Aspects of the Imagination in the Works of Charles Lamb and their relation to some contemporary ideas

Jane Aaron, St. Anne's College, Oxford. D.Phil. thesis. Trinity Term 1980.

The aim of this study is to place the writings of Charles Lamb in the context of his age. His work is assessed in relation to that of his friends and contemporaries, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Hazlitt, in order to ascertain how far he shared their characteristic preoccupations. Because of its central significance in the writings of the early English Romantics, and its problematic role in Lamb's own works, the concept of the imagination is employed as an unifying theme for this investigation.

The introduction summarizes the history of Lamb's reputation, and details in particular the fluctuations in critical opinion on the question of whether or not he can be considered a Romantic. In chapter one, Lamb's early relationship with Coleridge is described and its effects upon his imaginative development analyzed. The second chapter concerns itself with the damnation imagery rife throughout Lamb's work; what he makes of the theme is compared with its use in other contemporary writings. In chapter three, another characteristic subject of Lamb's, the glorification of childhood, is similarly analyzed and considered in the context of his age. The next three chapters deal primarily with Lamb's criticism. Chapter four illustrates his critical grasp and appreciation of the central Romantic concept of the imagination as an enhancer of consciousness. His strictures against the extreme 'egotistical sublime' aspects of Romanticism are detailed in the following chapter, mainly in relation to his criticisms of Wordsworth. His close involvement with another category of imaginative activity, the sympathetic imagination, is described in chapter six, and claims are made for his innovative function in its development. The final chapter relates the earlier findings to the Essays of Elia and concludes that a study of Lamb's writings may help to correct imbalances in the conventional idea of the spirit of the age.

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Abbreviations

Biographia	Biographia Literaria by S.T. Coleridge, ed. J. Shawcross (2 vols., 1907).
C.L.	Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. E.L. Griggs (6 vols., Oxford, 1956-71).
C.L.B.	The Charles Lamb Bulletin, N.S. (references are to part issues rather than to volumes).
C.N.	The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Vols. i-, 1957-).
C.P.	The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. E.H. Coleridge (2 vols., Oxford, 1912).
De Q.W.	The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, ed. David Masson (14 vols., Edinburgh, 1889-90).
E.C.	Essays in Criticism.
E.L.H.	English Literary History.
E.S.	English Studies.
E. & S.	Essays and Studies, Collected for the English Association, N.S.
H.C.R.	Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers, ed. Edith J. Morley (3 vols., 1938).
H.W.	The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe (21 vols., 1930-4).
J.E.G.P.	Journal of English and Germanic Philology.
K.L.	The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1958).
K.P.	The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. H.W. Garrod (2nd edn., Oxford, 1958).
L.L.	The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (Vols. i-, Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1975-).
L.W.	The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb, ed. E.V. Lucas (7 vols., 1903-5).

M.L.Q.	Modern Language Quarterly.
N. & Q.	Notes and Queries.
P.M.L.A.	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.
P.Q.	Philological Quarterly.
Prelude	William Wordsworth: The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire (2nd edn., Oxford, 1959), (1805-6 text).
R.E.L.	Review of English Literature.
R.E.S.	Review of English Studies, N.S.
S.E.L.	Studies in English Literature.
S.R.	Studies in Romanticism.
W.C.	Wordsworth Circle.
W.L.	The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787-1805, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. C.L. Shaver (2nd edn., Oxford, 1967). The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years 1806-1820, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman and A.G. Hill (2nd edn., 2 vols., Oxford, 1969-70). The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years 1821-1850, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (3 vols., Oxford, 1939).
W.P.	The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford 1940-9), vols. ii and iii rev. Helen Darbishire (2nd edn., Oxford, 1952-4).
W.Pr.	The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (3 vols., Oxford, 1974).

Throughout the thesis, the place of publication of works cited is London, unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

The Critical Heritage

In 1975, the Charles Lamb Bulletin marked the bicentenary of Lamb's birth with a special edition which included an article by the American critic George L. Barnett on 'The History of Charles Lamb's Reputation'. In his first paragraph, Barnett confidently declared Lamb's position in the canon of English literature to be securely defined and generally respected. After two hundred years of reading and scholarship, students of literature, according to Barnett, have become finally convinced that Lamb had an important part to play in directing and informing the spirit of his age; as a 'pioneer romantic', he shared the interests and themes of his contemporaries and 'exhibited an innovative importance in prose comparable to that of Wordsworth in poetry'.[1] Although it is true that recent developments in American criticism of the Elia essays substantiate Barnett's assertions, Lamb's reputation in Britain cannot realistically be considered at present healthy and secure. Nor can it be said that his status as a mainstream Romantic has been generally recognized by British critics: the tendency persists either to associate him with the latter half of the eighteenth century, with Johnson or with Sterne, or to see him

1 George L. Barnett, 'The History of Charles Lamb's Reputation', C.L.B., x-xi (1975), 22.

as a pre-Victorian and an influential precursor, for better or for worse, of writers such as Dickens, Browning and the Victorian and Edwardian essayists. There are contradictions and anomalies in the history of Lamb's reputation which have not yet been resolved, and which Barnett, in concentrating upon Lamb's contemporary reviewers, either belittles or ignores. This thesis is intended as a reappraisal of Lamb's position in relation to his age, and as such it necessitates an introductory clarification of the critical heritage of Lamb studies.

A striking characteristic of the heritage is the consistency of its violent internal contradictions. From the first, Lamb evoked extreme reactions; the critics either hate his work or love it, and write more as if they were personal friends or enemies of their subject than his impartial judges. The emotionalism is self-perpetuating: attack is followed by defence, and adulation by scornful dismissal. From the first also, the question of whether or not Lamb could be classified as a Romantic, or as a member of the 'Lake school', as his early reviewers termed it, functioned as an emotional issue, with the critics further differing as to whether the connection was to Lamb's glory or detriment. In 1798, when Lamb's early verse was first reviewed, the fact that his name was linked to those of Coleridge, Southey and Charles Lloyd led to his being attacked in the Anti-Jacobin, and subsequently in the Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine, as a rebel of anarchic

sympathies.[2] Later publications of Lamb were damned by the critics for sharing the same so-called 'perverted taste for simplicity' as the Lyrical Ballads.[3] Lamb's play John Woodvil (1802), for example, was mocked in the Edinburgh Review as a primitive drama, 'the first of those lost links which connect the improvements of Eschylus with the commencement of the art'.[4] In 1818, Lamb's two volume Works was published, and again the verses it contained were dismissed by some of the reviewing journals as imitations of the Lake poets' work. The Monthly Review reported that 'Mr. Lamb is known to be a sort of ex-member of the Lake School' and described the poems as 'the fac-simile of many effusions of Mr. Wordsworth'.[5] A British Critic reviewer also judged Lamb's verses to be 'written after Mr. Wordsworth's fashion ... they have the air of serious, but awkward and unsuccessful imitations of the lyrical ballads'.[6] However, when Leigh Hunt, in his preface to Foliage (1818), categorizes Lamb as a member of the 'new school of poetry' he does so to praise and not to belittle him. According to Hunt, Lamb held an eminent position in

2. See 'The New Morality', Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner, 9 July 1798, p. 286; the poem was reprinted in the Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine, i (August 1798), 115. See also, for further references to Lamb, a second satirical poem, 'The Anarchists: an Ode', Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine, i (September 1798), 366.

3 See [Francis Jeffrey], Edinburgh Review, i (October 1802), 68.

4 [Thomas Brown], Edinburgh Review, ii (April 1803), 91.

5 Monthly Review, xc (November 1819), 254 and 259.

6 British Critic, xi (February 1819), 141.

the new movement: the preface presents Wordsworth as the school's 'most prominent ornament', Coleridge as its 'inner priest', and then continues,

> Between these two for natural powers, and superior to both in what renders wisdom amiable and useful, which is social sentiment, I should place Charles Lamb, a single one of whose speculations upon humanity, unostentatiously scattered about in comments and magazines, is worth all the half-way-house gabbling of critics on the establishment. 7

But not all his contemporaries classified Lamb as a 'Laker'. Wordsworth himself, in fact, in a letter of 1804, had previously altogether denied the existence of such a school, although in so doing he does acknowledge Lamb as one whose name had been associated with the spurious notion.[8] John Wilson, reviewing Lamb's Works in Blackwood's Magazine, accepts the idea of a Lake school but denies membership to Lamb.[9] After the publication of the first volume of Elia essays in 1823, the magazines further emphasized Lamb's individuality as a writer; if anything, his work was now compared to that of eighteenth-century writers. An 1823 review in the British Critic, for example, connects Lamb's name for the first time with that of Sterne, and sees the Elia essays as an improvement upon the techniques of Tristram

7 Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (N.Y. and London, 1956), pp. 129-30.

8 See W.L., i, 433-4, to John Thelwall, mid-January 1804.

9 See [John Wilson], Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, iii (August 1818), 601: 'Before we leave Mr. Lamb's poetry, however, we must remark, that there can be no greater folly than to talk of him as being one of the Lake School of Poets'.

Shandy.[10] Hazlitt's portrait of Lamb in The Spirit of the Age (1824) presented him as one who became successful through deliberate non-alignment of himself with his immediate contemporaries and their concerns:

> Mr. Lamb has succeeded, not by conforming to the Spirit of the Age, but in opposition to it. He does not march boldly along with the crowd, but steals off the pavement to pick his way in the contrary direction. He prefers bye-ways to highways. [11]

Not all of the reviewers of the essays were prepared to grant success to Elia, however. The Monthly Magazine condemned the 'disagreeable quaintness and affectation' of his style and the 'revolting indelicacy' and 'ridiculous puerility' of his subject-matter.[12] Nor was Lamb's next publication, the Album Verses of 1830, greeted with praise. The editor of the Literary Gazette, William Jerdan, attacked the volume with particular vituperation: as well as condemning the verses, he lamented the 'blinding and engrossing' 'conceit' of the author, who had the face to publish such a 'collection of absurdities'.[13] This personalized attack was answered by a warmly personal defence of Lamb by his friends: Robert Southey, for example, published in the Times the poem 'To Charles

10 See British Critic, xx (July 1823), 92.

11 H.W., xi, 178. Cf. [Wilson], art. cit., p. 599: '[Lamb] has small pleasure in following others along the beaten high-road. He diverges into green fields and sunshiny glades'.

12 Monthly Magazine, lv (February 1823), 62-3.

13 [William Jerdan], London Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, 10 July 1830.

Lamb: On the Reviewal of His Album Verse in the Literary Gazette',[14] and Hunt, in the Tatler, printed a series of epigrams lampooning Jerdan and the Gazette.[15] This dispute first made apparent the connection by his critics of Lamb's work with his personal life, a connection later to become an ubiquitous characteristic of Lamb studies. In ostensibly defending the work from Jerdan's attack, Southey, in fact, praises and upholds the man. Lamb is spoken of with affectionate protectiveness, as if he were the beloved child of his friends rather than their adult contemporary. Southey asserts that:

> To us, who have admired and loved thee long,
> It is a proud as well as pleasant thing
> To hear thy good report... 16

As well as being a reaction to Jerdan's assault, his friends' protectiveness was perhaps also the consequence of earlier personal attacks upon Lamb's reputation. William Gifford, who had been the editor of the Anti-Jacobin when Lamb was first castigated in its columns, went on to become editor of the Quarterly Review in 1809. In 1811 the Quarterly described Lamb as insane,[17] and, in 1822, it reported him to be an incurable alcoholic.[18] These two accusations of

14 The Times, 6 August 1830.

15 The Tatler, 4 and 6 September 1830; see also The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt, ed. H.S. Milford (Oxford, 1923), p. 752.

16 Poems of Robert Southey, ed. Maurice H. Fitzgerald (1909), p. 402.

17 See Quarterly Review, vi (1811), 485.

18 See ibid., xxvii (April 1822), 120-1.

insanity and drunkenness were seconded by Thomas Carlyle, who met Lamb twice, in 1824 and 1831. After his second visit Carlyle recorded in his diary:

> Charles Lamb I sincerely believe to be in some considerable degree insane. A more pitiful, ricketty, gasping, staggering, stammering Tomfool I do not know.... Besides, he is now a confirmed, shameless drunkard ... Poor Lamb! Poor England, when such a despicable abortion is named genius! 19

His Reminiscences contain a similar indictment of Lamb's 'diluted insanity'.[20] But very few amongst the many visitors Lamb received after the popularity of the Elia essays had made him relatively famous appear to have found him anything other than congenial. When Walter Savage Landor encountered Lamb a year after Carlyle's last visit, for example, he was charmed and captivated to the highest degree by the whole household.[21] His subsequent correspondence contains extreme praise of Lamb, and he included in a letter to Lady Blessington, 25 April 1835, verses which celebrated his meeting with Elia in most extravagant terms:

> Once, and once only, have I seen thy face,
> Elia! once only has thy tripping tongue
> Run o'er my heart, yet never has been left
> Impression on it stronger or more sweet.
> .....
> Of all that ever wore man's form, tis thee
> I first would spring to at the gate of Heaven. 22

19 Carlyle's diary for 2 November 1831, given in James Anthony Froude, Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life 1795-1835 (1890), ii, 215.

20 See Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle, ed. C.E.Norton (1932),p.65.

21 After the visit, Landor wrote poems to Emma Isola, the Lambs' ward, and to Mary Lamb as well as to Charles. For the poem to Mary, written on the occasion of Charles's death, see The Poetical Works of Walter Savage Landor, ed. Stephen Wheeler (Oxford,1937), ii, 383. For the verses to Emma Isola, see the editor's notes, The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, ed. E.V. Lucas (1935), iii, 343.

22 Poetical Works, ii, 383-4.

In life as well as in his works Lamb appears to have had the knack of getting under the skin of his acquaintance so that he became to them either a blessed idea to be cherished and protected, or a thing of darkness, arousing hatred and contempt more than pity.

The immediate result of Lamb's death in December 1834 was, naturally enough, a proliferation of personal testaments to the sterling worth of his character. Wordsworth's elegy affirmed unequivocally 'O, he was good, if e'er a good Man lived!'[23] Consequently, Lamb's writings came to be appreciated more and more for the light they threw upon an exemplary individual, whose personality was now rapidly being established as one of mythic proportions. The Essays of Elia were, of course, particularly rich feeding-ground for assumptions of autobiographical content. H.N. Coleridge, writing in the Quarterly Review in 1835, for example, insists that the 'Elias''were not merely written by Lamb, - they were and are Lamb, - just the gentle, fantastic, subtle creature himself printed off'.[24] As soon as Lamb's letters began to be published they provided further matter for his admirers and seem quickly to have achieved more popularity than the actual works. The Cornell University Press edition now in the process of publication is the fifteenth on the list of new editions of the letters, while the works have been edited

23 'Written after the Death of Charles Lamb', W.P., iv, 273.
24 [H.N. Coleridge], Quarterly Review, liv (July 1835), 59.

ten times.[25] The immediacy and freshness of Lamb's affectionate tone of voice in the correspondence won for him a substantial following of friends and admirers. The numerous biographies and memoirs of Lamb published throughout the century which followed his death are also evidence of public eagerness to acquire every detail of his life.

One other eminent Victorian apart from Carlyle, however, found cause to quarrel with Lamb. Thomas Macaulay, when ostensibly reviewing Leigh Hunt's edition of The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar for the Edinburgh Review in 1841, wrote sternly against the 'sophistical' and immoral argument of the Elia essay 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century'.[26] In the essay, Lamb presented the Restoration comedies as a 'world of themselves', an 'Utopia of gallantry', which a nineteenth-century audience destroyed by applying to its characters conventional moral tests and judgements.[27] Macaulay protested that the morality of The Country Wife and its like is not that of 'an unreal world, but of a world which is a great deal too real'; 'the immorality is of a sort which never can be out of date, and which all the force of religion, law, and public opinion can but imperfectly restrain'.[28] The levity and irresponsibility

25 See bibliography, pp. 321-2.
26 See The Complete Works of Lord Macaulay (1898), ix, 342-6.
27 L.W., ii, 141-4.
28 Complete Works, ix, 346 and 344-5.

of Lamb's argument appears to Macaulay to indicate a serious flaw in a nature otherwise admirable. In 1848, a British Quarterly review, attributed to George Lewes, defended Elia from Macaulay's reprimand. For Lewes, 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century' illustrates the capacity of Elia's 'guileless' mind to draw out the sting of evil and immorality from indecent material.[29] No attempt is made in this review to take Lamb's argument seriously; his redeeming personal innocence alone is presented as sufficient vindication of his point of view. And, as if in order to give further force to his description of Lamb's virtue, Lewes goes on to provide the first published account of the domestic tragedy which shattered the Lamb household in 1796, when Mary Lamb in a fit of insanity killed her mother. Charles took upon himself all responsibility for the remaining members of the family, and committed himself particularly to care for his sister while she lived, thus procuring her release from permanent incarceration. Lewes sees in this 'suffering, unselfish' embrace of 'the stern austerity of duty' a dearly won self-discipline which gives to Lamb's mind the profundity to strengthen and enlarge those of his readers.[30] Later in 1848, Thomas Noon Talfourd revealed in full the details of Lamb's self-sacrifice in his Final Memorials of Charles Lamb.[31] In the

29 [George Lewes], British Quarterly Review, liv (May 1848), 298.

30 Ibid., p. 307.

31 Final Memorials of Charles Lamb; consisting chiefly of his letters not before published, with sketches of some of his companions , ed. Thomas Noon Talfourd (1848).

face of this unequivocal proof of goodness, the anti-Lamb school of thought was effectively silenced for the rest of the Victorian era, while Lamb's admirers continued to provide an enthusiastic market for yet more biographies. Works such as P.G. Patmore's My Friends and Acquaintance (1854), B.W. Proctor's Charles Lamb: A Memoir (1866), Percy Fitzgerald's Charles Lamb: His Friends, His Haunts and His Books (1866), Alfred Ainger's Charles Lamb (1882) and W. Carew Hazlitt's The Lambs: Their Lives, Their Friends, and Their Correspondence (1897) encouraged the processes of a popular idolatry which now amounted to a secular canonization of 'Saint Charles'.

But not all Victorian commentary on Lamb lacked critical discrimination. Walter Pater's essay 'Charles Lamb', first published in the Fortnightly Review (October 1878) and reprinted in his Appreciations, remains one of the best assessments of Lamb's writings; it introduces for the first time many ideas which were later to form the basis of twentieth-century interpretations. Pater is not afraid to indicate the apparent contradictions in Lamb's work, while at the same time stressing that he was 'one who lived more consistently than most writers among subtle literary theories'.[32] One contradiction liesin the 'modern subjectivity' of Elia and his egotistic 'self-portraiture' as opposed to Lamb's particularly selfless 'loyal, self-forgetful work for others' as a critic.[33] Further, Pater found that in the making of

32 Appreciations, The Works of Walter Pater (1910), v, 106.
33 Ibid., v, 117 and 111.

prose Lamb realized 'the principle of art for its own sake, as completely as Keats in the making of verse', and yet he points out that the essays 'reached an enduring moral effect also, in a sort of boundless sympathy'.[34] But, for all his intricate and subtle appreciation of Lamb's work, Pater remained one with his age in his stress on the importance of never forgetting the life. Following what he considers to be one of Lamb's chief characteristics, his 'habitual apprehension of men's life as a whole - its organic wholeness',[35] Pater insists that Lamb's readers must always keep his domestic tragedy in mind:

> In estimating the humour of Elia, we must no more forget the strong undercurrent of this great misfortune and pity, than one could forget it in his actual story. 36

Few Victorian readers of Lamb could have been capable of forgetting the details of his personal history; the importance of the life was impressed upon them from all sides. Augustine Birrell, for example, in the first series of his Obiter Dicta, refused to accept as an admirer of Lamb any reader not thoroughly acquainted with the life:

> I run no great risk in asserting that, of all English authors, Charles Lamb is the one loved most warmly and emotionally by his admirers, amongst whom I reckon only those who are as familiar with the four volumes of his 'life and letters' as with 'Elia'. 37

34 Appreciations, The Works of Walter Pater, v, 109-10.

35 Ibid., v. 116.

36 Ibid., v, 108.

37 Augustine Birrell, Obiter Dicta (1884), pp. 102-3.

Birrell goes on to compare Lamb with Dr. Johnson, but he does so on the grounds of their mutual humanity and 'obedience to duty' in matters which relate to their lives alone rather than to their works.[38]

The importance of the life was also stressed by Lamb's most vociferous and enthusiastic Victorian idolator, Swinburne; superlatives flow from Swinburne's pen whenever he concerns himself with Lamb. He attempts very little straightforward criticism of his 'best beloved', however, presenting instead a justification for not doing so in terms which would invalidate further critical studies of Lamb altogether:

> No good criticism of Lamb, strictly speaking, can ever be written; because nobody can do justice to his work who does not love it too well to feel himself capable of giving judgment on it. 39

Loving Lamb becomes a moral touchstone for Swinburne: he asserts that 'All men worthy to know him would seem always to have loved him in proportion to their worthiness'.[40] Given the extravagance of such praise, it is surprising that a critical back-lash against Lamb did not commence sooner; perhaps one reason why nothing of the kind occurred was due to the fact that the Victorians were still reading Lamb's own writings intensively, as well as reading eulogiums on him. Agnes Repplier, for example, in her Points of View,

38 Birrell, Obiter Dicta, p. 111.

39. Miscellanies, The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, ed. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, xiv (1926), 281.

40 Ibid., p. 245.

argues against what she sees as a characteristic trend of her age, the introduction of moral lessons into the writing or the appreciation of art, and accuses Swinburne of being one of its worst practitioners. But she refers to Lamb for support for her own argument: he had recognized that 'the natural point of view, as apart from the purely ethical point of view, supplies the proper basis for all imaginative writing'.[41] She quotes effectively from some of Lamb's more obscure works to prove her point. Another ardent Lamb lover, Arthur Symons, found in his favourite author similar enfranchizing qualities. In his Figures of Several Centuries, he praises Lamb as a 'mental gipsy' who saw 'in every orderly section of social life magic possibilities of vagrancy'.[42] At the same time he too assures his readers of the ethical amelioration to be gained from a study of Lamb: 'To read Lamb makes a man more humane' and 'incites to every natural piety'.[43] During the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, the myth of Lamb appears to have functioned to such potent effect because it incorporated in the one figure two apparently disparate ideals of human life, both of which the age found particularly compelling: firstly, the highly honourable allegiance to duty and domestic responsibility of the upright Victorian paterfamilias; secondly, the blithe, childlike freedom of a Never-never land or Wonderland, with its mischievous dodging of the values of

41 Agnes Repplier, Points of View (1893), pp. 117-8.
42 Arthur Symons, Figures of Several Centuries (1916), p. 34.
43 Ibid., p. 29.

a conventional grown-up world.

At any rate, during the first three decades of this century, Lamb's status as 'best beloved' writer went unquestioned in England. His chosen literary form, the essay, achieved particular popularity in these years, too; not only were many volumes of essays produced, but the history and techniques of the form were recorded and analyzed. In these records, Lamb figures as the greatest practitioner of the 'ideal' essay, that is, the familiar essay.[44] His own work is rarely analyzed, however; according to his Edwardian admirers, he 'belongs to a small group of authors for whom we cherish a kindly feeling that precludes any cool, critical estimate'.[45] In his History of English Criticism, George Saintsbury, it is true, dares to hint at some of Lamb's limitations as a critic, but he does so in the mildest and most affectionate of terms, and takes care to establish his own moral worthiness by the preliminary assurance that 'if any be an "Agnist," I more'.[46] But Lamb was defended as a critic, too. E.M.W. Tillyard, in introducing his 1923 edition of Lamb's criticism, presents him as 'among the very greatest critics' for any reader who looks to criticism for 'a more intimate understanding of the

44 See, for example, Hugh Walker, The English Essay and Essayists (1915), pp. 20 and 3: 'The ideal essay seems to imply a certain lightness and ease, and a confidential relation between the author and the reader'; 'Lamb's essays are the best examples in English'. See also W.L. MacDonald, 'Charles Lamb, The Greatest of the Essayists', P.M.L.A., xxxii (1917), pp. 547-72.

45 C.T. Winchester, A Group of English Essayists (N.Y., 1910), p. 76.

46 George Saintsbury, A History of English Criticism: Being the English Chapters of A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 347.

original than would have been possible without its help'.[47] In 1931, Edmund Blunden goes further and asserts that if the proposition he puts forward, that criticism 'is at its finest a secondary poetry', be accepted, then Lamb is 'the chief of critics'.[48] Blunden's contributions dominated the first years of the thirties in Lamb studies: his critical biography Charles Lamb and his Contemporaries (1933) was followed in 1934, the year of the centenary of Lamb's death, by the volume Charles Lamb: His Life recorded by his Contemporaries, which Blunden compiled. The centenary year also saw the publication of two further studies on Lamb, both semi-critical, semi-biographical and largely sentimental, J. Lewis May's Charles Lamb: A Study and A.C. Ward's The Frolic and the Gentle. These four works provided material for the unashamedly fictional biographies which followed them, books such as E. Thornton Cooke's Justly Dear: Charles and Mary Lamb and Neil Bell's So Perish the Roses. Altogether, adulation of Lamb reached its height in the thirties, after a century of affectionate tribute to his merits and appeal.

But in the centenary year itself nemesis descended upon the 'Agnists', and Lamb's reputation received a blow from which, despite George L. Barnett's protestations, it can hardly be said to have recovered. The clamour of his idolaters

47 Lamb's Criticism, ed. E.M.W. Tillyard (Cambridge, 1923), p. viii.

48 Edmund Blunden, Votive Tablets: Studies Chiefly Appreciative of English Authors and Books (1931), pp. 281-2.

brought Lamb to the attention of Scrutiny, and, in the furtherance of its self-imposed duties as the watchdog of literary values, Scrutiny damned him. Denys Thompson, in an article entitled 'Our Debt to Lamb', found the 'extravagant eulogy' accorded to Lamb 'preposterous and so unrelated to fact, that one can hardly take it seriously or find a point to engage controversy'.[49] Instead, he stated his own reactions to Lamb categorically: Lamb's was a 'regressive mind, shrinking from full consciousness'; 'Elia has been a Bad Influence'.[50] According to Thompson, Lamb's work does not require its reader to 're-orientate' himself, and provides no salutary 'shock to self-satisfaction'; consequently, it represents a falling away from the more rigorous eighteenth-century essay which attempted to improve the reader's 'spiritual manners' by disturbing his complacency. That the essay of his own day was a 'profitable channel for vulgarity, "low-brow" propaganda and a studied irresponsibility' Thompson attributes to his contemporaries' debt to Lamb.[51] His article was collected in the volume Determinations, edited by F.R. Leavis and published in 1934; in the same year the first edition of Thompson's Reading and Discrimination appeared. The manner in which Lamb is referred to in this practical criticism guide for schools

49 Denys Thompson, 'Our Debt to Lamb', Determinations, ed. F.R. Leavis (1934), pp. 201-2.

50 Ibid., pp. 204 and 209.

51 Ibid., pp. 203, 206 and 216.

did him in all probability more effective harm than the Scrutiny essay itself. The professed intention of Reading and Discrimination is to train its students to discriminate for themselves between good and bad literature, but, in fact, its commentary on the extracts it supplies, the choice of extracts, and the guidance implicit in the order in which they are placed, make up altogether a didactic and domineering over-view of the texts which it would take an unusually independent-minded student to resist. In the section 'The Essayist - Then and Now', an extract from the Elia essay 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers' is placed between an extract from an Addison Spectator essay and a verbose twentieth-century advertisement. The commentary informs the student or teacher that in the eighteenth century the essay was a medium for serious writers but 'Lamb reduced it to a vehicle for charming whimsies'. The Elia extract is described as 'remarkable for its offensive affectedness, a pseudo-literary style unvitalized by living speech'.[52] Its 'pretentiousness' and 'Bad Influence' have resulted in the 'undesirable' style of the advertisement which follows it, according to Thompson, and he goes on to deplore that Lamb's work should be distributed as 'literature' in schools at all.[53] A revised edition of Reading and Discrimination appeared in 1954 in which the section on Lamb

52 Denys Thompson, Reading and Discrimination (1934), p. 39.
53 Ibid., pp. 40-1.

remained substantially the same as in the 1934 edition,[54] but when a 'New edition, completely rewritten' was published in 1979 it contained no mention of Lamb whatsoever. Thompson's diatribes have had their effect: Lamb is no longer generally taught in schools, and it is exceptional to find his name on university syllabuses. Satisfied, the watchdog desists from worrying its victim further, and leaves him, as it were, for dead.

However, Lamb's few remaining supporters have presented two arguments intended to draw out the sting of Thompson's attack. The first, put forward by Geoffrey Tillotson in 1966, maintains that what Scrutiny was in fact protesting against was not so much Lamb's own work as that of his Edwardian admirers and imitators.[55] Much of 'Our Debt to Lamb' is indeed devoted to disparagements of the works of Thompson's immediate contemporaries rather than of Elia. A.C. Benson is quoted, for example, as self-damningly confessing that 'the point of the essay is not the subject, for any subject will suffice, but the charm of personality. It must concern itself with something "jolly"'.[56] But if there was one Edwardian essayist who caused Lamb to be represented in the worst possible light from the point of view of a rigorous 'new critic' like

54 See Denys Thompson, Reading and Discrimination (rev. ed., 1954), pp. 45-6.

55 See Geoffrey Tillotson, 'The Historical Importance of Certain Essays of Elia', Some British Romantics: A Collection of Essays, ed. James V. Logan, John E. Jordan, and Northrop Frye (Columbus, Ohio, 1966), p. 114.

56 A.C. Benson, The Art of the Essayist, quoted in Thompson, Determinations, p. 211.

Thompson, it was not Benson but Lamb's editor and biographer, E.V. Lucas. The titles alone of Lucas's essay collections are sufficient to reveal him as belonging to the escapist essayists of slippered ease who so repelled Thompson: his works include Domesticities (1900), Loiterer's Harvest (1913), Urbanities (1921), and Pleasure Trove (1935). From their appearance in 1903-5, his edition of the works and his biography have remained the standard texts on Lamb. Although invaluably detailed in the factual information they provide, the life and the notes to the edition are coloured by a partisanship so extreme as to render their subject at times very nearly ridiculous. In the notes, Lamb is gently chided for composing any piece of work which, according to his editor, has an 'unfamiliar' bite to it: the political epigrams of the early 1800s are demurred at, for example.[57] Lucas enthuses over such slight and sentimental pieces as the 1827 poem 'Angel Help', but shakes his head, although with a resigned 'boys will be boys' indulgence, over the 'Nonsense Verses' which Lamb later composed as a parody of 'Angel Help'.[58] The uncollected Elia essay on adultery, 'A Vision of Horns', in so far as it represents, in the editor's words, 'a fantasia on a theme no longer acceptable', also caused some difficulty; Lucas has to incorporate it into the sanctioned canon as a 'whimsical appendix to the Elia essay the "Artificial

57 See L.W., v, 332.
58 See ibid., v, 307 and 341.

Comedy"'before he can bring himself to publish it.[59] And even in his last, 1935 edition, Lucas is still bowdlerizing Lamb's letters: as the new Cornell edition shows, any phrases which might be considered rude were changed or dropped altogether in the 1935 transcripts.[60] One of Lucas's aims as an editor seems to have been to draw Lamb's claws, refine his language, and generally represent him to be as urbane, jolly and unobjectionable an Edwardian gentleman as his editor himself. It is this representation that the Scrutiny article attacks, in so far as it attacks Lamb, as opposed to his imitators, at all.

Freed from the rigours of editorship, Lucas, in his many references to Lamb throughout his essays, abandons himself to fond celebration of his pet. For the centenary year, he collected and published a series of such essays under the title At the Shrine of St. Charles. The volume provides a remarkable illustration of Stuart M. Tave's suggestion, in his evaluation of Lamb's critical heritage, that Lamb's admirers

59 See L.W., i, 492.

60 Cf., for example, Letters, ed. Lucas, i, 250 and L.L., ii, 276: in a letter to Manning, 27? February 1801, Lamb, with relation to his epistolary reprimand from Wordsworth and Coleridge for lacking in appreciation of the Lyrical Ballads, writes 'my back tingles from the northern castigation' according to Lucas, but 'my Arse tickles red from the northern castigation' in Marrs. Cf. also, an earlier letter to Manning, 15 February 1801: 'George skipped about like a scorched pea at the receipt of so much cash' (Letters, ed. Lucas, i, 248) and 'George skipped about like a pea with its arse scorched, at the receipt of so much cash' (L.L., ii, 274). The manuscripts of both these letters are easily available in American libraries, and Lucas in his introduction implies that he had consulted them (Letters, ed. Lucas, i, vi).

and his detractors are in substantial agreement on the qualities of the man, and are disgusted or delighted in response to precisely the same traits.[61] In the essay 'The Evolution of Whimsicality', Lucas defines whimsicality as 'unreluctant egoism'; 'the author's side-long amused canonization of himself' is its most noticeable characteristic.[62] Lamb was the 'chief popularizer' of whimsicality, according to Lucas, and he 'came naturally to his task and fondled and displayed his ego with all the ecstasy of a collector exhibiting bric-à-brac or first editions'.[63] It would be easy to believe that Lucas was here damning his subject; he appears to see Lamb's whimsicality as much more seriously debilitating than, for example, an anti-Elian critic A.R. Orage presented it in his section on 'The Danger of the Whimsical' from 'The Art of Reading'. Orage finds fault with Lamb because he occasionally allowed the whimsical to overcome his natural good judgement, and 'succumbed as easily to a facetious triviality in the midst of a serious essay as to a pun in the midst of a serious conversation'.[64] But this is subdued compared to Lucas's account of Lamb's whimsical gusto. Much closer to Lucas's essay in terminology is a

61 Stuart M. Tave, The English Romantic Poets and Essayists: A Review of Research and Criticism, ed. Carolyn Washburn Houtchens and Lawrence Huston Houtchens (N.Y., 1957), p. 56.

62 E.V. Lucas, At the Shrine of Saint Charles: Stray Papers on Lamb brought together for the Centenary of his Death (1934), p. 40.

63 Ibid., p. 46.

64 A.R. Orage: Selected Essays and Critical Writings, ed. Herbert Read and Denis Saurat (1935), p. 28.

particularly vituperative, personalized attack on Lamb which was in fact provoked by At the Shrine of St. Charles. When he reviewed Lucas's volume, along with Blunden's Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, for the Spectator in March 1935, Graham Greene also hailed Lamb as a master in self-portraiture, but for Greene such a talent constitutes a mastery in deceit. Greene discusses 'the cunning of the pathos, the guile of the sentiment, the deception inherent in the whole portrait of Elia'; 'no one could better disclose the tear by hiding it with a smile'.[65] Like Thompson, Greene is reacting to the sentimental canonization of Lamb, rather than to the man himself, let alone his work. It is primarily the image accorded to Elia by his admirers that he loathes, and would shatter.

In 1957, Thompson's and Greene's attacks were repeated and further disseminated by G.D. Klingopulos in his account of 'The Spirit of the Age in Prose' for the Romantic volume of the Pelican Guide to English Literature. Klingopulos introduces Lamb only to disparage him, and is apparently motivated by the need to make sure that the flames of Lamb's past fame are thoroughly extinguished. He dismisses the work as artificial and lifeless, and the man as 'self-consciously ingratiating' and lacking in integrity.[66] But, here again,

65 Graham Greene, 'Lamb's Testimonials', Spectator, 30 March 1934, pp. 512 and 513.

66 G.D. Klingopulos, 'The Spirit of the Age in Prose', The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Blake to Byron, ed. Boris Ford (1957), pp. 146 and 148.

it is the adulation of Lamb by his earlier eulogizers, rather than Lamb himself, which appears to arouse Klingopulos' disgust most strongly.

The second means, more recently introduced, by which Lamb's supporters have attempted to deflect the blows rained upon him from 1935 on, is through the assertion that Lamb suffered only in consequence of a general disparagement and neglect of the Romantics as a whole.[67] This ground for his defence is not strongly substantiated in British criticisms of Lamb, however. Although it is true that Scrutiny downgraded the Romantics generally, the Thompson essay draws no connection between Lamb and his contemporaries but sees him more in terms of his effect upon his successors than in relation to his age. One European critic of Lamb, moreover, disparaged him in 1956 precisely because he was not sufficiently a Romantic. Mario Praz, in The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, finds in Lamb's work 'an atmosphere of attenuated Romanticism', 'a languid, intimate, bourgeois Romanticism', which anticipates Victorian longeurs.[68] George Watson, in The Literary Critics, similarly represents Lamb as an adherent of Romanticism only 'if it is not too romantic';[69]

67 See, for example, Barnett, 'The History of Charles Lamb's Reputation', p. 32: 'At the time of his centenary, Lamb was suffering from the general anti-Romantic attack of the "new critics"'.

68 Mario Praz, The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, trans. Angus Davidson (1956), pp. 65 and 67.

69 George Watson, The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism (1964), p. 123.

for Watson, Lamb rightly belongs with his predecessors, being essentially a 'Johnsonian critic', only 'partly romanticised by his reverence for Coleridge'.[70]

The few who came to Lamb's defence in Britain in the sixties also depicted him as significantly related either to the eighteenth century or to the Victorians rather than to his contemporaries. Geoffrey Tillotson, in the essay 'The Historical Importance of Certain Essays of Elia', praises Lamb, and would re-establish him as an author worthy of study, because of his influence on such mid-nineteenth-century figures as Dickens and Browning.[71] He argues, for example, that Elia essays like 'A Batchelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People' established the form of the ironic dramatic monologue, later to be refined by Browning in such poems as 'My Last Duchess'.[72] Ian Jack, in his volume English Literature 1815-32 for the Oxford History of English Literature, connects Lamb's name with those of Johnson and Sterne. Lamb's preoccupation with childhood is seen as characteristic of his age,[73] but Jack also finds in his work a 'distrust of the unbridled workings of the imagination that recalls Samuel Johnson',[74] and an important stylistic debt to the author of Tristram Shandy.[75]

70 Watson, The Literary Critics, p. 121.

71 Tillotson, in Some British Romantics, p. 90.

72 Ibid., p. 95.

73 See Ian Jack, English Literature 1815-32, The Oxford History of English Literature, ed. F.P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée, x (Oxford, 1963), p. 289.

74 Ibid., p. 279.

75 Ibid., p. 290.

During the seventies, British scholarship has concentrated more or less exclusively on Lamb's criticism; perhaps the equivocal reputation of Elia is still too embarrassingly alive in the minds of many English academics to allow even his admirers to affirm whole-heartedly the need for complete reincorporation of the Essays into the canon of respectable literature. The latest British work does, however, follow recent American trends in concentrating upon the comparisons to be drawn between Lamb and his Romantic contemporaries. Wayne McKenna in his Charles Lamb and the Theatre, Joan Coldwell in introducing Charles Lamb on Shakespeare and Roy Park in the introduction to his edition of Lamb's criticism, all stress the similarities between the critical ideas of Lamb and those of his age, particularly those of Coleridge and Hazlitt.[76] The new series of the Charles Lamb Bulletin has also furthered Lamb studies very effectively in recent years, but, although a British publication, it appears to be much more easily available in America.[77]

Altogether, since 1935, British criticism of Lamb has been marked by a distinct defensiveness of tone which is, indeed, very difficult to avoid. The essential strength of Lamb's writing does lie in its suggestiveness; his appreciators cannot but intuit the wealth of his contribution before being

76 See Wayne McKenna, Charles Lamb and the Theatre (Gerrards Cross, 1978); Charles Lamb on Shakespeare, ed. Joan Coldwell (Gerrards Cross, 1978); Lamb as Critic, ed. Roy Park (1980).

77 None of the major Oxford libraries subscribes to the C.L.B., for example.

in a position to assess it analytically. When assailed by his detractors, Lamb's admirer may well have nothing to fall back upon but a subjective conviction which is in danger of appearing merely doting protectiveness. On the other hand, if a Lamb supporter takes the offensive, and attempts to force an antagonistic audience to accept his subject's merits, he may of necessity be driven to an over-systematic representation in which Lamb's subtler characteristics are lost. Outside academic circles, it is difficult to gauge the degree of Lamb's appeal to the British public at large. One notable exception to the post-1935 criticism was John Cowper Powys's 1955 essay on Lamb included in his volume Visions and Revisions. With a refreshing disregard for the state of Lamb's reputation, Powys celebrated him as a 'great epicurean philosopher' who could transmit to his readers the miraculous secret of how to live happily through 'transforming the commonplace'.[78] But if other such appreciators of Lamb's qualities still exist in Britain, then they are keeping the secrets they gain from his works well guarded.

Lamb's reputation in America has never undergone the same vacillations from praise to detraction as it has in Britain. He was cordially received from the start, particularly after Talfourd's Final Memorials revealed 'the painfully-exciting

78 John Cowper Powys, Visions and Revisions: A Book of Literary Devotions (1955), p. 86.

cause' of his occasional over-indulgence in drink,[79] and he has since been established as a minor, but respectable, member of the Romantic school. While his Edwardian admirers were busy preparing the ground for his eventual degradation in England, Lamb did, it is true, suffer some disparagement from the pen of one of his American readers, Paul Elmer More. In two volumes from his series of Shelburne Essays, More commented on the 'unsubstantiability' of Lamb's criticism, and, more damagingly, on 'the peculiar evasion of truth that runs through all Lamb's essays'.[80] But his detractions appear to have had little effect on Lamb's standing: later American studies of the essay, such as Marie H. Law's The English Familiar Essay in the Early Nineteenth Century, and Melvin R. Watson's Magazine Serials and the Essay Tradition 1746-1820 see in the Essays of Elia the perfection of the form.[81] Ernest Bernbaum's Guide through the Romantic Movement presented Lamb as a whole-hearted Romantic, and one who in 'his persuasive warning against narrow formalizations of one's conception of human life and character' gave effective expression to one of the movement's most characteristic principles.[82] A volume which appeared in 1957, The English Romantic Poets

79 Knickerbocker, xxxii (September 1848), 258, quoted in Wallace Nethery, Charles Lamb in America to 1848 (Worcester, Mass., 1963). In this book, and in a companion volume, Eliana Americana: Charles Lamb in the United States 1849-1866 (Los Angeles, 1971), Nethery provides a detailed record of Lamb's early reception in America.

80 Paul Elmer More, Shelburne Essays, 2nd series (N.Y., 1905), p. 96; 4th series (N.Y., 1906), p. 165.

81 See Marie H. Law, The English Familiar Essay in the Early Nineteenth Century (Philadelphia, 1934); Melvin R. Watson, Magazine Serials and the Essay Tradition 1746-1820 (Baton Rouge, 1956).

82 Ernest Bernbaum, Guide through the Romantic Movement (N.Y., 2nd ed., 1949), p. 122.

and Essayists: A Review of Research and Criticism, contained a chapter which did much to direct subsequent developments in Lamb studies in America. In concluding his survey of the criticism, Stuart M. Tave suggested that future work should endeavour to ascertain the 'position of Lamb in his own age, as influencer and influenced'; he also found criticism of Lamb deficient in 'close analyses of the compositional elements in his essays'.[83] A number of American scholars have subsequently endeavoured to realize both his suggestions.

In Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia (1964), George L. Barnett provided a detailed account of the influences - primarily early eighteenth-century, according to Barnett - which went to form Lamb's style, and analyzed the manner in which many of the Elia essays evolved from Lamb's personal letters.[84] A year earlier, in 1963, the American periodicals had started to publish the first articles in a sequence of studies analyzing the Essays of Elia as examples of the workings of a characteristically Romantic imagination. Daniel J. Mulcahy's 'Charles Lamb: The Antithetical Manner and the Two Planes' discusses Lamb's dual awareness of the world of experience as divided into two planes, one of mundane reality and the other of the transforming imagination. Mulcahy presents Lamb's excursions on the plane of the imagination as by no means

83 Tave, The English Romantic Poets and Essayists, pp. 66 and 68.
84 See George L. Barnett, Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia (Bloomington, 1964).

escapist but, rather, part of the general Romantic attempt to redeem the triviality of the actual and give to its chaotic transience order and significance.[85] A similar article which appeared in the same year is Richard Haven's 'The Romantic Art of Charles Lamb'. Haven compares the Elia essays to Coleridge's conversation poems and to Keats's odes. Like the Romantic poet, Elia can transform the common world into Fortunate Fields by involving his reader in a dramatic process which creates symbols of eternity from domestic banalities.[86] In 1965, Donald H. Reiman, in an article entitled 'Thematic Unity in Lamb's Familiar Essays', contributed further analyses of Lamb's symbol-creating power to the new trend.[87] A fourth essay, John R. Nabholtz's 'Drama and Rhetoric in Lamb's Essays of the Imagination' which appeared in 1972, discussed 'those Elia essays which dramatize the experience of imaginative liberation'. In such essays, Nabholtz sees the reader as being involved in a dramatic process which dissolves and dissipates his original perspective on experience, and converts him to a more imaginative point of view.[88] Finally, in 1976, in an article published in the Charles Lamb Bulletin, Frank Jordan sees in the Elia essays a profoundly sympathetic imagination at work which marks out their author as essentially

85 Daniel J. Mulcahy, 'Charles Lamb: The Antithetical Imagination and the Two Planes', S.E.L., iii (1963), 517-42.

86 Richard Haven, 'The Romantic Art of Charles Lamb', E.L.H., xxx (1963), 137-146.

87 Donald H. Reiman, 'Thematic Unity in Lamb's Familiar Essays', J.E.G.P., lxiv (1965), 470-8.

88 John R. Nabholtz, 'Drama and Rhetoric in Lamb's Essays of the Imagination', S.E.L., xii (1972), 683-703.

Romantic.[89]

This series of articles led to two full-scale studies of the Romanticism of the Elia essays, Fred V. Randel's The World of Elia: Charles Lamb's Essayistic Romanticism (1975) and Robert D. Frank's Don't Call Me Gentle Charles! (1976).[90] Like the articles which preceded them, both these books achieve their effects through detailed analyses of individual Elia essays. Randel emphasizes the manner in which Lamb, at one and the same time, transformed the traditions of the essay form through Romanticizing it, and yet tempered the extremities of Romanticism through merging it with the techniques and attitudes of the familiar essay tradition. Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!, a more useful study than its title would suggest, takes seven Elia essays and demonstrates the way in which they are shaped and informed by characteristically Romantic themes and devices. Given the uniformity of opinion concerning Lamb manifested in these articles and volumes,it is not so surprising that, for George L. Barnett, Lamb's status as a mainstream Romantic appeared securely established. But in fact this new development, for all the strength of its convictions, concerns itself with only limited aspects of Lamb's work: it does not attempt to deal with any of the writings

89 Frank Jordan, 'More About the Romantic Art of Charles Lamb', C.L.B., xiii (1976), 89-101.

90 Fred V. Randel, The World of Elia: Charles Lamb's Essayistic Romanticism (Point Washington, N.Y., 1975); Robert D. Frank, Don't Call Me Gentle Charles! An Essay on Lamb's Essays of Elia (Corvallis, Or., 1976).

apart from Elia, and is very selective in its choice of essays from that volume.

It is the purpose of this present study to explore further the possibilities of connection between Lamb and his contemporaries. In view of the fact that the Elia essays have been so intensively discussed by recent American publications, the thesis concentrates primarily on Lamb's earlier writings. Much of the early creative work has received no critical treatment whatsoever since its first publication, and the criticism has never been analyzed at length. But the importance of the Elia essays cannot be overlooked, and the final chapter constitutes an attempt to relate the findings of the earlier investigations to the ambivalent figure of Elia. The Romantic preoccupation with the concept of the imagination seems suitable as an unifying theme for the presentation of Lamb in relation to his contemporaries because of its central significance in the writings of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Hazlitt and its problematic role in Lamb's own works.

Chapter One

The Early Years

According to his own testimony, Lamb's imagination was first incited to creative and critical activity by the example and influence of his friend and former school-mate, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. During the winter evenings of 1794-5, the two met frequently at a London tavern, the Salutation and Cat. There Lamb enjoyed 'those old suppers at our old ... Inn, - when life was fresh, and topics exhaustless, - and you first kindled in me, if not the power, yet the love of poetry'.[1] Coleridge, in his youth at least, must have had an extraordinary capacity for inspiring and awakening latent creativity. In 1798, the twenty year old Hazlitt was 'stunned, startled ... as from deep sleep' by his first encounter with the inflammatory conversationalist and preacher, and thereafter considered Coleridge's influence to have been the means whereby his understanding 'did not remain dumb and brutish',but 'found a language to express itself'.[2] For Wordsworth too, Coleridge's acquaintance in the late 1790s proved a vital source of inspiration, as so much of his poetry and prose gratefully acknowledges.[3] That Lamb, with much sensitivity and a natural

1 L.W., v. 2. The passage occurs in the 'Dedication', 'To S.T. Coleridge, Esq.', to the first volume of the 1818 Works of Charles Lamb.

2 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', H.W., xvii, 107.

3 See, for example, Prelude, xiii, 246-68.

tendency towards hero-worship, should have been strongly impressed, is therefore hardly surprising.

Although the potency of Coleridge's influence upon him has not since been doubted,[4] certain of Lamb's critics and biographers and even his close acquaintance, have questioned whether its effect was wholly beneficial. In 1796, John Lamb, for one, attributed to the pernicious after-effects of those heady nights at 'the little smoky room at the Salutation and Cat' his younger brother's mental collapse the subsequent winter. Charles informed Coleridge of his brother's attitude:

> much as he dwelt upon your conversation while you were among us, and delighted to be with you, it has been his fashion ever since to depreciate and cry you down, - you were the cause of my madness - you and your damned foolish sensibility and melancholy - and he lamented with a true brotherly feeling that we ever met ... 5

Charles and his brother did not always concur in their judgements; nevertheless, for all that Lamb obviously reports the damning pronouncement with tongue in cheek, his own account of the onset of his illness does not wholly clear Coleridge of the incrimination. In 1794, both young men had been suffering from recent disappointments in love; Coleridge, not surprisingly, was best able to give satisfactory

4 See, for example, Alfred Ainger, Charles Lamb (1882), p. 13: 'the influence of Coleridge over Lamb ... is one of the most important elements a biographer of Lamb has to take account of'.

5 L.L., i, 78, 10 December 1796.

expression to their mutual loss.[6] Such was Lamb's appreciation of his friend's eloquence that his own grief appears to have been sympathetically absorbed into it, without finding fit and necessary expression of its own.[7] 'In your conversation you had blended so many pleasant fancies, that they cheated me of my grief,' he recalled later. As a result, when Coleridge left London,

> in your absence, the tide of melancholy rushd in again, & did its worst Mischief by overwhelming my Reason. 8

Lamb recovered quickly from that collapse and never had to enter an asylum on his own account again. Yet, if we are to take his word for it, his tendency to rely on Coleridge to provide authoritative endorsements for his own half-thoughts and impressions persisted throughout his life. A few months after Coleridge's death on 25 July 1834, and one month before his own, Lamb recorded in a private album what must be accepted as his sincere assessment, in his bereavement, of the life-long relation between them. He hardly presents it as one of reciprocity and intellectual equality:

> His great and dear spirit haunts me. I cannot think a thought, I cannot make a criticism on men

6 See L.L., i, 18, to Coleridge, 9 June 1796.

7 See ibid., i, 77, to Coleridge, 10 December 1796, for a similar complaint by Lamb in response to Coleridge's attempts to persuade him to write poetry again: 'With regard to my leaving off versifying, you have said so many pretty things ... that you might melt the most un-muse-ical soul, - did you not ... in yourvery epistle, by the many pretty fancies and profusion of heart displayed in it, dissuade and discourage me from attempting anything after you.'

8 Ibid.,i, 18, 9 June 1796.

> or books, without an ineffectual turning and reference to him. He was the proof and touchstone of all my cogitations. He was a Grecian (or in the first form) at Christ's Hospital, where I was a deputy Grecian; and the same subordination and deference to him, I have preserved through a life-long acquaintance. 9

Many of his biographers have taken seriously to heart Lamb's avowal here, and have seen in the promptness with which Lamb's death followed upon his friend's proof of his inability to continue without that support: Lucas, for example, in the standard life, insists that Lamb 'began to die on July 25th'.[10] Thus, blame for the two disintegrations of Lamb's life, one mental, and the second the final physical deterioration, has been laid at Coleridge's door; his personality is understood to have supported the deputy Grecian to such an extent that Lamb could barely tolerate his absence, and collapsed utterly on the permanent withdrawal. And certainly, it must be admitted that throughout his life, whenever Lamb referred to Coleridge, he employed the concepts of dominion or possession to describe his friend's influence over him. Coleridge's poetry affected him powerfully; first his 'Joan of Arc', then the 'Ancient Mariner' Lamb describes as having 'made me feel possess'd'[11] and 'dragged me along'. Of the latter he adds: 'I was totally

9 'The Death of Coleridge', L.W., i, 351.

10 E.V. Lucas, The Life of Charles Lamb (1905), ii, 269. See also John Forster, 'Charles Lamb: His Last Words on Coleridge', New Monthly Magazine, xliii (1835), 198: 'Lamb never fairly recovered the death of Coleridge'.

11 L.L., i, 15, to Coleridge, 8 June 1796.

possessed with it for many days'.[12] He judged Coleridge's power 'of exciting interest, [o]f leading all hearts captive' too 'forcible' to make him a suitable host for Mary after her illness,[13] and, even as late as April 1816, he wrote similarly to Wordsworth of Coleridge's effect upon Mary and himself:

> Tis enough to be within the whiff & wind of his genius, for us not to possess our souls in quiet. 14

These same references also serve, however, to show how Lamb sought to defend himself from any excessive dependency on Coleridge. They reveal his acute awareness of Coleridge's influence over him, and the latter two show him wisely maintaining his equilibrium by denying himself the pleasure of his friend's company when it might dangerously affect his self-possession or Mary's. In fact, during the last half of their lives, Lamb and Coleridge met rarely in person, although Coleridge was then residing permanently in London. What is more, those critics who have examined the relation in detail, and from

12 L.L., i, 266, to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801. See also Lewis M. Schwartz, 'A New Review of Coleridge's "Christabel"', S.R., ix (1970), 115–19, for the transcript of an early review of 'Christabel' in which it is said of the poem that 'it lays irresistible hold of the imagination' (p. 115), and 'seizes on and masters the imagination, from the beginning to the end' (p. 116). Schwartz argues that the review is Lamb's. The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers. Part A: The Lake Poets, ed. Donald H. Reiman (N.Y. and London, 1972), ii, 890–1 reproduces the review and also tentatively attributes it to Lamb.

13 L.L., i, 127, to Coleridge, 28 January 1798.

14 Ibid., iii, 215, 26 April 1816. See also H.C.R., i, 24–5, for Hazlitt on Coleridge's disturbing effect on the Lambs.

a perspective necessarily more detached than Lamb's own, conclude generally that it was one of far greater reciprocity than Lamb's grateful humility would allow. Edith C. Johnson's paper on 'Lamb and Coleridge' illustrates the 'strong and mutual respect' both entertained for each other's minds,[15] and John Beer, writing very recently in the Charles Lamb Bulletin, though he stresses Lamb's discipleship to Coleridge, goes on to suggest that in his adherence to one central Coleridgean concept, that of the 'philosophy of the heart's imagination', the pupil showed a greater consistency and wholeheartedness than his master.[16] Basil Willey, in an earlier Bulletin, also emphasizes the reciprocal relation between what he presents as two different, but complementary minds.[17]

Much of the textual evidence for these critical presentations is taken from the early series of letters sent by Lamb to Coleridge during the years 1796-1798, when his dependency might have been expected to be at its completest. What the one detailed study of these letters aims to show, however, is the extent of Lamb's influence over Coleridge, and not vice versa.[18] George Whalley has even entitled his

15 Edith C. Johnson, 'Lamb and Coleridge', The American Scholar, vi (1937), 153.

16 John Beer, 'Coleridge and Lamb: The Central Themes', C.L.B., xiv (1976), 120.

17 Basil Willey, 'Charles Lamb and S.T. Coleridge', C.L.B., i (1973), 1-9.

18 George Whalley, 'Coleridge's Debt to Charles Lamb', E. & S., xi (1958), 68-85.

essay 'Coleridge's Debt to Charles Lamb', his argument being that after the maturing experience of his mother's death and Mary's illness, Lamb rid himself of his earlier 'painful vulnerability' and dependency upon Coleridge, and began to assert his own critical judgement.[19] He did so to such effect that he refined Coleridge's taste and forced him to renounce that easy rhetorical sentimentality to which, according to Lamb's brother at least, the young Coleridge was indeed inclined. Whalley even proposes that Lamb's compelling suggestions, along with what he rather loosely terms 'other hints and visions', finally brought about the composition of the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan'.[20] George Barnett in his latest volume on Lamb accepts Whalley's suggestions, and concedes that Lamb's criticisms 'may have been influential' in directing the creations of Coleridge's 'annus mirabilis'.[21]

Here is a reversal of roles indeed; but although the effect of these arguments is to make one rightly wary of accepting unequivocally Lamb's assessment of the relation, insufficient evidence prevents Whalley's suggestions from developing beyond the sphere of conjecture. Coleridge's replies to Lamb's letters have been lost; only Lamb's own development in relation to his friend during this period, as he himself records it, can be traced with anything approaching certainty. Although Whalley

19 Whalley, 'Coleridge's Debt to Lamb', p. 77.

20 Ibid., p. 81.

21 George L. Barnett, Charles Lamb (Boston, 1976), pp. 131 and 156 n. 58.

grants so much to Lamb's influence, the focus of his essay is Coleridge's literary career; its scope does not allow him to explore with equal diligence Lamb's evolution. Yet, from the 'day of horrors' onward, this correspondence illustrates a slow process whereby Lamb gradually frees himself, not so much from his admiration for Coleridge, as from the influence over him of certain systems of thought which Coleridge then advocated, and he had at first enthusiastically adopted.

The letters detail the first self-affirmatory and, indeed, self-discovering steps towards the formulation of that familiar Elian personality whose characteristics included the abhorrence of all system-making as arbitrary and exclusive, and who 'learned to shrink from writing down anything that was not as it were part of himself'.[22] But in order to appreciate fully Lamb's developing independence during this period we must first summarize briefly the nature of those systems to which Coleridge sought his adherence.

In 1795, Coleridge subscribed to two very singular systems of thought, one in the field of aesthetics, the other theological. His literary enthusiasms were still engrossed by the slow twilight of the era of sensibility or sentimentality. A fervent youthful admiration for the popular sonneteer, Bowles, had not yet waned, and it led him to make proselytes for his cause with what he later acknowledged in the Biographia Literaria (1817)

22 Percy Fitzgerald, Charles Lamb: His Friends, His Haunts, and His Books (1866), p. 3.

to be 'undisciplined eagerness and impetuous zeal'.[23] Coleridge's enthusiasm stemmed from the conviction that reading Bowles had first 'Wak'd in me Fancy, Love, and Sympathy'. The sonnet to Bowles in which he so maintains continues:

> And when the darker day of life began,
> And I did roam a thought-bewilder'd man!
> Thy kindred Lays an healing solace lent,
> Each lonely pang with dreamy joys combin'd,
> And stole from vain REGRET her scorpion stings. 24

These lines suggest that direct and unabashed escapism constituted the main charm of Bowles's work for the young Coleridge, an escapism of self-indulgent sensation and of evocation of the muses as a soothing drug to distance or obliterate painful realities. To produce such effects was indeed Bowles's intention; his preface to the 1798 edition of Sonnets and Other Poems presents his verses as 'exhibiting occasional reflections which naturally arose in his mind, chiefly during various excursions, undertaken to relieve, at the time, depression of spirits'.[25] Sonnet xxi, for example, stresses the seductive capacities of harmonious mellifluousness to dissolve the anguish of true grief.[26] When Coleridge and Lamb, both 'sore galled with disappointed Hope', met in the Salutation and Cat, it was probably with these sonnets, or with his imitations of them, that Coleridge enchanted and bemused Lamb, with 'many

23 Biographia, i, 9. For the influence upon Coleridge of late eighteenth-century poetry, see also George Dekker, Coleridge and the Literature of Sensibility (1978).

24 C.P., i, 84.

25 William Lisle Bowles, Sonnets and Other Poems (Bath, 1798), p. v.

26 See ibid., p. 28.

an holy lay, that mourning, soothed the mourner on his way'.[27] Lamb was indeed captivated, and proceeded to produce his own Bowlesian sonnets,[28] which Swinburne was later to dismiss as a 'few imitative sentimentalities of his earliest versifying days'.[29]

In theology, Coleridge embraced the then fashionable creed of necessarianism. Consistently enough, the goal of this system of thought was also the disintegration of human anguish in the face of evil or pain. The necessarian optimist taught that suffering and evil were a necessary part of Providence's design, and needs must culminate in good.[30] Coleridge endorsed his commitment to extreme necessarianism when he announced in his 'Lectures on Revealed Religion' of 1795:

> Reasoning strictly and with logical Accuracy I should deny the existence of any Evil, insasmuch as the end determines the nature of the means and I have been able to discover nothing of which the end is not good.

Human pain and suffering are but 'a stimulus to Man in order that he may remove moral Evil'.[31] Such must have been Coleridge's eloquence in presenting this creed to his disciple that Lamb was enthusiastically ready to adopt the system too, as his

27 L.L., i, 18, to Coleridge, 9 June 1796.

28 See, for example, the four sonnets published in Coleridge's 1796 pamphlet, Sonnets from Various Authors, which included verses by Bowles, Southey, Charles Lloyd and Lamb. The Lamb sonnets included were: 'We were two pretty babes' (L.W., v, 8); 'Was it some sweet device' (L.W., v, 3); 'When last I roved' (L.W., v, 7); 'O! I could laugh' (L.W., v, 4).

29 Swinburne, Miscellanies, Complete Works, xiv, 247.

30 See, for example, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed.J.T.Rutt (1817-1832), iii, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity (1818), 507: 'notwithstanding all present unfavourable appearances, whatever is, is right ... even all evils, respecting individuals or societies, any part or the whole of the human race, will terminate in good'. For Lamb's praise of Priestley's doctrine of necessity, see L.L., i, 12, to Coleridge, 31 May 1796.

31 Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion, ed. L. Patton and P.Mann The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, i (1971),105 and 106.

letters reveal:

> I rejoyce in being, speculatively, a necessarian. - Would to God, I were habitually a practical one. Confirm me in the faith of that great & glorious doctrine, & keep me steady in the contemplation of it. 32

This faith had, according to Coleridge, supported Lamb through earlier trials. In December 1794, for instance, his mentor reported approvingly on Lamb's spartan reaction to an early attack of Mary's:

> Her illness preyed a good deal on his Spirits - though he bore it with an apparent equanimity, as beseemed him who like me is a Unitarian Christian and an Advocate for the Automatism of Man. 33

The events of 22 September 1796, however, altered the situation radically: that the long term repercussions of the manner of his mother's death had a detrimental effect upon Lamb's loyalty towards a doctrine so dismissive of human suffering is hardly surprising. As for his allegiance to the sentimental ethos, a closer study than Swinburne's of the imitative poetry he produced does, in fact, reveal that even before September 1796, elements of individuality did manifest themselves in Lamb's work. Traces of an authentic anguish and intensity alien to Bowles's characteristic tone, and at odds with his concept of art as the disperser of cares, tend to find their way into Lamb's earliest verse. He appears occasionally to be attempting to find some poetic expression for a sense of irredeemable loss and personal nullity which

32 L.L., i, 89, to Coleridge, 9 January 1797.
33 C.L., i, 147, to Southey, 29 December 1794.

haunted him at this time, and culminated in the six weeks 'in a madhouse at Hoxton'.[34]

When insane, Lamb, it seems, believed himself to be the fictional character Young Norval, hero of a play popular at that period, John Home's Douglas. Norval, of royal blood but reared as a shepherd, was plagued with ambitions and yearnings beyond his circumscribed station:

> Once on the cold and winter shaded side
> Of a bleak hill, mischance had rooted me,
> Never to thrive, child of another soil...35

The disparity between his surroundings and what Norval considered to be his true destiny prevented him from developing any idea of himself by which to live:

> Clouded and hid, a stranger to myself,
> In low and poor obscurity I liv'd. 36

His striving ambition was to make himself in one way or another renowned so that his existence might be given some substance, and the nobility of his spirit might reveal itself beyond the narrow limits which confined it. Like Norval's, Lamb's ambitions, now awakened by Coleridge, must have seemed endangered and darkened by a limiting existence - in Lamb's case, his labours as a trading-company clerk. Family poverty probably made it difficult for him to contemplate a future

34 L.L., i, 4, to Coleridge, 27 May 1796.

35 John Home, Douglas: A Tragedy (1757), p.59. When restored to his rightful station, Young Norval is known as Douglas.

36 Ibid., p. 64. Lamb's 1796 poem 'The Tomb of Douglas', in which Douglas is lamented as one who 'died without his fame' (L.W., v, 10), further exemplifies his obsession with the character.

time in which he might be freed to devote himself to authorship, even before Mary's dependence on him made such thoughts quite impossible. His consequent depression and sense of personal alienation does make itself felt, at times, in the early verse. But Coleridge, exercising his privilege as mentor over Lamb's work, appears to have found even these very tentative approaches towards an individual voice unacceptable.

In 1794, for example, Lamb supplied the concluding lines for a sonnet of Coleridge's which lamented the passing of 'pleasant days of Hope'. Lamb's lines read originally, at least in Coleridge's transcription of them in a letter to Southey,

> Availeth not Persuasion's sweetest Tone
> To lure the fleet-wing'd Travellers back again -
> On on they haste to everlasting Night,
> Nor can a Giant's arm arrest them in their Flight! 37

Lamb here wishes to stress a despair at the total and unequivocal loss of the past which Coleridge appeared to have considered inappropriate to the general mellifluousness of the whole. When he published the sonnet in 1796 under the title 'The Gentle Look', he retained the first two of Lamb's lines but altered the concluding couplet to read:

> Yet fair, though faint, their images shall gleam
> Like the bright Rainbow on a willowy stream. 38

Similarly, Coleridge seems to have been disturbed by the last lines

37 C.L., i, 136, 11 December 1794.
38 C.P., i, 48.

of one of Lamb's own 1794 sonnets. Lamb portrays himself as aboard ship in a state of wild despair which the elements aggravate

> Even till it seemed a pleasant thing to die, -
> To be resolv'd into th'elemental wave,
> Or take my portion with the winds that rave. 39

The mere suggestion of such drastic and irrevocable self-destruction was sufficiently contrary to the diffused and vapory melancholia of a Bowlesian mood for Coleridge to reject these lines. When he published the poem in Sonnets from Various Authors (1796), he inserted in their place a more palliative conclusion:

> How Reason Reel'd! What gloomy transports rose!
> Till the rude dashings rock'd them to repose. 40

But such radical alteration of his meaning did goad the docile disciple. In refusing to grant these lines his approbation, Lamb exclaims with some heat:

> 'How reason reeld' & . - are good lines but must spoil the whole with me, who know it is only a fiction of yours & that the rude dashings did in fact not rock me to repose.

His indignation reveals the sonnets' authenticity, and he stresses that he saw them as representing a sincere anguish:

> I love my sonnets because they are the reflected images of my own feelings at different times ... I charge you, Col. spare my ewe lambs... 41

39 L.W., v, 4.

40 See the editor's notes, ibid., v, 280.

41 L.L., i, 20, 9 June 1796.

Suggestions of an intense personal anguish are perhaps only to be expected in works written just before and just after a period of mental breakdown. There is another element foreign to Bowlesian sentiment in Lamb's work at this period, however, to which Coleridge likewise objected. This second strain seems to have no direct association with Lamb's situation at the time; its originality stems more from habits of mind which made up a persistent aspect of Lamb's personality throughout his life. Coleridge feared that the blank verse fragment Lamb composed in 1796, 'The Grandame', was too homely and mundane; he objected particularly to its presentation of religious aspects. Lamb wrote in defence of the portrayal:

> You may think I have not kept enough apart
> the ideas of her heavenly and her earthly master
> but recollect I have designedly given in to her
> own way of feeling... 42

In his attempts to convey the quiet steadiness of the old woman's existence, he had indeed stressed the easy connection between her mortal and her spiritual life. Her church, for example, is hardly to be differentiated from the simple secular dwellings which surround it:

> the house of prayer, a modest roof,
> And not distinguish'd from its neighbour-barn,
> Save by a slender-tapering length of spire... 43

His concern is two-fold: to portray the woman's life according to the way in which she herself experienced it, and to convey

42 L.L., i, 30, to Coleridge, 13 June 1796.
43 L.W., v, 5.

a strong impression of the homely intermingling of that life of secular and religious duties. The poem reveals a more palpable compassion for the realities of day-to-day living than might be expected from a disciple of Bowles, and a view of religion less metaphysical and mystical than that likely from a Coleridgean.

Another of Lamb's 1796 poems, 'The Sabbath Bells', explores a similar idea. A 'contemplant, solitary man / Whom thoughts abstruse or high have chanced to lure / Forth from the walks of men' is wandering, in the accustomed Bowlesian manner, through a country landscape. Lamb's contemplative, however, cannot remain fully content with the lofty abstractions of abstruser musings: 'thought-sick and tired ... the lonely man / Half wishes for society again'. He is soon granted a release from the excesses of dangerous isolation:

> Him, thus engaged, the sabbath bells salute
> Sudden! his heart awakes, his ears drink in
> The cheering music; his relenting soul
> Yearns after all the joys of social life,
> And softens with the love of human kind. 44

The state of mind to which the wanderer is restored by the parish bells has little in connection with religious metaphysical thought or personal mystical experience. It represents, rather,

44 L.W., v, 9. Coleridge must have approved of the closing lines of 'The Sabbath Bells', at least, for the conclusion of his poem 'Fears in Solitude' (April 1798) owes much to them. 'Fears in Solitude' exhorts men in the grip of war to 'make yourself pure' through the recollection of the 'Sabbath bells' (C.P., i, 260). But the poem reverses the significance of Lamb's concluding lines in its own conclusion: the poet of 'Fears in Solitude' is 'grateful, that by nature's quietness / And solitary musings, all my heart / Is softened, and made worthy to indulge / Love, and the thoughts that yearn for human kind' (C.P., i, 263).

a reassociation of himself with the solidarity and security of a human community, whose religious life provides an anchorage for the humility, simplicity and loving-kindness uniting it. And Lamb's yearning at this period for assurance of the continuing reality of untroubled, unselfconscious communal life is exemplified also in one of the few sonnets of the period devoted to a subject other than that of his forlorn romance. In 'We were two pretty babes', he asks of Innocence:

> Beloved, who shall tell me where thou art -
> In what delicious Eden to be found -
> That I may seek thee the wide world around? 45

He commented further in a letter to Coleridge: 'To men whose hearts are not quite deadened by their commerce with the world, Innocence (no longer familiar) becomes an awful idea.'[46] This, it seems, was a sense of loss more real than the loss of romantic love; perhaps much of the poignancy the latter had for Lamb was due to its connection in his mind with the loss of an innocent Eden.

As they stand, Lamb's juvenilia suggest that he could not fit himself quite as completely to Coleridge's ideology as his affections led him to believe he could, and should. He was not yet sufficiently in control of his craft, however, to realize that the Bowlesian sonnet genre was in fact distorting his emotion, and hindering its true expression. But

45 L.W., v. 8.
46 L.L., i, 22, 10 June 1796.

the shock of his mother's death, and its consequence, greatly accelerated Lamb's development towards self-awareness and creative independence, and had an immediate effect upon his career as a poet.

At the close of that letter by which Coleridge was first informed of the events of 22 September 1796, Lamb announced his decision to abandon poetry. In the light of the fearful responsibilities then thrust upon him 'the idle trade of versifying' seemed a petty distraction. The banality of the verse which he had hitherto been encouraged to write probably accentuated his tendency to regard with suspicion any lingering poetical frame of mind, as if he feared the spuriousness of the emotions it might provoke.[47] In December, he reiterates his decision to have done with verse-making on his own account, though he assures Coleridge that he does not therefore 'relish other people's poetry less'.[48] But, now that a grim reality had taught him to suspect the artificiality of his own past output, Lamb could not but look a little more critically at his friend's. He had occasionally criticized Coleridge's earlier poetry for lack of strenuousness; now his comments became more assiduous and compelling in their insistence upon the iniquity of spurious poetic feeling, and the virtue of simplicity in style and sincerity in content. Convinced of the need to 'Cultivate simplicity... for simplicity

47 See L.L., i, 44, to Coleridge, 27 September 1796: Lamb abandons poetic composition because 'with me the former things are passed away, and I have something more to do that [sic.] to feel'.

48 Ibid., i, 72, 5 December 1796.

springs spontaneous from the heart', he dismissed certain Coleridgean passages with curt assurance: 'I hate made-dishes at the muses' banquet'.[49]

Nor were Lamb's expostulations wasted on one who held bad writing to be the result of bad feeling. In December 1796, Coleridge confesses to John Thelwall that his poetry 'frequently both in thought & language deviates from "nature & simplicity"'.[50] A month later, in two consecutive letters to his publisher, Joseph Cottle, he acknowledges Lamb's influence directly, and even announces that he thought Lamb's 'taste & judgment ... more correct & philosophical than my own'.[51] In later years Coleridge became one of the most influential critics to analyze and denounce the excessive egotism and bad faith to which the epoch of sensibility was liable. No doubt his former allegiance to the creed added the harshness of personal shame to his recoil from it. At any rate, in Aids to Reflection (1825), he denounces the whole school as positively anti-Christian:

> All the evil achieved by Hobbes ... will appear inconsiderable if it be compared with the mischief effected and occasioned by the sentimental Philosophy of STERNE, and his numerous Imitators ... Can anything manly, I say, proceed from those, who for Law and Light

49 L.L., i, 60 and 102, 8 November 1796 and 13 February 1797.

50 C.L., i, 278, 17 December 1796.

51 Ibid., i, 297 and 309, 6 and 10 February 1797. For further accounts of Lamb's effect on Coleridge during this period, see Whalley, 'Coleridge's Debt to Charles Lamb', pp. 68-85, and Mary Jacobus, Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798 (Oxford, 1976), pp. 72-3 and 84-5.

> would substitute shapeless feelings, sentiments, impulses, which as far as they differ from the vital workings in the brute animals owe the difference to their former connexion with the proper Virtues of Humanity...52

In 1798, however, Lamb himself, with the composition of his sentimental novel Rosamund Gray, became one of Sterne's numerous imitators. For Lamb's apostasy from sensibility was not in any sense absolute in 1796. If anything, his grief, loss and confusion made him for a period more in need of emotional release than ever, and although that same sharp grief showed him the ultimate uselessness of such ploys, the themes explored in the writing of Rosamund Gray do apparently constitute an attempt at exorcism of his anguish through the morbid medium of the sentimental novel. But though the telling of the tale may well have brought Lamb a measure of release, it did not serve to halt his growing distaste for the genre. For towards its close, marked signs of dissent levelled against the conventionalities of the sentimental, and even attacks upon its most favoured emotional citadels, are apparent within the novel itself. After the catastrophic end of Allan Clare's courtship of Rosamund,[53] three of the novel's remaining characters dedicate themselves to lives of selfless service. Both the elder sister, Elinor Clare, and the narrator of the tale affirm that they can

52 S.T. Coleridge, Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character, on the several grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion (1825), pp. 53-5.

53 See L.W., i, 21-3: Rosamund is raped by Matravis; as a result she dies, and so does her blind grandmother. Lamb took the name of his villain from Edward II's gaoler in Marlowe's play - Matrevis, whose heart was 'hewne from the Caucasus'. See The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1973), ii, 91.

only tolerate their continuing existence if it is to be of some worth to others,[54] and Allan Clare has found in tending the inmates of hospitals and 'lazar houses' '<u>privileges</u>, for which he was content to live'.[55] The widened experience of human life gained by Clare in the performance of these duties enables him to express judgement upon his previous existence, and indeed upon the ethos of the sentimental novel in general:

> Between two persons of liberal education, like opinions, and common feelings, oftentimes subsists a Vanity of Sentiment, which disposes each to look upon the other as the only being in the universe worthy of friendship, or capable of understanding it ... when the odds are, that under every green hill, and in every crowded street, people of equal worth are to be found, who do more good in their generation, and make less noise in the doing of it. 56

Possibly, there was some connection in Lamb's mind between this dismissal of sentimental friendships and a 1798 quarrel with Coleridge over the latter's treatment of his former protégé and Lamb's new friend, Charles Lloyd.[57] At any rate, in the October of that year, Lamb was writing similarly to Lloyd's brother, Robert, of the selfishness and narcissism inherent in specific friendships. He adds:

> Our duties are to do good expecting nothing again, to bear with contrary dispositions ... not to crave

54 See <u>L.W.</u>, i, 15 and 27.

55 Ibid., i, 29.

56 Ibid.

57 See <u>C.L.</u>, i, 357-8, to Joseph Cottle, c.20 November 1797, for an account of the 'Nehemiah Higginbottom' parodies, the probable cause of the quarrel. For Lloyd's revenge, see Charles Lloyd, <u>Edmund Oliver</u> (Bristol, 1798).

> and long after a communication of sentiment and feeling, but rather to avoid dwelling upon those feelings, however good, because they are our own - a man may be intemperate & selfish, who indulges in <u>good feelings</u>, for the mere pleasure they give him. 58

His excessive dependence on Coleridge had passed and left behind it a residue of distaste toward such emotionally intense relationships; he tells Robert, 'You must depend upon yourself'. His enthusiasm for the sentimental ethos and for the cultivation of feeling for feeling's sake had slowly withered in the face of a most real and grievous cause for actual anguish. Fears of personal nullity, 'the painfulness of vacuity, all its achings & inexpressible longings', were to be eased not by the desperate effort to establish sentimental friendships and emotional communication, but rather, Lamb now thought, by the mundane domestic ties of duty and responsibility. These he presented to Lloyd as the only reliable 'object' of existence, and advised him to discipline his mind 'to wait with patience for duties, that may be your lot in life'.[59]

The few verse fragments Lamb did compose after 1796 cannot be considered as exceptions to his veto on sentimental poetry; concerned largely with his domestic trials they were intended 'to keep present to my mind a view of things which I ought to indulge', an aim which, as Lamb himself acknowledged, was

58 <u>L.L.</u>, i, 135, 13 or 23 August 1798.
59 Ibid., i, 134, early to mid-August 1798.

hardly likely to heighten their purely aesthetic appeal.[60] Taken in conjunction with his advice to Lloyd, Lamb's writing during this period is evidence of 'stamina of seriousness'[61] so unalloyed by frivolity that the ironies and sustaining humour of the Elia essays seem far distant. Yet the context of Lamb's final epistolary reference to Bowles serves to redress the balance. Robert Lloyd, who seemed, in 1798, to turn to Lamb with an emotional need equivalent to that which had led Lamb earlier to rely heavily upon his 1796 correspondence with Coleridge, has again written to bemoan the fact that the world to him seemed 'drain'd of all its sweets!' After the mischievous suggestion that 'At first I had hoped you only meant to insinuate the high price of Sugar!', a comment obviously intended to persuade the young man not to take his despondency too seriously, Lamb continues:

> You may extract honey from every thing; do not go a gathering after gall - . the bees are wiser in their generation than the race of sonnet writers & complainers, Bowless & Charlotte Smiths, & all that tribe, who can see no joys but what are past, and fill peoples' heads with notions of the Unsatisfying nature of Earthly comforts - . I assure you I find this world a very pretty place. 62

In view of Lamb's self-acknowledged temptation throughout a much troubled life to see 'no joys but what are past', that

60 See L.L., i, 87, to Coleridge, 10 January 1797.

61 See ibid., ii, 11, to Walter Wilson, 14 August 1801.

62 Ibid., i, 144, 13 November 1798.

he should be able to present such advice at this stage illustrates the extent of mature and balanced perception already achieved. The note thus struck is markedly anticipatory of the gently solacing closes of many of the milder Elian essays, with their effect of leaving the reader more at home in the human condition. Sentimental melancholia and self-willed and indulgent alienation might remain potential temptations, but for Lamb there was no longer anything honourable or aesthetically commendable in their practice.

Lamb's development away from Coleridge's theological doctrines, however, traced a more winding path than his apostasy of Bowlesian sentimentality. The situation was complicated by Coleridge's own response to the 'day of horrors'. In accordance with his necessarian convictions of the usefulness of pain, Coleridge bestowed upon the stricken Lamb the sancity of a man of sorrows, a chosen scape-goat:

> I look upon you as a man called by sorrow and anguish and a strange desolation of hopes into quietness, and a soul set apart and made peculiar to God! 63

Not even the young Coleridge, however, could for long welcome as disguised grace the tragedy that struck the Lamb family, or so at least Kathleen Coburn gathered from her attempts to date his notebook entries. A typically necessarian pronouncement

63 C.L., i, 239, 28 September 1796.

reads:

> Real Pain can alone cure of us of imaginary ills! We feel a thousand miseries till we are lucky enough to feel Misery ... 64

Kathleen Coburn remarks:

> It seems doubtful whether this entry ... could have been written after Coleridge knew about Lamb's domestic tragedy...

And when a little later Coleridge abruptly records seeing

> Our quaint metaphysical opinions in an hour of anguish like playthings by the bedside of a child deadly sick 65

his editor assigns the entry to late September or early October 1796, perhaps partly on the assumption that Coleridge's volte-face was the consequence of Lamb's tragedy. Coleridge is understood to indicate that his vicarious experience through Lamb of acute but innocent suffering had indeed shaken the basis of his necessarian confidence. Although it did not prevent him from exhorting Lamb at the time to consider the tragedy as an opportunity for moral rearmament, it did afford him a glimpse of the horror and reality of pain, undreamt of in his philosophy. Not much later, in 1801, Coleridge renounced completely the doctrine of necessarian-ism.[66]

As for Lamb himself, he admitted in replying to Coleridge

64 C.N., i, 28.
65 Ibid., i, 182.
66 See C.L., ii, 706, to Thomas Poole, 16 March 1801.

that his initial reaction to the tragedy had not been solely religious. He phrases his account with care:

> is it folly or sin in me to say that it was a religious principle that most supported me? I allow much to other favorable circumstances. I felt that I had something else to do than to regret... 67

In other words, he was not immediately struck down by the horror and desolation of his situation, but found in his immediate responsibilities a solace to his confusion and a release from that spiritual isolation with which Coleridge had envisaged him burdened. And when Mary began to recover, Lamb's relief was such that with the returning hope for their eventual happy life together, he felt positively joyous. But Coleridge's letter had the effect of returning him forcibly to the profundities of his situation:

> I was in danger of making myself too happy; your letter brought me back to a view of things I had entertained from the beginning ... I must be serious, circumspect, & deeply religious thro' lif[e;] & by such means may both of us escape madness in the future if it so pleases the Almighty. 68

During the next few months the tone of Lamb's letters is characterized by repeated pleas for Coleridge's spiritual support; the intensity of his need appears to be the consequence of an uncertainty in adopting the saintly role. As far as Coleridge was concerned, sacrifice and sainthood were apparent

67 L.L., i, 47, 3 October 1796.
68 Ibid., i, 51.

in Lamb's care of his sister, but Lamb himself, as his letters reveal, saw his loyalty to Mary as based purely upon a natural, abiding affection. He refused to regard her as in any way changed, or removed from him, by her temporary attack. The most assured happiness of his previous existence had been her company, and his attempt to regain it was quite untinctured by any sense of the virtue of his behaviour.[69] Coleridge's letter had the effect not of rendering his sainthood tangible to him but of convincing Lamb that supernatural powers had laid a particular burden upon him; as he assured Coleridge, he accepted at the time the necessity this appeared to lay upon him to maintain strictly religious habits of mind, without regression into despondency or carelessness.[70] But to aid him in that endeavour, Lamb found himself yearning more for the comfort of human assistance than for divine support. He complained to Coleridge of the dearth in his circumstances of '"a choice of company, as tends to keep up that right bent, & firmness of mind"',[71] and admits, in January 1798, that

> I want more religion - . I am jealous of human helps & leaning-places.... a careless and a dissolute spirit has advanced upon me with large strides. 72

His natural inclination is to turn toward human support to

69 See L.L., i, 50 and 52, to Coleridge, 3 and 17 October 1796.

70 See ibid., i, 66, to Coleridge, 1 December 1796.

71 Ibid., i, 88, 9 January 1797. Lamb quotes from the 'Dedication' to Priestley's A Free Discussion of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price, and Dr. Priestley (1782).

72 L.L., i, 126-7, 28 January 1798.

weather through his despondency.

Lamb's stress upon the benefits of human companionship is consonant with another aspect of his growing inability to accept Coleridge unquestioningly as a religious guide during this period. In his first consolatory letter, Coleridge had offended both Charles and his sister by his easy assumption of human participation in the divine. Lamb answers:

> You seem to me to have been straining your comparing faculties to bring together things infinitely distant and unlike; the feeble narrow-sphered operations of the human intellect and the everywhere diffused mind of Deity... 73

Man, Lamb insists, is 'a weak and ignorant being, "servile" from his birth "to all the skiey influences", with eyes sometimes open to discern the right path, but a head generally too dizzy to pursue it'.[74] The human stands in relation to its God as a child to its parents, and can never himself partake of divinity. One consequence of Lamb's commitment to this view may have been his religious uncertainty in later life. Developing independence and maturity of mind could not but endanger so determinedly child-like a faith. If no human capability, not even the most spiritually exalted, could be regarded as a means by which to approximate to the divine, then, as the 'child' matured, his divine parent, in so far as he could hardly, like the human parent, come to be seen by the developing individual as human like himself, became a more and more shadowy

73 L.L., i, 56, 28 October 1796.
74 Ibid., i, 54, 24 October 1796.

concept. His existence was not refuted, but simply lost all practical meaning.[75]

But whatever the future effects of Lamb's belief, its consequence at this period was to make him recoil with much suspicion from any believer who sought to set himself above his fellows by claiming for himself divine powers or particular spiritual approbation. Lamb could no more approve of the saintly pretensions of others than he could tolerate the concept of himself as a saint. An excellent example of this developing characteristic is his account of the disillusionment he suffered in attempting to embrace the Quaker faith. His dislike of any preaching had awakened his sympathy for Quakerism, but at one meeting he attended he

> unluckily ... saw a man under all the agitations and workings of a fanatic, who believed himself under the influence of some 'inevitable presence.' This cured me of Quakerism; I love it in the books of Penn and Woolman, but I detest the vanity of a man thinking he speaks by the Spirit, when what he says an ordinary man might say without all that quaking and trembling. 76

Lamb's abhorrence of all separatism through pride, and especially of religious separatism, was pronounced throughout his life. It found poetic expression at this early period in

75 Cf. René Fréchet, 'Lamb's "Artificial Comedy"', R.E.L., v (1964), 32: '[Lamb] seemed to decide that religion was too abstract a thing for him, and that God was so far above man that it sounded like presumption or cant to speak about Him seriously.'

