if the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang them up in silent icicles
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

But the lines qualitatively apply also to the stasis in which the reverie begins and ends. The central image of the film on the grate which "flutters there, the sole unquiet thing" mirrors the fluttering thought. The visible and the mental, the objective and the subjective, melt into each other and it is impossible to draw any sharp line between them.

All this, of course, is part of what Coleridge meant by 'organic' form and is a common characteristic of many of his poems and of many of Wordsworth's. What has not been sufficiently noticed is the extent to which it is also characteristic of Lamb.

Even at first glance, "Old China" bears some resemblance to Coleridge's poem. The major part of the essay consists not quite of reverie, but of two monologues, both of which are nostalgic recollections of the past. The first is by Elia's cousin-sister Bridget, who wishes "the good old times would come again . . . when we were not quite so rich . . . [but] were a great deal happier." The second, in reply, is by Elia, who realizes that it was not merely their poverty but their youth which made them happier. Like the reverie, these two monologues are given a dramatic setting, a 'location,' by a description of Bridget and Elia taking tea together from a set of old blue china. It is Elia's comment on "how favorable circumstances had been to us of late years, that we could afford to please the eye sometimes with trifles of this sort" which prompts Bridget's monologue. And Elia's monologue concludes with a description of a tea cup: "And now do just look at that merry little Chinese waiter holding an umbrella, big enough for a bed-tester, over the head of that pretty insipid half-Madonnaish chit of a lady in that very blue summer house."

As is the case with Coleridge's poem, what belongs to the public world and provides a meeting place for reader and author is not a set of ideas but a specific situation, a set of physical objects. But again, as in the poem, this situation is more than a simple frame, more than an occasion for the monologues.

On the tea cup are portrayed people also having tea: "Here is a young and courtly Mandarin, handing tea to a lady from a

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salver." But they are silent, motionless, unchanging, idealized. The tea cup presents " a world before perspective " in which are " those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element." They are " old friends—whom distance cannot diminish." In art as in thought, all things are possible, time and space can be defied: " And here the same lady, or another . . . is stepping into a little fairy boat, moored on the hither side of this calm garden river, with a dainty mincing foot, which in a right angle of incidence (as angles go in our world) must infallibly land her in the midst of a flowery mead—a furlong off on the other side of the same strange stream! "

All this provides an essential context for Bridget and Elia and their recollections. Both of them describe the past, a happier, a more ideal—or idealized—past. In thought as in art, that past can be retained in the present. Remembered figures and events also " float about, uncircumscribed by any element." But Bridget and Elia are also creatures subject to " the angles of this world," where change is inescapable, where distance does diminish friends, and the past is beyond recall. They are not " a young and courtly Mandarin, handing tea to a lady,' but an aging man and woman. It is this that Bridget does not realize, and that Elia does. To Bridget, the difference between the real present and the ideal past is only a difference in circumstances, which in theory might be changed again. It is Elia who realizes that they, unlike the Mandarin and his lady, are subject to inescapable change.

The description of the china thus serves to create a tension between internal and external, between real and ideal. It also serves to control that tension. Like Coleridge's still and frosty weather, the china provides the point of stasis from which the essay begins and to which it returns. In the monologues, we see the changes which affect the real but not the painted people, and we see also a change in intensity of feeling. Bridget's monologue is quietly regretful, nostalgic. Elia's begins with affectionate amusement (" I could not help smiling ") and gentle common sense (" I am afraid we must put up with the excess . . . . We must ride where we formerly walked: live better and lie softer —and shall be wise to do so ") but then rises in a slow crescendo of feeling:

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> Yet could those days return—could you and I once more walk our thirty miles a-day—could Bannister and Mrs. Bland again be young, and you and I be young to see them—could the good old one-shilling gallery days return—they are dreams, my cousin, now—but could you and I at this moment, instead of this quiet argument by our well-carpeted fire-side, sitting on this luxurious sofa—be once more struggling up those inconvenient stair-cases, pushed about, and squeezed, and elbowed by the poorest rabble of poor gallery scramblers—could once more hear those anxious shrieks of yours—and the delicious *Thank God, we are safe,* which always followed when the topmost stair, conquered, let in the first light of the whole cheerful theatre down beneath us—I know not the fathom line that ever touched a descent so deep as I would be willing to bury more wealth in than Croesus had, or the great Jew R——— is supposed to have, to purchase it.

This is the emotional climax of the essay, the greatest internal motion, almost violence. And with the next sentence, ("And now do just look . . . .") it is deftly turned back into the changeless china with its "*very blue* summer house." The intensity of feeling is transformed into an intensity of color, the movement is frozen. Like Keats' Urn, Lamb's china is 'cold,' yet it can *contain* passion.