76 L.L., i, 103, 13 February 1797. See also Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 193, to Bernard Barton, 5 December 1828: 'I have ever said that the Quakers are the only Professors of Christianity as I read it in the Evangiles; I say Professors - marry, as to practice, with their gaudy hot types and poetical vanities - they are much at one with the sinful.'

the closing lines of 'Composed at Midnight', probably written in 1797 and one of the last of his blank verse confessional pieces. Here Lamb castigates those poets or 'prose declaimers' who have fabricated for themselves a beatific vision of the after-life, but have 'o'er stockd hell with devils' for their less worthy fellows. The poet complacently pictures himself elevated into a 'heaven of gold',

> far removed
> From damned spirits, and the torturing cries
> Of men, his breth'ren, fashioned of the earth,
> As he was, nourish'd with the self-same bread,
> Belike his kindred or companions once -
> Through everlasting ages now divorced,
> In chains and savage torments to repent
> Short years of folly on earth. Their groans unheard
> In heav'n, the saint nor pity feels, nor care,
> For those thus sentenced - pity might disturb
> The delicate sense and most divine repose
> Of spirits angelical. 77

The satire of these last lines is echoed in the 'Theses Quaedam Theologicae' which brought to a close the sequence of Lamb's early correspondence with Coleridge, and marked their quarrel over Coleridge's supposed negligence of Charles Lloyd. Lamb, responding to Coleridge's invitation 'poor Lamb, if he wants any knowledge he may apply to me',[78] requests information regarding the angelic attributes, as opposed to those of their merely human counterparts. The 'angels', Coleridge's presumed ideals, he envisages as heavenly analogies to those arrogant and separatist metaphysicians and poets

77 L.W., v, 24-5.
78 See the editor's notes, L.L., i, 130.

attacked in 'Composed at Midnight'. Lamb asks whether they only 'manifest their virtues by the way of vision & theory', practice being a 'sub-celestial & merely human virtue'. He wonders whether they do not sometimes sneer, and whether they have the capacity to love. The letter is signed, with some irony now,

> Your friend and docile Pupil to instruct
> Charles Lamb 79

But the rift, such as it was, was not of long duration, thanks largely to Coleridge's wise and affectionate recognition of its cause. He wrote openly to Lamb giving his assessment of the situation:

> Both you & Lloyd became acquainted with me at a season when your minds were far from being in a composed or natural state & you clothed my image with a suit of notions & feelings which could belong to nothing human. You are restored to comparative saneness, & are merely wondering what is become of the Coleridge with whom you were so passionately in love. 80

But however more moderate Lamb's opinion of his friend had become by 1798, Coleridge still retained the ability to inspire his creative potential. Barnett suggests that Rosamund Gray and Lamb's play John Woodvil (1798-1802) were

79 L.L., i, 128-9. The 'Theses' appear to be parodies of works such as the Forty Questions of the Soul, concerning its Original, Essence, Substance, Nature or Quality, and Property, what it is, from Eternity to Eternity. Framed by a Lover of the Great Mysteries Doctor Balthasar Walter, and Answered in the Year, 1620 by Jacob Behme called Teutonicus Philosophus. Englished by John Sparrow (1665). The work includes such enquiries as 'question 34: Of the miserable and horrible condition of the damned Souls' (p. 4). For Boehme's influence on Coleridge, see below, pp. 243-4.

80 C.L., i, 405, early May 1798.

the products of renewed enthusiasm inspired by visiting Coleridge in 1797.[81] And certainly Lamb himself recorded in a letter to Thomas Manning that it was Coleridge who encouraged him in 1800 to compose the pastiche of Burton, his first published prose.[82] For all his failings, Coleridge retained through life for Lamb an aura of that charismatic near-divinity they had both recognized and criticised in 1798; he remained 'an Arch angel a little damaged', his face with its 'ancient glory'.[83]

But the close dependency had passed; Lamb had found an individual voice through the development of a faith of his own, consistent though never systematized, and based on the primary need for compassionate and inclusive bonds with one's kind, and on art as a means of extending and maintaining such ties. In order to preserve these contacts, and, indeed, to be true to the realities of his situation, the artist cannot afford to regard himself as in any way elevated above the mass of humanity through his creative gifts. He too is 'servile' to 'all the skiey influences' and is ignorant, like a child, of any certain solution to the painful mysteries of consciousness and of life. As the next chapter will show, Lamb lamented the fact that his domestic tragedy caused him to be regarded as alien and suspect by neighbours and acquaintances; much of

81 Barnett, Charles Lamb, p. 47.
82 L.L., i, 189-90, 17 March 1800.
83 Ibid., iii, 215, to Wordsworth, 26 April 1816.

his literary output from this period on attempts to persuade his readers to extend the boundaries of their tolerance and to accept the outcast and isolated back into social fellowship. Yet Lamb's life-long devotion to Coleridge, and his appreciation of Coleridge's contributions to literature and the life of the mind, involved him closely and intimately with the more visionary aspects of his age, and with the idea of the poet as a figure necessarily set apart from 'the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd'.[84] As one who could be at once an admirer and a mocker of Coleridge, Lamb was in a position to develop an equivalent paradoxical duality in his response to the Romantic imagination generally.

84 'Dejection: an Ode', C.P., i, 365.

Chapter Two

The Damned

On August 6 1800 Lamb wrote to Coleridge to expostulate against the publication of 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison', with its blatant and to his mind offensive references to the virtues of 'My gentle-hearted Charles':

> For God's sake (I never was more serious), don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print ... It did well enough five years ago when I came to see you, and was moral coxcomb enough at the time you wrote the lines, to feed upon such epithets; but, besides that, the meaning of gentle is equivocal at best, and almost always means poor-spirited, the very quality of gentleness is abhorrent to such vile trumpetings. My sentiment is long since vanished. I hope my virtues have done sucking. I can scarce think but you have meant it in joke. I hope you did, for I should be ashamed to think that you could think to gratify me by such praise, fit only to be a cordial to some green-sick sonneteer. 1

The protest reveals Lamb's sense of how far he had developed away from the old Salutation and Cat days: he has weaned himself from reliance upon Coleridge's praise and approval, and is no longer burdened with the artificial yearning sentiment of the 'green-sick sonneteer'. On the whole, his critics and biographers agree that in this emergence from under the distorting shadow of the young Coleridge's influence Lamb's original personality,

1 L.L., i, 217-8. For evidence that Lamb maintained this stance consistently and applied it to others as well as to himself, see Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 101, to Mrs. Basil Montagu, Summer 1827: 'Monuments, to goodness, even after death, are equivocal.... Goodness blows no trumpet, nor desires to have it blown.'

and the early traces of 'Elia', first made themselves apparent.[2] The tragedy which struck the Lamb family in 1796 functioned as a catalyst in this process, and quickened Lamb's development to maturity and self-reliance.[3]

One biographer of Lamb takes an opposite view of his development, however. F.V. Morley in Lamb Before Elia saw the family tragedy as an event which, while it strengthened Lamb as a man, weakened him as an imaginative writer. Morley argues that Lamb took his own mental collapse very lightly,[4] but that Mary's illness provoked a very different reaction:

> He was now for the first time terrified of madness; and he was now for the first time conscious of responsibility, and aware that he was rising to it, and in a way exalted by that knowledge. 5

It is the first, more negative, response that Morley emphasizes as the key to Lamb's later writings: the dread of insanity resulted in a withdrawal from speculative thought as potentially dangerous. Lamb's assumption of family responsibility was beneficial, on the other hand, because

> [t]he exaltation of self-sacrifice which accompanied it seems to have been the best thing possible for his health. Lamb's withdrawal from the world becomes a main theme from this point. His change of mood was violent, and may perhaps be held to have interrupted his intellectual growth. Lamb's distaste for thinking

2 See Jack, English Literature 1815-32, p. 281.

3 See above, pp. 50-65.

4 F.V. Morley, Lamb Before Elia (1932), p. 130.

5 Ibid., p. 137.

> becomes apparent from now on. But intelligence and health are not synonymous, and so far as peace of mind was concerned the rush of feeling did not threaten so much as stabilize it. 6

This curious passage, in which 'intelligence' and 'health' seem to be considered as antonymous rather than 'not synonymous', introduces Morley's theory that, from the 'day of horrors' on, Lamb sought to escape through self-indulgent eccentricity and whimsical detachment from any direct cognizance of his situation. He renounced seriousness in all relations with others[7] and in his writing,[8] and assumed a self-dramatized persona or mask, which resulted eventually in the development of the Elia character. The original personality of the 'real' Lamb, hiding behind the laughing mask, becomes more withdrawn and 'more silent as hope is lost'.[9] For all that Edith C. Johnson took up the cudgels in defence of the authenticity of Elia in her book Lamb Always Elia (1935),[10] Morley's notions have had some influence. For example, an unpublished thesis on Lamb's career as a poet accuses Lamb in similar terms of having attempted, after his mother's death, 'to absolve himself from any emotional tension, a vigorous wrestling with which could alone have given [his poems] greater depth'.[11] This withdrawal is considered to be due to his fear of the

6 Morley, Lamb Before Elia, p. 146.

7 See ibid., pp. 191-2.

8 See ibid., p. 233.

9 Ibid., p. 215.

10 Edith C. Johnson, Lamb Always Elia (1935). See also, Mario Praz, reviewing Letters, ed. Lucas, E.S., xviii (1936), 19: from a perspective far less sympathetic to Lamb than Johnson's, Praz also disparages Lamb Before Elia.

11 W.C. Chau, 'The Poetical Career of Charles Lamb' (University of Oxford, unpublished B.Litt. thesis, presented 1969), p. 137.

imagination, and to constitute a 'backing away from an over-involvement in fancy leading to insanity'.[12]

However, the thesis does not succeed in presenting a convincing case for the originality of the very meagre writings produced by Lamb before the blow fell. Morley, too, acknowledges Lamb's early dependence upon Coleridge and its unfortunate effects upon his first verses,[13] and has very little to say on the specific merits of the pre-1796 fragments. What Lamb Before Elia concentrates upon is the damaged personality which developed as a consequence of the family tragedy. Morley's arguments are based upon two assumptions, both of which concern the development of Lamb's imagination from 1796 on. The first is that a fear of possible madness curbed Lamb's exercise of his own imaginative powers; the second, that he sought to escape from the restrictions and miseries of his domestic lot through indulging in nostalgic fantasies of the lost simplicities of childhood. Both these suggestions have been endorsed by critical studies which regard Lamb's work from a perspective very different from Morley's. Daniel Mulcahy, in analysing such Elia essays as 'The Old Margate Hoy', found in Lamb a fear of the possible excesses of the imagination, and Ian Jack has indicated Lamb's Johnsonian distrust of unchecked imaginative power.[14] As to Morley's second argument, a recent

12 Chau, 'The Poetical Career of Charles Lamb', p. 87.

13 Morley, Lamb Before Elia, p. 122.

14 Mulcahy, 'Charles Lamb: The Antithetical Manner and the Two Planes', S.E.L., iii, 528-9; Jack, English Literature 1815-32, p. 279.

critical essay by James Scoggins, 'Images of Eden in the Essays of Elia', stresses Lamb's preoccupation with the loss of childhood and his attempt to regain that state through the reconstruction of his personal past, and through his appreciation of the writings of a simpler, more innocent age.[15] Such approaches are of necessary concern to any present-day assessment of Lamb's work: subsequent chapters of this thesis discuss their significance. However, before moving on to consider the long-term consequences of the family tragedy for Lamb's literary output, its more immediate impact upon his imagination needs first to be explored. Approaches such as those of Morley and Scoggins assume that Lamb, for the rest of his life, was struggling to maintain an equilibrium threatened not simply by the tangible calamity, but by a perpetually encroaching mental state of horror and morbidity which the tragedy instigated. If this were indeed the case, images and motifs relating to such a pressing concern might be expected to occur throughout his work from this period on: this chapter is devoted to the pursuit and exploration of such themes in Lamb's writing, and their relation to trends at work in the larger context of Romanticism.

One aspect of Lamb's reaction to his mother's death was considered earlier, in the first chapter, in accounting for his refusal to regard '[m]y poor dear dearest sister' as being in any way changed or distanced from him through her

15 James Scoggins,'Images of Eden in the Essays of Elia', J.E.G.P., lxxi (1972), 200-1.

action as 'the unhappy & unconscious instrument of the Almighty's judjments [sic.] to our house'.[16] Lamb's letters to Coleridge at this time make it clear that the thunderclap shock of insane slaughter did indeed, as Morley assures us, have a salutary and strengthening effect upon his own mental constitution,

forcing it to come together in a moment in the face of this overwhelming reality. He accepted gladly complete responsibility for his remaining relations, his older brother, John, having now, with a selfishness which Lamb, in writing to Coleridge, does his best to mitigate and excuse, distanced himself from the apparently shipwrecked family.[17] Charles's most pressing concern in thus assuming control was to ensure that Mary should not be consigned to a public hospital, but be maintained privately, and join him as soon as their ailing father's death made that outcome possible. In forming and persevering with such a plan he was compelled to withstand and cross his father's and his brother's wishes, as well as the indictments of general public opinion. His letters show him to be acutely aware of the opprobrium and suspicion which Mary's rehabilitation in society, and with her family, would incite,[18] but nevertheless he exults in the opportunity to continue to enjoy Mary's company, and to manifest the extent of his affection for her. Another of his twentieth-century biographers has seen Lamb's

16 L.L., i, 47, to Coleridge, 3 October 1796.
17 See ibid., i, 48.
18 See ibid., i, 66, to Coleridge, 1 December 1796.

great, but hitherto unactivated, gratitude to his sister as his inspiration at this time: Flora Masson, in describing Lamb's reaction, connects it with 'the mighty debt of love' he had previously feared he could never repay his sister.[19] Lamb had expressed his strong sense of obligation in a sonnet written to Mary during his 1795 sojourn in a mad house:

> Thou to me didst ever shew
> Kindest affection; and would oft-times lend
> An ear to the desponding love-sick lay,
> Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay
> But ill the mighty debt of love I owe,
> Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend. 20

This opportunity to express his gratitude with an energy and forcefulness quite beyond Mary's expectations,[21] and in response to her dire need, must have seemed in part to Lamb a liberating enhancement of the little brother's role.

In his 1934 attack upon Lamb and his admirers, Graham Greene dismissed all claims to the extra-ordinariness of the young Lamb's behaviour towards his sister:

> Lamb's friends seem sometimes to regard suffering as in itself a virtue, and his protection of his sister as a major sacrifice, but no man of normal affection could have done less ... 22

By protecting his sister, however, Lamb was not simply offering a home to an afflicted relative: he was throwing in his lot

19 Flora Masson, Charles Lamb (1913), p. 24.

20 L.W., v, 8.

21 See L.L., i, 49, to Coleridge, 1 October 1796, for Mary's first assumptions of Charles's reaction: Charles writes of Mary, 'Poor thing, they say she was but the other morning saying, she knew she must go to Bethlem for life; that one of her brother's would have it so, but the other would wish it Not, but he obliged to go with the stream'.

22 Greene, 'Lamb's Testimonials', Spectator, p. 512.

with one who caused the death of his mother. His action, therefore, in one sense goes against the grain of 'normal affection'; it is the result of an enforced choice between opposing loyalties. He leaves father and mother, and cleaves to his sister; the bond so formed needs must be intensified under the pressure of circumstance to a pitch of unusually close identification. In after years Lamb, to save his sister pain, rarely referred in writing or in conversation to their mother.[23] In 1796, not all his immediate grief for the dead prevented his recognition of how cruelly her mother's habitual lack of affection and sympathy for Mary oppressed the daughter's spirits and hastened her mental collapse.[24] Coleridge, in giving an account of the mother's death to a correspondent, describes his 'dearest Friend', Charles, as a 'Brother, whose soul is almost wrapped up in' his sister.[25] The phrase suggests a union of a very different nature from that envisaged by Greene, in which the brother offers but his 'protection', as to one irrevocably afflicted and diminished. Lamb, on the contrary, could not consider his sister to be in any way personally tainted or changed by a deed for which he did not hold her responsible. After the event, he writes to Coleridge in terms which make it clear that he saw Mary as one who was left to suffer the consequences of an act of which she herself

23 See Lucas, Life, i, 123.
24 See L.L., i, 52.
25 C.L., i, 267, to Benjamin Flower, 11 December 1796.

was entirely innocent. He was confident that she would face such a fate with courage and dignity:

> I understand her throughly; & if I mistake not in the most trying situation that a human being can be found in, she will be found (I speak not with sufficient humility, I fear, but humanly & foolishly speaking) she will be found, I trust, uniformly great & amiable... 26

It is one thing, however, to accept that for Charles Mary remained the same patient and wise older sister after her illness as before it, but quite another to believe that he was anything but deluded, or wilfully self-deceived, in the assumption. It is in such obstinate blindness, as they conceive it, that critics such as Morley and Greene discover the seeds of his regression. Eye-witnesses less partial than a brother, however, have testified to Mary's gentleness and to her strength. Wordsworth, for example, in his elegy on Lamb, describes her as 'the meek, / The self-restraining, and the ever-kind'.[27] Thomas Noon Talfourd in his Final Memorials of Charles Lamb records both his own admiration and esteem of her character and Hazlitt's recommendation of her good sense. Mary, alone of all her sex, becomes the exception that proves the misogynist's rule:

> Hazlitt used to say, that he never met with a woman who could reason, and had met with only one thoroughly reasonable - the sole exception being Mary Lamb. 28

Nor is proof of Mary Lamb's worth limited to the

26 L.L., i, 50, 3 October 1796.
27 'Written After the Death of Charles Lamb', W.P., iv, 275.
28 Talfourd, Final Memorials, p. 227.

testimonials of others: her own writing gives direct evidence of her abilities. 'Thorough reasonableness', along with a sympathetic concern for the affairs of her correspondents, is the predominant tone of all her extant letters.[29] Of her other work, the 1815 essay, 'On Needle-Work', for all its innocuous title, concerns itself with the problematic issues of female employment in general, and of female aptitude for occupations conventionally pursued only by men. Ostensibly the purpose of the essay is to beg of affluent wives no longer to take money out of the mouths of their needy sisters by needle-work '<u>done at home</u>'. No other lucrative labour apart from needle-work is available to the unmarried woman whose parents' income 'does not very much exceed the moderate', not because she lacks the capacity for acquiring new skills or the robustness for furthering them, but because she has never been in any way trained or prepared for such tasks. The essay argues that the male of the species, were he in the same position, could fare no better:

> Even where boys have gone through a laborious education, superinducing habits of steady attention, accompanied with the entire conviction that the business which they learn is to be the source of their future distinction, may it not be affirmed that the persevering industry required to accomplish this desirable end causes many a hard struggle in the minds of young men, even of the most hopeful disposition? What then must be the disadvantages under which a very young woman is placed who is required to learn a trade, from which she can

29 See, for example, on her relation with her brother, <u>L.L.</u>, ii, 220, to Sarah Stoddart, 14 March 1806.

> never expect to reap any profit, but at the expence of losing that place in society, to the possession of which she may reasonably look forward, inasmuch as it is by far the most common lot, namely, the condition of a happy English wife? 30

Nor is 'the condition of a happy English wife'allowed to pass as an idyllic lot: earlier in the essay the tedium and frustration of 'feminine duties (that generic term for all our business)' have been feelingly delineated:

> I believe it is every woman's opinion that the condition of men is far superior to her own.
>
> 'They can do what they like,' we say. Do not these words generally mean, they have time to seek out whatever amusements suit their tastes? We dare not tell them we have no time to do this; for, if they should ask in what manner we dispose of our time, we should blush to enter upon a detail of the minutiae which compose the sum of a woman's daily employment. Nay, many a lady who allows not herself one quarter of an hour's positive leisure during her waking hours, considers her own husband as the most industrious of men, if he steadily pursue his occupation till the hour of dinner, and will be perpetually lamenting her own idleness.
>
> Real business and real leisure make up the portions of men's time - two sources of happiness which we certainly partake of in a very inferior degree. 31

Nevertheless, the author's stance in the essay as a whole prevents one from interpreting in an ironic light her reference to 'the happy English wife'. Although she argues that only their conditioning stops women from sharing in the occupations of men, and that as a result of this deprivation

30 L.W., i, 179.

31 Ibid., i, 177. For a critical appreciation of Mary's feminism, see Katherine Anthony, The Lambs: A Study of Pre-Victorian England (1948), pp. 158-172. Anthony detects in 'On Needle-Work' the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and acclaims the essay as a 'manifesto' of the women's movement (p. 171).

they suffer both materially and in terms of thwarted potential, yet Mary Lamb would not have the status quo essentially changed. On the contrary she asks her reader

> to contribute all the assistance in her power to those of her own sex who may need it, in the employments they at present occupy, rather than to force them into situations now filled wholly by men. 32

Similarly, her happy English husband 'expects, and justly expects' that his helpmate should 'soften and sweeten' his existence.[33] No arguments sustain these reversals: they are interjected abruptly and baldly into the passionately protesting body of the text, in a manner reminiscent of Elizabeth Gaskell's 'double-think' on the rights and wrongs of class warfare in Mary Barton.[34] But whereas in Mrs. Gaskell's case close observation and imaginative sympathy, rather than personal experience, provide the materials for protest, for Mary the ills of which she tells, and those, indeed, of which she does not tell, were her own, as a self-supporting spinster of the lower middle-class. She refrains from describing in 'On Needle-Work' the conditions of life of the needle-woman who must earn her livelihood through her craft. Her own labours as a mantua-maker caused her so much destructive anguish of mind and health,[35] that she may well have felt that

32 L.W., i, 179.

33 Ibid., i, 177.

34 See Mary Barton, The Works of Mrs. Gaskell, The Knutsford Edition (1906), p. 24. The suffering of the working class during an industrial recession is described convincingly, and contrasted to the continuing affluence of the masters, only to be abruptly retracted by authorial intervention.

35 See the account of Elizabeth Lamb's death in Morning Chronicle, 26 September 1796, for the attribution of Mary's derangement to 'the harassing fatigues of too much business'. See the editor's notes, L.L., i, 45.

to touch upon such a theme would be to shatter the ostensible purpose of her plea completely. For if her affluent female audience had been enlightened as to the position of those who earned their living by the needle they might well have preferred to force the penurious of their sex into competition for the clerical occupations of men than to perpetuate through their commissions the sweat-shop trade.

The diarist Henry Crabb Robinson, a close acquaintance of the Lambs, reported that in composing 'On Needle-Work' Mary underwent 'great fatigue': writing was to her 'a most painful occupation'.[36] That it should be so cannot be surprising: to feel and to communicate so vividly the underlying iniquities of a system, as well as its more blatant injustices, and yet to forbear from formulating such grievances effectively, acquiescing,rather, with the preconceived habits of society - such a confusion and a self-confounding was no doubt painful to confront and to attempt to order. As in the case of Mrs. Gaskell's novel, the thoroughly reasonable tone of the essay and its lack of bitterness may in part have furthered the cause for which it pleads by not antagonizing or alienating its more reactionary readers, but this effect was produced at the expense of an enforced ambivalence between the ills perceived, and in Mary's case experienced, and the conclusions drawn. Mary, like Charles, had imbibed from her parents the ethos of service: when Lamb portrays his father as Lovel in the Elia essay 'The

36 H.C.R., i, 156, entry for 11 December 1814.

Old Benchers of the Inner Temple' he attributes to him, in relation to his erring 'betters', a comparable example of ingrained 'double-think', in which the father at any rate clearly took pride.[37] What ironies and subtle subversions of the conventional code Lamb employed to maintain his own equilibrium will later be explored; in Mary's case her very being became expressive of the conflict. Her 'sweet reasonableness'[38] and patient self-restraint were shattered at yearly intervals throughout her life from 1796 onwards by violent fits of insanity.[39]

The close bond between brother and sister necessarily entailed that Charles was intimately involved in the recurring anguish of the onset of each illness. In their letters both Charles and Mary record the misery of their interaction at such times. A letter to Dorothy Wordsworth, for example, written by Charles while Mary was absent from him at the time of her 1805 attack, tells of their previous agitation:

> when she begins to discover symptoms of approaching illness, it is not easy to say what is best to do. Being by ourselves is bad, & going out is bad. I get so irritable & wretched with fear, that I constantly hasten on the disorder. You cannot conceive the misery of such a foresight. 40

After such a period of acute stress leading up to the inevitable

37 L.W., ii, 87-8, and see below, pp. 254-5.

38 See Herbert Paul, Stray Leaves (1906), p. 231, for an account of 'the haunting demon which always lurked behind the sweet reasonableness of Mary Lamb.'

39 See C.L., ii, 941, to his wife, 4 April 1803, for a vivid account of the onset of one such attack.

40 L.L., ii, 169, 14 June 1805.

confinement Lamb's state when he was finally left alone was one of profound depression. On the occasion of Mary's 1800 confinement a letter of his to Coleridge expressed his state of mind at its lowest:

> My heart is quite sunk, and I dont know where to look for relief -. Mary will get better again, but her constantly being liable to such relapses is dreadful ... I am completely shipwreck'd. - My head is quite bad.... I almost wish that Mary were dead..41

This concluding admission has been seized upon with apparent relief by some of Lamb's critics who see in it healthy signs of Charles's detachment from his sister and indeed of his hatred for her. R.A. Foakes, in a recent article, uses it as evidence of 'the element of hatred' in Lamb 'for one who, through her fits of madness' was 'such a clog to him'.[42] As for F.V. Morley, he would maintain it inhuman of Lamb were he not to hate his sister:

> Did not Lamb sometimes hate Mary? Surely he would have been inhuman if he did not. She frightened him, and fear means hate. 43

The actual details of Lamb's treatment of Mary, and his epistolary references to her, do not, however, support such an assumption. His behaviour towards her became, if anything, more devoted with the passage of years. From 1830 on, Mary's state deteriorated gravely, and Lamb felt it necessary

41 L.L., i, 202-3, 12 May 1800.

42 R.A. Foakes, 'The Authentic Voice: Lamb and the Familiar Letter', C.L.B., ix (1975), 4.

43 Morley, Lamb Before Elia, p. 249.

to save her the fatigue of constant removals to and from the private homes in which she was nursed by himself moving to live with her permanently in such an establishment. He explains the situation to Wordsworth in a letter of May 1833. Wordsworth's communication of his sister Dorothy's illness has clearly made it easier for Lamb to confide the details of his own situation in response, with an abandonment of his customary reserve on his domestic plight:

> Your letter, save in what respects your dear Sister's health, chear'd me in my new solitude. Mary is ill again. Her illnesses encroach yearly. The last was three months, followed by two of depression most dreadful. I look back upon her earlier attacks with longing. Nice little durations of six weeks or so, followed by complete restoration - shocking as they were to me then. In short, half her life she is dead to me, and the other half is made anxious with fears and lookings forward to the next shock. With such prospects, it seem'd to me necessary that she should no longer live with me, and be fluttered with continual removals so I am come to live with her, at a Mr. Walden's and his wife, who take in patients, and have arranged to lodge and board us only ... I see little of her; alas! I too often hear her. Sunt lachrymae rerum - and you and I must bear it. 44

Mary's state has worsened to a degree beyond the sphere of any sibling 'protection', but Lamb continues to share her company in so far as he can. Her recovery from each successive attack could still mark for them both a joyful return to their accustomed contentment, as one joint letter of theirs, written on 30 July 1833, to Edward and Emma Moxon records. This letter also hints at Lamb's own condition during Mary's periods of insanity, when, deprived of her support, he found in alcohol a comfort

44 Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 370-1, end of May, 1833.

difficult to resist. But at her recovery he announces his decision to turn over a sober new leaf, with confidence and with joy.[45] Such evidence reinforces his claim throughout his earlier letters that Mary was his 'daily & hourly prop', that without her 'I totter and stagger with weakness, for nobody can supply her place to me';[46] '[a]ll my strength is gone, and I am like a [fool, bere]ft of her cooperation'.[47] So strong was his hold on the idea of their dual existence that on the few occasions when he was ostensibly free to enjoy a brief vacation from his domestic responsibilities he felt that 'there is something of dishonesty in any pleasures I take without her'.[48] His word is 'dishonesty' rather than disloyalty: Mary is a part of himself which it would be dishonest to deny, rather than a relation to whom he offers loyal protection.

But if this close bond supported him, it also cut him off from other more conventional human ties. In July 1819 the actress Fanny Kelly refused his offer of marriage on the grounds of Mary's condition, as she confided to her sister:

> I could not give my assent to a proposal which would bring me into that atmosphere of sad mental uncertainty which surrounds his domestic life. 49

Throughout their life together, Charles, like Mary, was also deprived of more general social support: it was not Mary's

45 Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 380-2.
46 L.L., i, 203-4, to Manning, 17 May 1800.
47 Ibid., ii, 169, to Dorothy Wordsworth, 14 June 1805.
48 Ibid., i, 215, to Coleridge, 28 July 1800.
49 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 256.

illness alone and in itself which oppressed them but the public reaction to it. In the May 1800 letter to Coleridge quoted above, after giving the details of Mary's relapse, Lamb continues:

> nor is it the least of our Evils, that her case & all our story is so well known around us. We are in a manner marked. 50

The shadow which bound the two by closer ties than those customary to sibling relationships also estranged them from their fellows. To curious and superstitious observers, both seemed tainted by the guilt of matricide and the horror of insanity, Mary through her actions, and her brother through his having insisted on her release from permanent confinement and having taken upon himself the responsibility of her reinstatement in the normal social world. He too felt himself included in the shrinking distaste, or stronger repugnance, with which she was beheld. Indeed, he deliberately stressed his inclusion in her disgrace, both in his words and his actions; when he went to live with Mary in her last 'home' at Edmonton, for example, he was locally regarded, as he must have known he would be, as insane himself.[51] Both the Lambs hated moving house, for the fatigue of removal generally resulted in one of Mary's relapses, but the suspicion and opprobrium of neighbours when their story became known often

50 L.L., i, 202.

51 See H.F. Cox, 'Charles Lamb at Edmonton', The Globe (1875), given in Lucas, Life, ii, 253, on the recollections of a schoolmistress neighbour of the Lambs: 'The reputation of insanity attaches, in the schoolmistress's mind, to the brother as well as the sister.'

enforced such a move.[52]

To a nature as yearningly convivial as Lamb's own, the knowledge of their outcast position must have been a continual torment. It is not surprising that at this time he became engrossed with images of curious damnation, of men singled out from amongst their fellows to bear solitary disgrace, and exiled from the Eden of normal human companionship to a weary existence of self-dependence and ostracism. His early non-critical prose pieces are often strongly coloured by macabre presentations of such doom. In the 1810 essay 'On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged', a man so 'marked' who was reprieved and cut down, describes his present loneliness and concludes:

> somehow or other, there is a want of strong virtue in mankind. We have plenty of the softer instincts, but the heroic character is gone. How else can I account for it, that of all my numerous acquaintance, among whom I had the honour of ranking sundry persons of education, talents, and worth, scarcely here and there one or two could be found, who had the courage to associate with a man that had been hanged. 53

Here the blame for such loneliness is placed squarely where it belongs: on the shoulders of cowardly acquaintance guilty of such cruel and irrational dread. But more frequently in the damnation imagery which is rife throughout Lamb's prose and letters the oppressive guilt is self-referred. Lamb's tone is often flippant, but the note of doom perpetually recurs.

52 Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 373, to Sarah Hazlitt, 31 May 1833: 'I am driven from house and home by Mary's illness'. On the danger to Mary's mental balance of house-moving, see Randall Norris's letter to the Misses Norris, 6 August 1823, as transcribed in E.V. Lucas, Lemon Verbena (1932), p. 36.

53 L.W., i, 58.

An August 1800 letter, for example, in which he repeats his expostulations against Coleridge for 'your Satire upon me' in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', gives as another reason for the unsuitability of the term 'My gentle-hearted Charles' his irredeemable fall from grace:

> I shall certainly come to be damned at last. I have been getting drunk two days running. I find my moral sense in the last stages of a consumption, my religion burning as blue and faint as the tops of evening bricks. Hell gapes, and the Devils great guts cry "cupboard" for me. 54

Lamb's involvement with play-writing and theatrical performance during this period but added fuel, unfortunately, to his hell-fire flames. 'We are damned!' he wrote to Thomas Manning on 15 December 1800, referring to the discouraging reception of William Godwin's first play Antonio, for which Lamb had composed an epilogue.[55] The Professor's[56] 'monstrous and almost satanical pride' in his creation is jocularly presented as having suffered its rightful fall in the damnation of the piece. Eight years later Manning received notice of another such catastrophe, this time the damnation of Lamb's own farce Mr. H-. That Lamb was seriously hurt by the incident is evident from his graphic account of this 'fall' and its repercussions:

> I go creeping on since I was lamed with that cursed fall from off the top of Drury Lane Theatre into the Pit something more than a year ago ...

54 L.L., i, 224.

55 Ibid., i, 258.

56 Lamb's nickname for Godwin was 'the Professor'.

> Damn 'em how they hiss'd! it was not a hiss neither but a sort of a frantic yell like a congregation of mad geese,with roaring sometimes like bears, mows & mops like ap[e]s, sometimes snakes that hiss'd me into madness. Twas like St. Anthony's temptations. Mercy on us that God should give his favorite [sic.] children men, mouths to speak with, to discourse rationally, to promise smoothly, to flatter agreeably, to encourage warmly, to counsel wisely, to sing with, to drink with, and to kiss with, and that they should turn them into mouths of adders, bears, wolves, hyenas, and whistle like tempests and emit breath thro' them like distillations of aspic. poison, to asperse and vilify the innocent labours of their fellow-creatures who are desirous to please them!... Blind mouths! as Milton somewhere calls them. 57

The inhuman and bestial noise still rang in his ears in 1811, when his chagrin found vent in the essay 'On the Custom of Hissing at the Theatres, with some account of a Club of Damned Authors'. In it he describes the formation of a new society for the mutual support and self-help of failed playwrights. Those so afflicted have banded together in their fall from grace to commemorate their losses by melancholy rites:

> To keep up the memory of the cause in which we suffered, as the ancients sacrificed a goat, a supposedly unhealthy animal, to AEsculapius, on our ~~feast~~-nights we cut up a goose, an animal typical of the popular voice, to the deities of Candour and Patient Hearing. 58

In 1814 Lamb returned to the same theme in writing an epilogue to James Kenney's farce Debtor and Creditor. The epilogue is in dialogue form; one character relates to the other the history of his own damnation as a young playwright - the public

57 L.L., ii, 272-3, to Manning, 26 February 1808.
58 L.W., i, 91.

received his piece with a noise 'like geese', and the din haunts him yet.[59]

However, on the evening of the actual performance, Lamb's initial reaction to the downfall of his farce showed no such morbid sensitivity. Hazlitt, in his account of the event given in the essay 'On Great and Little Things', records that though the gaiety of the author's friends was eclipsed by the play's damnation, that of Lamb himself was not; on the contrary, he 'swore he had no hopes of it from the beginning'.[60] Although Lamb's letters of the period provide evidence that he did not in fact before the performance see its prospects in such a totally pessimistic light,[61] he was certainly very quick to accept and apparently agree with the audience's condemnation. Crabb Robinson recorded that the author joined in the hisses of the piece with great gusto, as if he accepted the judgement of the public immediately, on the first hiss, without demur, and without reserve.[62] Drury Lane play-bills for the next few days show that the theatre authorities did not consider their 'New Farce' irrevocably damned on its first night, and were prepared to attempt a second staging; they were prevented from doing so, however, by the author's own request that the work should be withdrawn.[63] Lamb seems to have been only capable of dealing with the horror of the

59 L.W., v, 127.

60 Table-Talk (1822), H.W., viii, 232.

61 See, for example, L.L., ii, 231-2, to Wordsworth, 26 June 1806.

62 H.C.R., i, 9: 'When the squeamishness of the vulgar taste in the pit on the disclosure of the name showed itself in hisses, Lamb joined and was probably the loudest hisser in the house.'

63 See L.W., v, 370.

damnation if he accepted it instantly as the irrevocable destiny of the piece. For him, as he explained to Wordsworth the following day,

> A hundred hisses - damn the word, I write it like kisses - how different - a hundred hisses outweigh a1000 Claps. The former come more directly from the Heart. 64

He concludes 'Well, tis withdrawn & there is an end', with apparent relief: the experience was too sharp, and cut too close to the bone, to be withstood, or to be provoked again.

Why this should be so is hinted at in the text of Mr. H- itself. The plot of the farce hinges around the disclosure of the hero's name. The mystery concerning his appellation, along with the agreeable characteristics of the man, prove a great attraction to the ladies of the piece at first, but when the name is revealed to be 'Hogsflesh', they disperse in disgust. Mr. H- is left alone to bemoan his fate:

> Was ever any thing so mortifying? to be refused by old Mother Damnable! - with such parts and address, - and the little squeamish devils, to dislike me for a name, a sound.... Farewell the most distant thoughts of marriage ... No son of mine shall exist, to bear my ill-fated name. No nurse come chuckling, to tell me it is a boy... 65

His monologue proceeds into further fantasies of self-pity; he sees himself as ostracized for ever from the customary life-style and pursuits of men, by the fatal distinguishing mark set upon him - his name. One of 'the little squeamish

64 L.L., ii, 251, 11 December 1806.

65 L.W., v, 204-5.

devils' whose favour he has lost is Melesinda, the heroine; in the following scene she is chastized by her maid for her over-refined distaste. The maid is ready to respond to the man rather than to the name:

> MAID
> Lord, Madam! before I'd take on as you do about a foolish - what signifies a name? Hogs - Hogs - what is it - it is just as good as any other for what I see.
>
> MELESINDA
> Ignorant creature! yet she is perhaps blest in the absence of those ideas which, while they add a zest to the few pleasures which fall to the lot of superior natures to enjoy, double edge the -
>
> MAID
> Superior natures! a fig! If he's hog by name, he's not hog by nature, that don't follow - his name don't make him anything, does it? 66

The farce closes with the timely death of an aged relative who leaves a will bestowing upon Mr. H- not only an estate but also a new name - Bacon. With this removal of the accursed mark Melesinda is free to follow the original inclination of her heart, and Mr. H-, or rather, Bacon, Esq., achieves the condition of a happy English spouse.

No such fortunate outcome could result from Lamb's own love-making, as we have seen, not so much because he would not rid himself of Mary, as some of his biographers would suggest, as because his life as a whole was bound up with hers and with her insane act of matricide. He was '<u>marked</u>' in his inner being by the events of September 1796, and the fact that he demonstrated outwardly the existence of that mark by close

66 <u>L.W.</u>, v, 206.

domestic association with Mary only clarified the situation. However, he could not resist the temptation to exorcise the stigma through dramatic representation. All Lamb's plays concern themselves with the theme of damnation and disgrace: the central character in each play is isolated through shame, and cannot share in the customary comforts of men.

His first play, the tragedy John Woodvil (1798-1802), concerns the death of a father rather than a mother. Woodvil commits indirect patricide, in that his revelation of secret haunts bring about his outlawed father's death. He succumbs to the crime through pride, as Lamb explained in a letter to Manning of 28 December 1799 in which he defends the play's original intended title, 'Pride's Cure'.[67] In the pride of his liquor, Woodvil suffers an inflation of the ego, through which he soars above the need for customary ties and bonds.

He declaims at the crisis point of the play:

> These high and gusty relishes of life, sure,
> Have no allayings of mortality in them.
> I am too hot now and o'ercapable,
> For the tedious processes, and creeping wisdom,
> Of human acts, and enterprizes of a man. 68

All such 'great spirits' as himself, he feels

> cannot, ought not to be bound by any
> Positive laws or ord'nances extern,
> But may reject all these:
> .....
> As public fame, civil compliances
> Misnamed honor, trust in matter of secrets,
> All vows and promises, the feeble mind's religion,
> .....
> The ties of blood withal, and prejudice of kin. 69

67 See L.L., i, 177.

68 L.W., v, 158.

69 Ibid., v, 160-1.

Kindled by these convictions, he betrays to a treacherous friend his father's whereabouts; the friend acts upon the information, and the father expires instantly on being apprehended.

Arthur Symons considered John Woodvil to be rife with references and applications to 'the tragic story which had desolated [Lamb's] own household'. He sees the play as Lamb's attempt at 'a sort of solace and defence for Mary', in that its moral concerns the redemption of guilt through remorse.[70] However, as F.V. Morley pointed out,[71] the sins Woodvil commits are caused by factors which relate far more closely to Lamb's life before the death of his mother than to Mary's. It was Lamb who, in the exultation of his early friendship with Coleridge and during those heady nights of inspired inebriation at the Salutation and Cat, felt himself exalted above the human sphere, and as a consequence temporarily lost his sanity.[72] As Symons observed, Lamb often sees fit to place in Woodvil's mouth utterances strangely similar to those he himself expressed at the time of his mother's death.[73] For example, on receiving sympathy in his remorse from his once affianced Margaret, Woodvil exclaims:

> I almost begin
> To understand what kind of creature Hope is.
> .....
> Yet tell me if I over-act my mirth. 74

In nearly so many words Lamb had confided to Coleridge on 3

70 Arthur Symons, The Romantic Movement in English Poetry (1909), p. 164.

71 Morley, Lamb Before Elia, p. 198; 'Pride's Cure is primarily the cure of pride in the Salutation kind of friendship'.

72 See above, pp. 34-5.

73 Symons, The Romantic Movement in English Poetry, p. 164.

74 L.W., v, 173.

October 1796 that only Coleridge's sober and religious letter had prevented him from excessive over-acting of his relief at Mary's preliminary recovery.[75]

When he returned to try his hand again at play-writing years later, after the composition of the Elia essays, Lamb's plots still concerned themselves with disgrace, and the fear of disclosures of hidden shames. The Wife's Trial (1827) is based upon Crabbe's 'The Confidant', from his Tales (1812). It concerns the blackmailing of Katherine Selby by her former school friend, Mrs. Frampton. Mrs. Frampton was party to Katherine's first marriage, to a sailor. The sailor being lost at sea and presumed dead, Katherine marries a second time, without disclosing to her new husband the history of the first. Even when the sailor is finally known to have perished she cannot bring herself to reveal the details of her past. However, the domestic comforts she has gained by her second marriage are imperilled by the arrival of Mrs. Frampton in her home. Armed with the threat of disclosure, Mrs. Frampton entails upon Katherine 'An iron slavery of obsequious duty', in response to her least whim.[76] In Lamb's play, unlike Crabbe's tale, this iron band is finally snapped when Mrs. Frampton succumbs to the feigned advances of Selby, the husband, who has resorted to this ploy as a last desperate attempt to spur his wife through jealousy into ridding herself of her burdensome 'confidant'. As soon as Katherine hears of her friend's weakness, however,

75 See L.L., i, 51.
76 L.W., v, 244.

she is freed. As she tells Mrs. Frampton:

> You have broke
> The worse than iron band, fretting the soul,
> By which you held me captive. Whether my husband
> Is what you gave him out, or your fool'd fancy
> But dreams he is so, either way I am free. 77

Mrs. Frampton has shown herself to be at least as erring as Katherine, and the sharing of such a disgrace is its disintegration. It is far from Mrs. Frampton's intention, of course, to offer such a healing sympathy, but in effect her behaviour provides the mirror which allows Katherine to recognize the pettiness of her own shame, and finally to confess it, without excessive prostration, to her husband.