The intensity of feeling is also controlled by the tone in which the china is described. In the monologues, Lamb approaches sentimentality. But as he so often does, he avoids sentimentality through ironic humor. And this, it will be noticed, appears not, with one exeception, in the monologues themselves, but in the description of the tea cups, where the ideal is seen as lovely, appealing,—and a little ridiculous. The lady about to plant her "dainty mincing foot" a furlong away in a meadow, the "cow and rabbit couchant, and coextensive," the umbrella "big enough for a bed-tester,"—these make us smile, though these are examples of the freedom of the ideal from those iron laws which in reality give pain. The pain is genuine, but it is not allowed to destroy a sense of proportion.

Finally, the china, the work of art *in* the essay, becomes a symbol for the work of art, the essay, which contains it. As Keats' Urn is not only the subject of the poem, but the poem itself, so here the tea cup is not only the occasion for the essay, but *is* the essay ("likeness is identity on tea cups"). For the aging human beings with their changing thoughts and feelings are also

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fixed in words like the figures fixed in glaze. *In the essay*, Bridget and Elia are also quaint and changeless, "grotesques . . . that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element," free from the "angles of our world." And the work of art, unreal in this, is like the tea cup also real as the thing which exists and continues to exist, the thing to which we can point: "And now do just look. . . ." At the end, it is, so to speak, the tea cup which we hold in our hands, with Bridget and Elia, idealized once more into the Chinese waiter and the chit of a lady, fixed forever in its azure glaze. "So objects show, seen through the lucid atmosphere of fine Cathay."

"Old China" is, I think, Lamb's most perfectly finished essay. But "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" is, if perhaps less perfect, still in many ways equally impressive. Like "Old China," and indeed like so many of Lamb's essays, this again is concerned with past and present, with the passage of time, with the loss of youth and enchantment. And here again we find, though in a somewhat different manner, the fusion of external and internal, of image and thought, of form and content. As the primary subject of "Old China" at first appears to be the monologues describing the "good old days," so the primary subject here at first appears to be the three portraits of the Old Benchers, Thomas Coventry and Samuel Salt, and of Salt's clerk, 'Loval.' But again this material proves to be functionally inseparable from the frame in which it appears, and to be much more important as part of the total experience than when read in isolation.

The objective situation in this case is provided by the description of the Inner Temple in the second paragraph, and it is through this that Lamb leads his reader into the essay. The garden is described not from some remote point of view but as it might actually be seen and experienced. We are taken to it like "a countryman visiting London for the first time," led from the Strand or Fleet Street by "unexpected avenues" into its precincts, shown its squares, its buildings, its gardens, its fountain and sundial. We are again, in other words, introduced to—more involved in—a specific location in which we meet first as concrete objects what will later become the significant shapes of the experience.

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But this description does not only serve to introduce us into the physical situation. It also applies to the experience which will follow as we are led "for the first time" and "by unexpected avenues" into the "ample squares" of Lamb's memory, into the garden of his childhood "where the fountain plays." (Is it too much to be reminded of the garden of Xanadu where a fountain "flung up momently the sacred river"? Or of Eliot's rose garden, where the bird says "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality"?) And it is here too that we are reminded of the passage of time by the "now almost effaced sun dials . . . seeming coevals with the Time which they measured."

Two objects in the garden become of particular importance. The first of these is the fountain "Which I have made to rise and fall, how many times! to the astoundment of the young urchins, my contemporaries, who, not being able to guess at its recondite machinery were almost tempted to hail the wondrous work as magic!" The fountain, of course, is one of the things whose disappearance from his adult world Lamb regrets. But it is more than this. Water is a recurrent image in the essay. The first paragraph begins "I was born, and passed the first seven years of my life, in the Temple. Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountain, its river, I had almost said—for in those young years, what was this king of rivers to me but a stream that watered our pleasant places?" And a little later, he speaks of "the stately stream, which washes the garden-foot with her yet scarcely trade-polluted waters, and seems but just weened from her Twickenham Naiades!" It is, clearly, the life-giving recollections of childhood, "yet scarcely trade polluted" that now water his pleasant places, that gush forth in the garden of his memory. In his adult world, fountains are "fast vanishing . . . dried up, or bricked over." Like his fountain of imaginative and magical memories, they are thought to be of no use in mature and practical affairs: "The fashion, they tell me, is gone by, and these things are esteemed childish. . . . Why must everything smack of man, and mannish? Is Childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and the best some of the child's heart left, to respond to its earliest enchantments?" In the conclusion of the essay, finally, in the adult comment on the magic of childhood, the fountain reappears as a figure of speech. "—in the heart of childhood, there will, for ever, spring up a

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well of innocent or wholesome superstition—the seeds of exaggeration will be busy there, and vital—from everyday forms educing the unknown and the uncommon. In that little Goshen there will be light, when the grown world flounders about in the darkness of sense and materiality." And it is this fountain, of course, which is the source of the essay, this pleasant place, and which the adult artist controls—as, when a child, he made the real fountain "to rise and fall"—to the astoundment of his readers who might be "almost tempted to hail the wonderous work as magic."

The second object is the sun dial. The sun dial is the gauge of time, as important an element in the texture of the essay as the life-giving imagination. But unlike a clock, that "dead thing." that type of modernity and mechanism, "with its ponderous embowelments of lead and brass, its pert or solemn dullness of communication," the sun dial, which gets its "revelations" of time "immediately from heaven" is an "altar-like structure" and communicates through "silent heart-language." It was "the garden god of Christian gardens," the "horologue of the first world." It is, like the sun dial in Marvell's "The Garden," which he quotes, a part of nature, but it is also an almost religious object, something which points beyond nature, "holding correspondence with the fountain of light." Like the garden and the fountain, the sun dial thus operates as an organic symbol. It exists, "almost effaced," in the present, in the world of "man and mannish," but 'seeming coeval with the Time it measures,' it remains both changed and changeless, communicating, like all symbols, through "silent heart-languge." It measures, and participates in, not only the passage of time, but also the passage from altar to utilitarian clock, from imagination to practical reason.

Like the "first world," the Garden of Eden, to which the sun dial, the "primitive clock," seems to belong, the world of childhood is a world of magic and a world of myth, a world filled with objects that mean more than their mere physical appearance. There are the "four little winged boys" which once adorned the Lincoln's Inn fountain, the winged horse over the Inner Temple-hall, and "those frescoes of the Virtues, which Italianized the end of the Paper-buildings—my first hint of allegory." And there are the Old Benchers. For it is to this more than commonplace

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world that they belong. Like the monologues in "Old China," the portraits of the Old Benchers may be read by themselves as mildly witty and appealing reminiscences. But to read them so is much the same as reading a speech from a play without regard to the character who speaks it. From Coventry, "whose person was quadrate, his step massy . . . his gait . . . indivertible from his way as a moving column," and in whom there is something of both the sun dial and the statue, to Loval, that man "of an incorrigible and losing honesty," and to the more briefly mentioned Mingay whose iron hand Lamb "reconciled to my ideas as an emblem of power—somewhat like the horns of Michael Angelo's Moses," these are in their dramatic setting not items of history but figures of enchantment. The Old Benchers may be—they are—"grotesques," like the statues on the fountain, but they are also in their way heroic, or so they seemed and are made to seem. "In those days I saw Gods, as 'old men covered with a mantle'; walking upon the earth." They were, as Lamb concludes, part of "the mythology of the Temple."

If, at the end, we look back again to the opening sentence, "I was born, and passed the first seven years of my life in the Temple," we realize what Lamb has accomplished. For he was born and passed his childhood in the temple of myth as well as the Temple of law, and he has transformed the one into the other, the commonplace into myth before our eyes, leading us by "unexpected avenues" into the "first world." He has not, as might seem to be the case, presented us with rambling reminiscences, but has in fact done what in his last paragraph he talks about: "from every-day forms educing the unknown and the uncommon."

In a famous passage in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth wrote:

> Paradise, and groves
> Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
> Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be
> A history only of departed things,
> Or a mere fiction of what never was?
> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these
> A simple product of the common day.

Lamb, city bred and city lover, does not present us with those

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transcendent visions of Nature which are so common a theme in Romantic poetry. But he produces his Fortunate Fields, nevertheless, in much the same way. For the Romantic poet (this is true, I think, not only of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but sometimes of Keats, Shelley, and even Byron) turns the common world into Fortunate Fields by involving us in a dramatic situation and then making us experience the concrete images of that situation as symbolic or mythic forms. And this is also the method of Lamb's art.

Edmund Blunden has written that in Lamb's early years "there had been signs of his ripening into a masterly and continued accomplishment of verse, and ranking in authority of performance with Coleridge and Wordsworth." [8] That promise was never realized. But when, many years later, he produced the Elia essays, he exhibited an art comparable in kind as well as in quality to what those early poems seemed to promise. Lamb's place in literature is deservedly lower than that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. His was an altogether smaller talent, inferior to theirs in compass and in strength. But he was no mean master of the romantic idiom.

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[8] *Charles Lamb and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 53.

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