The Pawnbroker's Daughter, a farce which Lamb composed in 1825, deals yet more explicitly with the healing of an alienated and marked outsider, through sympathy. Miss Flyn wishes to espouse the acquitted felon, Pendulous, who, like Lamb's earlier afflicted letter-writer, has been cut down from the gallows and lived to bear the mark and disgrace of the rope. Pendulous refuses to conclude his long and honourable suit of Miss Flyn because he wishes to save her from the public shame of connection with 'a - reprieved man!'[78] In her attempt to cure him of his mistaken delicacy, Miss Flyn strikes upon the idea of getting herself incriminated with a false charge. As she tells her friend, the pawnbroker's daughter, she will 'try the experiment, by placing myself in the hands of justice for a little while, how far equality in misfortune might breed

77 L.W., v, 265.
78 Ibid, v, 224.

a sympathy in sentiment'.[79] The experiment is successful, and Pendulous bids

> False delicacy, adieu! The true sort, which this lady has manifested - by an expedient which at first sight might seem a little unpromising, has cured me of the other. We are now on even terms. 80

Protracted existence after the repeal of a death sentence is a theme which had strong morbid fascination for Lamb. One reason for his obsession lies, perhaps, in the fact that no atonement of a life for a life was made at his mother's death. He and Mary are both 'marked', as with the hangman's rope, in that both were spared the crudest consequence of Mary's act, but both must continue to live on bearing its social and psychological stigma. The Pawnbroker's Daughter dramatizes the relief gained by a sharing of disgrace, a sharing akin to Lamb's sympathetic identification with Mary's situation. Like Lamb's other plays, and much of his journalism, it also points to the merits, and need for, a society in which no man is isolated because of his superficial oddity, and in which no social barrier prevents the rehabilitation of the guilty and the damned. Sympathy and a loving sense of connection cure all afflictions. Even Mrs. Frampton is welcomed to stay and share in the restored Selby marriage at the close of The Wife's Trial,[81] whereas in Crabbe's

79 L.W., v, 234.

80 Ibid., v, 242.

81 See ibid., v, 273. The play closes with Selby's speech to Mrs. Frampton: 'Widow, your hand. I read a penitence / In this dejected brow; and in this shame / Your fault is buried. You shall in with us, / And, if it please you, taste our nuptial fare: / For, till this moment, I can joyful say, / Was never truly Selby's Wedding Day.'

tale the confidant's fate is one of miserable obscurity.[82]

The situation of Lamb's hanged man of 1810 was darker and more forlorn than that granted to his theatrical characters. In The Pawnbroker's Daughter the living death of the marked outsider is exorcized through sympathy, but in 'On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged' there is no reprieve for the sufferings of 'Pensilis'. Like Mr. H-, Pensilis deplored the squeamishness of those who responded to 'that fatal mark' rather than to the man.[83] He endeavoured to escape from his fate by concealing the mark, and taking up residence in the crowded metropolis where 'stigmatised innocence had the best chance of hiding her disgrace'.[84] However, his scheme fails, for he is discovered by a chance old acquaintance and cannot subsequently avoid the recognition in his neighbours' eyes of his grotesque abnormalities. He pleads for sympathy in his letter, but has little remaining hope of ever receiving any.

Another early essay of Lamb's, 'On the Danger of Confounding Moral with Personal Deformity; with a Hint to those who have the

82 See The Poetical Works of the Rev. George Crabbe, ed. George Crabbe [son] (1934), v, 158. The poem ends with the confidant's disgrace in the face of the husband's loving forgiveness of his wife: 'Twice made the Guest an effort to sustain / Her feelings, twice resumed her seat in vain, / Nor could supress her shame, nor could support her pain: / Quick she retired, and all the dismal night / Thought of her guilt, her folly, and her flight; / Then sought unseen her miserable home, / To think of comforts lost, and brood on wants to come.'

83 L.W., i, 56.

84 Ibid., i, 57. Cf. L.L., i, 207, to Manning, 20 May 1800: 'It is a great object to me to live in town, where we shall be much more private; and to quit a house & a neighborhood where poor Mary's disgrace and disorder, so frequently recurring, has made us a sort of marked people. We can be no where private except in London'.

Framing of Advertisements for Apprehending Offenders' (1810), presents the obverse side of the effects of such prejudice. According to Lamb, the image of one known to have committed an inhuman crime develops, in the imagination of others, physical deformities and marks bearing apparent testimony to his sin. As a result, the man who represents in truth a danger to society, and who ought to be isolated, escapes notice: no one can believe the criminal to be 'a sleek, smug-looking man, with light hair and eye-brows, - the latter by no means jutting out or like a crag, - and with none of those marks which our fancy had pre-bestowed upon him'.[85] In this essay, Lamb calls the prejudice which produces the erroneous image 'wise', and its fiction 'blameless', for they construct the 'impassable barriers' which guard 'our innocence ... against the commission of such appalling crimes': to believe that one's appearance would deteriorate so markedly from that of an unexceptionable man by the committing of an inhuman deed establishes a barrier not so much between society and the criminal as between the social man and the realization of his own latent criminal impulses. Yet the prejudice remains unfortunate for it encourages adults to produce, like children, stereotypedand superstitious caricatures of evil, rather than to attempt to recognize and grapple with the reality of human iniquity.

The essay in which Lamb explored most fully the Horrors of an existence marked out for 'Death-in-Life' was the 1813 'Confessions of a Drunkard'. It begins with an appeal to the

85 L.W., i, 68.

'sturdy moralist' to pause and consider, and 'ere thy gorge riseth at the name which I have written, first learn what the thing is; how much of compassion, how much of human allowance, thou may'st virtuously mingle with thy disapprobation'.[86] Unless such sympathy is procured, the scorn of the conventional moralist further bars the way to reform for the unfortunate Drunkard, who is already reduced to 'the ruins of a man' through his complete loss of self-respect, along with the physical effect of his habits. The essay goes on to explore the psychological state brought about by the enforced abandonment of intentional action, and the collapse of self-control. The Drunkard's lack of self-trust results in a decadent moral consciousness and the atrophy of all purpose and energy. He had once found an image of his state in a print after Corregio, which he describes thus:

> a man ... sits fast bound at the root of a tree. Sensuality is soothing him, Evil Habit is nailing him to a branch, and Repugnance at the same instant of time is applying a snake to his side. In his face is feeble delight, the recollection of past rather than perception of present pleasures, languid enjoyment of evil with utter imbecility to good, a Sybaritic effeminacy, a submission to bondage, the springs of the will gone down like a broken clock, the sin and the suffering co-instantaneous, or the latter forerunning the former, remorse preceding action - all this represented in one point of time. - When I saw this, I admired the wonderful skill of the painter. But when I went away, I wept, because I thought of my own condition. 87

An inability to see clearly in what way his own action could order the confused chaos of his life allows Correggio's victim

86 L.W., i, 133.

87 Ibid., i, 136-7.

to succumb to complete passivity, though he finds in it little positive pleasure. Just as the print warned the Drunkard of his own condition, so he attempts to imprint upon the mind of his reader the horror of that state as he himself has experienced it. He assures him

> what a dreary thing it is when a man shall feel himself going down a precipice with open eyes and a passive will, - to see his destruction, and have no power to stop it, and yet to feel it all the way emanating from himself ...

A youth would be invulnerable to the temptation of alcohol 'could he feel the body of the death out of which I cry hourly with feebler and feebler outcry to be delivered'.[88]

When he read the 'Confessions of a Drunkard', Crabb Robinson considered that the essay succeeded in its aim to do good generally by sobering example, but added, in connection with the biographical details of Lamb's life, 'it will hardly be thought so near a correct representation of a fact as it really is'.[89] In later years Lamb himself disparaged as crass and unimaginative such assumptions of autobiographical association between the Drunkard and his author. When republishing

88 L.W., i, 137. Cf. L.L., ii, 35, to Robert Lloyd, 18 November 1801: 'My brain is overwrought with variety of worldly-intercourse ... Who shall deliver me from the body of this Death?'; and Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 385, to Bernard Barton, 3 May 1823, on the Elia essays: 'Poor Relations is tolerable - but where shall I get another subject - or who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'

89 H.C.R., i, 128, entry for 29 April 1813. But see also, for a contrary view of the case, Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, Recollections of Writers (1878), p. 56: 'Lamb, far from taking much, took very little, but had so weak a stomach that what would have been a mere nothing to an inveterate drinker, acted on him like potations "pottle deep".'

the 'Confessions' in the London Magazine in 1822 he added to the essay a note, accounting for its publication by 'Elia':

> It is indeed a compound extracted out of his long observations of the effects of drinking upon all the world about him; and this accumulated mass of misery he hath centered (as the custom is with judicious essayists) in a single figure. We deny not that a portion of his own experience may have passed into the picture ... but then how heightened! how exaggerated! 90

Lamb's letters, however, reveal that his account of the miseries of conscious but passive degeneracy was the result of introspection as much as of purely objective comprehension: those facts of his experience which he thus chose to heighten and exaggerate were ones dwelt upon frequently in his correspondence throughout his life. The Drunkard, for example, cannot maintain in his life a self-discipline which would allow him to behave reliably towards others, in work or in friendship:

> I fancy all sorts of discouragements, and am ready to give up an occupation which gives me bread, from a harassing conceit of incapacity. The slightest commission given me by a friend, or any small duty which I have to perform for myself, as giving orders to a tradesman, &c. haunts me as a labour impossible to be got through. So much the springs of action are broken.
>
> The same cowardice attends me in all my intercourse with mankind. I dare not promise that a friend's honour, or his cause, would be safe in my keeping, if I were put to the expense of any manly resolution

90 L.W., i, 432. In composing the note, Lamb is objecting to the Quarterly Review, xxvii (April, 1822), pp. 120-1. A reviewer quotes from the 'Confessions' and refers to it as a paper 'which affords a fearful picture of the consequences of intemperance, and which we have reason to know is a true tale'.

> in defending it. So much the springs of moral action are deadened within me. 91

Similarly Lamb, in a letter of 1822, attributes to his drinking habits the gross deterioration of his 'connecting organ' and his consequent inability to apply himself methodically to any task.[92]

Furthermore, Lamb had himself personally suffered from the opprobrium with which the Drunkard was regarded by a society unready to mingle 'compassion' and 'human allowance' with their disapprobation of his condition. One Sunday morning in 1809 he and a fellow clerk, Brook Pulham, were placed in the stocks in Barnet for brawling while a religious service was in progress.[93] Lamb attempted to take out the sting of this particular damnation too through reliving it in his art. In April 1821, he published in the London Magazine 'The Confessions of H.F.V.H. Delamore, Esq.', in which Delamore admits that owing to a 'calendary inadvertence', 'timing my Saturnalia amiss', 'these legs, with Kent in the play, though for far less ennobling considerations, did wear "cruel garters."'[94] Another article on a similar theme, 'Reflections in the Pillory', was published by Lamb in the London Magazine for March 1825. The essay constitutes a dramatic soliloquy delivered by 'one R - d' as he undergoes the process of being in the pillory. Unlike Delamore, 'R - d'

91 L.W., i, 139.

92 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 341, to John Howard Payne, 22 October 1822.

93 See Lucas, Life, ii, 144.

94 L.W., i, 210.

negates the shame of his situation, and reverses the roles allotted to himself and to the public by taking pleasure and pride in the perspective from which he views the scene. His elevation produces in him a sense of superiority to the 'gaping curiosity' of the 'vast miscellaneous rabble in the pit there'.[95] The theatrical metaphor is appropriate: Lamb had earlier connected the experience of being in a pillory with that of being damned as a playwright. In a letter to Manning of 26 February 1808 and in his 1814 'Epilogue' to James Kenney's farce Debtor and Creditor, he compared the two revilements and found them painfully alike.[96] But the tremendous egotism of 'R - d' has the happy effect of subverting all intended disgrace. He 'sings the Pillory' with mounting enthusiasm as his hour of glory draws to a close and sees himself as raised to an eminence upon a level with that of the city's aristocracy and royalty: 'They, and I, from equal heights, and with equal superciliousness, o'er-look the plodding, money-hunting tribe below'.[97] Yet the farcical discrepancy between 'R - d's view of his situation and what it is in reality has the effect not so much of dignifying him as of representing the foolishness and self-inflation of all who can take pride in their superiority to the common herd.

Had Lamb in all seriousness continued to portray the damned

95 L. W., i, 281.
96 See L.L., ii, 271 and L.W., v, 127.
97 Ibid., i, 283.

as in some way elevated above the masses who would condemn them he would have approximated more nearly to the conventional idea of Romantic attitudes and values. One expected trait of the Romantic poet is his sublime isolation far removed from the rabble, and his scorn of their disapproval of his dangerously anti-social stance. Mario Praz, for example, in his The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, would deny full-blooded Romanticism to Lamb because he failed to react to the calamities of his lot with a titanic rebelliousness. Praz finds nothing tumultuously 'ambitious and tormented' in Lamb's writings but only timidity and a yearning for intimacy which is essentially 'bourgeois' and anti-Romantic.[98] But further critical investigations into the nature of Romantic thought, and into the ideas of the early English Romantics in particular, have rendered such assumptions questionable. The theme of the damned soul, marked with a sense of personal guilt, and wandering an outcast on the Borderlands of society, is characteristic of early English Romanticism; in concerning himself with damnation imagery at all Lamb discloses connections with his age. It is true, however, that in many Romantic works the situation of the outsider is glamorized, as it never is in Lamb's work. In Godwin's Caleb Williams (1794), the haunted figure of Falkland exerts a terrible fascination over his servant Caleb. Eventually Caleb's ungovernable curiosity leads him to discover evidence of the murder his master had committed. Through eating of the

98 Praz, The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction, pp. 66-7.

forbidden fruit of this knowledge, Caleb himself, like Falkland, is damned and set apart from more unconscious and innocent men.[99] As Robert Kiely points out in his recent study The Romantic Novel in England, Falkland's persecution of Caleb after the discovery of the secret 'is merely the literal extension of a psychological event which cannot be undone'.[100] Caleb has possessed himself of Falkland's mind and shared the burden of its knowledge: consequently he too must wander a marked man on the outskirts of society, attempting to conceal himself and his guilty knowledge. But neither of the two conclusions Godwin planned for his novel ultimately presents Caleb's situation in a heroic light. In the first, discarded conclusion, his conviction and continuing isolation from human society through imprisonment leads to insanity;[101] in the second, more interestingly, Caleb, standing trial, discloses the secret, and Falkland, after confessing to its truth, dies. Although technically now innocent, Caleb is left with his sense of guilt redoubled; in revealing his knowledge, he has not exonerated the original sin of curiosity, but has lost, in Falkland's death, his one companion in perdition.[102] Society is more severely criticized for its prejudices, and government for its oppressive, crime-inducing measures, in Godwin's work than

99 See William Godwin, Caleb Williams, ed. David McCracken (Oxford, 1970), p. 138: 'The ease and light-heartedness of my youth were for ever gone.... I was tormented with a secret of which I must never unburden myself; and this consciousness was at my age a source of perpetual melancholy.'

100 Robert Kiely, The Romantic Novel in England (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 92.

101 See Godwin, Caleb Williams, pp. 330-4.

102 See ibid., p. 325.

in any writing of Lamb's, but their stress on the desperation and terror of the isolated damned is the same.

Similarly, the poems Wordsworth composed which were affected by Godwin's influence portray outlaws and criminals who learn in their ostracism the importance of maintaining social ties and bonds. The Sailor in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' (1795 -), for example, through bearing the guilt and horror of his murderous crime, gains appreciation of the value of such 'homely truths' as the sanctity of the 'bond of nature', and he communicates his hard-won knowledge to others.[103] In May 1796, Lamb had read 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' 'not without delight'.[104] But of all Romantic compositions the work which appears to have appealed to him most strongly was Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'. Protesting against Wordsworth's 1800 'Note to the Ancient Mariner', Lamb stressed the power the poem had exerted over him. Wordsworth had found the Marinere's passivity to be a fault in the poem; Lamb considered it an intensely convincing characteristic:

> the Ancient Marinere undergoes such Trials, as overwhelm and bury all individuality or memory of what he was. - Like the state of a man in a Bad dream, one terrible peculiarity of which is, that all consciousness of personality is gone.

To Wordsworth the Marinere had not appeared to be sufficiently

103 The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), p. 149, ll. 658-66.

104 L.L., i, 11, to Coleridge, 31 May 1796.

affected by his experiences, but Lamb protested that he 'has acquired a supernatural and strange cast of phrase, eye, appearance &c. which frighten the wedding guest'.[105] The Marinere's agony in isolation has left him marked and eternally set apart from his kind, for all the moral of the necessity for human affection that he preaches. But there is little of the 'titanic rebel' about the Marinere, and he seems more akin to Lamb's Drunkard in disposition than to Byron's Childe Harold or to Shelley's Prometheus.

For if the Marinere had suffered a 'Trial' like a 'Bad dream', existence itself for the Drunkard had become a nightmare from which he saw no chance of an awakening:

> Life itself, my waking life, has much of the confusion, the trouble, and obscure perplexity of an ill dream. In the daytime I stumble upon dark mountains. [106]

Throughout his adult life Lamb, too, for better or worse, dwelt in a world of doubt and unclarity. In the 'Letter of Elia to Robert Southey' (1823), written in defence of the first volume of Elia essays which Southey had attacked as unsound in its religious feeling, he presented his limitations as being 'an effect of the nerves purely':

> There are some who tremblingly reach out shaking hands to the guidance of Faith - Others who stoutly venture into the dark (their Human Confidence their leader, whom they mistake for Faith) ... Some whose hope totters upon crutches - Others who stalk into futurity upon stilts.... The shaping of our heavens

105 L.L., i, 266, to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801.

106 L.W., i, 138.

> are the modifications of our constitution; and Mr. Feeble Mind, or Mr. Great Heart, is born in every one of us. 107

Fleeting visions of certitude and hope are generally nostalgic in mood in Lamb's work, and refer to a past age rather than to a future one. They are often kindled by recollections of his unclouded childhood, before the family tragedy left him and Mary damned, marked, and ostracized. In 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital' (1813), for example, he accounts for his retrospective habits of mind thus:

> For me I do not know whether a constitutional imbecility does not incline me too obstinately to cling to the remembrances of childhood; in an inverted ratio to the usual sentiments of mankind, nothing that I have been engaged in since seems of any value or importance, compared to the colours which imagination gave to everything then. I belong to no <u>body corporate</u> such as I then made a part of. 108

In his childhood he knew himself to belong unquestionably to a closely bound community; his adult life did not seem to him at this time to supply that need. The loss of former companionships, the gaps in his 'little circle of domestic friends',[109] and the perpetual uncertainty as to the permanence of his last support, all contributed to his yearning for past certainties, and even had the effect of rendering present pleasures less tangible, through their instability, than those safely established and fulfilled in the past. It is true that at

107 <u>L.W.</u>, i, 227.

108 Ibid., i, 146.

109 From the poem 'Written on the Day of my Aunt's Funeral' (1797), ibid., v, 20.

times Lamb's work seems to lapse too easily into the sweet melancholy of such nostalgia, but he is certainly expert at conveying its modulations of joy and pain. In his 1819 review of Falstaff's Letters, for example, he writes of its author, James White:

> He may have forgotten, but we cannot, the pleasant evenings which ensued at the Boar's Head ... when over our pottle of Sherris he would talk you nothing but pure Falstaff the long evenings through.... Those evenings have long since passed away, and nothing comparable to them has come in their stead, or can come. "We have heard the chimes at midnight." 110

Even as early as 1797, however, Lamb had recognized in part the danger of such romanticizing. When the present held possibilities of real friendship to which he dearly wished to adhere, he was quick to perceive how insidiously the quicksands of nostalgic recollection could deprive him of them. In June of that year, he wrote to Coleridge welcoming the renewal of their correspondence, and expressing his sense of loss at its temporary suspension:

> The little room (was it not a little one?) at the Salutation was already in the way of becoming a fading idea! it had begun to be classed in my memory with those 'wanderings with a fair hair'd maid,' in the recollection of which I feel I have no property. 111

But present experience had to be of Coleridgean dimensions before Lamb could maintain his pleasure and interest in it, in the face of the incessant attractions of past glories. The seeming

110 L.W., i, 195.

111 L.L., i, 110, to Coleridge, 13 June 1797.

hopelessness of his adult life served, at times, to render nothing securely precious but his former joys.

In 'Confessions of a Drunkard', the writer had yearned for a return to the simple clarity and innocence of childhood as a foil to the dark torment of his actual lot, but with little hope of the possibility of such a reversal.[112] John Woodvil, on the other hand, does present the realization of a cure, and a change of heart, through the beneficial effect of recollections of childhood. On hearing of his father's death Woodvil is overwhelmed with guilt, from which desolation he is eventually saved by the return of his faithful love, Margaret. Before her arrival, Woodvil had found some solace in the extremities of his remorse in responding to a call of bells, and issuing forth 'to pray with Christian people'. In recounting the scene to Margaret he tells how, once in church,

> [I] Upon the little hassock knelt me down,
> Where I so oft had kneel'd
> A docile infant by Sir Walter's side...

His sense of reassociation with his father through this gentle resurgence of an innocent memory alleviates the intensity of his self-condemnation to such an extent that

> It seem'd, the guilt of blood was passing from me
> Even in the act and agony of tears,
> And all my sins forgiven. 113

112 See L.W., i, 137.

113 Ibid., v, 176.

As with Woodvil's pride, so with his cure, we may draw comparisons between his experience, and even the words he uses to describe them, and Lamb's personal life. In like manner Lamb seemed to have sought immediate consolation after his mother's death in his memories of an innocent childhood in her care:

> I think sometimes, could I recall the days that are past, which among them should I choose? ... the days, Coleridge, of a mother's fondness for her school-boy ... 114

So he wrote in November 1796, and a year later he expressed a similar yearning in the poem 'Written a Year After the Events'. In it he asks for divine forgiveness

> If in a mood of grief I sin almost
> In sometimes brooding on the days long past,
> And from the grave of time wishing them back,
> Days of a mother's fondness to her child,
> Her little one. 115

These are amongst the very few references in Lamb's writing to his mother: the urge to recapture his childhood must have been very strong to overcome the ban he had imposed upon himself forbidding references to her. The misery of his present circumstances induced the preoccupations with childhood as a vital and potent stay, rather than for escapist purposes.

The strain of limpid, childlike simplicity which characterizes John Woodvil has generally been considered a matter for critical scorn rather than approbation. In 1803 the Edinburgh Review published an attack by Thomas Brown upon the new tragedy.[116]

114 L.L., i, 64, to Coleridge, 14 November 1796.

115 L.W., v, 21.

116 [Brown], Edinburgh Review, ii, 90-6. Masson, Charles Lamb, p. 48, mistakenly attributes the review to Jeffrey.

Brown hails it as a primitive masterpiece, and quotes from the play to some satirical effect:

(A noise of bells heard.)

MARGARET
Hark the bells, John.

JOHN
Those are the bells of St. Mary Ottery.

MARGARET
I know it.

JOHN
Saint Mary Ottery, my native village
In the sweet shire of Devon.
Those are the bells. 117

On this exchange Brown comments:

> The exactness of John's information is of peculiar use; as Margaret, having been some time at Nottingham, may be supposed to have forgotten the name of the parish, and perhaps of the sweet shire itself; and the cautious and solemn iteration at the close, in an affair of so much moment, gives an emphasis to the whole, that is almost inimitable. 118

However, in thus attacking John Woodvil, Brown was but furthering the war against the so-called Lake Poets, first declared in the pages of the Edinburgh Review by Francis Jeffrey, in reviewing Southey's Thalaba (1801). In this review Jeffrey damned 'the perverted taste for simplicity, that seems to distinguish our modern school of poetry',[119] and poured particular scorn upon the 1800 'Preface' to the Lyrical Ballads.[120] A subsequent review of his, on Wordsworth's

117 L.W., v, 174.
118 Edinburgh Review, ii, 92.
119 [Jeffrey], Ibid., i, 68.
120 Ibid., i, 65-6.

Poems, in Two Volumes (1807), condemned the '[c]hildishness, conceit and affectation' of the Lake Poets,[121] and dismissed some particular poems with a sweeping disdain. All Jeffrey can say in concluding his comments on 'Alice Fell', for example, is

> If the printing of such trash as this be not felt as an insult on the public taste, we are afraid it cannot be insulted. 122

The fact that Lamb's play was damned in company with well-respected works does not, of course, necessarily imply that it deserves better respect itself, but it does suggest that, just as there was method in Wordsworth's simplicities, so the apparent banality of John Woodvil may serve some literary purpose. In the above quotation given by Brown, for example, Woodvil is establishing renewed ties with his local habitation; a bond broken through his 'pride' and subsequent shame is in the process of being regained. He is about to relate to Margaret the experience in the church which disenburdened him of his sense of guilt, through the grace of childhood recollection. It is he, not Margaret, who is restored to his 'native village'; so he reminds himself, falteringly, and still as yet with an uncertain wonder, of that renewed tie.

Other works of Lamb during this period have been compared to the early productions of Wordsworth and Coleridge. E.V. Lucas, in his notes to Rosamund Gray, suggests that its 'sweet

121 [Francis Jeffrey], Edinburgh Review, xi (October 1807), 214.

122 Ibid., xi, 222.

simplicity and limpid clarity' constituted Lamb's '(perhaps unconscious) contribution to the revolt against convention' which Lyrical Ballads chiefly urged.[123] The glorification of childhood as a cure for adult experiences of alienation and self-distrust was by no means unique to Lamb, but played a vital part in the spirit of the age. Nevertheless, Lamb's espousal of the theme was heart-felt and personally necessary; the series of disastrous changes in his domestic circumstance compelled him to look yearningly back to his childhood, as to a golden era before the Fall, and encouraged him to muse over the nature of childhood in general. But in so doing he was contributing to a Romantic preoccupation which has done much to shape subsequent assumptions on the nature of the imagination and its intuitive strengths. Lamb's interest in childhood is the corollary of his sense of personal damnation; the two themes represent opposing yet mutually dependent poles in the structure of his thought. In this, he was very much the representative of his age, as the following chapter on Lamb and the childlike imagination will attempt to show.

123 L.W., i, 389.

Chapter Three

Paradise Regained

In his essay 'On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry', Jung suggested the existence of an antithetical connection between the poetical preoccupations of a period and its prevalent vulgar ideology:

> The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. 1

Poetry, or literature in general, is represented as wielding its powers, consciously or unconsciously, to maintain the mental equilibrium of the age. The artist's sensitivity is such that he is likely to be soonest disquieted by any unhealthy bias in the contemporary conceptual framework, and so he stands himself in greatest need of the antidotal psychic elements neglected in his environment. Hence he will hunt them out, and, if he has sufficient creative talent, in discovering them for himself he will realize them for the age. Although Jung does not apply his theory to any particular era, it works suggestively when applied to the Romantic period. The marked progressive drive of society at the commencement of the nineteenth century towards industrial

1 The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature, trans. R.F.C. Hull (1966), The Complete Works of C.G. Jung, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler (1953-79), xv, 82-3.

sophistication and, consequently, towards popular exploitation might well have been disquieting to a sensitively attuned contemporary consciousness. The pressures thus accumulating may have been experienced as constituting a limitation upon men's freedom and upon their potential for achieving a fulfilled and creative existence. The chartered streets and chartered Thames of Blake's London, and 'the mind-forg'd manacles' he heard resonant in the voices of its citizens, were also apparent and audible to others amongst his fellow authors.[2] And, like Blake, they too strove for a restoration of the age's equilibrium, not through economic or social strategies, but through their attempts to regain those imaginative qualities of the mind which their age seemed in particular danger of losing. Wordsworth's account of the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind', for example, can be seen to some extent as impelled by his wish to enforce a recognition of the powerful liberating capacity of the imagination. For him, as for Blake, natural and vibrant imaginative workings were most readily apparent in childhood, in the joy and wonder of the human creature's first perceptions. Both believed that the retreat into the remembrance and exploration of childhood's vitalities might provide the collective adult consciousness with an understanding of the freedom to be found in the life of the imagination. It was this freedom that their age

2 'London', Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789-1794), The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1966), p. 216.

was in danger of foregoing in its advocacy of mechanical progress.

A literary interest in the child's perceptions was not new to the nineteenth century, however. Poets of an earlier era had dwelt with even greater intensity upon childhood's recollected glories. The writings of Thomas Traherne and Henry Vaughan, for example, embody certain striking concepts of childhood and create images and symbols of its perfections which can usefully extend our understanding of the preoccupations of some of the Romantic poets. Traherne's description, in his 'Third Century' (c. 1670), of the 'Citie' he experienced as his natural environment when a child - the Citie which 'seemed to stand in Eden, or to be Built in Heaven'[3] - is well-known; but a less familiar account of its glories is to be found in a recently discovered manuscript, which probably antedates the Centuries. Here Traherne writes:

> I remember the time when its Gates were Amiable, its Streets Beautifull, its Inhabitants immortall, its Temple Glorious, its Inward Roomes and chambers Innocent and all Misterious, Soe they appeared to the little Stranger, when I first came into the world. As sweet every thing as paradice could make it. For I saw them all in the light of Heaven. And they were all mine, Temple Streets Skies Houses Gates and people. I had not learned to appropriat any thing other way. 4

3 Thomas Traherne, Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings, ed. H.M. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1958), i, 111.

4 See the Traherne manuscript 'Select Meditations' (c. 1660), quoted by L.L. Martz, The Paradise Within (New Haven and London, 1964), p. 208.

Two notable characteristics appear in this account of infant perception. The one is that all objects the child sees are viewed with wonder, and the other, that the child observer possesses all he perceives. Visionary as the account seems, both characteristics are explicable enough in natural and rational terms.

The child does not yet have the capacity to see as familiar the objects that surround him. He is unable to synthesize the passing momentary perceptions of an object into a comprehension of its abiding and separate existence. For the very young child, only his instant perception has any reality, and what he sees does not exist independently of himself. But if he cannot conceive of an independent exterior world, neither can he realize himself as an object with an existence detached from his perceptions; consciousness of an existence of his own, beyond his experiencing of each momentary sense-perception, is not available to him. All perceptions must necessarily strike the child afresh: without the power to recognize familiarity, he comes across something miraculously new at each turn. And because his existence consists of such perceptions, he cannot conceive of the independent existence of objects, but they seem his own possessions. He cannot at the time realize them as his own, it is true, but if these earlier experiences be recalled once self-consciousness has been achieved, the remembered sense of complete integration with the object will no doubt be enough to encourage memory to represent the former relationship as

that of ownership. Thus Traherne jubilantly records his recollections of miraculous perception, and of ownership of that which was perceived.

Henry Vaughan's poem 'The Retreate' presents other consequential characteristics of infant perception. The poet yearns for a return to that state in which he

> felt through all this fleshly dresse
> Bright shootes of everlastingnesse. 5

and saw the objects which surrounded him as eternal in their existence. He confirms that the child lives fully in and through his single perception, without relating it to any before or after. Thus the object which at a given moment confronts him constitutes his whole world; it fills all time and space for him, and is therefore experienced as eternal and boundless. Conceived in this way, a child's visual field represents, for Traherne and Vaughan, great joy and holiness and becomes the object of their yearning and regret.

> I cannot reach it; and my striving eye
> Dazzles at it, as at eternity . 6

wrote Vaughan in 'Childe-hood', while for Traherne,

> A simple Infant's Ey is such a Treasure
> That when 'tis lost, w' enjoy no reall Pleasure. 7

For Vaughan and Traherne, of course, these insights have profound spiritual application: each man's childhood is his gift

5 The Works of Henry Vaughan, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford, 2nd edn., 1957), p. 419.

6 Ibid., p. 520.

7 Traherne, Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings, ii, 86.

by the grace of God, and by remembering it he may appreciate his divine potential and strive for the future reclamation of that Eden lost. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed, on a more secular and humanistic plane, a renewal of imaginative interest in the child as the glorious ancestor of adult man. Nowhere do we find a clearer and more concise delineation of what childlike perception implied for Vaughan and Traherne than in the opening lines of Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence':

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour. 8

'To see a World in a Grain of Sand' is to see, in the one object presently engrossing the sense, all existence. Nothing exists beyond what is perceived, not even the observing self; in itself, therefore, the perception constitutes a whole world. And if the object into which perception is thus absorbed has a beauty of its own, then the joy and glory of that unique world - the world, say, of a wild flower - is paradisiac. What is more, without the perspectives of time and space, which make the momentary experience relative, infinity is palpable and eternity is perpetually present. So the perceiver, absorbed in his experience, 'Hold[s] Infinity in the palm of [his] hand / And Eternity in an hour.'

The epigrammatic nature of these introductory lines leaves

8 Blake, Complete Writings, p. 431.

the reader in doubt as to whether Blake believed all men did enjoy such perceptual experience, or merely that it would be a happy thing for them if they did. But an earlier poem, 'Infant Joy', in the 'Songs of Innocence', makes it clear that the idea that innocent childhood necessarily lived in a world of such bliss was for him a vital truth. Blake considered himself to have the power to recapture this lost delight,[9] and he attempted in his poetry and art to bring the possibility vividly to the attention of his audience and so to bring to life their imaginative potential for seeing their environment as perpetually wondrous and their own. In a sense, this is not a re-awakening of childhood perception, but the discovery of a new experience, for, strictly speaking, the child does not see imaginatively; his unique perception is the result of cognitive limitation, and not an active construction of his own. The adult, in recapturing his former mode of perception, must consciously dismantle his hard-won constructions of spatiality and time, and, by active effort, see again as if for the first time. Such conscious activity the Romantics saw as essential to the childlike imagination, and in its 'co-existence with the conscious will' and its re-creation of the perceived world, it obviously can be categorized as an activity within the scope of Coleridge's 'secondary imagination', as he defines it in Biographia Literaria.

9 See The Letters of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (rev.edn., 1968) p. 30, to Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799.

Earlier in the Biographia, in a passage referring to Wordsworth's 'The Female Vagrant', Coleridge had given an account of the general characteristics of the imagination. He described it in terms of an amalgamation of the child's and the adult's point of view:

> To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar ... this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents. And therefore is it the prime merit of genius, and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence. 10

To revive a childlike vision in another by a compelling manifestation of it in one's writing is to rescue him from the bonds of custom. Categorizations and abstractions by which familiar objects have come to be represented are, on an instant, abandoned, and the perceiver sees, with freshness and wonder, the 'thing itself'. Coleridge is here describing, of course, the avowed intention of Wordsworth and himself in writing the Lyrical Ballads. The task of rendering the familiar unfamiliar was then allotted to Wordsworth, and one of the most effective methods he found of achieving this goal in the volume was to use the very words of children as the medium to revivify perception. His own idealization of the childlike is apparent throughout his work, from the description of the

10 Biographia, i, 59-60.

infant's world of joyous love in Book II of The Prelude,[11] to his grief at the passing of that glorious vision in the 'Immortality Ode', a grief which is expressed in phrases remarkably reminiscent of Traherne's desolation at the loss of his own age of innocence.

Lamb's critics have not been slow to recognize in him a similar absorption and idealization. In a recent essay entitled 'Images of Eden in the Essays of Elia', James Scoggins asserted that

> Lamb's preoccupation with the loss of childhood, man's temporal approximation of Eden, is at least as marked as Wordsworth's ... 12

He proceeds to substantiate this claim by indicating in all the characteristic interests and activities of Elia a purposive search for lost childhood. Lamb's passion for reliving childhood memories; his adherence to old friends endowed with a persistently childlike nature; his preference for writers of a simpler, more innocent past; his defence of 'drama, and other works of imaginative art' which 'demand that we enter into their kingdoms as little children'; and his tendency to elaborate upon the charms of enclosed or sequestered haunts - all serve as illustrations of the theme.[13] But this paper does little to further the cause of those

11 Prelude, ii, 237-75.

12 Scoggins,'Images of Eden in the Essays of Elia', J.E.G.P., lxxi, 200.

13 Ibid., p. 201.

who would see in Elia qualities not 'childish' but 'childlike'. In presenting his thesis, Scoggins seems happy to accept that Lamb's exploration of childhood was predominantly escapist:

> If one prevailing mood of Romantic writers is sublime and Promethean, the other is the desire for what Wordsworth called "a green shady place," a paradise wherein man is not forced to act and to choose.... The most ambitious writers of the period embarked on both, but Charles Lamb's direction is consistently inward and regressive. 14

Although ostensibly of his party, the terms in which Scoggins describes Lamb differ little from those with which Peter Coveney attacked him, in his The Image of Childhood. For Coveney, Lamb's attitude to children, in contrast to Blake's, is nostalgic rather than vital; his sensibility is 'caught within regret for itself'.[15] Coveney quotes from Lamb's early poems, 'Childhood' (1796) and 'The Old Familiar Faces' (1798),to prove his point, and makes no further reference to Lamb's writings for children. Lamb's involvement with the theme of childhood, then, needs defending on two accounts: firstly, that his concern was not wholly self-orientated and bound by personal nostalgia; and secondly, that it partook of a Romantic preoccupation in itself potent and creative, rather than regressive.

Lamb's own words in praise of the seventeenth-century poet, George Wither, may be used in his defence against Coveney's attack. Wither, like Traherne and Vaughan, stressed in his writings the childlike nature of the apparently adult man at

14 Scoggins, 'Images of Eden in the Essays of Elia', J.E.G.P., lxxi, 198.

15 Peter James Coveney, The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: a Study of a Theme in English Literature (rev. edn., Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 56.

best. In relation to God, Wither experiences himself as a 'wandring Child':

> Yet (I confesse) in this my Pilgrimage,
> I like some Infant am, of tender age. 16

In these lines from 'Wither's Motto', and, indeed, in that long poem as a whole, the poet's concern is apparently purely personal. In his essay 'On the Poetry of George Wither' (1818), however, Lamb writes in defence of the 'Motto':

> He seems to be praising another person, under the mask of self; or rather we feel that it was indifferent to him where he found the virtue which he celebrates; whether another's bosom, or his own, were its chosen receptacle. His poems are full, and this in particular is one downright confession, of a generous self-seeking. But by self he sometimes means a great deal, - his friends, his principles, his country, the human race. 17

Wither probes and explores himself in order the better to understand human characteristics as a whole; the truths he discovers of himself can be generally applied to the condition of men at large. Even in his early poems, there are examples of a similar use of self-concern in Lamb's verse. The 1795 sonnet to Innocence, for example, although expressed throughout in the first person, describes the corruption and defilement of the growing child, and his consequent loss of the 'Eden' of innocence, in a manner very similar to that of Traherne and Vaughan.[18]

Furthermore, certain key passages from the Elia essays

16 Juvenilia. Poems by George Wither. Contained in the Collections of his Juvenilia which appeared in 1626 and 1633. Publications of the Spenser Society (Manchester, 1871), XI, iii, 664 and 663.

17 L.W., i, 181.

18 See ibid., v, 8.

reveal Lamb's conviction that the loss of childhood innocence meant the loss of vital imaginative powers as well. In 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple', he celebrates childhood as one of the surest means by which the imagination can retain its place in human consciousness:

> Let the dreams of classic idolatry perish, - extinct be the fairies and fairy trumpery of legendary fabling, - in the heart of childhood, there will, for ever, spring up a well of innocent or wholesome superstition - the seeds of exaggeration will be busy there, and vital - from every-day 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. While childhood, and while dreams, reducing childhood, shall be left, imagination shall not have spread her holy wings totally to fly the earth. 19

The virtue of childhood lies in its ability to retain those imaginative activities which an adult materialistic world imperils; its privilege is to act for the renewal and re-invigoration of radical imaginative perception, by which things shall be seen as they are, and not according to stale and corrupted categorizations. Such an exploration of childhood can no longer be seen as regressive or escapist. Compelled not so much by present miseries as by the desire to provide for an uncertain future, it grants assurances of the permanent place of the imagination in human consciousness, and of its capacity to revitalize old truths. When Lamb looked back to his own younger days, 'the colours which imagination

19 L.W., ii, 90.

gave to everything then'[20] seemed, by contrast to dim the experience of later years, and in his occasional adult relationships with children he found much to reassure him of the continuing existence of his own recollected early activity.[21]

It was this persistent concern which resulted in his being one of the first among his contemporaries to react with anger to the growing influence of a new pedagogy. The first thirty years of the nineteenth century witnessed experiments in education based largely upon Utilitarian principles, and coloured by a markedly scientific bias. Long before Dickens was to capture and condemn these Benthamite techniques in the schoolroom confrontations of Hard Times, writers of the Romantic era sought to alert their audience to the dangers inherent in such sterile and anti-imaginative teaching practices. In 1802, Lamb wrote to Coleridge of his annoyance at finding a children's bookshop out of which the 'matter of fact' encyclopaedic tomes of Mrs. Barbauld had ousted all the old romances. What worried Lamb most was the resulting encouragement of ignorant conceits in the child reader:

> Knowledge insignificant & vapid as Mrs. B's books convey, it seems, must come to a child in the shape of knowledge, & his empty noddle must be turned with conceit of his own powers, when he has learnt that a Horse is an Animal,

20 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', L.W., i, 146.

21 See Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 265, to Dorothy Wordsworth, 25 November 1819, on her nephew Willy: 'The Lion in the 'Change by no means came up to his ideal standard. So impossible it is for Nature in any of her works to come up to the standard of a child's imagination.'

> & Billy is better than a Horse, & such like:
> instead of that beautiful Interest in wild
> tales, which made the 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? 22

Teachers who hurry to inform a child of his objective position, and who present him with abundant factual material concerning the world about him, break up, Lamb implies, that wondering and imaginatively nourishing inter-relationship that had hitherto bound the child instinctively to his environment. The factual knowledge thus gained means very little to the child beyond his prowess in assimilating it; hence it develops his conceit without increasing his intellectual powers and actually inhibits his imaginative growth.

Coleridge must have sympathized with Lamb's complaints on this issue, for some years later he published in the Biographia a similar indictment of 'improved pedagogy'. Again, the emphasis is upon the shallow self-conceit thus engendered in the child:

> Prodigies of self-conceit, shallowness, arrogance
> and infidelity!... these nurselings ... are taught
> to dispute and decide; to suspect all, but
> their own and their lecturer's wisdom; and to
> hold nothing sacred from their contempt, but
> their own contemptible arrogance... 23

Wordsworth, too, was aroused by the new educational malpractices, and in Book V of The Prelude he describes with much compassion the pitiful state of the unfortunate pupils. A child so taught

22 L.L., ii, 81-2.

23 Biographia, i, 7-8.

is unable to take anything upon trust, or according to his own spontaneous reaction, but must analyze all, in discourse 'Massy and ponderous as a prison door'.[24] Prison imagery, as illustrative of the confined world of the modern child - still ignorant, but now cut off from direct experience and living knowledge - colours the passage throughout; the child's teacher-captors

> pound him like a Stray
> Within the pinfold of his own conceit;
> Which is his home, his natural dwelling-place. 25

To deprive a child thus of his natural birthright of imagination and wondering innocence was the great imprisonment. In 'Play-House Memoranda' (1813), Lamb describes his reactions on seeing his first play and attempts to show the nature and extent of the enchantment open to childhood and the atrocity of its curtailment:

> Oh when shall I forget first seeing a play, at the age of five or six? ... The mystery of delight was not cut open and dissipated for me by those who took me there.... It was all enchantment and a dream.... What should I have gained by knowing (as I should have done, had I been born thirty years later) ... that the royal phantoms, which passed in review before me, were but such common mortals as I could see every day out of my father's window? We crush the faculty of delight and wonder in children, by explaining every thing. 26

But Lamb does not seem capable of believing that a child's imagination could be irrevocably so limited. In

24 Prelude, v, 321.

25 Ibid., v, 361-3.

26 L.W., i, 160.

'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', he recounts the history of a young fore-runner of Dickens's Bitzer who was restored to natural childlikeness simply through a healthy association with his fellows:

> a pert young coxcomb, who thought that all knowledge was comprehended within his shallow brains, because a smattering of two or three languages and one or two sciences were stuffed into him by injudicious treatment at home, by a mixture with the wholesome society of so many schoolfellows ... has sunk to his own level, and is contented to be carried on in the quiet orb of modest self-knowledge in which the common mass of that unpresumptuous assemblage of boys seem to move: from being a little unfeeling mortal, he has got to feel and reflect. 27

For the majority of children, the most effective alternative to scientific knowledge was the continuing production of tales of wonder, romance and imagination.[28] Although the Tales from Shakespear (1807) were, of course, initially Mary's project, Lamb, remembering, perhaps, the debt he himself owed to his childhood reading,[29] lent his assistance readily. In his section of the preface, he announces that the Tales are intended to be 'enrichers of the fancy', and he hopes that they will encourage a 'withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts', and will teach humanity.[30]

27 L.W., i, 143.

28 See Prelude, v, 520-57, for Wordsworth's belief that only imaginative tales or Nature could save a child under such constraint.

29 See L.L.,ii,82, to Coleridge, 23 October 1802: '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 & Natural History?'

30 L.W., iii, 2.

The tales are coloured by Mary's influence, in their relative sobriety and restraint; Lamb's own adaptation which followed, The Adventures of Ulysses (1808), is wilder far and reaches the extremities of any child's imagination. Episodes such as the blinding of Gloucester are dropped from the Tales, but No man's outwitting of Polyphemus is described in vivid detail in Ulysses. This descriptive gusto was too much for Godwin, Lamb's publisher; he demanded that the most violent passages be cut. Lamb defended them on the grounds of their authenticity and aesthetic merit:

> I think the terrible in those two passages seems to me so much to preponderate over the nauseous as to make them rather fine than disgusting.... I will not consent to alter such passages which I know to be some of the best in the Book. 31

Their retention gave to the children's tale the force of the original, and of Chapman's translation of it. The simplicity of Lamb's prose style in his adaptation allows him to deal directly, yet inoffensively, with the scenes of violence, and to present the deeper implications of Ulysses' wanderings with a Biblical precision and resonance.[32] Such passages as Philaetius' rebuke to the suitors for their brutal treatment of the beggar-king, have a beauty and majesty of prose rhythm:

> 'for such who are compelled by need to range here and there, and have no firm home to fix their feet upon, God keeps them in this earth,

31 L.L., ii, 279, to Godwin, ?10 March 1808.

32 For a contemporary appreciation of the Biblical style of the Adventures, see John Payne Collier, An Old Man's Diary of Forty Years Ago (1871), iv, 83.

> as under water; so are they kept down and depressed. And a dark thread is sometimes spun in the fates of kings.' 33

The Benthamite pupil might indeed glean imaginative insight into worlds not dreamt of in his philosophy through such writing.

These works were carried out by Lamb in the trust that the embers of wonder and spontaneous sympathetic involvement were still alight in the minds of his child readers. But if children could so easily be brought to a state of near imaginative extinction, then the degenerate wastes of aridity in which their elders languished rendered that adult state virtually hopeless. Just as the improved pedagogy had reduced its disciples to 'boy-graduates in all the technicals, and in all the dirty passions and impudence of anonymous criticism',[34] so the critical spirit of the times infused itself into adult veins also, stifling natural responses and imaginative freedoms. In 'Play-House Memoranda' (1813), Lamb expressed his most heartfelt concern at this miserable state of affairs:

> In the pit first begins that accursed critical faculty, which, making a man the judge of his own pleasures, too often constitutes him the executioner of his own and others! You may see the jealousy of being unduly pleased, the suspicion of being taken in to admire; in short, the vile critical spirit, creeping and diffusing itself, and spreading from the wrinkled brows and cloudy eyes of the front

33 L.W., iii, 267.

34 Biographia, i, 8.

> row sages and newspaper reporters (its proper residence), till it infects and clouds over the thoughtless, vacant countenance, of John Bull tradesmen, and clerks of counting-houses, who, but for that approximation, would have been contented to have grinned without rule, and to have been pleased without asking why. The sitting next a critic is contagious. 35

The proximity is contagious because the judicial stance adopted by the critic appeals to the layman as a mark of distinction; in succumbing to the pose, however, he alienates himself from direct appreciation and enjoyment of the work of art. He is always thinking of how he may best analyze and discuss the work, so as to manifest his own merits as aesthetic judge, or intellectual observer, but in so doing he loses sight of the intrinsic object. He may find in the work a host of thematic and structural attributes, but he will not find pleasure. 'Shall we never again read to be <u>amused</u>?' Lamb asks in the 'Lepus Papers' (1825), 'but to judge, to criticise, to talk about it and about it? Farewel, old honest delight taken in books not quite contemporary ... farewel to reading for its own sake!'[36]

That the sophistications of scientific or analytic processes of discovery did not necessarily assist scholars to their stated end - that of the further conceptualization and stabilization of truths - but could rather blind them to intuitive conviction of chance truth made manifest, is the

35 <u>L.W.</u>, i, 159.
36 Ibid., i, 274.

theme of one of Lamb's very earliest prose works, his second extract from the 'Curious Fragments, Extracted from a Common-place book which belonged to Robert Burton' (1802). Tricked out in Burtonian stylistic and orthographic eccentricity, the passage complains of

> Philosophy running mad, madness philosophizing, much idle-learned enquiries, what truth is? and no issue, fruit, of all these noises, only huge books are written, and who is the wiser? *****
> Men sitting in the Doctor's chair, we marvel how they got there ... these spend their time, and it is odds but they lose their time and wits too into the bargain, chacing of nimble and retiring Truth.... Truth is the game all these hunt after, to the extreme perturbacyon and drying up of the moistures ... and for all this ... they bowle awry, shooting beside the marke.

Truth cannot be established through logical analysis or through learned criticism but is experienced as an emotional conviction, a sensation rather than a thought. The fragment continues:

> but and if Very Truth be extant indeede on earth, as some hold she it is who actuates men's deeds, purposes, ye may in vaine look for her in the learned universities, halls, colleges.... but oftentimes to such an one as myself, an Idiota or common person, no great things, melancholizing in woods where waters are, quiet places by rivers, fountains, whereas the silly man expecting no such matter, thinketh only how best to delectate and refresh his mynde continually with Natura her pleasaunt scenes, woods, water-falls, or Art her statelie garden, parks, terraces, Belvideres, on a sudden the goddesse herself Truth has appeared, with a shyning lyghte, and a sparklyng countenance, so as yee may not be able lightly to resist her. 37

37 L.W., i, 33-4. Coleridge incited Lamb to the composition of this early journalism. See L.L., i, 189-90, to Manning, 12 March 1800: '[Coleridge] has lugg'd me to the brink of engaging to a Newspaper, & has suggested to me for a 1st plan the forgery of a supposed Manuscript of Burton the Anatomist of Melancholy'.

'Truth' manifests itself like a 'lyghte', or an intuition, which convinces through the extent of the joyousness and wonder it brings with it. Lamb may even be suggesting that profound joy is itself 'Truth', whether it is consciously caused by new insight or not; it may be unaccompanied by any particular conviction apart from the very consciousness of joy. Taken in this sense, 'Truth' is obviously least assailable by analytic approaches.

Just as his fellow Romantics joined Lamb in repudiating the new pedagogy, so they also expressed similar distress at what they saw as the destructively analytic spirit of the age in general. In 'The Tables Turned' in Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth's condemnation of 'Our meddling intellect'[38] appears to be based upon an idea of truth or knowledge very like Lamb's. In place of the analytic approach, he recommends the quiet observance of living nature as an educative and ethical experience of the highest worth:

> And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
> And he is no mean preacher ... 39

A second poem from Lyrical Ballads, 'Lines written in early Spring', offers further illumination as to the nature of the bird's preaching. Wordsworth expresses his faith that objects in nature, the flowers and birds, positively and actively enjoy their harmonious existence:

38 Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (1963), p. 105.

39 Ibid., p. 104.

> The budding twigs spread out their fan,
> To catch the breezy air;
> And I must think, do all I can,
> That there was pleasure there. 40

But these 'pleasant thoughts' are associated in his mind with sensations of profound sadness, which he attempts to explain to himself by recognizing that the easy and joyous naturalness of his close union with nature in this mood is juxtaposed in his understanding with a sense of man's usual inability to perceive, and to participate in, the joy all around him in the natural world. The very security of Wordsworth's faith in that joy only serves to deepen his pain at man's loss:

> If I these thoughts may not prevent,
> If such be of my creed the plan,
> Have I not reason to lament
> What man has made of man?

Just as 'the deep power of joy' by which we may 'see into the life of things' is the essence of natural life, so it was the prerogative of human existence, before self-imposed alienating sophistications and conventionalities caused its loss. The state of innocence - that 'aweful idea', in which human existence, in complete lack of self-consciousness, was at one with all around it - is corrupted and eventually destroyed by dawning recognition of the kind of environment man's endeavour has established as the medium of his existence - a world of barbarous exploitation, affectation and sterility.

But in so far as that corruption was brought about through human folly, then the possibility presented itself of its effects

40 Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, p. 69.

being alleviated, and of man being guided back to a repossession of something like his original joy, through efforts as human but more wise. Under such conditions, the artist seemed likely to be the most effective guide, since that faculty which could promote the achievement of fresh perception, the imagination, was best brought into play, not through theoretically based moral education, but through the incitement to imaginative activity by the example of others. In Wordsworth's case, not only his experiment in Lyrical Ballads and his account of his own growth in the Prelude, but also some of his later poems are motivated by the same concern. For just as 'The Idiot Boy' attempts to show the mysterious power of disinterested love in the humblest of hearts, and to impress upon the imagination the truth of such natural affection, so a few similar light-hearted works have their part to play in the diffusion of Wordsworth's ethical teaching. In 'The Waggoner', for example, he portrays the weaknesses of his bibulous Benjamin, 'that frail Child of thirsty clay',[41] with a tolerant, if teazing, affection which might well have led many of his readers to look subsequently with a more cheerful and sympathetic eye upon similar frailties. In the epilogue to 'The Waggoner', the poet assures us of the joy he has discovered in his homely theme:

> For what I have and what I miss
> I sing of these; - it makes my bliss! 42

Joy is present in the ability to behold one's imperfect environment

41 W.P., ii, 180, l. 93.

42 Ibid., ii, 204, ll. 207-8.

with an affection that binds one to it without alienation. It was because this particular poem of his friend's was so imbued with 'a spirit of beautiful tolerance' that it became 'no common favourite' for Lamb;[43] in fact, so pronounced was his appreciation of 'The Waggoner' that it encouraged Wordsworth to publish the poem in 1819, against his prior judgement, and he dedicated it to Lamb.[44]

That humorous toleration necessary to persuade men of the joy of their union with erring humanity Lamb was said to possess in great abundance. Indeed, a comment from a letter he wrote to Wordsworth suggests that he himself recognized the extent of his endowment in this sphere:

> Now I think I have a wider range in buffoonery than you. Too much toleration perhaps. 45

Nowhere is Lamb's regenerative tolerance expressed to better account in his writing than in one of his early journalism pieces, 'The Londoner' (1802). The Londoner glorifies his city as the object and enhancer of his affection and his understanding, particularly his moral understanding. The gusto of its inhabitants irresistably kindles his sympathetic appreciation, and breaks down any melancholic sense of isolation, while its various scenes of human encounter, on however squalid a level, epitomize abiding ethical truths:

43 See Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 249, to Wordsworth, 7 June 1819.

44 W.P., ii, 176: 'To Charles Lamb, Esq.... In the year 1806, if I am not mistaken, THE WAGGONER was read to you in manuscript, and, as you have remembered it for so long a time, I am the more encouraged to hope that, since the localities on which the Poem partly depends did not prevent its being interesting to you, it may prove acceptable to others.'

45 L.L., iii, 112, 19 September 1814.

> The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me.... I gladly behold every appetite supplied with its proper food.... I see grand principles of honor at work in the dirty ring which encompasses two combatants with fists, and principles of no less eternal justice in the detection of a pickpocket....
> Thus an art of extracting morality from the commonest incidents of a town life, is attained by the same well-natured alchymy, with which the Foresters of Arden, in a beautiful country,
> Found tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in every thing. 46

Having thus through active toleration made ugliness work to good effect, the citizen is rescued from being forced to disassociate himself, with the growth of moral discernment, from that environment which he first loved in innocence. His relish for the abundant life of the streets is unalloyed by any tendency to judge or condemn; he can yet experience 'unutterable sympathies' with all he perceives, and lend out his heart freely with the joyous confidence of a child.

Lamb's 'The Londoner' was a reworking of sentiments he had previously expressed in personal letters; and there they are characterized by an even greater insistence upon the joys of the metropolis. In a letter to Robert Lloyd, for example, he describes the city's fascinations as 'perfect Mahometan paradises upon Earth!'[47] To Wordsworth he wrote, of London's ceaseless activities:

> all these things work themselves into my mind and feed me without a power of satiating me.

46 L.W., i, 40.
47 L.L., i, 271, 7 February 1801.

> The wonder of these sights impells me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fullness of joy at so much Life.... ever fresh & green and warm are all the inventions of men and assemblies of men in this great city. 48

The emphasis is upon the perpetual wonder with which he perceives the city,[49] and his sense of total absorption in the happiness of that perception. Just as moral judgements do not mitigate his pleasure, neither do temporal or spatial qualifications; his experience of the city will remain for ever fresh and new, and its extent boundless, in that it constitutes all his chosen world. Lamb perceives the city with a child's delight, as Hazlitt pointed out in writing an account of Elia for 'The Spirit of the Age':

> The streets of London are his fairy-land, teeming with wonder, with life and interest to his retrospective glance, as it did to the eager eye of childhood... 50

For all its distinct similarities with the perceptual structure delineated earlier in this chapter, however, this awareness can hardly represent a manifestation of actual childlike perception; it is, rather, a creative act of the childlike imagination, reconstructing and regenerating the 'fallen' objects of adult perception. In Lamb's view, a scientific

48 L.L., i, 267 and 268, 30 January 1801.

49 For a further connection by Lamb between seeing afresh and the sensation of joy, see L.L., ii, 55, to Thomas Manning, 15 February 1802: 'It appears to me, as if I should die with joy at the first Landing in a foreign Country. It is the nearest Pleasure, which a grown man can substitute for that unknown one, which he can never know, the pleasure of the first entrance into Life from the Womb.'

50 H.W., xi, 181.

or analytic perspective on life worked to establish distinctions and construct differential systems; his energies are here devoted to the breaking down of partitions which men may erect between each other and their environment, and to rescue both victims and propagators of prejudice and antipathy from consequent embittered isolation.

'The Londoner' did not fail to evoke for at least some of his readers that joy which he himself experienced. Leigh Hunt's review of the 1818 volumes of Lamb's work pays particular attention to this essay as peculiarly exemplifying 'the author's genius', which he saw as 'less busied with creating new things, which is the business of poetry, than with inculcating a charitable and patient content with old, which is a part of humanity'.[51] For this purpose Lamb 'desires no better Arcadia than Fleet-street; or at least pretends as much, for fear of not finding it.'[52] That Hunt thought Lamb's glorification of London in part a necessity for him, rather than an unforced actuality, did not lessen his ability to enjoy the piece; he writes of it, and of the other pseudonymous sketches which Lamb published during this period:

> Some of the pleasantries are among what may be called our <u>prose tunes</u> - things which we repeat almost involuntarily when we are in the humour... 53

And a more recent critic has found in 'The Londoner', and in

51 <u>Examiner</u> (March 1819). See Edmund Blunden, <u>Leigh Hunt's 'Examiner' Examined</u> (1928), p. 211.

52 Ibid., p. 223.

53 Ibid., p. 221.

its letter sources, evidence for his theory that Lamb's work 'gave birth to the most religious sentiment of which man is capable: grateful joy.'[54] Arthur Symons, in his chapter on Lamb from the collection Figures of Several Centuries, writes of the previously quoted letter to Wordsworth:

> There, surely, is the poem of London, and it has almost more than the rapture, in its lover's catalogue, of Walt Whitman's poems of America.... London was to [Lamb] the new, better Eden.... To love London so was part of his human love, and in his praise of streets he has done as much for the creation and perpetuating of joy as Wordsworth ... has done by his praise of flowers and hills. 55

Symons's comment, however, is presented simply as a personal value judgement. He does not attempt to tell us in what way, other than through the expression of love, Lamb's Londoner creates joy. Lamb himself would probably have elucidated further the workings of his genius in this important case; for, whatever his uneasiness respecting critical approaches, he was not slow to attempt an explanation of a joy of a very similar nature which he experienced at a dramatic performance in 1818. Thanking Mrs. Gould for her performance in 'Don Giovanni in London', Lamb addresses her thus:

> free, fine, frank-spirited, single-hearted creature, turning all the mischief into fun as harmless as toys, or children's make-believe ... You have taken out the sting from the evil thing, by what magic we know not, for there are actresses of greater

54 Arthur Symons, Figures of Several Centuries, p. 21.

55 Ibid., pp. 25 and 26.

> mark and attribute than you. With you and your Giovanni our spirits will hold communion, whenever sorrow or suffering shall be our lot. We have seen you triumph over the infernal powers; and pain, and Erebus, and the powers of darkness, are henceforth "shapes of a dream". 56

To exorcize evil from the perception of others, as Lamb attempts to do in 'The Londoner' by presenting human frailty as merely the medium for moral understanding and growth, is to revivify that perception, so that a regenerate audience may be visited by the 'Joy that ne'er was given, / Save to the pure, and in their purest hour'.[57] The immediate impression and effect of their performance rendered actors, if such should be their ability, particularly able to promote such imaginative purification. Elia later praises another favourite performer, Suett, for possessing similar innocent 'magic':

> Evil fled before him ... because it could not touch him ... He was delivered from the burthen of that death... 58

The writer too, through a more conscious and laboured craft, might achieve in his work the expression of his own unalienated joy, and might rekindle an imaginative life in his readers.

For all the power of the imagination, however, childlike perception itself is, paradoxically enough, completely impotent

56 'Five Dramatic Criticisms: 1 - Mrs. Gould (Miss Burrell) In "Don Giovanni in London"' (1818), The Works of Charles Lamb, ed. E.V. Lucas (1912), i, 217. This review is not in Lucas's 1903-5 standard edition.

57 'Dejection: an Ode', C.P., i, 365, ll. 64-5.

58 'On Some of the Old Actors', L.W., ii, 139. Cf. Prelude, vii, 394-406, for a description by Wordsworth of a child whose innocent beauty worked the same effect.

in the face of evil. If ugliness plays no part in the child's world, so that those perceptions which make up his whole existence are all beauteous and joyous, then naturally his life seems paradisiac. But should images of unequivocal cruelty or viciousness impinge themselves upon his perception, then he is completely defenceless. For just as his world before was all one heaven, it now becomes a boundless hell; the ugliness momentarily perceived is all his existence; he cannot set limits to the experience, and it appears timeless. It was Suett's instinctive ability continually to dodge encounters with outright evil, and hence to remain innocent, that constituted his genius. For the majority of imaginative perceivers, however, evil or ugliness presents itself, sooner or later, so forcibly to the senses, that the powerless vulnerability of childlike perception becomes all too apparent.

No false optimism blinded the Romantics to this danger. Keats's poetical epistle to J.H. Reynolds, 25 March 1818, introduces, into a lighter-hearted context, a sudden vision of such inescapable evil and destruction. Wandering the sea-shore once on a quiet evening, the poet had felt that

> I was at home,
> And should have been most happy - but I saw
> Too far into the sea; where every maw
> The greater on the less feeds evermore:-
> But I saw too distinct into the core
> Of an eternal fierce destruction,
> And so from Happiness I ⟨was⟩ far was gone.
> Still am I sick of it: and though to day
> I've gathered young spring-leaves, and flowers gay
> Of Periwinkle and wild strawberry,
> Still do I that most fierce destruction see,

> The shark at savage prey - the hawk at pounce,
> The gentle Robin, like a pard or ounce,
> Ravening a worm ... 59

The intensity of his ability to live 'in the present hour' afforded Keats no protection from complete immersion in the ugly perception. The mind which could absorb itself in the existence of a sparrow, was unable to rationalize away its sense of empathy with the ravening robin. Keats's inability to escape from this dilemma contaminated all his existence, so that experiences of beauty and fresh pleasure - the gathering of young spring-leaves - seemed unreal by contrast; the ugly moment is boundless and his world becomes a hell. And not only the animal kingdom afforded him experiences of anguish; his human acquaintance, too, caused him much sympathetic suffering, as he told Benjamin Bailey:

> the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits - when I am not suffering for vicious beastliness I am the greater part of the week in spirits. 60

It is also the poet's inexorable bondage to a feverish world of human sickness and corruption that renders the joyous experience of the Nightingale's song well nigh unreal - perhaps a dream.[61]

Keats's awareness of the oppressiveness of his mental state at this time led, perhaps, to his epistolary exposition of the development from childlike perception; the darkening of

59 K.L., i, 262.
60 Ibid., i, 175, 30 October 1817.
61 See 'Ode to a Nightingale', K.P., p. 260, ll. 78-80.

the 'Chamber of Maiden Thought' is effected by a completely natural 'sharpening' of 'one's vision into the heart and nature of Man' and a subsequent necessity 'of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression'.[62]

Keats considered, however, that at least one among his contemporaries was capable of shedding light upon this enveloping gloom. Through his reading of 'Tintern Abbey', he saw Wordsworth as having reached this dismal state ahead of him, and decided that Wordsworth's 'Genius' lay in the further exploration and illumination of its 'dark Passages'. Had Keats been accorded an early hearing of The Prelude, he would certainly have thought his appreciation of its author justified. For, in Book VIII, Wordsworth describes the desolation and fear that overcame him on first experiencing the realities of human corruption when an undergraduate in Cambridge. There, 'temporal shapes / Of vice and folly' were 'thrust' upon his view; the 'vulgar light / Of present actual superficial life' may have been tempered by the traditions and old privileges of the university town, but this could not eradicate the ugliness of the impression:

> This notwithstanding, being brought more near
> As I was now, to guilt and wretchedness,
> I trembled, thought of human life at times
> With an indefinite terror and dismay
> Such as the storms and angry elements

62 K.L., i, 281, to J.H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818.

> Had bred in me, but gloomier far, a dim
> Analogy to uproar and misrule,
> Disquiet, danger, and obscurity. 63

Upon the innocent breaks the horror of human knowledge. A child's very avariciousness for intense experience leads him to unavoidable perception of evil; once encountered, it shatters his paradise, rendering his existence chaotic and frightful rather than beatific, and compelling him, if he is to survive, to find some means in himself of rationalizing and understanding savagery. Having once eaten of the tree of knowledge, he must seek beyond the province of childlike perception, and its engrossment in the eternal moment, for the ability to judge and balance his experience. But in so doing, he leaves behind him his former Eden, now despoiled.

In the passage which follows the above, Wordsworth does indeed explore and shed light upon the manner of his own early development out of the darkened and chaotic 'Chamber':

> It might be told (but wherefore speak of things
> Common to all?) that seeing, I essay'd
> To give relief, began to deem myself
> A moral agent, judging between good
> And evil,not as for the mind's delight
> But for her safety, one who was to act,
> As sometimes, to the best of my weak means,
> I did, by human sympathy impell'd;
> And through dislike and most offensive pain
> Was to the truth conducted; of this faith
> Never forsaken, that by acting well
> And understanding, I should learn to love
> The end of life and every thing we know. 64

If the individual is not to be overcome by experience of evil,

63 Prelude, viii, 641-64.

64 Ibid., viii, 665-77.

then he must discover or develop within himself a power more active than the sensory absorption of childhood, which is, for all its vivid intensity, essentially passive. It is necessary that alongside imaginative involvement in the perceived world, an understanding of its objectivity, and of the relation of objects to each other in that world, develop as well, so that the mind becomes able to understand the significance of what it sees. Greater understanding, while decreasing the sense of complete absorption in the perception, provides bases for the development of mature moral consciouness, and hence the ability to see, in Keats's phrase, the 'ballance of good and evil'.[65] In its turn, the growth of moral discernment, if sufficiently forceful and motivated, encourages the agent to commit himself to the active propagation of his new-found understanding; he acts, according to his capacities, to correct any undesirable preponderances in the moral balance of his environment, and to attempt the achievement of a closer resemblance between the states of actual reality and the structures of justice and harmony constructed by his private contemplative efforts. Evil experience forces the individual, in self-defence, to recognize the distinction between himself and his environment; but, if he tries to temper his first grievous alienation by struggling to understand the nature and potential of his surroundings, he may, impelled by 'human

65 K.L., i, 281.

sympathy', develop evaluative structures by which he himself may understand his life, and even act to enlighten the confusion of others. However intense his perception, the child can never fully understand or sympathize with the preoccupations of a reasoning agent, for he is not even able to recognize another's objective existence, let alone appreciate his circumstances. If ugly experience leads to the development of self-consciousness, and subsequent social consciousness, then, Wordsworth would suggest that, rather than a necessary evil, it is a positive good.

Whether or not the growth Wordsworth describes in The Prelude be as universal as he would suggest, we look in vain for such a clear exposition and analysis of its nature in any work of Lamb's. That the latter appreciated the perils of childlike perception, particularly its isolation and lack of social, or common, sense, is revealed very clearly, however, in one of the works he and his sister prepared for children in the first decade of the new century. Mrs. Leicester's School (1807) was highly esteemed by at least two prominent authors, Coleridge and Landor, during the Lambs' lifetime. Coleridge envisaged a glorious future for the tales when he remarked to Allsop:

> It at once sooths and amuses me to think - nay, to know, that the time will come when this little volume of my dear and well nigh oldest friend, Mary Lamb, will be not only enjoyed, but acknowledged as a rich jewel in the treasury of our permanent English literature;

> and I cannot help running over in my mind the long list of celebrated writers, astonishing geniuses! novels, romances, poems, histories and dense political economy quartoes, which, compared with Mrs Leicester's School, will be remembered as often and prized as highly as Wilkie's and Glover's Epics and Lord Bolingbroke's Philosophics compared with Robinson Crusoe! 66

No doubt Defoe's superior skill in sustaining a narrative renders his work more deserving of lasting popularity than the Lambs' tales, but both Mary and Charles manifest in these stories pronounced ability to intuit and express the cognitive schema of others, and to create characters as convincing as Robinson Crusoe, if, admittedly, constructed on a slighter scale, both literally and aesthetically.

In accordance with contemporary practice,[67] Mrs. Leicester's School had a clear, though subtly presented, educative purpose. It attempted to illustrate the benefits of sociability and human affection, particularly for any likely to prove vulnerable to the 'tyranny of a mighty faculty',[68] the imagination. A consignment of new pupils arrive at Mrs. Leicester's school, and she suggests that they spend their first evening together relating to each other the histories of their past lives, in order that they "will not then look so unsociably upon each

66 Thomas Allsop, Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of S.T. Coleridge (N.Y., 1836), pp. 241-2. See also The Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, ed. Thomas Sadler (1869), ii, 110, Walter Savage Landor to Robinson, April 1831.

67 See, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft, Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness (1791).

68 See the Elia essay 'The Old Margate Hoy', L.W., ii, 181.

other".[69] This framework is Mary Lamb's, and in many of her tales, too, the girls lay particular stress on transitions in their lives by which they were brought out of an isolated and potentially unstable situation into a more sociable relation with others, and were encouraged to achieve a mental balance based upon cognitive realities, in place of their former introspective and often destructively fantasy-ridden seclusions. Elizabeth Villiers's life, for example, is brightened and stabilized by the intrusions of a robust sailor uncle, who frees her from an unhealthy preoccupation with her mother's grave, a preoccupation induced in part by her melancholic father.[70] Another of the young ladies, Margaret Green, forced by circumstance at one period of her life into more or less complete isolation, has no realities from which to develop her imagination and understanding other than the old books she finds in a secluded library.[71] Chancing upon a religious tract, she becomes absorbed to such an extent by the mysteries of Mahometanism, that her imagination is feverishly possessed with fears for her Christian soul's perdition, and for the souls of her few acquaintance. She is cured by the sympathetic interest and understanding of her doctor's wife, who takes her out from the mansion in which she was immured to a local fair, where the 'cheerful sight' of 'so many happy faces assembled

69 L.W., iii, 274.

70 See ibid., ii, 277. Elizabeth's dreams are full of images of death in which 'still it was the tombstone, and papa, and the smooth green grass, and my head resting upon the elbow of my father'.

71 See L.W., iii, 308, for Margaret's conjecture: 'It must have been because I was never spoken to at all, that I forgot what was right and what was wrong'.

together' causes Ishmael and Mahomet to vanish 'out of my head in an instant'.[72]

The state of self-effacing introversion in which Margaret describes herself at the commencement of her tale is similar to that experienced by the Christ's Hospital boy, as Lamb pictured him in 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital'. A typical pupil, once outside the seclusion of his lively and imaginative school-world, would steal along the busy streets 'with all the self-concentration of a young monk'.[73] A recently discovered letter, however, written by Charles Valentine Le Grice after Lamb's death in answer to Talfourd's plea for any information regarding their schooldays together, questions the generality of this description:

> The description which he gives in his Recollections of Christ's Hospital of the habits and feelings of the schoolboy is a delineation of himself: --- the feelings were all in his own heart: while others were all fire and play, he 'stole along with all the self-concentration of a young monk'. 74

If a tendency to avoid the natural extension of his horizon was peculiar to Lamb in his youth, then, remembering, perhaps, the deprivations and unhappy distortions which he might thereby have suffered, he was probably eager to second and extend Mary's thematic purpose in Mrs. Leicester's School. At least, all

72 L.W., iii, 310.

73 Ibid., i, 141.

74 See, for a transcript of the original letter, Richard Madden, 'The Old Familiar Faces', C.L.B., vi (1974), 116.

three of the tales which he contributed to the volume illustrate a process of growth from self-involvement to greater understanding and appreciation of the objective world, in particular of other people, and of the benefits of shared perception. And, as if to heighten the degree of personal exploration present in the tales, his 'The Witch Aunt' is rife with blatant autobiographical detail of the Lambs' old aunt.

This tale, the longest of the three, is very similar in construction to Mary's 'The Young Mahometan', except that Maria Howe's isolation is largely of her own choosing. Immersed within her 'book-closet', or stealing alone along a favourite dark walk,[75] Maria allows her obsession with the supernatural images she discovers in her reading to govern and distort all her perceptions, till she finally becomes terrorized by her own imaginary transformations of her old aunt into a witch.[76] She is cured from this nervous illness by another more discerning aunt who drags her reluctant niece away from dark enclosures and introduces her to 'lightsome rooms and cheerful faces', to

75 L.W., iii, 318.

76 The illustration which terrified Maria was the engraving of the Witch of Endor raising up Samuel, from Stackhouse's New History of the Bible. See.L.W., iii, 320. That Lamb had been himself as a child tormented by the same nightmare image is apparent from his account of such fears in the Elia essay 'Witches and other Night-Fears', ibid., ii, 67. In a passage from the original version of John Woodvil, Woodvil also describes similar childhood experiences. The lines are given by Lucas in his notes to the play, ibid., v, 364: Woodvil tells Margaret that the Stackhouse engraving 'so possest my fancy, being a child, / That nightly in my dreams an old Hag came / And sat upon my pillow'.

books 'rational or sprightly', teaching her 'to laugh at witch stories', to become sociable and to conform herself to her family and friends.[77] Maria acknowledges with gratitude this release from the misery of an isolated imagination to the security of the community. The little girls to whom, according to the framework of the volume, she tells her story, are not allowed to think for a moment that there was anything quaint or 'romantic' about her former imbalance: 'if you knew what I suffered,' she tells them, 'you would be thankful that you have had sensible people about you to instruct you and teach you better.'[78] The sanity of common sense is a necessary and healing correction to the imbalanced imagination; human society is a beneficial antidote to the terrors which prey upon the ostracized individual consciousness.

The issue which the Lambs explore in Mrs. Leicester's School is, admittedly, but imperfectly analogous to Wordsworth's preoccupation in Book VIII of The Prelude. For Wordsworth, the threat to the self's equilibrium lay outside, in the experience of the corruption of others; while the mental balance of the Lambs' schoolgirls is endangered by their own disorientating imaginative activity. But, in both cases, the error lies in the subject's inability to disassociate himself from disturbing mental images, whether they be his own creations or forced upon him by external agents. Wordsworth feels his

77 L.W., iii, 323.
78 Ibid., iii, 322.

own life dangerously darkened by the chaos he perceives, and Maria Howe experiences the pictorial witch image entering into her own life and threatening her in the person of her aunt. Both have to develop beyond the state of total integration with the experience of perception and the image perceived before they can understand their fears and begin the process of freeing themselves from them. It seems, therefore, that the vulnerability of childhood derives not so much from the evils it must encounter in its environment as from its own intrinsic insularity. Even if no actual images of evil enter its world, should it persist in a state of ignorance regarding all objectivities and relativities, innocence becomes a danger to itself and can create perils where none in fact exist. The developing consciousness must learn to regard what it sees as detached from itself, and objective, if it is to continue in its growth, and not to stagnate in a world whose joys may be as lacking in foundation as its debilitating, self-created fears. But to profess that Lamb advocated such an objective and critical stance, seems to belie the attribution to him, earlier in this chapter, of contradictory beliefs and postulations. In many of his essays, even in those taken in the preceding pages as examples of his attempts to express and excite childlike imagination, there are elements present which seem to cast some ambiguity on what appears to be his central theme.

'The Londoner', for instance, was first interpreted, in

accordance with the appreciations of Leigh Hunt and other subsequent Elian acclaimers, as a straightforward paean of simple celebration. But before formulating such an unequivocal interpretation, Lamb's eulogizers might have been well advised to study the original version of the paper. In it a passage, later dropped, presents the Londoner as having been thwarted in his aspirations to become the city's Lord Mayor, but now assuring its citizens that

> if I cannot by virtue of office commit vice & irregularity to the material Counter, I will at least erect a spiritual one, where they shall be laid fast by the heels. In plain words, I will do my best endeavors to write them down. 79

Such stress renders Lamb's actual purpose ambivalent when he describes, in the second half of the paper, 'the very deformities of London'. We are told that they could not disgust him, and that indeed he perceived universal truths in them; nevertheless, the pandering salesmen, the covetous customers, the brawlers, the avid 'tumultuous detectors of a pickpocket' and the crowd jostling to view the execution[80] are 'written down' in such plain terms that their 'spiritual' limitations are made manifest enough. The Londoner cannot forbear to love them, just as he loves London's very smoke, but they are endeared to him because they have been 'the medium most familiar to my vision'. Through them he has learnt to understand and love his environment,

79 'The Londoner. No. 1.', as transcribed in a letter to Manning, L.L., ii, 56, 15 February 1802.

80 Ibid., ii, 57.

but they have no intrinsic virtue of their own, and are no more desirable in themselves than the smoke. The Londoner's final image, of 'spleen ... Humour, Interest, Curiosity' sucking at the measureless breasts of his city 'without a possibility of being satiated',[81] is all too reminiscent of Spenser's description of the monster 'Errour' in the first canto of The Faerie Queene, with her thousand 'ill fauored' 'yong ones' 'Sucking vpon her poisonous dugs'.[82] The Londoner seems to say - 'I cannot but love the city as it is all the life that was ever given me to love, and I cannot condemn where I love, but do you not see the pity of it?' For while it is the all-embracing joyousness of the paper as a whole that transforms these black faults into brightness and worth, their actual specification works to deepen our appreciation of the Londoner's tears of 'unutterable sympathies' in the crowded Strand.

In other words, Lamb is here at work upon his experience of the city in a much more active and creative way than could be conceivable inside childlike perception proper. He is not blind to its ugliness and confusion, but, on the affection he can yet bear towards it, he builds the trust that there are multitudes among its citizens still struggling to harmonize their own lives and maintain their compassion for their fellows.

81 L.W., i, 40.

82 The Works of Edmund Spenser, ed. Frederick Morgan Padelford (Baltimore, 1932), i, 8. Cf. L.L., i, 248, to Manning, 28 November 1800, in which Lamb writes of 'London with-the-many-sins', the 'City abounding in whores'.

He hopes that they may be assisted by this attempt to present the worth that exists in apparent worthlessness. A power of Lamb's own is exerted to balance the ugliness of his experience with the knowledge of abiding goodness; the object of his perception is not seen in momentary isolation, but in all its complex circumstance and effects. Certainly, the ability to perceive an object afresh, and with wonder, is imaginatively potent, but to create of it a lasting joy, invulnerable to disillusionment, greater active imaginative effort is needed than that aroused by the summons back to merely childlike perception.

The momentary 'vision splendid' of the childlike is chastened and subdued by developing awareness of that 'still, sad music of humanity' perceptible in each seemingly isolated experience. The process is one of gain as much as loss, or so Wordsworth's 'Ode' assures us. The radiant hour 'Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower'[83] is gone never to return, for, once conceptual awareness of the relativities of time and space develops, nature cannot again be experienced with the pure joy of complete absorption in simple sensation. But he who can retain the recollection of what is precious in the early experience, along with new human awareness, possesses the ability not only to perceive the beauties of nature with a more 'habitual', if less vivid, appreciation, but also to

83 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', W.P., iv, 284, l. 179. For an interpretation of the 'Ode' to which I am here indebted, see Lionel Trilling, 'The Immortality Ode', The Liberal Imagination (1951), pp. 129-59.

share his understanding with his fellows. Another of Lamb's pre-Elian dramatic criticisms, the report entitled 'Miss Kelly at Bath' (1819), contrasts a purely childlike performance to one darkened by knowledge of human suffering. The innocent carelessness of the comic actress Mrs. Jordan is assessed in the light of the more thoughtful performances of Fanny Kelly. Although Lamb praises both actresses, ultimately he leaves his readers in no doubt as to which performance seemed to him the finest:

> Mrs. Jordan's was the carelessness of a child; her child-like spirit shook off the load of years from her spectators; she seemed one whom care could not come near; a privileged being, sent to teach mankind what it most wants, joyousness. Hence, if we had more unmixed pleasure from her performances, we had, perhaps, less sympathy with them than with those of her successor. This latter lady's is the joy of a freed spirit, escaping from care, as a bird that has been limed; her smiles, if I may use the expression, seemed saved out of the fire, relics which a good and innocent heart had snatched up as most portable; her contents are visitors, not inmates: she can lay them by altogether; and when she does so, I am not sure that she is not greatest. 84

The development of human sympathy leads, then, of necessity to the dissolution of purely childlike perception. Such growth alone does not, however, automatically ensure the child's ascension to the rank of moral agent. For to formulate an ethical conceptual structure by which one may judge 'between good / And evil, not as for the mind's delight / But for her safety',[85] and, furthermore, to realize one's convictions in action, requires a vigorous activity of the mind for which

84 L.W., i, 185.

85 Prelude, viii, 668-70.

sympathetic tendencies alone are insufficient. It was not simply by his more passive appreciation of abiding merits and virtues in individual lives but rather by discovering and exerting an active force for the construction of stability and order in himself that Wordsworth overcame his fears on first detecting the incipient chaos of human existence. Having discovered his own organizing powers, he achieves the confidence of the autonomous agent; it is this confidence which enables him to step out boldly into new and unchartered territories at the commencement of The Prelude:

> The earth is all before me: with a heart
> Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty,
> I look about, and should the guide I chuse
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way. 86

Unlike Milton's exiles, Wordsworth is not even reliant upon Providence as his guide; such is his confidence in his own sense of inner purpose that he knows he may take whichever path he comes across and still achieve his fulfillment and salvation.

The closing lines of Paradise Lost had impressed themselves forcibly upon Lamb's mind as well, or so one might assume from his many references to them, such as that in a letter to John Rickman, 1 February 1802. Here Lamb announces the publication of what was intended to be the 'First Number' of 'The Londoner', and adds:

86 Prelude, i, 15-19.

> I have done no more, so I have all the World before me where to chuse. I think you could give me hints. 87

One difference between Lamb's attitude towards his newly opening possibilities and Wordsworth's outlook upon his is self-evident: Lamb, either in order to involve his friend, or simply because he lacked sufficient confidence in himself, immediately asks for assistance. Furthermore, Lamb did not succeed in realizing his intentions in this case - 'The Londoner' never extended beyond its first number. But that Lamb found it very difficult to maintain an invigorating confidence in his own powers, and in its default could but look to others for assistance, might well have been conjectured from works discussed earlier in this chapter. The young ladies of Mrs. Leicester's School are not rescued from the destructive isolation of their fantasies through their own efforts to realize and correct their state. Helpless and passive in themselves, they are rather plucked bodily out from their afflicting circumstances by the activity of discerning acquaintances. They have the intelligence necessary to realize their improved position afterwards, and the sensitivity to be fully aware of their suffering at the time, but not the vigour, confidence and autonomy to assist themselves out of that unhappy situation.

There is also a suggestion in at least one of Charles's tales for the volume that the girls' acceptance of their new

87 L.L., ii, 49.

socialization is darkened by a yearning for their older, more imaginative, if more dangerous, view of things. 'Susan Yates: First Going to Church' tells of Susan's endeavours to become part of the religious community from which she has been isolated. She is successful, and concludes her account of her first church service with the remark:

> before that day I used to feel like a little outcast in the wilderness, like one that did not belong to the world of Christian people. I have never felt like a little outcast since.

Yet, in her final sentence, Susan reverts back to the time before she knew what a church was, and imagined that the church-bells she heard were the voices of angels:

> But I never can hear the sweet noise of bells, that I don't think of the angels singing, and what poor but pretty thoughts I had of angels in my uninstructed solitude. 88

The outcast has been rehabilitated, but her socialization has detracted from an imaginative experience that was in this case a blessing rather than a curse.

Susan can no longer make the mistake of believing in her first interpretation of the bells. She remembers the happiness the fancy gave her with a poignant pleasure, but cannot recreate her actual belief. Similarly, for Lamb, too, there could be no return to childlike perception, for all his uncertainty at times in the human world outside that Eden.

88 L.W., iii, 331.

He may have progressed with 'wandering steps and slow', and often looked back with nostalgia, but he realized the irretrievability of innocence once lost, and the worth of the more human and compassionate perspective gained thereby.

Chapter Four

The Shaping Spirit

The first part of this thesis delineated the falsities imposed upon Lamb's awakening creativity through his dependence upon the young Coleridge, and his insecurity as he veered from one enthusiasm to the next in an eager attempt to find some safe anchorage. With the unlooked-for accumulation of his responsibilities came greater personal stability and confidence, and over a period of time he weaned himself away from total reliance upon Coleridge. An imaginative impulse more intrinsic and original to himself came consciously to dominate his thought, and he discovered in recollections of childhood a secure joy within himself, and delighted in the continuation of his ability to see still as a child at times - with wonder and freshness. This seemed a gift which he might possibly communicate to others too. But another instinctive compulsion of his, one which had led him away from Coleridge's notions in the first place, his outgoing sympathy with the circumstances of others, prevented him from being absorbed in the enforcedly egocentric nature of childlike perception, and made him aware of its limitations and dangers. To understand an object or a person in the light of circumstance, and to strive toward ethical comprehension and the ability to balance good and evil seemed to him human assets worth the loss of the fervent 'unalloyed joy' of the child's world, endangered as that world

is by its deep-seated vulernability, the consequence of its exclusion of concepts of relativity. The capacity of seeing as a child remains precious because of its imaginative vitality and freshness, but a strength of comprehensive insight beyond its limitations must be developed if that imaginative gusto is to be employed usefully in working towards a coherent understanding of oneself and others. This central section will explore Lamb's success or failure in the struggle to objectify his environment, and, through the power of various facets of the imagination, to recreate it coherently. To his inability to succeed fully in doing so earlier in his career must be attributed the seemingly half-born nature of his work, the themes of which remain inadequately objectified, revealing all too clearly the fluctuation, vacillations and self-contradictions of a mind still immersed in the actual wandering process of discovering its beliefs, and creating coherent expression for its impressions.

From the first, however, Lamb had shown himself to be primarily concerned as a critic with works of art embodying those complex facets of human relationship which the childlike imagination in all its startling simplicity could not encompass. In the critical essays which represent the most noteworthy products of his pen from 1808 to the Elia essays in the 1820s, he concerns himself mainly with authors whom he saw as exploring and delineating in their art the intricacies of mature consciousness. His 1808 introduction to the Specimens of English Dramatic Poets who lived about the time of Shakspeare explicitly

states that, when selecting from the plays, he naturally turned to passages of moral and emotional concern, rather than to simpler genialities or more visionary beauties:

> The kind of extracts which I have sought after have been, not so much passages of wit and humour, though the old plays are rich in such, as scenes of passion, sometimes of the deepest quality, interesting situations, serious descriptions, that which is more nearly allied to poetry than to wit, and to tragic rather than to comic poetry. The plays which I have made choice of have been, with few exceptions, those which treat of human life and manners, rather than masques, and Arcadian pastorals, with their train of abstractions, unimpassioned deities, passionate mortals ... My leading design has been, to illustrate what may be called the moral sense of our ancestors. To show in what manner they felt, when they placed themselves by the power of imagination in trying situations, in the conflicts of duty and passion, or the strife of contending duties; what sort of loves and enmities theirs were; how their griefs were tempered, and their full-swoln joys abated... 1

Lamb's concern is to explore that ethical understanding which the old dramatists revealed when, by an act of the sympathetic imagination, they bodied forth in dramatic verse the human realities of their time. His introduction suggests that the capacities which, in Lamb's view, enabled such expression were predominantly ones of feeling and imagination: 'To show in what manner they felt, when they placed themselves by the power of imagination in trying situations'. Feeling is the primary and essential function, but it is released from an inexpressive subjectivity by that power of the imagination which provides

1 L.W., iv, xi-ii. Robert Southey may have incited Lamb to produce the Specimens: see The Life and Correspondence of the late Robert Southey, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey (1849-50), ii, 287, to Mrs. Southey, May 1804; and Lucas, Life of Charles Lamb, i, 289-90.

an objective form to which the feeling can respond, while the action represented itself gathers profundity from the nature and penetration of that response. As a result, the 'moral sense' thus presented has all the freshness and authenticity of childlike perception, as opposed to the conventionalized dogmatism of less imaginative thought, yet it can also, most importantly, encompass an intricate world of consequence as well as action, and of suffering as well as epiphanic joy. All Lamb's major critical writing of this period, his essays on Shakespeare, on Hogarth, on Wordsworth and on Keats, as well as the extensive notes on Shakespeare's contemporaries in the Specimens, concentrates upon the capacity of art to embody through imagistic form the inner world of consciousness, so that the ethical response of one mind to its experience is effectively communicated to others as one other aspect of universal truth, and one new clarification of 'the burden of the mystery'.

Such a preoccupation with the imagination as a conscious function, synthesizing subject and object, would suggest that Lamb was hardly developing away from Coleridge during these years, but was once again following in the footsteps of his friend, and proceeding into the critical battle as earlier, upon his own confession, he had proceeded into the field of poetry 'under cover of the greater Ajax'.[2] Or so, at any rate, many of his subsequent critics have assumed, and, in this context

2 L.W., v, 1.

as well as in the earlier poetical case, the suggestion has been made that Coleridge's influence was unfortunate, and directed Lamb away from a mode of criticism more appropriate to his natural bent, if less Romantic. George Watson, in assessing the literary critics, categorizes Lamb's approach to literature as essentially Johnsonian in its 'sound Anglican moralism', but confused and misdirected by Coleridge.[3] How far Lamb can be considered Johnsonian may become apparent later, but in what ways his approach to literature was conditioned by that of Coleridge, and in what ways it deviated from his erstwhile mentor's, or may possibly even be said to have directed Coleridge's own progress, is necessarily a matter of more immediate concern. Certainly, Hazlitt accused Coleridge of appropriating some of Lamb's original insights without acknowledging the debt: in his account 'On the Conversation of Authors', he informs his readers that Lamb 'has furnished many a text for C- to preach upon'.[4] But Hazlitt here may be in part simply returning the compliment, for Coleridge himself frequently insisted that all Hazlitt's best ideas came originally from Lamb. In 1816, while discussing Hazlitt's attacks upon him in the September Examiner of that year, he gravely assured his correspondent that

> Hazlitt possesses considerable Talent; but is diseased by a morbid hatred of the Beautiful, and killed by

3 Watson, The Literary Critics, pp. 120-3.

4 H.W., xii, 36.

> the absence of Imagination, & alas! by a wicked Heart of embruted Appetites.... Almost all the sparkles & originalities of his Essays are, however, echoes from poor Charles Lamb ... 5

In December of that year, he repeated this judgement to Henry Crabb Robinson who duly reported it in his diary.[6] Nor did Coleridge let the matter drop there: much later, towards the close of his life, his table-talk still dwelt upon Hazlitt's debt to Lamb. When comparing vital creativity to static repetitiveness, he suggests to his audience

> You will find this a good gauge or criterion of genius - whether it progresses and evolves, or only spins upon itself. Take Dryden's Achitophel and Zimri ... every line adds to or modifies the character, which is, as it were, a-building up to the very last verse; whereas, in Pope's Timon, &c., the first two or three couplets contain all the pith of the character ... In like manner compare Charles Lamb's exquisite criticisms on Shakespeare with Hazlitt's round and round imitations of them. 7

However, this last accusation has been given at length because the account of genius leading up to it shows Coleridge himself adapting an insight which Lamb first recorded in his notes to the Dramatic Specimens. Commenting upon a passage from John Fletcher's Thierry and Theoderet, Lamb remarks that

> noble as the whole scene is, it must be confessed that the manner of it, compared with Shakspeare's

5 C.L., iv, 686, to Hugh J. Rose, 25 September 1816. See also, for Hazlitt's personal acknowledgement of the close connection between some of his ideas and those of Lamb, The Letters of William Hazlitt, ed. Herschel Moreland Sikes and others (1979), p. 203, to John Scott, January 1821.

6 H.C.R., i, 200: 'He denies Hazlitt, however, originality, and ascribes to Lamb the best ideas in Hazlitt's article'.

7 Table-Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. H.N. Coleridge (Oxford, repr. 1917), p. 194.

> finest scenes, is slow and languid. Its motion is circular, not progressive. Each line revolves on itself in a sort of separate orbit. They do not join into one another like a running hand. 8

He continues in this vein in concluding his judgements upon Fletcher, in terms even closer to Coleridge's:

> His ideas moved slow; his versification, though sweet, is tedious, it stops every moment; he lays line upon line, making up one after the other, adding image to image so deliberately that we see where they join: Shakspeare mingles every thing, he runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors; before one idea has burst its shell, another is hatched and clamorous for disclosure. 9

Of course, given the close relationship between Coleridge and Lamb, and between Lamb and Hazlitt too, for that matter, to have published a subsequently shared insight first was no guarantee of having first conceived it. George Barnett warns the naive researcher against such an assumption in his account, The Evolution of Elia:

> With Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Lamb brought together so frequently in conversation, it is not surprising that they should have exchanged ideas that were later developed into literary form, sometimes with two writers using the same theme at the same or at different times. Ideas were common property, and it is not possible to ascertain the originators in many cases, but the authors themselves were aware of their mutual dependence and influence. 10

Furthermore, in the case of Coleridge, at any rate, even if some of his critical insights into the functioning of the

8 L.W., iv, 329.

9 **Ibid.**, iv, 341. See also, for a similar comparison, R.C. Bald, Literary Friendships in the Age of Wordsworth (Cambridge, 1932), p. xxii n. 2.

10 Barnett, The Evolution of Elia, p. 66.

imagination were not formally presented until the long-delayed publication of the Biographia, the recently published early notebooks reveal the process of his thought as it developed, and his poems, too, published as they were at an early stage in his career, suggest his ideological convictions in terms that would communicate much to those accustomed to listening to the famed conversationalist.

In the 1802 'Dejection: an Ode', for example, Coleridge posits the same connection between feeling and the imagination in the process of creativity as Lamb delineated in the 1808 introduction to the Dramatic Specimens given above. For Coleridge, it is 'my shaping spirit of Imagination' which presents to the subject a form to which it can respond with emotion. 'Outward forms' alone, the mere superficial appearance of nature as presented to the blank eye, cannot in themselves call forth feeling. Only the power of the imagination allows man to participate joyously in life at large by synthesizing with the exterior form 'the passion and the life, whose fountains are within', and so producing the vital image which frees him from the crippling limitations of either perpetual self-contemplation, or unnatural, because unfeeling, preoccupation with 'abstruse research'.[11] Lamb's concern in 1808 with this imaginative process was, however, differently weighted: he then saw it as valuable because of the greater understanding, in particular the more profound ethical understanding, it

11 C.P., i, 362-8, ll. 86, 45, 46 and 89.

allowed, and unlike Coleridge, he did not dwell at this point upon the joy of the activity in its own right, its enfranchizing and humanizing effects. But Coleridge, too, stressed continually, of course, the all-important gain in understanding provided by the functions of the imagination.

During the series of lectures given in the spring of 1818, Coleridge assured his audience that

> In the imagination of man exists the seeds of all moral and scientific improvement ... The imagination is the distinguishing characteristic of man as a progressive being. 12

The imagination performed this extension of man's awareness through its ability to present to the mind in the more clarified and tangible form of images its own half-conscious intuitions. In an earlier entry in the Notebooks, Coleridge attempted to analyze how this half-conscious, and half-inspired, objectivization came about:

> In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim Awaking of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! 13

The subject in Coleridge's description looks out to a natural object, and by means of the imagination associates with it an idea of the subject's own, an idea perhaps hitherto unconscious,

12 Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (1936), p. 195.

13 C.N., ii, 2546, entry for 14 April 1805.

or present to consciousness as but an amorphous emotion. The fusion of object and idea through the imagination produces an image or symbol capable of representing objectively that which was previously confused or subjective. The symbol thus fleshes forth in the form of a permanent artifice the transitory emotion it objectified.

Undoubtedly Coleridge owed much of his concept of the imagination to Kant and his followers amongst the German metaphysicians. On the visit to Germany in 1798-9, he had learnt to read German, and two years later he began to read Kant seriously and with great enthusiasm. The Critique of Pure Reason influenced him to such an extent that he announced, in 1801, the overthrow of his former allegiance to the doctrines of association and necessity, in favour of a complete commitment to Kantian theories of the creativity of the mind in opposition to the laws of mechanic association, and of freedom from necessitarianism through the moral will.[14] His near hero-worship of Kant did not wane; in 1817, he was writing to a friend:

> I reverence Immanuel Kant with my whole heart and soul; and believe him to be the only Philosopher, for all men who have the power of thinking. I can not conceive the liberal pursuit or profession, in which the service derived from a patient study of his works would not be incalculably great, both as cathartic, tonic, and directly nutricious. 15

14 See C.L., ii, 706, to Thomas Poole, 16 March 1801.

15 Ibid., iv, 792, to J.H. Green, 13 December 1817.

Later, he wrote to an aspiring student, in yet more absolute terms:

> I by no means recommend you to an extension of your philosophic researches beyond Kant. In him is contained all that can be learnt... 16

His philosophic and quasi-philosophic writings are saturated with Kantian terms and references; much of The Friend is an exposition of Kant's moral philosophy. Nor was he ever slow to acknowledge his debt to the German philosophers in general, however often he appears to have overlooked the need for reference in specific cases. In 1804, he admitted his debt with candour:

> In the Preface of my Metaphys. Works I should say - Once & all read Tetens, Kant, Fichte, &c. - & there you will trace or if you are on the hunt, track me. 17

Why Kant's work made such an impression on Coleridge may be largely attributable to the latter's intellectual state when he first encountered the philosopher's works. The fervency of the young Coleridge's adoption of the philosophy of necessarianism was discussed in the first chapter; before 1800, however, he had begun to show signs of a faltering faith,

16 C.L., v, 14, to James Gooden, 14 January 1820.

17 C.N., ii, 2375. In this entry, Coleridge appears to foresee the accusations of plagiarism later raised against him by such critics as Norman Fruman in Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel (N.Y., 1971). He adds in his own defence: 'Why then not acknowledge your obligations step by step? Because, I could not do in a multitude of glaring resemblances without a lie / for they had been mine, formed, & full formed in my own mind, before I had ever heard of these Writers'. See also, on the 'coincidental' similarities between his work and Schelling's, Biographia, i, 102.

due to his suspicions of the mental passivity inherent in such ideologies. No alternative structure seemed then available to him; he denounced the 'vagueness or insufficiency of the terms used in the metaphysical schools of France and Great Britain', and considered Newton and Locke, as well as Priestley, to be but 'Theists of the mechanic school'.[18] His study of the first Critique, however, enabled him to proclaim with confidence his own apostasy:

> If I do not greatly delude myself, I have not only completely extricated the notions of Time, and Space; but have overthrown the doctrine of Association, as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern Infidels - especially, the doctrine of Necessity. 19

Nor was Coleridge the only glad recipient amongst his British contemporaries of Kant's liberating doctrine; Crabb Robinson, the diarist, who was to become a close acquaintance of the Lambs, recorded in his letters and journals his dismissal, through his grasp of Kant, of Priestley's necessarianism.[20] But none of Crabb Robinson's detailed diary reports of his conversations with Lamb suggest that he ever introduced the subject of the German philosophers to his friend, nor does Lamb seem to have been self-directed towards such reading.[21] In so far as his views are coloured

18 Biographia, i, 192 and 184 n. See also, for an account of the paucity of philosophic idealism in eighteenth-century Britain, René Wellek's Immanuel Kant in England (Princeton, 1931), p. 4.

19 C.L., ii, 706, to Thomas Poole, 16 March 1801.

20 See The Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, i, 74-6.

21 For Lamb's ignorance of German, see Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, 'Janus Weatherbound; or the Weathercock Steadfast for Lack of Oil', London Magazine, vii (1823), 51: '[Lamb] had ... a dislike to all German literature, - by which language he was, I believe, scrupulously intact'.

by the new philosophy at all, then, he can only have been affected through the medium of Coleridge's writings and conversation. And for Coleridge the primary stimulus of the new philosophy came from its vivid categorization of the necessary activity and creativity of the mind in cases of even apparently elementary cognition. He need no longer accept those systems in which the 'Mind ... is always passive - a lazy Looker-on on an external World'.[22] All such he renounces and welcomes instead a philosophy which has as its basis a concept of the mind as powerful and capable of organized growth and production, and which employs as a term for such unique mental power the word 'imagination'.

In tracing the process by which 'the rules of the IMAGINATION' came to represent for Coleridge and others 'the very powers of growth and production'[23] in order to understand what was meant by that statement, it will not prove satisfactory merely to present the data of their acquaintance with Kant: an attempt must be made to present the ideas which so impressed them. Analyzing human perception in the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant moves, in a key passage, from a statement on that which is primarily given to the introduction of imagination as necessary for the assimilation of that given:

> What is first given to us is appearance. When combined with consciousness, it is called perception.... Now,

22 C.L., ii, 709, to Thomas Poole, 23 March 1801.

23 Biographia, ii, 65.

> since every appearance contains a manifold, and since different perceptions therefore occur in the mind separately and singly, a combination of them, such as they cannot have in sense itself, is demanded. There must therefore exist in us an active faculty for the synthesis of this manifold. To this faculty I give the title, imagination. 24

In the context of Romanticism, what strikes us as most significant here is Kant's assertive pronouncement of the mind in perception as active. The passive reaction of the child when faced with a fresh representation, before consciousness of what he is looking at develops, cannot therefore be said to constitute 'perception' in the Kantian sense; the child merely responds, animal-like, to sensual stimuli. But the characteristics of the imagination beyond its essential activity are veiled in mystery; Kant terms it a 'blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious'.[25] All that can be said in description is that the faculty is active, and that its activity is synthesis. By its power, each single momentary representation is combined to present a coherence; thus conscious perception is rendered possible.

But Kant adds one characteristic to the faculty, one which accounts for its function. The imagination, he insists, must be a priori: that is, it does not deduce its results from previous knowledge, but arrives at them intuitively, as it were, on the strength of its own power.[26] For, in order to

24 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (1929), pp. 143-4, A.120.

25 Ibid., p. 112, A.78.

26 See ibid., p. 133, A.101.

perceive a series of representations as constituting one appearance, the consciousness must already have grasped basic concepts such as those of time, space and number. It must be able to see one representation as differentiated from, and related to, another in respect of such categories.[27] For example, representations of the same tree differ according to the passage of time, although each different presentation is part of the manifold of appearance of the single tree; similarly, representations of a table differ according to the spatial point from which they are viewed but the table remains one appearance. Kant saw the ability to form various appearances into recognizable concepts, like tree or table, as a function of what he terms the reproductive imagination; the primary growth, that to consciousness of the categories, he saw as an achievement of the productive, or transcendental, imagination.[28] What remains mysterious is the manner in which the previously unthought-of, the categories, abruptly come to be recognized. Faced with sundry representations, the mind must have made a remarkable discovery, a discovery unrelated to any previous knowledge either through inference or deduction, but yet one which its embryonic understanding was able to ratify and accept as true. It is this strange leap in the dark, which yet seems to carry with it its own conviction, that Kant suggests constitutes the imaginative. Two of the characteristics

27 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, p. 131, A.99.
28 See ibid., p. 183, A.141.

of the Kantian imagination are, therefore, activity in response to impressions, and synthesis as the achievement of that activity; what is more, both must be of sufficient power to carry inherent conviction of the validity of the original discovery thus arrived at.

A third, and highly significant, characteristic of the Kantian imagination is its spontaneity. Although functioning through the sensibility, it is not determinable by the senses, but is rather 'a faculty which determines the sensibility a priori', according to the first Critique.[29] That is, its discoveries, as we have seen, are not automatically inferable from the sensory experience, but depend upon the strength and bias of individual responses to it. If the reaction be sufficiently vibrant, it will impel a process of organization by which its significance may be recognized and realized. And both the initial reaction, and the process of organization, Kant apparently subsumes under the concept of imagination. It is thus that imagination forms its own laws, and becomes 'productive and exerting an activity of its own (as originator of arbitrary forms of possible intuitions)', or so Kant expresses it in his 'Analytic of the Beautiful', from The Critique of Judgement.[30]

Throughout that work, the essential freedom of the imagination is emphasized. In judging an object to be beautiful, Kant

29 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, p. 165, B.152.

30 Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1928, repr. 1952), p. 86.

understands the mind to be free of any interest in its usefulness, agreeability or merit.[31] Rather, the object is to be judged only according to its intrinsic properties, that is, upon consideration of such questions as the degree of harmony in the balance of its parts, and the appropriateness of each part in relation to the whole. Obviously, the imagination does not act in limbo; understanding of what constitutes harmony and appropriateness is necessary, both as preliminary knowledge, and as continuous relativizing activity. Indeed, Kant understands the pleasure of aesthetic experience to lie in this harmonious but free interaction of the imagination with the understanding.[32] But in ordering the impressions received through the fresh experience, the imagination can actually add to the understanding previously amassed and according to which it must be rating the new impression. Although it cannot work in a sphere beyond that made sensible by formerly achieved concepts and conceptual structures, its new discoveries can bring fresh understanding to the primary source. This paradoxical characteristic of the imagination, at once bound and free, at once leaping ahead to fresh insight yet that insight worthless if not ratified and recognized by earlier understanding, leads Kant to stress 'the free conformity to law of the imagination'.[33] By 'law' he here refers to the structure of concepts established

31 See Kant, The Critique of Judgement, p. 49; 'taste in the beautiful may be said to be the one and only disinterested and free delight'.

32 See ibid., pp. 58 and 60.

33 Ibid., p. 86.

by former understanding, that is, those concepts conceived by the productive and reproductive imaginations in the first place; the new imaginative discovery, when it conforms to the pre-established knowledge, constitutes an addition to the apprehender's conscious understanding.

According to this construction, then, the imagination has an evolutionary function in relation to human consciousness. And so we find Coleridge continually glorifying the function's ability to create order and harmony out of the original chaos of perception, and to add incessantly, by new combinations and new recognitions, to the ordering achieved. Activity, growth and production - these are the characteristics of the imagination, and its operations are associated with confidence and joy. Unfortunately, however, the inherent freedom of this 'shaping spirit' entails that it cannot be activated at will. In the Notebooks, Coleridge describes an unhappy state in which the initial imaginative insight still functions, but the second burst of imaginative energy necessary to amalgamate the new insight with former understanding is miserably lacking:

> Whither have my Animal Spirits departed? My Hopes - O me! that they which once I had to check ... should now be an effort/Royals & Studding Sails & the whole Canvas stretched to catch the feeble breeze! - I have many thoughts, many images; large Stores of the unwrought materials; scarcely a day passes but something new in fact or in illustration, rises up in me, like Herbs and Flowers in a garden in early Spring; but the combining Power, the power to do, the manly effective Will, that is dead or slumbers most diseasedly. 34

34 C.N., ii, 2086. Entry for 11 May 1804.

A similar sense of desolation at the accumulation of insights not quite specific and vivid enough to organize themselves into full expression also haunted Lamb. But the understanding achieved through conscious realization of this weakness led him to record with admiring appreciation the ability of great art to express a particular perception very forcibly by unifying or synthesizing all the details of a scene so that each provides an additional representation or reflection of the initial apprehension. In the essay 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth' (1811), a well-known passage delineating the particular merits of the print Gin Lane reads:

> There is more of imagination in it - that power which draws all things to one, - which makes things animate and inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects and their accessories, take one colour, and serve to one effect. Every thing in the print, to use a vulgar expression, tells. Every part is full of 'strange images of death.' 35

The passage has probably received more attention than the majority of Lamb's critical pronouncements because of Wordsworth's use of it in his preface to the 1815 edition of the Lyrical Ballads.[36] Wordsworth, in fact, presents this aspect of the power of the imagination 'in the language of one of my most esteemed Friends', and Lamb was later to thank him for the inclusion.[37] The prominence thus given to the passage led

35 L.W., i, 73.
36 See W.Pr., iii, 34.
37 L.L., iii, 139-40, to Wordsworth, 16 April 1815.

M.H. Abrams to comment on it in The Mirror and the Lamp. Having made the assumption that Coleridge as well as Wordsworth would probably have agreed 'that this power of coadunating every part ... is a gift of the imagination', Abrams adds:

> But Lamb, though a gifted and sensitive literary commentator, was disinclined to speculation or theoretical construction, and has little more to say on the matter. 38

This dismissal illustrates the scantiness of Abrams's knowledge of Lamb's work. Certainly, Lamb's disinclination for theoretical criticism, and his humility in presenting himself as an influential speculator,[39] curtailed his contribution to the Romantic debate on imagination, but throughout his letters and more formal writings, expression of his thought and ideas upon the imagination abound.

For example, Lamb had recognized previously the need for imaginative synthesis as a means for intellectual growth and development. As early as January 1797, he attempted to persuade Coleridge of the gain in understanding and confidence he might achieve by struggling to synthesize his poetic sensibilities, and to direct them towards one goal.[40] It was a year later before Coleridge first expressed himself his need for unity, the desire which became so characteristic a

38 M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (N.Y., 1953), p. 179.

39 See, for example, from a further letter to Wordsworth commenting on the 1815 'Preface': 'The account of what you mean by Imagination is very valuable to me. It will help me to like some things in poetry better, which is a little humiliating in me to confess'. L.L., iii, 148, 28 April 1815.

40 Ibid., i, 87, 8 January 1797.

feature of his later writing. [41] And, in those early notes to the Dramatic Specimens on Fletcher and Shakespeare, Lamb had indicated his appreciation of a vibrant cohesiveness in art; Shakespeare's unflagging imaginative synthesizing activity was an example of that shaping power which both Lamb and Coleridge understood and which Coleridge longed to possess.[42] Only such intensity could have done justice to the complexity he perceived in his own experience at each moment. 'Who ever felt a single sensation?' he asked in the Notebooks, and proceeded:

> Is not every one at the same moment conscious that there co-exist a thousand others in a darker shade, or less light ... 43

Only imaginative synthesis can carry alive some of the numerous sensations into representations, and present the experience in all its complexity as a unified manifold.

Lamb's appreciation and understanding of this complexity which imagination can represent in an art-form lies behind one particular critical judgement of his which has generally been found unacceptable, or dismissed as exaggerated whimsy. Although most readers of the 1811 essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation' would agree that its assessment of the individual tragedies is often insightful enough, few pay particular attention to Lamb's main argument. In the essay,

41 See C.L., i, 349, to John Thelwall, 14 October 1797: 'My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great - something one & indivisable'.

42 L.W., iv, 329 and 341.

43 C.N., ii, 2370.

Lamb proposes the paradox that the plays of Shakespeare for all their 'distinguished excellence', or rather because of their distinguished excellence, are less calculated for stage performance than those of almost any other dramatist.[44] Recent criticism has tended to concentrate on the connection between Lamb's views and the theatre of his day. John I. Ades, for example, in his article 'Charles Lamb, Shakespeare and the Early Nineteenth-Century Theater', depicts in detail the limitations and failings of stage performances of Shakespeare in Lamb's time, and argues that 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare' concerned itself with these limitations alone, and was never intended to have a more general significance.[45] Ades's article is in part a reply to two earlier papers by Sylvan Barnet, 'Charles Lamb's Contribution to the Theory of Dramatic Illusion' and 'Charles Lamb and the Tragic Malvolio'. Although Barnet also concentrates on the actualities of stage performances in the early nineteenth century, he concludes that Lamb's ideas on Shakespeare existed independently of the theatre of his day. The representation of Malvolio included in the Elia essay 'On Some of the Old Actors' was presented by Lamb as an account of the actor Robert Bensley's performance of the role, but Barnet shows that it is 'not Bensley's, not the age's, but Lamb's own'.[46] Similarly, Barnet considers that in the earlier

44 L.W., i, 99.

45 John I. Ades, 'Charles Lamb, Shakespeare, and Early Nineteenth-Century Theater', P.M.L.A., lxxxv (1970), 514-26.

46 Sylvan Barnet, 'Charles Lamb and the Tragic Malvolio', P.Q., xxxiii (1954), 188.

essay on Shakespeare's tragedies Lamb's denunciations of dramatic performances of the plays was absolute and as such went beyond the evidence afforded by the theatre of his day.[47] But neither of these critics discusses the independent value of Lamb's argument. In his Dramatic Chracter in the English Romantic Age, Joseph W. Donohue does deal at some length with what he sees as the general Romantic preference, expressed in particular by Coleridge and Hazlitt, for a 'closet' Shakespeare, and he considers Lamb's view to be helpful 'in demonstrating that the reading of a play in the closet represents for these critics something more than a negative reaction to the grossness of much contemporary theatrical production'.[48] But, for Donohue, Lamb's ideas are 'extreme' and 'fleshless'; he leaves Lamb's work with 'increased respect' for the more reasonable criticisms of Hazlitt and Coleridge, and is not even ready to give Lamb credit for having been the initiator of this approach to Shakespeare.

When taken seriously for its own sake, however, Lamb's argument in 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare' is interesting not only for the light it throws upon his own critical presuppositions but also in relation to the theories of the imagination delineated earlier in this chapter. For his argument is based upon the thesis, echoed later by Leigh Hunt

47 Sylvan Barnet, 'Charles Lamb's Contribution to the Theory of Dramatic Illusion', P.M.L.A., lxix (1954), 1150-9.

48 Joseph W. Donohue, Jr., Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age (Princeton, 1970), p. 288.

in commenting upon a performance of Richard III, that the 'union of such a variety of tones of feeling as prevails in the great humanities of Shakespeare' can never be adequately represented by an actor.[49] The 'shaping spirit' of Shakespeare's imagination has produced an organization of such complexity that all the trappings of stage presentation cannot sufficiently embody it. Rather, the response required is that of the contemplative and reciprocal imagination, reacting with satisfaction and developed understanding to the power of each detail of the manifold, and relating to its own former experience each new discovery presented. Lamb admits that this is not to say that a performance of Shakespeare is always worthless, nor that the distinctness which stage presentation brings to aspects of a play cannot provide a high degree of pleasure, but he insists that the play must always be made another thing by being acted. He concludes:

> What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind, and its movements: and this I think may sufficiently account for the very different sort of delight with which the same play so often affects us in the reading and the seeing. 50

The distinction Lamb here wishes to draw is that between response to single and distinct action, and involvement in a

49 Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (N.Y., 1949), p. 220. Written in 1819, the critique as a whole is obviously much influenced by Lamb's essay and by his earlier criticisms of Richard III in performance (see L.W., i, 36-8).

50 L.W., i, 108.

subtle mental process which synthesizes complex apprehensions into its representations by means of the imagination. So much of the uniqueness of a Shakespeare play rests upon the accurate delineation of motivation for action, rather than upon the importance of the 'bodily action' alone. A stage presentation affects this balance; the act is more forcibly presented to the senses, and the meditative passages, as they must carry the distinctive idiosyncrasies of the particular actor enunciating the lines, are bound to be that much more difficult to assimilate and relate to one's own experience. The distinctiveness provided by the actor must curtail the store of 'possible intuitions' contained in the complexity of the work itself. The actor's physical personality limits the audience's disinterestedness; they are likely to feel sympathy <u>for</u> Lear, destitute on the heath, and hence lack the necessary emotional detachment to feel, rather, a sympathy <u>with</u> the abdicating king in his common humanity.[51] On the stage, 'when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty, but we are left to our poor unassisted senses', Lamb even suggests that 'the first and obvious prejudices' to Othello's colour are bound to prove a hindrance to appreciation of that tragedy.[52]

These are the unfortunate results of the 'instantaneous

51 <u>L.W.</u>, i, 107: 'We want to take him into shelter and relieve him. That is all the feeling which the acting of Lear ever produced in me'.

52 Ibid., i, 108.

nature of the impressions which we take in at the eye and ear at a playhouse, compared with the slow apprehension oftentimes of the understanding in reading'.[53] This sentence presents Lamb's case most compactly, and its phrases reward careful attention. The playhouse audience is struck by instantaneous impressions in much the same manner as a child is overwhelmed by his first sensory experiences. A complex response of the imagination working with the understanding is not called for; the actor has done the imaginative work for them, to the extent to which he is able, and they need be no other than passive recipients of his craft. But, in the reading of the play, there is no medium between the imaginative power of the work and the mind of the reader. When he is moved, it is because he has exerted his own ability to make real to himself the world of the play in all its complexity. His imaginative activity in response to the work of art leads him to new discoveries, and to their ratification and slow assimilation by the understanding. Hence his perception of human experience develops and deepens; he apprehends more subtle and complex conceptual structures. Cognitive growth, absent from the experience of the theatre audience, here flourishes.

Nor are the distinctions Lamb presents in this essay an isolated example of his critical insight into this concern.

53 L.W., i, 98.

In 'Play-House Memoranda', written in 1813, he notes the lively reactions of a blind man to a stage performance, and concludes that 'having no drawback of sight to impair his sensibilities', the blind perceiver's greater imaginative participation in each scene increased his pleasure, concentration and profit.[54] Earlier, in 1794, in what was probably his first poem, he had compared the experience of attending a performance by the actress Sarah Siddons to that of a child listening enthralled to a 'Grandam's' tales.[55] Here, part of his admiration for the actress lies in the fact that she is capable of exerting such an overwhelming impression; by 1808, however, he is praising another actress in verse for her ability to do far more than merely overcome the audience's senses for the instance. Fanny Kelly he describes as having been 'by fortune thrown amid the actor's train', rather than by suitability of histrionic temperament. She does not follow the 'common strain' of performers, but retains a 'native dignity of thought', maintaining at all times 'a pensive face / And thoughtful eye, and a reflecting brow'.[56] Lamb considers her performance superior to those of more conventionally impressive actors, of whom Mrs. Siddons provides the superlative example, because she is able to reflect something of the more complex, contemplative material of the work of art in her actual physical expressions.

54 L.W., i, 158.
55 Ibid., v, 3.
56 Ibid., v, 40.

In similar vein, Lamb praises the faces captured in the engravings of Hogarth:

> The faces of Hogarth have not a mere momentary interest, as in caricatures, or those grotesque physiognomies which we sometimes catch a glance of in the street, and, struck with their whimsicality, wish for a pencil and the power to sketch them down; and forget them again as rapidly, - but they are permanent abiding ideas. Not the sports of nature, but her necessary eternal classes. We feel that we cannot part with any of them, lest a link should be broken. 57

Hogarth's faces possess such universal significance because of the 'thinking character' impressed upon them as representations of his own eminently thoughtful nature. Their expressions reflect apprehensions of the humiliation, suffering and wastage of human lives. The interest they arouse is not momentary, their significance not soon forgotten, because they have not overwhelmed the peruser by instantaneous impression, but instead have captured and activated his imagination. Once aroused, the imaginative response involves the understanding in the verification of its fresh insight, and the new discovery supplements former apprehension and plays a part in the organization of the peruser's own conceptual structure. Hence, its significance for him is permanent and abiding, and represents a growth in his cognition, or a necessary 'link' in his understanding. Lamb, it is true, does not refer specifically to the function of the imagination in this passage; but, given the Kantian thesis that any significant response to art necessarily entails the active

57 L.W., i, 77-8.

participation of the imagination, it follows that the gain in ethical insight Lamb delineates here is the result of fresh apprehension initiated and organized by the 'shaping spirit of Imagination'. Both 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare' and 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth' are generally considered to be highly characteristic of Lamb's whimsical and pointed method and themes; if their authenticity is so accepted, then it must also be acknowledged that, at an early date in the history of English Romantic theory, they explore the nature and consequences of the new concepts of the imagination, as they come into play in the practical response to art, with the wholehearted commitment and consistency of self-originating involvement.

Chapter Five

The Power and the Glory

By the time he came to present to the public his theories of the synthesizing imagination, Coleridge was no longer confidently involved in the production of poetry. He interpreted the workings of the 'shaping spirit' with the clarity of an outsider, in exile from that creative joy in which he had earlier gloried. Lamb, however, is said never at any time to have possessed the capacity to shape a sustained work of art; he was never in a position to do more than appreciate the characteristics of full imaginative productivity at second-hand. Furthermore, a few of his twentieth-century detractors have even dismissed Lamb's critical writings on the grounds that a reader so 'lacking in systematic reflection' could hardly rank amongst the acknowledged judges of literature.[1] Lamb himself would have been the first to insist upon the unsuitability of that eminence as a fit position for himself: from his earliest writing days to his last, his letters are full of explanations and apologies concerning the difficulty he found, not only in organizing his own ideas into a systematic form,[2] but also in gaining a clear critical grasp of the work of others. In

1 More, Shelburne Essays, 4th ser., p. 160.

2 See, for example, L.L., i, 127, to Coleridge, 28 January 1798. On his inability to plot, see also Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 110, to Mary Shelley, 26 July 1827.

1799 he apologizes to Southey for his inability to 'judge system-wise' of the newly published Poems;[3] in 1803 he is compelled to assure Godwin repeatedly that his critical responses to the latter's Life of Chaucer could not possibly be shaped into a worthwhile review. Here again he stresses his incapacity to body forth his conceptions in sustained form, either in critical or more creative writing:

> As to reviewing ... my head is so whimsical a head, that I cannot after reading another man's book, let it have been never so pleasing, give any account of it, in any methodical way. I cannot follow his train ... I can vehemently applaud, or perversely stickle at parts: but I cannot grasp at a whole. This infirmity (which is nothing to brag of) may be seen in my two little compositions, the tale & my play. In both which no reader, however partial, can find any story. 4

He was forced to write a similar letter of self-excuse to Basil Montague in 1810.[5] And, for all his sincere desire to express his appreciation of Wordsworth's Excursion when it was published in 1814, he had great difficulty in screwing his courage to the sticking point, and producing a review. He told Wordsworth on 19 September that

> the book was like a Mountn. Landscape to one that should walk on the edge of a precipice. I perceived beauty dizzily ... I feel my inability, for my brain is always desultory & snatches off hints from things, but can seldom follow a "work" methodically. 6

3 L.L., i, 163, 15 March 1799.
4 Ibid., ii, 128, 10 November 1803.
5 Ibid., iii, 52, 12 July 1810.
6 Ibid., iii, 111.

For all his admiration of that shaping which produces an imaginative whole, Lamb felt himself to be miserably lacking in the organizing powers of mind necessary for the establishment of logical structures and wholes.

Whether or not this concept of himself as a radically unsystematic thinker is of any relevance to his ability to assess a work of literature, it does account for Lamb's comparative inactivity in another field in which the Romantic writers characteristically asserted themselves. A sense of pride in the possession of a penetrating and organizing intellect seems to have encouraged the poets of the era to follow through their initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution with a marked degree of involvement in political activity and political writing. The poet became a public spokesman, defending the rights of the voiceless and neglected, and prophesying the potential advent of a more just order, shaped by his own imaginative foresight. Coleridge, in writing the Watchman, confidently presented himself as his nation's political guardian; Wordsworth 'had given twelve hours thought to the conditions and prospects of society, for one to poetry',[7] while Shelley saw poetry itself as an infallible medium for society's political reform.[8] Lamb, on the contrary, expresses doubt concerning his ability to organize his

7 See Orville Dewey, The Old World and the New (1836), i, 106. This reference is taken from M.H. Abrams, 'English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age', Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Northrop Frye (N.Y., 1963), p. 43.

8 See 'A Defence of Poetry', The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (N.Y., 1930), vii, 140: 'The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry'.

own life effectively, and shows little sign of any desire to present ideal systems for more public reorganization.

The circumstances of his upbringing must have but deepened Lamb's characteristic reserve in this respect, and further encouraged his withdrawal from active issues of government. Both his parents came from the servant class and sought to establish for their children life patterns of obedience, in which one fulfilled the commands of others and never asserted an independent and self-governing initiative to any significant effect.[9] Lamb makes this clear when describing his father, under the name of 'Lovel', in the Elia essay 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple'. Although Lovel is presented as being ever ready to take up arms in the cause of the oppressed, he 'never forgot rank'. Consequently, he feels he must beg pardon of his betters if his spontaneous reaction to injustice has resulted in any clash with a 'man of quality'; and he never carries through his initial humane response systematically.[10] The son records this state of affairs with apparent approval.

Nevertheless, in his youth Lamb, like his contemporaries, had been affected by that vision of anarchical egalitarianism provided by the French Revolution in its early dawn, or so at least his account of his incorporation in 1801 into the production of the subversive news-sheet The Albion would suggest. The

9 See William Kean Seymour, 'Charles Lamb as a Poet', Essays by Divers Hands, N.S., xxvi (1953), 104: 'His parents - the father a gentleman's servant who became a barrister's clerk and indispensable factotum, and the mother the daughter of the housekeeper in a great house - gave him a heritage of service, quietness and humility'.

10 L.W., ii, 87-8.

paper's editor, John Fenwick, whom Lamb portrayed years later as Ralph Bigod, the epitome of all borrowers, in the Elia essay 'The Two Races of Men',[11] exercised much charismatic influence over his young assistant. But, quite apart from Fenwick's direction, more self-authenticated loyalties to past enthusiasms for the radical cause animated Lamb's pen, as he recorded, a little defensively, in the autobiographical essay 'Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago':

> Recollections of feelings - which were all that now remained from our first boyish heats kindled by the French Revolution, when if we were misled, we erred in the company of some, who are accounted very good men now - rather than any tendency at this time to Republican doctrines - assisted us in assuming a style of writing, while the paper lasted, consonant in no very under-tone to the right earnest fanaticism of F. 12

Until recently, Lamb's only recognized contributions to The Albion have been the political epigrams, lines similar in style and theme to the later 1802 verses he published in the Morning Post and to those he wrote for The Champion in 1820. The epigram 'To Sir James Mackintosh', for example, attacks Mackintosh as an apostate from his earlier more radical principles and encourages him to dispose of himself according to the example set by Judas - 'yet much I doubt, / If thou hast any bowels to gush out!'[13] It is clear that E.V. Lucas

11 L.W., ii, 23-5.

12 Ibid., ii, 225.

13 Ibid., v, 102. Mackintosh aroused Lamb's personal antagonism through his ruthless treatment of Godwin, Fenwick's mentor and Lamb's recent acquaintance. From January to June 1799, Mackintosh delivered a series of lectures attacking Godwin. See Burton R. Pollin, 'Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd as Jacobins and Anti-Jacobins', S.R., xii (1973), 643.

in editing these verses was taken aback by their ferocity, so unlike the characteristics generally attributed to his 'gentle-hearted Charles'. The signature 'R. et R.' was appended to the epigrams that appeared in The Champion, and of it Lucas comments in his notes to the poetry,

> Mr. Percy Fitzgerald suggests that it might stand for Romulus and Remus, but offers no supporting theory. He might have added that so unfamiliar a countenance is in these epigrams shown by their author, that the suggestion of a wolf rather than a Lamb might have been intended. 14

As if to avoid any further startling revelations of Lamb's lupine tendencies, Lucas does not appear to have searched the pages of The Albion in any very thorough fashion for more evidence of his author's hand: apart from the few verse epigrams, none of Lamb's contributions to the paper is to be found in the standard works, although the account of that period given in 'Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago' suggests that they were numerous. A present-day Lamb scholar has attempted, however, to fill this breach. Winifred F. Courtney recently published in The Charles Lamb Bulletin a series of papers entitled 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?' in which she presents both the texts and her arguments for judging the passages to be Lamb's.[15] Her general assumption that all the paragraphs signed 'R.' were Lamb's has since been questioned,[16] but, in the case of those

14 L.W., v, 332.

15 See Winifred F. Courtney, 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?', C.L.B. (1977), xvii, 1-11; xviii, 28-40; xx, 73-92. Courtney discovered copies of the 'Lamb' issues of The Albion in the Bath Municipal Library.

16 See ibid., xx, 75, for David V. Erdman's suggestion that 'R.' might be the signature of George Ross.

passages she deduces to be his through the characteristic use made in them of scattered italics,[17] internal evidence provides further confirmation of authorship. The comparatively lengthy polemic 'What is Jacobinism?',[18] which appeared in The Albion on 30 June 1801, is the strongest candidate amongst her new discoveries for inclusion in the Lamb canon: David Erdman has already seconded her proposal that it be considered his.[19] Unlike most of the other paragraphs brought to light by Courtney, 'What is Jacobinism?' also merits close attention for its own sake.

One reason for attributing its authorship to Lamb is that, in 1798, along with Coleridge, Southey and Charles Lloyd, he was attacked for anarchist sympathies in the Anti-Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin Review. In July, Canning's satirical poem 'The New Morality' appeared in the magazines, illustrated in the Review by a Gillray cartoon in which Lamb and Lloyd figured as 'Toad and Frog', singing their Blank Verse in praise of the theophilanthropist, Lepaux.[20] Blank Verse, the newly published slender volume of poetry co-authored by Lloyd and Lamb, was again attacked in a footnote to an Anti-Jacobin review of Lloyd's novel, Edmund Oliver:

> This Mr. Charles Lloyd we conceive to be one of the twin-bards who unite their impotent efforts to propagate

17 Courtney, 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?', C.L.B., xvii, 4.

18 See ibid., xvii, 6-8.

19 Ibid., xx, 75.

20 Anti-Jacobin; or, Weekly Examiner, 9 July 1798, p. 286; Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine, i (1798), 115. See David V. Erdman and Paul M. Zall, 'Coleridge and Jeffrey in Controversy', S.R., xiv (1975), 75, for the suggestion that the Anti-Jacobin attack was occasioned by George Dyer's poem, The Poet's Fate (1797), a footnote to which lists Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lloyd and Lamb as members of the Pantisocracy league.

> their principles, which are alike marked by folly
> and by wickedness, in a kind of baby language
> which they are pleased to term blank verse. 21

Subsequently, in September, the Review printed 'The Anarchists: an Ode' which represented the same four poets, 'C----DGE, S--TH-Y, L---D, and L--BE', as singing

> Of equal rights, and civic feasts,
> And tyrant Kings, and knavish priests. 22

In his life of Lamb, Lucas states that Lamb, unlike Lloyd, made no public protest in response to the attack.[23] In one sense he had no real need to do so, for the quarrel was not at that time his own. His contributions to Blank Verse were domestic rather than political in theme:[24] Lloyd, in his defensive pamphlet A Letter to the Anti-Jacobin Reviewers of 1799, stresses Lamb's innocence and lack of involvement in all speculative matters.[25] As a recent article on Lamb and Lloyd's alleged Jacobinism points out, the poem 'Living Without God in the World' which Lamb had sent to Southey before 15 June 1798[26] shows that prior to the Review assault Lamb even tended towards the Anti-Jacobin position, in so far as he could be said to be involved in such issues at all.[27] 'Living without God

21 Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine, i, 178.

22 Ibid., i, 366.

23 Lucas, Life, i, 138. But see Howard O. Brogan, 'Satire and Humour in Lamb's Verse', C.L.B., viii (1974), 155, for the suggestion that in 'The Triumph of the Whale' (1812) Lamb turns back against Tory supporters Gillray's caricatures of the so-called Jacobins as humanized beasts. 'The Triumph of the Whale' shows the Prince Regent metamorphosed into a whale and his followers into various monsters of the deep. See L.W., v, 103-4.

24 See ibid., v, 19-25.

25 Charles Lloyd, A Letter to the Anti-Jacobin Reviewers (Birmingham, 1799), p. 32.

26 See New Letters of Robert Southey, ed. Kenneth Curry (N.Y. and London, 1965), i, 167, to John May, 15 June 1798.

27 Pollin, 'Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd as Jacobins and Anti-Jacobins', S.R., xii, 642.

in the World', in its attack upon atheistic arrogance,[28] is similar to the satire upon poetic presumption in 'Composed at Midnight', one of the poems included in Blank Verse. If the latter can be taken in part as a criticism of Coleridge's metaphysical conceit,[29] the former, as Lloyd later underlined in yet another self-exonerating pamphlet,[30] reads as a dismissal of the Godwinian ethos. Lamb was not personally acquainted with Godwin at this time; but when he did meet him on 8 February 1800 his affection for the man along with his own recent experience of the unjustified persecution of the Anti-Jacobin party led him to take up the cudgels in Godwin's defence.[31] In writing for The Albion, Lamb in reality allied himself far more closely to the Jacobin cause than he did in publishing his Blank Verse poems. His political involvement at this time seems to have been largely defensive in nature, and to have been aroused more by the inhumanity of the Anti-Jacobin's uncalled-for attacks than by any aggressive Republicanism.

The content and tone of the article 'What is Jacobinism?' are exactly what one would expect of a writer in Lamb's situation. Its author does not attempt to explain Jacobin principles, but rather attacks the blind crudity of the use of categorizations and labels in general, and denounces the barbarous means by

28 See L.W., v, 17-18.

29 See above, pp. 61-2.

30 Charles Lloyd, Lines suggested by the Fast, appointed on Wednesday, February 27, 1799 (Birmingham, 1799), p.3.

31 See L.L., i, 185-6, to Manning, 18 February 1800.

which public opinion is manipulated by the unscrupulous.

Of those who encouraged the national witch-hunt for Jacobins The Albion correspondent writes:

> These men have set up an universal idol, or idea, under that name, to which they find it convenient to refer all evil, something like the Manichean principle. To define the boundaries and the natures of human action, to analyse the complexity of motives, to settle the precise line where innovation ceases to be pernicious, and prejudice is no longer salutary, is a task which requires some thought, and more candour. It is an easier occupation, more profitable, and more fitted to the maligant dispositions of these men, violently to force into one class, modes, and actions, and principles essentially various, and to disgrace that class with one ugly name: for names are observed to cost the memory and application much less trouble than things ... Names often associated with hostile and unpleasant feelings, in turn engender and augment those feelings, and the thing Jacobinism began to be disliked for the name of Jacobin. 32

The pernicious effects of arbitrary categorizations is a theme which Lamb forcefully presents to his readers in two of his acknowledged works of the period, the Dramatic Specimens and the essay on Hogarth. In the former, Lamb writes of the morality of the contemporary stage that it is too inclined to represent a vice or a virtue by conventional categorization rather than by any attempt at portraying a complex reality:

> We have a common stock of dramatic morality out of which a writer may be supplied without the trouble of copying it from originals within his own breast. 33

The dramatists of his time had not the courage and imagination

32 The Albion and Evening Advertiser, no. 566, Tuesday 30 June 1801, p. 3; as transcribed in Courtney, 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?', C.L.B., xvii, 7.

33 L.W., iv, 115.

to look at the 'truth of things',[34] but satisfied their audiences with stereotyped and dehumanized figures, symbolically representing the category or name of a vice, without embodying its intricate reality. Similarly, in writing on Hogarth, Lamb complains that the 'extreme narrowness of system' and the 'rage for classification' to which his age is prone prevent the recognition of Hogarth's merits: 'we are for ever deceiving ourselves with names and theories', without attending to the reality of the objects so categorized.[35]

Winifred Courtney finds examples throughout 'What is Jacobinism?' of phrases and ideas closely echoed in Lamb's other writings.[36] She points out, for example, that the phrase 'the multitudinous "goings-on of life"', which appears in the article, epitomized what Lamb loved about London, as he indicated in similar terms in 'The Londoner', the 1802 letter to the Reflector.[37] It can also be added that the context in which the phrase is used in 'What is Jacobinism?' is generally reminiscent of Lamb's characteristic preoccupations at this time. The passage concerns The Albion correspondent's defence of Sunday newspapers for the working-class. The papers, he protests, are useful in that they

> disseminate among the lower classes of men some knowledge ... of the state of public affairs ...

34 L.W., iv, 126.

35 Ibid., i, 74.

36 Courtney, 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?', C.L.B., xvii, 10-11.

37 See L.W., i, 39-40: 'tears have whetted my cheek for unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture, which [London] never fails to present at all hours, like the scenes of a shifting pantomime'.

> and, what is more valuable, by representing the daily occurrences of domestic events, births, and deaths, and marriages, and benefits, and calamities, and sad accidents of individuals or families, with all the multitudinous "goings-on of life," teach their readers to be men, by the link of human interest, and human passion, to human affairs; transferring their rude and partial domestic feelings over a wide range of sympathy with strangers and persons unknown, which is reflected back with accumulated intenseness upon that charity which they are to manifest in relationships which they do know... 38

In other words, the newspapers are envisaged as effecting the same growth of imaginative sympathy and expansion of ethical perceptiveness in their readers as Lamb, in his preface, hoped the Dramatic Specimens would encourage. The newspaper readers, through their 'humane and virtuous curiosity',[39] find themselves drawn out of the narrow circle of their own affairs to sympathize with those of others, in full recognition of their common humanity. This imaginative realization results in strengthened understanding of the nature of their own emotional ties: they begin to know themselves as they are impressed by the reality of the lives of others, enacted before them in the newspaper columns. The newspaper stories dramatize the 'moral sense' of their contemporaries, and show 'in what manner they felt' when placed 'in trying situations, in the conflicts of duties and passions, or the strife of contending duties'.[40] Consequently,

38 The Albion, no. 566, p. 3; Courtney, 'New Lamb Texts from The Albion?', C.L.B., xvii, 8.

39 Ibid.

40 L.W., iv, xii.

the readers' consciousness expands to receive this information, carried to it alive from the printed page through the activity of the imagination. The writer's stance is one of practical egalitarianism, untinged by any reformatory zeal. The methods by which the working classes are understood to acquire wisdom are appreciated and defended as they stand. That sympathetic acceptance of life's imperfections implied by the phrase 'humane and virtuous curiosity' epitomizes the general approach of the Albion correspondent.

By August 1801, The Albion enterprise was abandoned.[41] Lamb left its '"Delectable Mountains"','where whilom I fed my sheep', with regret, and found it difficult to adapt to 'the Rickshaws of fashionable tittle tattle' demanded of him by the Morning Post, his next journalistic source of additional income.[42] Apart from the few verse satires of later years,[43] and one further exception, the change brought to a close his attempts at political writing. The exception is an 1811 contribution to the Reflector, 'On the Probable Effects of the Gunpowder Treason in this country if the Conspirators had accomplished their Object'. Here Lamb envisages the consequences were Fawkes's explosion to take place in his own day: all corruptions in the franchise system would have been eradicated once and for all, and the 'senseless distinctions of party must

41 See the editor's notes, L.L., ii, 13-14. In 'Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago', Lamb attributes the death of the paper to the offence caused by its publication of his epigram on Mackintosh. L.W., ii, 225.

42 L.L., ii, 45, to Rickman, Mid-January 1802.

43 See L.W., v, 102-7.

have disappeared'.[44] Given the unlikelihood of such a sweeping reform, he concludes that it remains 'the duty of every honest Englishman to endeavour, by means less wholesale than Guido's, to ameliorate, without extinguishing, Parliaments; to hold the lantern to the dark places of corruption; to apply the match to the rotten parts of the system'.[45] These passages were reprinted by Lamb as part of the Elia essay 'Guy Faux' in the London Magazine, 1823, but 'Guy Faux' was never included in his collected volumes of Elia. Lamb presumably felt that its reforming fervour was uncharacteristic of Elia's apolitical tenour of mind.

In largely withdrawing from the political arena after 1801, Lamb was following once again in the footsteps of his earliest mentor. Coleridge had informed his brother in March 1798 of his intention to give up the 'immediate causes' of politics for more 'fundamental and general' matters of concern:

> I devote myself to such works as encroach not on the antisocial passions - in poetry, to elevate the imagination & set the affections in right tune by the beauty of the inanimate impregnated, as with a living soul, by the presence of Life - in prose, to the seeking with patience & a slow, a very slow mind ... What our faculties are & what they are capable of becoming. 46

But present-day Romantic critics, M.H. Abrams among them, suggest that in this venture Coleridge was still animated by political aspirations; he now sought not direct encounters on

44 L.W., i, 242.
45 Ibid., i, 243.
46 C.L., i, 397, to George Coleridge, 10 March 1798.

the mundane plane but a realization and effective expression of '"the politics of vision", uttered in the persona of the inspired prophet-priest'.[47] In the furtherance of this goal, at least in so far as it applied to poetry, Wordsworth advanced with greater actualizing power than Coleridge. As Coleridge recognized, The Prelude at once presents 'the beauty of the inanimate impregnated, as with a living soul, by the presence of Life', and explores 'what our faculties are & what they are capable of becoming', and incorporates the two themes into a vision of the free and vital imaginative life potentially achievable by all men.[48] The control and exercise of the sublime power of human consciousness, with its glorious potential to become for man 'A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells', is the hope that Wordsworth extends to his readers, along with the assurance that Coleridge and himself will 'teach them how' to realize this vision.[49]

No writing of this kind exists amongst the collected works of Charles Lamb. Given his felt inability to organize systems on a large scale, and his natural humility, it is hardly likely that he would be borne aloft on the confident wings of the visionary. Such as they were, his early political writings were motivated by the need to defend for his society the means

47 Abrams, 'English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age', Romanticism Reconsidered, p. 44.

48 See 'To William Wordsworth', C.P., i, 404-5 (ll. 16-19): Coleridge describes The Prelude as a record of 'moments awful, / Now in thy inner life, and now abroad, / When power streamed from thee, and thy soul received / The light reflected, as a light bestowed'. Thus life is given by the human soul to the inanimate world, and that life reflected back into consciousness as emblematic of the soul and its potential.

49 Prelude, xiii, 442-52.

of imaginative development, which the new reactionary extremism threatened, and to puncture through mockery the hypocritical self-esteem of the voices of the Establishment. He was not granted vistas of a brave new world to any galvanizing effect, and so remained untroubled by the goads of prophetic responsibility which pricked his fellow Romantics. But Lamb's attitude towards the Romantic sublime reveals some more positive aspects of his habits of mind, as writer and man, as well as his incapacities. He appreciated its strength in the work of others, and often communicated this vividly in his critical writing. On the other hand, his more critical reaction to the self-consciously adopted prophet-teacher persona of the visionary poet also contributes to our understanding of the Romantic imagination. Both these aspects of his involvement with the sublime may be brought out in an exploration of his assessments of Wordsworth's poetry, and his response to its development.

In writing the 1802 'Preface' to the third edition of the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth professed himself convinced that

> The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him ... as a Man. 50

The beauty of poetry must be, and will be, universally recognizable through the simple pleasure it bestows. No particular knowledge or interest is necessary for its appreciation, apart from that sympathetic imagination which he then took for granted belonged

50 W.Pr., i, 139.

to men as men. However, Wordsworth's optimism was short-lived. For all that recent scholarship has shown that Lyrical Ballads (1798) was, in fact, quite favourably received,[51] the poet himself became convinced that a more positive energy was demanded of his audience if they were to find anything pleasurable in material the beauties of which were unfamiliar to them. In his 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' of 1815, he now announced that

> TASTE ... is a metaphor, taken from a passive sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence not passive, - to intellectual acts and operations.... Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect ... without the exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the Reader, there can be no adequate sympathy ... 52

The faculty which was capable of exerting such power was, of course, the imagination. In Wordsworth's mind this became, at its highest,

> another name for absolute strength
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And reason in her most exalted mood. 53

How the imagination can bring about such an expansion of the mind is accounted for in one of Wordsworth's prose fragments of 1811-12, entitled by his editors 'The Sublime and the Beautiful'. In describing the effects of mountain scenery, Wordsworth explains that

51 See Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads', P.M.L.A., lxix (1954), 517-21.

52 W.Pr., iii, 81 and 82.

53 Prelude, xiii, 168-70.

> whatever suspends the comparing power of the mind & possesses it with a feeling or image of intense unity, without a conscious contemplation of parts, has produced that state of the mind which is a consummation of the sublime.... Power awakens the sublime either when it rouses us to a sympathetic energy & calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining - yet so that it participates [in the] force which is acting upon it; or, 2dly, by producing a humiliation or prostration of the mind before some external agency which it presumes not to make an effort to participate, but is absorbed in the contemplation of the might in the external power, &, as far as it has any consciousness of itself, its grandeur subsists in the naked fact of being conscious of external Power at once awful & immeasurable; so that, in both cases, the head & the front of the sensation is intense unity. 54

The impression made upon it through fear and awe awakens the mind to such energy that in its contemplation of the sublime spectacle it becomes conscious of containing within itself the idea of that power. This produces an impression of forceful, incorporating growth during which the perceiver in his energized excitement feels himself to be mentally, if not, of course, physically, in ascendance over the scene which initially aroused so much awe in him. He is no longer a passive observer, but triumphs over his surroundings, or at least shares in their sublimity, as a consequence of the intensity of his appreciation.

Such a passage does much to clarify and crystallize the process which Wordsworth was trying to describe throughout The Prelude, particularly in the accounts in the first two books of the growing boy's education, through fear and admiration of

54 W.Pr., ii, 353-4.

the extraordinary effects of nature around him. It also casts particular light upon another familiar passage, from Book VI, the passage following Wordsworth's description of the anti-climactic crossing of the Alps:

> Imagination! lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my Song
> Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted, without a struggle to break through.
> And now recovering, to my Soul I say
> I recognize thy glory; in such strength
> Of usurpation, in such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
> The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode. 55

The imagination is here acclaimed as possessed of the ability to conjure up hopes and ideas which reality can never substantiate. It is no longer simply responding to the power of natural phenomena, but has been taught by that response, working in conjunction with a basic creativity of its own, to construct sublime prospects quite independent of any actual sensory experience. The splendour of these artefacts dims the incipient reality and results in the mood of disillusionment. But in this lies not the imagination's weakness but its glory, for thus the conscious mind recognizes its own powers as beyond anything it sees around it in the material world. In doing so, it must acknowledge fully the limitations and failure of mortal existence in that world, but its over-reaching of that sphere saves it from humiliation. The recognition of a continual

55 Prelude, vi, 525-36.

falling away on the part of humanity from ends which it might achieve is sublime, for it signifies an idea of a possible existence far beyond that which is readily obtainable. The mind is seen as sublimely active, pushing at the limits of its mortal faculties, restless with its own boundaries, and always seeking to establish and consolidate positions further and further removed from the humiliations of its initial ignorance.

Ironically, the poetic growth of Wordsworth's own mind, according to general critical consensus, did not flourish after the completion of The Prelude. Yet if his ability to body forth in effective images his concept of the sublime waned, his appreciation of its attributes remained the same. In The Excursion, for example, he assures his readers that 'Man's celestial Spirit' can, through the imaginative virtue it possesses, still 'set forth' and 'magnify' itself. Whatever limitations and humiliations are its mortal lot, the celestial spirit 'feeds'

> A calm, a beautiful, and silent fire,
> From the incumbrances of mortal life,
> From error, disappointment, - nay, from guilt;
> And sometimes, so relenting Justice wills,
> From palpable oppressions of Despair.

This passage Lamb quoted in his 1815 review of the poem, in which he drew particular attention to the 'modifying and incorporating power' exemplified by the lines.[56] For all that Lamb himself dismissed as 'vulgarized and frozen' the published

56 L.W., i, 165.

text of his review after its editorial mishandling, as the only text available, the Quarterly article does still give a clear impression of Lamb's appreciation of his friend's poem, and in particular of its depiction of the sublimity of human endurance.[57] The 'notion of the thoughts which may sustain the spirit, while they crush the frame of the sufferer',[58] understandably appealed to one who knew himself to have been strengthened rather than weakened in character by desolating and tragic experience.

Lamb further cites with enthusiasm a passage in which Wordsworth stresses the inadequacy of mortal nature to bear the fervour of its own passions:

> Too, too contracted are these walls of flesh,
> This vital warmth too cold, these visual orbs,
> Though inconceivably endowed, too dim
> For any passion of the soul that leads
> To extacy; and, all the crooked paths
> Of time and change disdaining, takes it course
> Along the line of limitless desires. 59

The flesh cannot body forth adequately the acute emotion engendered by the suffering spirit; hence it cannot sustain it,but is broken or crucified by its force. Lamb's attention appears to have been drawn consistently to images of such sublime agony. In the Dramatic Specimens, he praises in particular John Ford's

57 See L.L., iii, 128-30,to Wordsworth, 7 January 1815, for Lamb's account of Gifford's, the Quarterly editor's, major alteration of the 'Review'. A recent article questions whether Gifford did, in fact, do Lamb a disservice. On the contrary, John I. Ades suggests that the cuts might have contributed to the review's critical acuteness. See 'Lamb on Wordsworth's Excursion', Re: Arts & Letters, iii (1969), 1-9.

58 L.W., i, 165.

59 Ibid.

presentation in The Broken Heart of a scene of similar spiritual anguish:

> What a noble thing is the soul in its strengths and in its weaknesses! who would be less weak than Calantha? who can be so strong? the expression of this transcendent scene almost bears me in imagination to Calvary and the Cross; and I seem to perceive some analogue between the scenical sufferings which I am here contemplating, and the real agonies of that final completion to which I dare no more than hint a reference. 60

Lamb's audacity here stems from the fact that in comparing the Christian Cross to the torment of a fictional dramatis persona he is establishing an analogy between art and religion, in their effects upon the human spirit. He acknowledges and welcomes the ability of art to relieve the oppressed spirit of its immortal yearning, a yearning which might otherwise sap its mortal substance. The limitless capacity for thought and feeling of the human spirit raises it in sublimity above the world of nature, and even above the degradations to which its mortal fleshly embodiment seduces it. So, at any rate, Lamb's summarizing eulogy of Ford suggests:

> Ford was of the first order of Poets. He sought for sublimity, not by parcels in metaphors or visible images, but directly where she has her full residence in the heart of man; in the actions and sufferings of the greatest minds. There is a grandeur of the soul above mountains, seas, and

60 L.W., iv, 218. It was to this passage that Gifford referred when, in reviewing Henry Weber's edition of The Dramatic Works of John Ford (1811) for the Quarterly, he said of Weber, 'He has polluted his pages with the blasphemies of a poor maniac who, it seems, once published some detached scenes of the "Broken Heart"'; Quarterly Review, vi (1811), 485. See L.L., iii, 129, for Lamb's suspicion that the bad feeling which resulted from this attack lay behind Gifford's mistreatment of the Excursion review.

> the elements. Even in the poor perverted reason of Giovanni and Annabella ... we discern traces of that fiery particle, which in the irregular starting from out of the road of beaten action, discovers something of a right line even in obliquity, and shows hints of an improveable greatness in the lowest descents and degradations of our nature. 61

The all-consuming intensity of the loves of Giovanni and his sister and the magnitude and sincerity of their suffering humanizes the incestuous element in the play, redeeming it from bestiality.

The lovers in 'Tis Pity she's a Whore suffer no disillusionment in their affections. Lamb's letters, however, provide an example of a dramatic character who became severely deluded owing to excessive imaginative activity. Writing to John Mathew Gutch in January 1819, Lamb praised Fanny Kelly's performance in an eighteenth-century farce entitled Inkle and Yarico, and emphasized 'the wonderful force of imagination in this performer':

> To see her leaning upon that wretched reed, her lover - the very exhibition of whose character would be a moral offence, but for her clinging and noble credulity - to see her lean upon that flint, and by the strong workings of passion imagine it a god - is one of the most afflicting lessons of the yearning of the human heart and its sad mistakes, that was ever read upon a stage. 62

Yarico's imagination creates a god of a character who is in fact less than a man; yet such is the force of her passion that, for Lamb, at least, the humiliation and shame he might otherwise experience from the representation of this miserable

61 L.W., iv, 218.

62 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 238.

example of his species is redeemed. In reality, there is no objective correlative of the image she loves, and yet such is the beauty and nobility of the character that she herself has created that it represents, not falsehood, but the truth concerning her own ethical characteristics and limitless capacity for selfless affection. In much the same way did Lamb represent Shakespeare as basing his imagined creations not upon the mean characters which surrounded him, but upon images created by the profound understanding and imaginative intuition of his own mind:

> We talk of Shakspeare's admirable observation of life, when we should feel, that not from a petty inquisition into those cheap and every-day characters which surrounded him, as they surround us, but from his own mind, which was,to borrow a phrase of Ben Jonson's, the very "sphere of humanity", he fetched those images of virtue and of knowledge, of which every one of us recognizing a part, think we comprehend in our natures the whole... 63

However, it must not be assumed from the above that Lamb yearned solely for representations of the extra-ordinary in art, and could dispense with the every-day human face. On the contrary, as another significant passage from his notes on the work of Fletcher makes clear, Lamb abhorred the needlessly unnatural. In comparing Fletcher and Shakespeare, Lamb comments upon

> the fondness of the former for unnatural and violent situations ... He seems to have thought that nothing great could be produced in an ordinary way.... Shakspeare

63 L.W., i, 102-3.

> had nothing of this contortion in his mind, none of that craving after romantic incidents, and flights of strained and improbable virtue, which I think always betrays an imperfect moral sensibility. 64

For Lamb, to portray some improbably heightened scene of emotional violence was a violation of the artist's privilege. An authentic passion, whether joyous or tortured, needed to find adequate expression through art; spurious emotion, engendered for the sake of exciting the audience, did not. If Shakespeare did not confine himself to portraying only the superficial lives of those around him, neither did he inflict upon his audience unnatural scenes, alien to his own good sense and knowledge of humanity. Rather, his comprehensive imagination enabled him to portray characters with a depth and completeness unknown to the many who provided the rough unconscious materials for his craft, but unforgettable for his admirers.

When Lamb emphasizes this soundness of Shakespeare by stressing his understanding of 'nature', he is referring, of course, not to nature in a general sense, but specifically to human nature. That an author could represent a sublimity perhaps only present in his imaginative mind by human personification Lamb understood and acclaimed; his attitude towards those of his contemporaries who saw in inanimate nature manifestations of divinity was more sceptical. But in reviewing The Excursion he was roundly faced with the issue. The text available suggests that Lamb still felt some uncertainty as to the true worth of such

64 L.W., iv, 329.

a symbolizing faculty. Of Wordsworth's system of thought he writes,

> To such a mind, we say - call it strength or weakness - if weakness, assuredly a fortunate one - the visible and audible things of creation present, not dim symbols, or curious emblems, which they have done at all time to those who have been gifted with the poetical faculty; but revelations and quick insights into the life within us, the pledge of immortality... 65

Lamb's tone here is one of defensiveness; Wordsworth is to be protected from unsympathetic audiences. Yet the phrase 'revelations and quick insights' suggests, perhaps, the problem at the root of Lamb's reservations. The synthesis which results in the transfiguration of a natural object into an affirmation of spiritual immortality occurs instantaneously; a further extract from the review expresses Lamb's fear that the combination might be dispersed as quickly. In praising a particular image of harmony presented by Wordsworth, that of a noble ram reflected in water, Lamb comments,

> Combinations, it is confessed, "like those reflected in that quiet pool," cannot be lasting ...

He adds, however,

> it is enough for the purpose of the poet, if they are felt. - They are at least his system... 66

Lamb's suspicion of visionary instantaneous experience, separated from life before and life after, has been explored in earlier chapters; indeed, in this very review he stresses once more

65 L.W., i, 163-4.
66 Ibid., i, 164.

the importance of circumstances. For he refuses to present the reader with 'powerful instances of pathos' from the poem because 'their force is in combination, and in the circumstances under which they are introduced'.[67]

In acknowledging, however, that for Wordsworth the momentary vision, once felt or experienced, could play a significant role in the individual's establishment of a conceptual structure, Lamb does admit to a certain extent the power of even this more extraordinary aspect of the Romantic sublime. For Wordsworth's stress is not so much upon the intensity of the vision, as in the reassurances it affords - reassurances of abiding truths that were guessed at before the instantaneous experience and will be glimpsed again. What is more, a favourite pictorial representation of his does lend permanence of a kind to the image of reflecting water. The 'There was a Boy' passage from The Prelude closes with the depiction of

> that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake. 68

An 1811 poem, 'Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old', similarly concludes with a reference to

> The many-coloured images imprest
> Upon the bosom of a placid lake. 69

In both of these, the 'steady' or 'placid' lake receives throughout the day numerous fleeting impressions or reflections of sky and earth. Quick excitement passes perpetually across the lake's

67 L.W., i, 169.
68 Prelude, v, 412-3.
69 W.P., i, 229.

patient and receptive surface, while in its steadiness it appears tantamount to a symbol of true contemplative reflection, as if it considered the significance of each passing vision and its place in the construction of the whole. In appreciating the paramount importance of such perception being 'felt', grasped, and drawn into contemplative consciousness, Lamb shows his understanding of the system of the Wordsworthian sublime, and its stress upon the need for man's slow and cumulative growth to the awareness of his own immense imaginative potential.

Taken in its entirety, Lamb's 'Review of The Excursion' can therefore be said to constitute a deliberate attempt at fulfilling the demands Wordsworth makes of the reader in his preface to the 1814 edition of the poem. There he states that

> It is not the Author's intention formally to announce a system: it was more animating to him to proceed in a different course; and if he shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself. 70

Lamb did his utmost to respond fittingly to this adjuration, and was particularly concerned when the Quarterly editor fragmented his account of the 'system':

> he has kept a few members only of the part I had done best which was to explain all I could of your "Scheme of harmonies" as I had ventured to call it between the external universe & what within us answers to it. 71

70 W.P., v. 2.

71 L.L., iii, 129.

Apparently Lamb had been 'feeding my fancy for some months with the notion' of pleasing Wordsworth through this presentation of his ideas, a labour which, given his self-acknowledged lack of systematic understanding, must have been a particularly onerous one. The self-imposed task may well have been undertaken as a reconciliatory gesture, for six years earlier Wordworth had found Lamb lacking in imaginative responsiveness to the underlying symbolism of his poetry. In the spring of 1808, Wordsworth, on a visit to London, had read out the recently completed 'White Doe of Rylstone' to Lamb and Hazlitt, only to be met with a deeply unsatisfactory response. By the time he came to write to Coleridge of the incident, Wordsworth had gained sufficient equanimity to lay the blame where it belonged:

> As to the reception which the Doe had met with in Mitre Court I am much more sorry on Lamb's account than on my own.... Let Lamb learn to be ashamed of himself in not taking some pleasure in the contemplation of this picture, which supposing it to be even but a sketch, is yet sufficiently made out for any man of true power to finish it for himself.

He concludes, most damningly,

> of one thing be assured, that Lamb has not a reasoning mind, therefore cannot have a comprehensive mind, and, least of all, has he an imaginative one. 72

However, his condemnation of Lamb should not be considered in isolation, for from 1800 onwards Wordsworth's relation to his public in general was perpetually marred, from his point of view, by their inadequate, unimaginative reception

72 W.L., ii, 221, 222 and 223, 19 April 1808.

of his work. Lamb, in failing to appreciate the 'White Doe', was but responding as Wordsworth pessimistically predicted that his readers in general would. As he told Coleridge, he had informed Lamb of this at the time:

> I said to him further that it could not be popular because some of the principal objects and agents, such as the Banner and the Doe, produced their influences and effects not by powers naturally inherent in them, but such as they were endued with by the Imagination of the human minds on whom they operated... 73

Like those who failed to appreciate the Lyrical Ballads in 1800 and were reprimanded for their blindness in the 'Essay supplementary to the Preface', Lamb had shown himself to be deficient in that 'co-operating power in the mind of the Reader' without which 'there can be no adequate sympathy'.[74] In the 1815 'Essay' Wordsworth preached with missionary zeal on the invigorating power of poetry:

> Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening of the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature.... What is all this but an advance, or a conquest, made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind, like an Indian prince or general - stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his leader, in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. 75

Through taking such a masterful hold of the reader's imagination, the poet teaches him to enjoy the new work. In so doing, he

73 W.L., ii, 222.

74 W.Pr., iii, 81.

75 Ibid., iii, 82.

fulfills the burden imposed upon the innovative writer, for Wordsworth accepted Coleridge's maxim that 'every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'.[76] The reader cannot depend upon old and stale poetic associations, 'the sickly taste' in verse of a bygone age; he must exert a reciprocal imaginative energy of his own. Only through so doing will he be in a position to recognize the new associations, between the object presented and the emotion with which it is perceived, through which the poetry communicates. As early as 1802, in a well-known letter to John Wilson, Wordsworth had made clear the nature of his high vocation as a poet. The public was to be shaken out of its torpid lassitude, and awakened to its true potential. Man 'as a Man' had proved himself insufficiently in command of the moral sensibility necessary to appreciate the poet's ideal. Therefore the 'great Poet' was burdened with the responsibility 'to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things'.[77] Through such educative efforts the Poet would prepare for that 'improving posterity' by which his work would be truly appreciated. By 1808, Wordsworth was adamant upon this issue:

76 W.Pr., iii, 80. Wordsworth adds: 'This remark was long since made to me by a philosophical Friend for the separation of whose poems from my own I have previously expressed my regret.' See also, for a similar statement, W.L., ii, 150, to Lady Beaumont, 21 May 1807.

77 Ibid., i, 355, 7 June 1802.

> Every great Poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing. 78

For all his forebodings, Wordsworth found other contemporary supporters, as well as Coleridge, for his new doctrine. In his 'Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected' (1823), Thomas De Quincey, for one, echoes the development in Wordsworth's poetical theory, and attributes his own understanding of the matter to the poet's conversation. 'What is that antithesis to <u>knowledge</u>, which is ... implicitly latent in the word literature?' De Quincey asks himself. He answers, 'The vulgar antithesis is <u>pleasure</u>', but

> The true antithesis ... is not <u>pleasure</u>, but <u>power</u>. All that is literature seeks to communicate power ... if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I, in my turn, would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasion for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness - as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them? I say, when these inert and sleeping forces <u>are</u> organized, when these possibilities <u>are</u> actualized, is this conscious and living possession of mine <u>power</u>, or what is it? 79

And when Henry Crabb Robinson was first introduced to Wordsworth by Lamb in 1808 he accepted the poet upon his own terms gladly, as he recorded in his diary:

> Wordsworth at my first <u>tête-à-tête</u> with him spoke freely and praisingly of his own poems, which I never felt to be unbecoming, but the contrary....

78 <u>W.L.</u>, ii, 195, to Sir George Beaumont, February 1808.

79 <u>De Q.W.</u>, x, 47-8. See also, for an account of Hazlitt's similar preoccupation with the idea of poetry as 'the language of power', John Kinnaird, 'The Forgotten Self', <u>Partisan Review</u>, xxx (1963), 302-6.

> He spoke at length on the connection of poetry with moral principles as well as with a knowledge of the principles of human nature. He said he could not respect the mother who could read without emotion his poem, Once in a lonely hamlet I sojourned.... He wished popularity for his Two voices are there, one is of the sea as a test of elevation and moral purity. 80

When the two met again in 1812, Crabb Robinson maintained his admiring endorsement of the poet's self-acclaim.[81]

In the 'Review of The Excursion', we find Lamb too, at one point, seconding, through ironical implication, Coleridge's view of the original poet as one who soared beyond the limitations of the common mind, and therefore was unlikely to be popular unless he succeeded also in raising the imaginative level of his readers. Lamb explains that

> The causes which have prevented the poetry of Mr. Wordsworth from attaining its full share of popularity are to be found in the boldness and originality of his genius. The times are past when a poet could securely follow the direction of his own mind into whatever tracts it might lead. A writer, who would be popular, must timidly coast the shore of prescribed sentiment and sympathy. He must have just as much more of the imaginative faculty than his readers, as will serve to keep their apprehensions from stagnating, but not so much as to alarm their jealousy. He must not think or feel too deeply. 82

In his letters to Wordsworth of this period, Lamb even offers a light and humorous apology for his initial lack of enthusiasm over the 'White Doe':

> No alderman ever longed after a haunch of buck venison more than I for a Spiritual taste of that

80 H.C.R., i, 10-11.

81 See ibid., i, 73.

82 L.W., i, 170.

> White Doe you promise. I am sure it is superlative, or will be when drest, i.e. printed -. All things read raw to me in M.S. 83

For all this, however, Wordsworth's demeanour upon his visits to London during these years did give rise to some anecdotal criticism of his defensive self-concern. With affectionate but mocking detail, Mary Lamb relates one such tale in a newly discovered letter of 22 May 1815:

> Godwin has just pub[li]shed a new book, I wish it may be successful but I am sure it is very dull. Wordsworth has just now looked into it and found these words "All modern poetry is nothing but the old, genuine poetry, new [vam]ped, and delivered to us at second, or twentieth hand." In great wrath he took a pencil and wrote in the margin "This is false, William Godwin. Signed William Wordsworth." 84

Well before this period, Lamb had begun to react adversely to aspects of Wordsworth's work and approach. His reception of the second volume of the Lyrical Ballads in January 1801 brought the two to open disagreement. Lamb's ire was aroused primarily not so much in attack against Wordsworth's own work, as in defence of Coleridge's. In a 'Note to the Ancient Mariner' added to the new edition, Wordsworth had seen fit to apologize for what he saw as faults in the poem. He complained that 'The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character ... secondly, that

83 L.L., iii, 148, 28 April 1815.

84 Ibid., iii, 161, to Mrs. John James Morgan and Charlotte Brent. Godwin's new volume was his Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton: Including Various Particulars of the Literary and Political History of Their Times.

he does not act, but is continually acted upon'.[85] Lamb, in whole-hearted defence of the poem, is 'hurt and vexed' by these detractions, and stresses his own capacity to sympathize with the plight of the Mariner all the more intensely precisely because of his lack of distinct personality, and because he is passively caught up by the events of the poem.[86] He is ready to lend his imagination to the nightmare processes of the poem and to undergo with the Mariner a complete lack of rational control over the dark and chaotic succession of events, even to the extinction of personality itself. Wordsworth, on the other hand, resists, by implication, this giving of himself up to the uncharted and uncontrollable seas upon which the Mariner's vessel drifts.

When Lamb turns in this 1801 letter to a direct attack on Wordsworth's own poetry and prose for the new volume, he similarly objects to Wordsworth's tendency to insist upon too marked and persistent a degree of personal control over the type of response which he wishes his poetry to elicit from its readers. To Lamb's taste, for example, the authorial voice intervenes too blatantly and didactically in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', as he tentatively suggests to the poet:

> I will just add that 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

85 See the editors' notes, Lyrical Ballads, pp. 270-1.

86 L.L., i, 266, to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801, and see above, pp. 104-5.

> 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 from Robinson Crusoe, the Vicar of Wakefie[l]d, 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! - &c. 87

For all his attempts to dilute the criticism with reassurances of the existence of far worse sinners in this vein, Lamb here characterizes Wordsworth's pedagogic tendencies with prophetical acuteness. 'I will teach you how to think upon this subject', along with 'Imagine, if you can' are, as we have seen, sentiments which consistently colour Wordsworth's attitude towards his reading public from this period on. The Lake poets' response to Lamb's criticism of 1801 only reinforced his impression of Wordsworth's obtrusive and over-insistent management of his readers' sensibilities. In a letter characteristic of their correspondence, Lamb reported to Manning the details of his 'northern castigation':

> The Post did not sleep a moment. I received almost instantaneously a long letter of four sweating pages from my reluctant Letterwriter, [Wordsworth], the purport of which was, that he was sorry his 2d vol.

87 L.L., i, 265-6. See Stephen Gill, 'Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet', E.C., xix (1969), 389-92, for a defence of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' as 'a lecture but not propaganda'. But for Lamb all lectures, as such, were distasteful. See Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 227, to Wordsworth, 18 February 1818.

> had not given me more pleasure (Devil a hint did I give that it had not pleased me) and "was compelled to wish that my range of Sensibility was more extended, being obliged to believe that I should receive large influxes of happiness & happy Thoughts" (I suppose from the L.B.-)

Lamb recommends some of the new poems to Manning, particularly the 'Lucy' poem 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways':

> This is choice and genuine, and so are many many more. But one does not like to have 'em ramm'd down one's throat - "Pray take it - its very good - let me help you - eat faster". 88

Overt moralizing in poetry was a trait Lamb was always particularly quick to detect and deplore. Earlier, in 1799, he had objected to the didactic conclusions of too many of Southey's poems. If a poem was to have a moral message at all, then it had to be more subtly integrated into the presentation of the poetic theme itself:

> A Moral should be wrought into the body and soul, the matter and tendency, of a Poem, not tagged to the end, like "A God send the good ship into harbour" at the conclusion of our bills of Lading... 89

Much later, in 1824, a new correspondent, the Quaker poet Bernard Barton, also showed the same propensity to moralize in verse, and to favour other didactically inclined poets. He too is warned by Lamb of the destructive aspects of moral propaganda in imaginative writing: 'the natural power of a story is diminished when the uppermost purpose in the writer seems to be to recommend

88 L.L., i, 272 and 274, 15 February 1801.
89 Ibid., i, 163, to Southey, 15 March 1799.

something else, viz Religion.'[90]

In the 1801 letter, however, Lamb's objection to Wordsworth's personal intervention in the process of communication between his poetry and its readers does not rest with this issue. After commenting on 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', he adds:

> I could, too, have wished that The Critical preface had appeared in a separate treatise.- All its dogmas are true and just and most of them new, as criticism.- But they associate a diminishing idea with the Poems which follow, as having been written for Experiments on the public taste, more than having sprung (as they must have done) from living and daily circumstances. 91

The suggestion is that the Ballads' preface, in presenting the poems as experiments, demands from the reader a certain type of response, rather than allowing the reader to react as he may. Although the response Wordsworth expects is one of spontaneous pleasure, the insistence in the preface that this is what the reader ought to feel, endangers, if it does not completely do away with, the possibility of any authentic spontaneity. If susceptible to the poet's pressure, the reader is in danger of being pleased because the preface tells him he ought to be pleased. With great penetration, Lamb further suggests that the experimental attitude expressed in the preface might even endanger the poet's own spontaneity: Wordsworth presents himself as writing in order to create a particular effect, rather

90 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 415, to Bernard Barton, 23 January 1824. Cf. K.L., i, 224, to Reynolds, 3 February 1818: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us - and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket'.

91 L.L., i, 266-7. See John I. Ades, 'Friendly Persuasion: Lamb as Critic of Wordsworth', W.C., viii (1977), 20, for the effect upon Wordsworth of Lamb's comment: in subsequent editions, the 'Preface' was placed after the poems.

than as writing because the object of his concern has forcefully presented itself to him as material for a poem. In other words, he is in danger of looking too much to the effect his words will have on others, rather than to the 'thing itself' which these words body forth. Lamb's criticism can be extended usefully to the 1815 "Essay": to be commanded to respond to poetry with authentic and spontaneous imaginative power is, if anything, more debilitating to the sources of true spontaneity than to be told one ought to respond with pleasure. Wordsworth will not relinquish his authority over the mind of the reader, and the effect, to Lamb's mind, is not only to diminish the range of potential response in the reader, but also to belittle the reality of the poems themselves.

Lamb continued, in later years, to comment upon what he saw as unfortunate developments in Wordsworth's poetry. In a letter of April 16 1815, he criticizes in detail the new edition of Poems ... including Lyrical Ballads and the Miscellaneous poems of the author. He objects to changes made to the early poems which detract from their original vitality. In 'The Blind Highland Boy', for example, he notices that whereas the Boy, in 1802, had voyaged in 'A Household Tub, like one of those / Which women use to wash their clothes', he now, in 1815, launched himself off from the shores of his native loch in a turtle-shell.[92] As Lamb reminds Wordsworth, this change is a 'flat falsification of the history'; the tub, on the other hand, 'was a good honest

92 W.P., iii, 91-2.

tub in its place, & nothing could fairly be said against it'.[93] The implication is that Wordsworth should have resisted the temptation to refine his verse, and should have remained unaffected by critical attacks upon its authentic simplicities. Wordsworth did not restore to the Highland Boy his tub, but some of Lamb's other complaints of this period proved more effective. From the new version of 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', Lamb missed the line 'the stonechat & the glancing sand-piper'.[94] This 'line quite alive' he demanded back from the poet, and it was indeed restored in the 1820 edition.[95] He also mourns the loss of the last line of 'Rural Architecture', with its 'holyday' conclusion 'Light hearted boys I will build up a giant with you'.[96] Though missing in the editions of 1805 and 1815, this was restored in later editions. Lamb criticizes one stanza from 'Yarrow Visited' as having 'a little tinge of the less romantic about it';[97] Wordsworth acted upon this objection too.[98]

In each case, Lamb is bemoaning the loss of that spirit of freshness and close relation to common life which characterized

93 L.L., iii, 139. Wordsworth himself had provided the grounds for Lamb's criticism. In a foot-note to the 1815 version of the poem, he notes of the Boy's adventures: 'In deference to the opinion of a Friend, I have substituted ... a shell for the less elegant vessel in which my blind Voyager did actually entrust himself to the dangerous current of Loch Leven, as was related to me by an eye-witness'. W.P., iii, 96 n.

94 L.L., iii, 139.

95 See W.P., i, 93. The line reads: 'The stone-chat, or the glancing sand-piper'.

96 L.L., iii, 139 and 147, 16 and 28 April 1815. The conclusion to the poem actually reads: 'Then, light hearted Boys, to the top of the crag; / And I'll build up a giant with you'. W.P., i, 244.

97 L.L., iii, 147.

98 W.P., iii, 107. In 1815, the lines Lamb criticized read: 'Yon cottage seems a bower of bliss, / It promises protection / To studious ease and generous cares / And every chaste affection!' They were subsequently altered to read: 'Yon cottage seems a bower of bliss, / A covert for protection / Of tender thoughts, that nestle there - / The brood of chaste affection'.

the early poetry. He warns against the possible endangering, through Wordsworth's changes, of the vital warmth of direct feeling communicated through genuine representations of the 'truth of things'. The later lyrics, with their more conventional versification, he sees as lacking in such romantic appeal. Even the 'Review of The Excursion', for all its very deliberate attempt to present the poem in the best possible light, contains an implied criticism of dangerously self-sufficient habits of mind. Lamb describes the development in Wordsworth of

> an internal principle of lofty consciousness, which stamps upon his opinions and sentiments (we were almost going to say) the character of an expanded and generous Quakerism. 99

The hesitating parenthesis suggests that Lamb is tentatively daring to criticize. His use of the verb 'stamps' hints at a possible state of affairs in which Wordsworth's spontaneous impressions and responses might be seen as rigidly contained and moulded by the demands of a self-imposed system. And although Lamb tempers this implication by stressing the 'expanded and generous' aspects of Wordsworth's 'Quakerism', his life-long suspicion of all religious or social sectarianism lies behind the description. Both here and later in the review, when Lamb hints at the appearance in The Excursion 'of a kind of Natural Methodism',[100] he represents Wordsworth as embodying in his own person an unique one-man, quasi-religious sect. But, for Lamb, all sectarians are too prone 'to seclude themselves from the

99 L.W., i, 165.
100 Ibid., i, 166.

rest of mankind, as from another species'; as a consequence of 'herding thus exclusively', they 'are in danger of contracting a narrowness'.[101] Their imaginative sympathies turn inwards; no longer need any attempt be made to comprehend the dissimilar lives of others. Instead, that particular system of thought which has gained the sect's approbation governs all possible routes of communication with others. Unless an outsider can be made an adherent, there is danger in even acknowledging his existence, except as an enemy to the system.

In conversation with his London literary acquaintance, Lamb had expressed similar criticisms of Wordsworth less tentatively. An 1811 entry in Crabb Robinson's diary reports a conversation with Lamb on the comparative merits of Wordsworth and Coleridge. To Crabb Robinson's surprise, Lamb had asserted'Coleridge to be the greater man':

> He preferred the Mariner to anything Wordsworth had written. Wordsworth, he thought, is narrow and confined in his views compared with [Coleridge]. He does not, like Shakespeare, become everything he pleases, but forces the reader to submit to his individual feelings.102

Consistently, throughout his writings, Lamb views with disapprobation works of art which depend for their effectiveness upon the forceful personality of the presenter, rather than upon the audience's conviction of the reality of the object presented. The last plate but one of Hogarth's 'Rake's Progress', for example, is for Lamb an object of profound and intense interest. His

101 'Letter of Elia to Robert Southey', L.W., i, 230.
102 H.C.R., i, 17.

involvement is all the more concentrated because it operates quite freely of any direction or influence of the artist's:

> Here is matterfor the mind of the beholder to feed on for the hour together,- matter to feed and fertilize the mind. It is too real to admit one thought about the power of the artist who did it. 103

That power and glory of the 'shaping spirit of Imagination', when it is experienced by the artist as a personal possession, in which he can take pride and by which he is exalted, can prove an unhappy accompaniment to creativity. The artist's insistence that the 'gift that consecrates my joy' is his gift, and that his audience must respond to it upon his terms, not only limits possible reactions to the work of art, but also circumscribes the power of the creating imagination itself, reducing consciousness to self-consciousness. Underlying Lamb's unease with certain aspects of Wordsworth's development as a poet is his profound respect and compassion for the vulnerable integrity of the individual, whether envisaged as the subject of art, or as its audience. The hard-won balance of personality in a reader must not be imperilled by a will to power on the part of the poet. Neither should the authentic characteristics of the object described be manipulated by the poet in order to body forth his mind's sublimities. For Lamb, the ideal poet - and the ideal critic too, for that matter - is the servant of life, and not its creator or master. He repeatedly attempted to attack with the weapon of humour that developing phenomenon of the spirit of the age, by which the Romantic poet was meta-

103 L.W., i, 75.

morphosized as a god. Coleridge is mocked for venerating 'his God, Wordsworth',[104] and the young De Quincey is teased out of his beatification and adoration of Coleridge.[105] Although he understood and appreciated to the full the new concept of the imagination as enhancer of human consciousness, first introduced to him by Coleridge, Lamb refuses to ally himself either with the practitioners or the worshippers of the Romantic imagination in its more sublime flights towards god-head.

104 L.L., i, 191, to Manning, 5 April 1800: 'Coleridge has left us, to go into the North, on a visit to his God, Wordsworth.'

105 'London Reminiscences', De Q.W., iii, 41-43. De Quincey, whose admiration for Coleridge at the time of his first encounter with Lamb 'was literally in no respect short of a religious feeling', is thrown into a 'perfect rapture of horror' by Lamb's impious criticisms of 'The Ancient Mariner'. Lamb concludes the torment by remarking 'with a most sarcastic smile ... "If you please, sir, we'll say grace before we begin."'

Chapter Six

Sympathy and Feeling

The last chapter attempted to account for Lamb's reluctance to flow with the mainstream of the Romantic sublime. However, his resistance to that one aspect of the spirit of the age by no means cut him off completely from contemporary innovations in the theory and practice of imaginative art. As well as the conceptualization of the transcendent imagination, with its didactic and prophetic drive, the age also saw the definition, or at least description of another category of imaginative activity, quite contrary to the first in its moral as well as aesthetic implications. The development of the sympathetic imagination as an aesthetic doctrine constituted a distinctively Romantic contribution to English critical theory. In his account of the ideological transitions of the period, Walter Jackson Bate, in From Classic to Romantic, attributes to this second category a central role in the evolution of literary criticism.[1] He presents the new insight into the functioning of the imagination as an outcome of the work of the eighteenth-century British philosophers, David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume in A Treatise of Human Nature (1739) and Smith in The Theory of

1 Walter Jackson Bate, From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), pp. 129-59.

Moral Sentiments (1759) both stressed the close links between the imagination and those affections upon which the moral sense is based.[2] Smith, in particular, emphasized that it is by the imagination alone that the suffering of others may be appreciated.[3] In the eighteenth century, such ideas appear to have found literary vent in the popular genre of the sentimental novel, designed to elicit an unceasing flow of compassionate tears from its readers through involving their imaginations in the pitiful histories of a string of stricken characters. The released flood of emotion apparently brought with it a peculiar pleasure and satisfaction: to weep was manifest proof of one's natural humane benevolence.[4] But the imaginative excursions of the sentimental novelists and their audience concerned themselves only with the grief-stricken subjects appropriate for charitable responses, and were not extended to cover the full range of all possible sensation. Furthermore, the pangs of the sentimentalist were never divorced from his own breast: in himself he felt the pains of others, but never lost sight of his own emotion however intense the moment of sympathy. He was personally vitalized and entertained by grief and stood in no danger of merging his identity with that of the object of his compassion.[5]

2 David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), pp. 424-7, and Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (3rd edn., 1767).

3 See Smith, p. 2.

4 For a connection between tears and satisfaction in experiencing the sentimental, see Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling (1771), ed. Brian Vickers (1967), p. 5.

5 On the appeal of the sentimental and its personally vitalizing effects, see Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick (1768), ed. Ian Jack (1968), p. 113.

As Bate suggested, and as subsequent critics of the period have argued in detail, Hazlitt's 1805 Essay on the Principles of Human Action developed further the theories of Hume and Smith.[6] In this work, Hazlitt presented an account of the human mind as necessarily disinterested, and possessed of the capacity for imaginative sympathy, in so far as it was capable to any degree of appreciating its own changing condition. His argument is that each individual, if he is to take an interest in his own future must pass by means of the imagination through the boundary of his present state of consciousness into his future one. By exercising this same function 'in the same sense and manner,' Hazlitt asserts that 'I can go out of myself entirely and enter into the minds and feelings of others'.[7] When he came to write literary criticism, Hazlitt effectively applied his theory of the imagination to the assessment of art. He searched for a manifestation of creative sympathy in authors and, where he found it, praised it as the highest characteristic of artistic genius. In 1814, he was writing of Shakespeare's skill in characterization:

> The poet appears for the time being, to be identified with the character he wished to represent, and to pass from one to the other, like the same soul, successively animating different bodies. By an art like that of the

6 See James Noxon, 'Hazlitt as Moral Philosopher', Ethics, lxxiii (1962-3), 279-83; and Roy E. Cain, 'David Hume and Adam Smith as Sources of the Concept of Sympathy in Hazlitt', Papers on English Language and Literature, i (1965), 133-40.

7 'An Essay on the Principles of Human Action: Being an Argument in Favour of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind', H.W., i, 39.

> ventriloquist, he throws his imagination out of himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the very mouth of the person whose name it bears. 8

This comment appears in a dramatic review of the contemporary actor Edmund Kean in the role of Hamlet; the piece was subsequently published in A View of the English Stage (1818). By the time Hazlitt delivered his lectures on the English poets in 1818, Shakespeare had become his paradigm of the selfless creator:

> He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become.... He had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it. 9

Through the encouragement of his friend Benjamin Bailey, Keats, in 1817, acquired a copy of the Essay or the Principles of Human Action.[10] Later in that year he published in The Champion a review of the acting of Kean composed very much in Hazlitt's manner.[11] Given his profound and still growing admiration for Hazlitt at this stage - in January 1818, writing to Haydon, he listed 'Hazlitt's depth of Taste' as one of the 'three things to rejoice at in this Age'[12] - it seems more than probable that Keats had read appreciatively Hazlitt's account of Kean.[13] He also attended with enthusiasm

8 H.W., v, 185.

9 'On Shakespeare and Milton', ibid., v, 47-8.

10 See Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 255-6.

11 See 'Mr. Kean', The Champion, 21 December 1817, reprinted in The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats, ed. H. Buxton Forman, revised Maurice Buxton Forman (1938-9), v, 227-32.

12 K.L., i, 203, to B.R. Haydon, 10 January 1818.

13 See, for the same conjecture, Bate, John Keats, p. 236, and Robert Gittings, John Keats (1968), p. 172.

the 1818 lectures on the poets.[14] The famous definitions of the 'poetical Character' given in Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse of October 1818 were therefore developed subsequent to the influence of Hazlitt's concept of the sympathetic imagination. In the letter, Keats contrasts the poetical character proper, of which he sees himself as a member, to the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime. The 'camelion Poet', as opposed to his more self-centered counterpart, 'is continually in for - and filling some other Body'; he 'has no self', is every thing and nothing', 'has no character'.[15] But, as so many other passages from his letters vividly display, the ability to merge himself sympathetically in the life of others was one of Keats's most characteristic traits before he was ever introduced to Hazlitt's theories. He was forever experiencing his identity as being swallowed up in that of others, and not in their sorrows alone but in the very fabric of their daily lives.[16] In so far as an object existed at all, he could share in that existence, and lose all sense of himself in so doing. The tendency was apparent to his acquaintance as well as to himself: many of his friends have testified to Keats's extraordinary and habitual imaginative activity in this respect.[17]

14 See K.L., i, 237, to George and Tom Keats, 21 February 1818.

15 Ibid., i, 387, to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818.

16 See ibid., i, 186, to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, for the well-known example of Keats's capacity to participate in the existence of a sparrow.

17 See, for example, ibid., i, 389, for Richard Woodhouse's letter to John Taylor, c. 27 October 1818, in which Keats's 'poetical Character' is described.

Like Keats, Lamb was easily impressible, to such a degree that he too became possessed by the personalities of his acquaintance, and often imitated them.[18] In general conversation he instinctively varied his manner to accord sympathetically with that of his immediate companion, as B.W. Procter noted in Charles Lamb: A Memoir.[19] In general, he was attendant to the characteristics of objects about him to an acute and readily appreciable degree. In an 1835 number of the Monthly Repository, a contributor published a recollection of Lamb which contrasted his behaviour with that of Coleridge in this respect:

> Coleridge's metaphysics seemed based in the study of his own individual nature more than the nature of others, while Charles Lamb seemed not for a moment to rest on self, but to throw his whole soul into the nature of circumstances and things around him. 20

Crabb Robinson's record of Lamb's 1811 assessment of Wordsworth, quoted at the close of the last chapter, provides evidence that Lamb's critical sensibilities, as well as his more intuitive modes of relation with others, were alive to the concept of imaginative sympathy. Wordsworth is criticized because he 'does not, like Shakespeare, become everything he pleases, but forces the reader to submit to his individual feelings.'[21] By this later stage in his poetic career, Wordsworth's

18 See L.L., i, 11, to Coleridge, 31 May 1796: 'I too bear in mind the "voice the look" of absent friends, & can occasionally mimic their manner'.

19 [B.W. Procter], Charles Lamb: A Memoir (1866), pp. 143-4. Procter writes under the pseudonym of 'Barry Cornwall'.

20 [Sarah Flower Adams], 'An Evening with Charles Lamb and Coleridge', Monthly Repository, ix (1835), 165.

21 H.C.R., i, 17; and see above, p. 232.

involvement in the object he wished to body forth was, according to Lamb, deficient in the intense concentration necessary to subjugate his own personality, and provide for the reader a self-sufficient image, effective in its own right. As for Lamb, by this relatively early stage in his writing career, he has succeeded in arming himself against a tendency in poetry distasteful to his instinct and now clarified and conceptualized to his thinking mind through this formation of its antithesis.

Ironically, however, Wordsworth and Coleridge had both provided some of the early descriptive stages which contributed to the process of establishing the concept of the sympathetic imagination. In The Art of the Lyrical Ballads, S.M. Parrish illustrates Wordsworth's grasp of the notion of the 'camelion Poet' and the egoistical sublime, and their relation as contraries, by referring to a passage from Lady Richardson's 'Reminiscences of Wordsworth'.[22] As evidence that '[t]hese notions may have circulated for years before Keats gave them names and (later) a kind of authority', Parrish cites both Lamb's 1811 criticism of Wordsworth as reported by Robinson and the distinction Coleridge drew between the imaginative powers of Shakespeare and Milton in his 1811-12 lectures.[23] For all three writers, however, passages

22 See Lady Richardson, 'Reminiscences of Wordsworth' (1841), The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1876), iii, 435-6, quoted in S.M. Parrish, The Art of the Lyrical Ballads (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. 239.

23 See Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (1930), ii, 96.

from their earlier works could have been proffered as suggestions towards the definition of the new concept. In the 1802 'Preface' to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth tentatively suggests the possibility of an identification with his subject on the part of the poet, an identification so close as to annihilate the poet's own personality:

> it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs... 24

In The Prelude, Wordsworth attributes this sympathetic humanization of his imagination in part to the influence of Coleridge. Coleridge had guided him to see the merit in interspersing his visionary and isolated preoccupations, 'the deep enthusiastic joy, / The rapture of the Hallelujah', with'closelier gathering thoughts / Of man and his concerns'.[25] In some of his early notebooks, Coleridge does indeed show himself to be acutely alive to the subject of sympathy and to the processes by which 'we become that which we understandly behold & hear'.[26] His public lectures of 1808 were, like the 1811 series, also vitalized by insights arising from the idea of such imaginative empathy. The notebook drafts for the second lecture, for example, suggest of Shakespeare

24 W.Pr., i, 138. See Patricia M. Ball, The Central Self: A Study in Romantic and Victorian Imagination (1968), pp. 73-4, for an account of 'the sympathetic impulse' as it is exercised in the Lyrical Ballads.

25 Prelude, xiii, 261-2, 257-8.

26 C.N., ii, 2086, entry for 11 May 1804.

that

> in his very first productions he projected his mind out of his own particular being, & felt and made others feel, on subjects no way connected with himself, except by force of Contemplation - & that sublime faculty, by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on. 27

If Hazlitt's critics ascribed his insight into the nature of the imagination to the influence of British philosophers, modern criticism of Coleridge has attributed his early explorations in this field to the influence upon him of mystical rather than rational thinkers, in particular of the German mystic Jacob Boehme. In the Biographia, Coleridge wrote of Boehme, and of his English translator and disciple William Law:

> They contributed to keep alive the heart in the head; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of DEATH ... 28

In his book Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence, and in subsequent writings, John Beer uses this quotation as an Archimedes point from which to elevate his theory of Coleridge's poetic development. Beer represents Coleridge as having endeavoured, from his school-days on, to establish a language for what Keats was later to call 'the heart's imagination': the 'head' was understood to devote itself to systematic and essentially divisive interpretations of its position in the world, while

27 C.N., iii, 3290, March 1808.
28 Biographia, i, 98.

imaginative sympathy was an operation of the 'heart'.[29] When he published an account of the relationship between Coleridge and Charles Lamb, Beer represented the latter as a faithful adherent to Coleridge's philosophy of the heart's imagination, and an adherent who, in his whole-heartedness, was more single-mindedly an upholder of the faith than was his original mentor.[30] Beer furthers his argument by comparing Lamb's use of certain significant imagery, of spring and fountain imagery in particular, to Coleridge's use of them and to their source in the writings of Iamblichus, Plotinus and Boehme.[31] The necessary limitations imposed by the periodical article, however, do not allow him to discuss in detail manifestations of 'the heart's imagination' in Lamb's work as a whole. To do so is the purpose of this chapter, and of the next. In the present chapter, the intention is to trace elements of the sympathetic imagination in Lamb's pre-Elian writings, and to explore the consequences incumbent upon such an approach to art and literature, both in terms of his criticism and his more creative work. In the seventh chapter, the development of this theme will be discussed in relation to the portrayal in the Elian essays of a state of being connected with the sympathetic imagination, yet not in itself an imaginative activity, but more a perpetual habit of mind. This state is taken to resemble more closely Keats's original description

29 See John Beer, Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence (1977), pp. 23-38, and Wordsworth and the Human Heart (1978), p. 49.

30 John Beer, 'Coleridge and Lamb: The Central Themes', C.L.B., xiv (1976), 120.

31 Ibid., xiv, 110-20.

of 'negative capability' than Hazlitt's, or Coleridge's, or indeed Keats's own concepts of 'the heart's imagination', although the link between imaginative functioning and the concomitant state of consciousness must, of course, be generally acknowledged and stressed.

That Lamb was nothing more than a follower or disciple of other more prominent Romantic writers in this field may be questioned from the outset. Above, the earliest example of the concept of imaginative sympathy used as a method of literary criticism was traced back to Coleridge's 1808 lectures, at least according to the evidence of his notebook proposals for the series. Neither Charles nor Mary Lamb were present at these lectures, however, because they had been temporarily alienated from Coleridge due to his neglect of them during his stay in London that year.[32] But, when it was published at the close of that year, the Dramatic Specimens contained an analysis of contrasting qualities in the work of Chapman and Shakespeare which paralleled Coleridge's notebook descriptions of the latter dramatist. Of Chapman, Lamb wrote:

> Dramatic Imitation was not his talent. He could not go out of himself, as Shakspeare could shift at pleasure, to inform and animate other existences, but in himself he had an eye to perceive and a soul to embrace all forms. 33

32 See L.L., ii, 289, Mary Lamb to Mrs. Clarkson, 10 December 1808.

33 L.W., iv, 83. But see Jordan, 'More about the Romantic Art of Charles Lamb', C.L.B., xiii, 90, for the suggestion that the sympathetic imagination first finds figurative expression in Lamb's writings in L.L., i, 267, 30 January 1801, when Lamb assures Wordsworth that 'the Mind will make friends of any thing'.

Lamb here presented, as the opposite of the sympathetic imagination, an associated process of imaginative thinking whereby the outer world took its significance from the eye of the perceiver. Chapman did not 'go out of himself' to vitalize his object but incorporated, or embraced, all exterior forms as manifestations, through symbolic reflection, of his own spirit. The effect could be very powerful: the poet could command the responses of his audience. Chapman 'makes his readers glow, weep, tremble, take any affection which he pleases'. But for all his admiration of Chapman's qualities, when it came to weighing the abiding pleasure and profit granted by the associative as opposed to the sympathetic imagination, Lamb had no doubt as to where his preference lay.[34]

Towards the end of his life, Lamb professed himself to have been one 'who, above every other form of Poetry ... ever preferred the Dramatic'.[35] Whether his love of drama led him to meditate upon the nature of the sympathetic imagination, or whether his appreciation of that type of imaginative activity resulted in his preference for the dramatic, cannot be ascertained; through his analysis of Chapman's work in relation to Shakespeare's, however, Lamb became the first critic to make explicit the connection between dramatic art and the sympathetic imagination. Dramatic imitation was not Chapman's talent because he would not

34 For an account of the associative, as opposed to the sympathetic, imagination, see J.-C. Salle, 'Hazlitt the Associationist', R.E.S., xv (1964), 38-51; and J.D. O'Hara, 'Hazlitt and the Functions of the Imagination', P.M.L.A., lxxxi (1966), 552-62.

35 Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 62, to the Editor of the 'Table-Book', January 1827.

go out of himself to inform and animate other existences. This idea, to be expanded and elaborated upon in the dramatic criticisms of Hazlitt a decade later,[36] provides the basis of Lamb's critical approaches in both the 1808 Dramatic Specimens as a whole, and in the 1811 essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare'. But Lamb was suspicious of the word 'sympathy': a comment from his correspondence shows that he considered its ubiquitous presence in contemporary writing unfortunate:

> Sympathy is a young lady's word, rife in modern novels, and is almost always wrongly applied. To sympathize is to feel with, not simply for another. 37

Though he may feel uneasy about using the word, to sympathize with his subjects remains Lamb's guiding intention in composing dramatic criticism. The preface to the Dramatic Specimens announces its author's intention of 'feeling with' the Elizabethean dramatists, as they 'feel with' their characters.[38] Lamb's Shakespearian criticism has also been particularly praised for its insight into character: Joan Coldwell, in the introduction to her edition of Lamb on Shakespeare, emphasizes his capacity to explore the 'many-sidedness of Shakespeare's characters',

36 See James Shokhoff, 'Charles Lamb and the Elizabethean Dramatists A Reassessment', W.C., iv (1973), 8-9, for a detailed account of Hazlitt's debt to Lamb. See also John Kinnaird, William Hazlitt: Critic of Power (N.Y., 1978), p. 404 n. 25, for a further acknowledgement that, in his 1819 lectures on Shakespeare's contemporaries, 'Hazlitt may be seen as amplifying suggestions that Lamb had first adumbrated in Specimens of English Dramatic Poets'.

37 Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 413, to J. Fuller Russell, Summer 1834. Cf. 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' (1823), De Q.W., x, 391-2 n. 2.

38 See L.W., iv, xii.

and to appreciate their 'human comprehensiveness'.[39] She indicates as an example his account of Richard III in 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare'. The Richard of Shakespeare displays, according to Lamb, a rich intellect and 'vast knowledge and insight into characters, the poetry of his part,' as well as the murderous tendencies which are necessarily exaggerated in any stage performance of the role.[40] As Lamb's earlier 1802 review of G.F. Cooke playing Richard emphasized, an actor can only present his audience with the '*monster* *Richard*, as he exists in the *popular* *idea*' and not 'the *man* *Richard*, whom Shakespeare drew'.[41] Lamb sympathizes with the character as Shakespeare conceived it, in all the gusto of its essentially human presentation.

Shakespeare's contemporaries, however, were, to Lamb's mind, not so unfailingly capable of creating comprehensive and convincingly human characters. He criticizes Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, for example, by contrasting its hero with Shakespeare's Shylock in this respect:

> Shylock, in the midst of his savage purpose, is a man. His motives, feelings, resentments, have something human in them. 'If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' Barabas is a mere monster, brought in with a large painted nose, to please the rabble. 42

But if the limitations of some of the Elizabethan dramatists

39 Coldwell, *Charles Lamb on Shakespeare*, pp. 13-14. See also, by the same author, 'The Playgoer as Critic: Charles Lamb on Shakespeare's Characters', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, xxvi (1975), 184-95.

40 *L.W.*, i, 106.

41 Ibid., i, 37.

42 Ibid., iv, 26.

prevented Lamb from 'feeling with' their characters as fully humanized creations, these very limitations facilitated his sympathy with the authors themselves, to a degree impossible with genius on the scale of Shakespeare's. His brief notes to the Dramatic Specimens often capture and communicate vividly the particular individuality of each playwright.[43] In writing of these dramatists, Lamb's own language develops a responsive sensuousness of its own: his prose is lyricized and adopts seventeenth-century cadences. His defence of Thomas Decker's 'frantic lover' Orleans in the play Old Fortunatus, for example, becomes in itself a prose poem, by which he attempts to recreate for a sophisticated nineteenth-century audience the fervour of a passionate commitment:

> Love's Sectaries are a 'reason unto themselves.' We have gone retrograde in the noble Heresy since the days when Sidney proselytised our nation to this mixed health and disease; the kindliest symptom yet the most alarming crisis in the ticklish state of youth; the nourisher and the destroyer of hopeful wits; the mother of twin-births, wisdom and folly, valour and weakness; the servitude above freedom; the gentle mind's religion; the liberal superstition. 44

Lamb is also quick to criticize a dramatist for not envincing to a sufficient degree that emotional response to experience which is the basis of sympathetic creativity. Fulke Greville is not the playwright he could be because in his mind the understanding 'held a most tyrannical pre-eminence'; consequently, his plays and lyrics are 'all frozen and made

43 See, for example, Lamb's note on Marlowe, ibid., iv, 34.
44 Ibid., iv, 53.

rigid with intellect'.[45] On the other hand, any attempt to exercise imaginative identification is appreciated even when the faculty is employed upon non-human aspects of nature. Of the funeral dirge for Marcello in Webster's The White Devil, V, iv, Lamb finely notes:

> I never saw anything like this Dirge, except the Ditty which reminds Ferdinand of his drowned Father in the Tempest. As that is of the water, watery; so this is of the earth, earthy. Both have that intenseness of feeling, which seems to resolve itself into the elements which it contemplates. 46

Lamb appears to have viewed Webster as one who had an imagination equal to that of Shakespeare's in passion and intensity, if not in scope. The Duchess of Malfi is one of the few characters from amongst those of Shakespeare's contemporaries whom Lamb sees as possessing the complete individuality of dramatic characterization at its most imaginative. She belongs to a world made unnatural and taken beyond the common human sphere through excess of suffering. And yet, so comprehensively has the dramatist imagined the situation that her reactions appear utterly convincing, extraordinary as they necessarily are.[47] Webster's 'intenseness of feeling'in sympathy with a person in the Duchess's plight has produced the compelling characterization: Lamb's sympathetic and imaginative response as a reader has granted him insight into the essence and totality of the portrayal.

45 L.W., iv, 242.
46 Ibid., iv, 192.
47 See ibid., iv, 179.

In the twentieth century, Lamb has been condemned as a critic for relying too heavily upon his subjective emotional responses to a work of art. René Wellek, in the second volume of A History of Modern Criticism, isolates for particular disapprobation Lamb's comment on The Revenger's Tragedy in the Dramatic Specimens, and W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks in Literary Criticism: A Short History also draw attention to the same note, although in a less condemnatory context.[48] Of the scene in which Vindici and Hippolito tempt their mother, Lamb wrote:

> The reality and life of this Dialogue passes any scenical illusion I ever felt. I never read it but my ears tingle, and I feel a hot blush spread my cheeks, as if I were presently about to 'proclaim' such 'malefactions' of myself, as the Brothers here rebuke in their unnatural parent ... 49

For Wellek, Lamb's notes as a whole are, as criticism, 'little more than exclamation marks, mere assertions of enthusiasm', and this particular comment reaches the depths of 'personal unargued criticism' of obvious 'irrelevance to the text'. Wellek, and Wimsatt and Brooks, categorize Hazlitt as well as Lamb as a critic who depended particularly on the use of the sympathetic imagination in appreciating literature.[50] Hazlitt, however, unlike Lamb, provided himself with theoretical defences and analyses of this mode of approach. In the essay

48 See René Wellek, The Romantic Age, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, ii (1955), 193; and William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (N.Y., 1957), p. 494.

49 L.W., iv, 160.

50 Wellek, op. cit., ii, 191; Wimsatt and Brooks, op. cit., p. 494.

'On Genius and Common Sense' (1821), for example, he argues that without such a basic feeling response, first to experience in the raw by the artist, and secondly, by implication, to the work of art so created by the critic, works and criticisms imbued with vital and imaginative insight could not exist.[51] It is true that both the artist and the critic who base their work on feeling stand in danger of over-personalizing their subject: E.M.W. Tillyard admitted as much in the introduction to his edition of Lamb's criticism.[52] But Tillyard did not allow that Lamb could, in fact, stand accused of such excesses. What is more, the evidence of Lamb's correspondence shows that from his earliest years as a critic he had appreciated the dangerous liabilities of the personal response. In 1803, he wrote of Godwin's work on Chaucer:

> there is one considerable error runs through it which is a conjecturing spirit, a fondness for filling out the picture by supposing what Chaucer did and how he felt, where the materials are scanty. 53

The critic must endeavour to look steadily at his object, and maintain a fidelity to its actual contours and colours.

Another critical comment from his early correspondence suggests a subtler method through which Lamb naturally and spontaneously diminished, or sublimated, the subjective

51 See H.W., viii, 42. For an account of Hazlitt's theories on the function of feeling in literature and criticism, see Roy Park, Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory (Oxford, 1971), pp. 161-85.

52 See Lamb's Criticism, ed. Tillyard, p. viii.

53 L.L., ii, 127, to Godwin, 10 November 1803.

element in his emotional response to literature. In defending 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' to Southey, Lamb claimed that

> I never so deeply felt the pathetic as in that part,
> A spring of love gush'd from my heart,
> And I bless'd them unaware -
> It stung me into high pleasure through sufferings. 54

As a reader, he can allow his feelings to be so sharply activated and aroused that the repercussions of the emotion pass beyond the boundary of subjective feeling alone, or of self-consciousness in the narrow sense. The emotion translates itself into a vision of the extended consciousness, a vision in this case of the sublime aspects of the pathetic, and the excitement and joy of that new plane of perception is experienced with 'high pleasure'. Lamb's method of appreciating literature appears to be to lay himself open emotionally before it and to extend, in Pater's phrase, 'a sort of boundless sympathy',[55] which emanates as it must from subjective feeling, but effects, in its involvement with the work, a transcendence of self-reference: at the same time he retains, as a constituent of that unquestioning sympathy, an honest and objective apprehension of its actual properties. Amongst Lamb's critics, Pater best appreciated and expressed this quality in Lamb's work. In Appreciations, he writes of Lamb's 'loyal, self-forgetful work for others'; Lamb has 'the true scholar's way of forgetting himself in his subject'.[56] Of his criticism as a whole, Pater

54 L.L., i, 142, to Southey, 8 November 1798. See Barbara Birkhoff, As Between Friends: Criticism of themselves and one another in the letters of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Lamb (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), p. 28, for praise of this letter as 'great criticism' which 'strikes what Pater would call the formula of the poem'. See also Derek Roper, Reviewing before the Edinburgh: 1788-1802 (1978), p.100, for the information that Southey's complaint of the 'Marinere's' unintelligibility 'seems to have been voiced by every contemporary critic except Charles Lamb'.

55 Pater, Appreciations, The Works of Walter Pater, v, 110.

56 Ibid., p. 111.

concludes:

> To feel strongly the charm of an old poet or moralist ... and then to interpret that charm, to convey it to others - he seeming to himself but to hand on to others, in mere humble ministration, that of which for them he is really the creator - this is the way of his criticism ... 57

Pater's portrayal of Lamb as the self-forgetful servant connects interestingly with the fact that throughout his career Lamb venerated as the 'noblest feature of the conception of [Shakespeare's] divine mind' that most unselfish of servants, Lear's Kent, or Caius. One of the items in 'Table-Talk by the Late Elia' (1833-34) is a descriptive appreciation of Kent's high-mindedness.[58] In the essay 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', written over two decades earlier, the woman who accompanied her seducer to Bedlam in the last of 'The Rake's Progress' sequence of prints is compared to Kent,

> the noblest pattern of virtue which even Shakespeare has conceived, - who follows his royal master in banishment, that had pronounced his banishment, and forgetful at once of his wrongs and dignities, taking on himself the disguise of a menial, retains his fidelity to the figure, his loyalty to the carcass, the shadow, the shell and empty husk of Lear. 59

Furthermore, in 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple', Lamb's father, here called Lovel, himself both in life and in the

57 Pater, Appreciations, The Works of Walter Pater, p. 112.

58 See L.W., i, 345-6.

59 Ibid., i, 72.

essay a servant to one of the Benchers, is indirectly connected with the figure of Kent by means of an allusive quotation.[60] The perfect, selfless servant represented a potent ideal for Lamb throughout his life; its effects are apparent in his work, to their merit and demerit. Just as the glorification of childhood operates as a prevalent and characteristic theme in his writing, so the servant ideal colours much of his output: both ideas are particularly apparent in the Elia essays. Lamb likes to remind himself and the reader of the child's eye view of the world in opposition to that of the conventional, coxcombical adult; he also likes to adopt the role of a humble servant whose foremost wish is to please 'my masters', his readers.[61] When he writes as a critic prior to the Elia essays, however, his 'masters' are not his readers, but, as Pater indicated, the authors whom he serves through drawing popular attention to their productions. In his letters too, Lamb hails favourite authors as his masters to praise and glorify: an 1801 letter to Robert Lloyd is a rhapsody on the qualities of Jeremy Taylor, 'the Bishop of Down & Connor, Administrator of the See of Dromore! My theme and my glory!'[62]

60 See L.W., ii, 87: Lovel is described as 'A good fellow withal, and "would strike."' In King Lear, V, iii, 285-6, Lear says of Caius, 'He's a good fellow, I can tell you that; / He'll strike, and quickly too'.

61 See 'New Year's Eve', L.W., ii, 32: Lamb wishes his readers 'a merry New Year, and many of them, to you all, my masters!' See also 'Ritson Versus John Scott the Quaker',ibid., i, 219, where Lamb promises that 'the town may be troubled with something more in his own way the ensuing month from its poor servant to command. ELIA.'

62 L.L., ii, 6, to Robert Lloyd, 16 April 1801.

Certain developments in modern criticism, in that their general thrust is to question and undermine the apparent authority of the individual writer, represent the antithesis of this form of criticism. The modern tendency is to see the critic who is ready, and even eager, to take a secondary role in relation to his author as necessarily a second-rate critic: his paeans of praise are dismissed as effusive adulations which do not even merit the title of criticism. However, if a critic's work is consulted as a means towards closer contact with an author, then the insights of the servant critic, who loses himself in contemplating and expounding the merits of his subject, can have much to offer.

At any rate, although the notes to the Specimens represent his least analytical and most fragmentary criticism, some amongst Lamb's readers have praised these 'marginalia' in terms akin to Pater's. During Lamb's lifetime, Coleridge, in the Biographia, recommended their fresh originality,[63] and Hazlitt praised Lamb as a better authority than either Dr. Johnson or Schlegel 'on any subject in which poetry and feeling are concerned'.[64] In August 1835, the Athenaeum printed a review of the second edition which recommended the annotations for 'the perfect unison of their style with that of the subject-matters'.[65] Later, in the Victorian period, Swinburne hailed

63 See Biographia, ii, 61.

64 H.W., iv, 270.

65 The Athenaeum, 8 August 1835, p. 598. See also [B.W. Procter], 'Recollections of Charles Lamb', ibid., 24 January 1835, p. 72: 'He had more real knowledge of old English literature than any man whom I ever knew.... The Spirit of the author descended upon him; and he felt it!'

Lamb in the extremest of terms as 'the greatest critic of dramatic poetry that ever lived and wrote',[66] and insisted that if the Dramatic Specimens 'were his one and only claim on the regard of Englishmen, this alone should suffice to ensure him of their everlasting respect and their unalterable gratitude'.[67] Swinburne also acclaims Lamb as sole originator of the revival of interest in Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists.[68] As if in revolt against this excessive partisanship, twentieth-century scholarship has presented evidence to modify such claims for Lamb's ascendancy. E.R. Wasserman, Robert D. Williams and F.S. Boas have all pointed out that, although Lamb's Specimens increased the popularity of the Elizabethan dramatists and created an enthusiasm for their work, he was not the first pioneer in the field but followed earlier editors and collectors.[69] Boas also found fault with an 'unctuously moralizing vein' in Lamb's notes.[70] During the last decade, however, the critical pendulum has again swung back in defence of the vital contribution

66 Swinburne, The Age of Shakespeare (1908), The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, xi (1926), 477.

67 Swinburne, Miscellanies, ibid., xiv, 285.

68 See ibid.: 'To him and to him alone it is that we owe the revelation and the resurrection of our greatest dramatic poets after Shakespeare'.

69 See Earl Reeves Wasserman, 'The Scholarly Origin of the Elizabethan Revival', E.L.H., iv (1937), 213-43; Robert D. Williams, 'Antiquarian Interest in Elizabethan Drama before Lamb', P.M.L.A., liii (1938), 434-44; F.S. Boas,'Charles Lamb and the Elizabethan Dramatists', E. & S., xxix (1943), 62-81.

70 Ibid., p. 69. See also, for a similar indictment of the Specimens' 'moral earnestness and a certain squeamishness about matters of sex', R.C. Bald, 'Charles Lamb and the Elizabethans', Studies in Honor of A.H.R. Fairchild, ed. Charles T. Prouty, University of Missouri Studies, xxi (1946), 169.

made by the Specimens. A Wordsworth Circle article stressed that it was through Lamb's work alone that certain of the more obscure dramatists were restored to public view,[71] and Wayne McKenna, in his book Charles Lamb and the Theatre, defends Lamb's originality and his aesthetic sense.[72] McKenna also defends Lamb from the accusation of overt moralization on the grounds that the faults Lamb condemned in works such as Fletcher's The Faithful Shepherdess, for example, were presented as flaws in taste and balance: Lamb is making an aesthetic rather than a more narrowly ethical criticism.[73] In a recent Charles Lamb Bulletin article, Angus Easson also shows that in his selections Lamb is not so much morally squeamish as eager to avoid false representations of morality.[74]

Charles Lamb and the Theatre attempts to answer the Wellek attack on Lamb's subjectivity as a critic, too. McKenna claims that Lamb combined sensibility with critical intelligence, and hence saved himself from excessive personalization.[75] But the potency of Lamb's chosen form of critical commentary, and its effectiveness in awakening the reader's response through the communication of his own, is not stressed here. However, in the case of his art criticism, as opposed to his dramatic criticism, Lamb's readers have been more ready to acknowledge

71 Shokhoff, 'Charles Lamb and the Elizabethan Dramatists: A Reassessment', W.C., iv, 3-7.

72 McKenna, Charles Lamb and the Theatre, p. 39.

73 See ibid., p. 49.

74 Angus Easson, 'The Musician and the Nightingale: Charles Lamb and Elizabethan Drama', C.L.B., xxix (1980), 91-2.

75 McKenna, Charles Lamb and the Theatre, pp. 50-2.

the strength of his 'feeling' approach. During Lamb's own day, John Scott, the first editor of the London Magazine, compared the essay 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth' very favourably with a German description of Hogarth's works: Scott found in Lamb 'a far purer and deeper sympathy with Hogarth's spirit'.[76] A recent twentieth-century article echoes Scott's words and gives a detailed account of the 'perfect sympathy' Lamb exercised in his criticism of Hogarth's prints and etchings. According to John I. Ades, Lamb derives an estimate of a work of art by imaginatively sympathizing with the characters portrayed in it and by placing himself in their position.[77] Ades refers to Lamb's comments on the print 'Election Entertainment' as the apotheosis of this method of critical approach in the essay. In Lamb's use of this print as part of his defence of Hogarth against those critics who would dismiss him as worthless and mean, close attention is paid to individual figures, and to their experience of the scene portrayed. The effect is to draw the reader willy nilly into the life of the print, and to recreate it. Lamb describes, for example:

> That poor country fellow, that is grasping his staff (which, from that difficulty of feeling themselves at home which poor men experience at a feast, he has never parted with since he came into the room), and is enjoying with a relish that seems to fit all the capacities of his soul the slender joke, which

76 [John Scott], 'German Descriptions of Hogarth's Works', London Magazine, ii (September 1820), 277.

77 John I. Ades, 'Perfect Sympathy: Lamb on Hogarth', C.L.B., x-xi (1975), 50.

> that facetious wag his neighbour is practising upon the gouty gentleman ... 78

The description opens out without pause from the one man to his immediate context. As the prospective broadens, the print as a whole is shown to be imbued and vitalized with the accumulated gusto of each individual figure, each one appreciated by the critic's imaginative sympathy. According to Lamb's 'reading' of it,[79] 'Election Entertainment' has

> no central figure or principal group, (for the hero of the piece, the Candidate, is properly set aside in the levelling indistinction of the day, one must look for him to find him) nothing to detain the eye from passing from part to part, where every part is alike instinct with life ... 80

Nor is this 'teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning' confined to Hogarth's representations of men and women: for Lamb 'tables, and chairs, and joint-stools in Hogarth, are living and significant things' and contribute to his graphic representation, 'the dumb rhetoric of the scenery'.[81] As well as the furniture, the print contains 'more than thirty distinct classes of face', all naturally and characteristically represented, 'yet all partaking of the spirit of the occasion which brought them together, so that we feel that nothing but an election time could have assembled them'.[82] No one figure predominates over

78 L.W., i, 85.

79 See ibid., i, 71: '[Hogarth's] graphic representations are ... books: they have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of words. Other pictures we look at, - his prints we read'.

80 Ibid., i, 84.

81 Ibid., i, 85.

82 Ibid., i, 84.

the scene, but each member of the multitude contributes in unchecked individualism to the expression of that occasion which has brought them together, and binds them together. Lamb's account of the print is comparable to his 1802 love-song in praise of London in which 'the multitudinous moving picture' of city life depends for its effect upon the endless variety of its inhabitants, all working together to create the one phenomenon, London.[83]

The figures in Hogarth's more sombre prints, such as those of the series 'The Rake's Progress' or of the engraving 'Gin Lane', summon, if anything, a yet more intensely sympathetic identification from Lamb than did the characters of the lighter, comic scenes. He has received, for example, 'matter for the mind of the beholder to feed on for the hour together' from the countenance of the rake in the last plate but one of his 'Progress'. In the print, a letter has just been brought to the profligate containing the news that his play 'will not do' - a state of affairs with which Lamb could sympathize from personal experience. But his description of the rake goes far beyond personal reference and suggests connections with his general critical stance:

> Here all is easy, natural, undistorted, but withal what a mass of woe is here accumulated! - the long history of a mis-spent life is compressed into the countenance as plainly as the series of plates before had told it; here is no attempt at Gorgonian looks which are to freeze the beholder,

83 See L.W., i, 39-40; see above, pp. 136-40.

> no grinning at the antique bed posts, no face-making, or consciousness of the presence of spectators in or out of the picture, but grief kept to a man's self, a face retiring from notice with the shame which great anguish sometimes brings with it, - a final leave taken of hope, - the coming on of vacancy and stupefaction,- a beginning alienation of mind looking like tranquillity. 84

This passage may be compared with the description of Caravaggio's representation of Vice given by the Drunkard in his 'confessions', and discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.[85] Like the Caravaggio, Hogarth's print portrays a member of the consciously, but helplessly, damned, one who has destroyed his life and knows it. Lamb sympathizes particularly with those who have placed themselves beyond the pale of conventional social bonds and who are in danger of relinguishing the burdens of human communication and sanity.

Lamb's description of the rake also presents in embryo the ideas behind an essay of his to be published a few months after the appearance of his Hogarth criticism, the essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare'. Earlier in this thesis, the views expressed in that essay were accounted for by stressing Lamb's imaginative involvement with the 'shaping spirit' behind a work of art. A theatrical performance, in that it provides for its passive audience but 'a copy of the usual external effects of ... passions', necessarily diminishes that potential imaginative response to the inner mind of the characters and their emotions which is available to the sympathetic

84 L.W., i, 75.

85 'Confessions of a Drunkard', ibid., i, 136-7; see above, pp. 97-8.

reader.[86] The reader is free to share the character's inner processes of thought and feeling: as Lamb puts it, 'we see not Lear, but we are Lear, - we are in his mind'.[87] Shakespeare's tragedies achieve their pre-eminence not so much through his representation of action as in his disclosure of 'the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity'[88] which prompts the protagonists to commit their crimes. Similarly, the rake's countenance does not present any caricature of emotion to an audience, but discloses a grief experienced reflectively and privately. The reflecting spirit, there to be read rather than seen, is burdened with consciousness of the past, 'the long history of a mis-spent life'. The rake's emotion is not momentary and single but is made up of a private shame of such complex proportions, and darkened by such a desolating awareness of past mistakes and of the prospective future, that he cannot assimilate it and remain balanced and healthy in mind. The sympathetic imagination of the artist has penetrated to the inner reality of a man caught in such a plight and has represented it effectively to the contemplative, equally sympathetic, beholder. The childlike form of imaginative activity which, for all its selflessness, a selflessness equal to that of the sympathetic imagination, cannot penetrate beyond the transitory impressions of life

86 L.W., i, 102; see above, pp. 184-7.
87 Ibid., i, 107.
88 Ibid., i, 106.

could never receive such a comprehension. When Coleridge, lecturing on Shakespeare in 1818, seconded Lamb's argument in 'On the Tragedies of Shakspeare', he referred specifically to the agency of the sympathetic imagination. Of The Tempest he wrote:

> It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty; and although the illusion may be assisted by the effect on the senses of the complicated scenery and decorations of modern times yet this sort of assistance is dangerous. For the principal and only genuine excitement ought to come from within, - from the moved and sympathetic imagination; whereas, where so much is addressed to the more external senses of seeing and hearing, the spiritual vision is apt to languish, and the attraction from without will withdraw the mind from the proper and only legitimate interest which is intended to spring from within. 89

A further connection can be made between Lamb's account of Hogarth's print and themes discussed earlier in this study. The manner in which Lamb responds to the 'retiring' aspect of the rake, when taken in conjunction with his concluding assessment of the print as a whole - namely, that it is 'too powerful to admit one thought about the power of the artist who did it' - may be related to Lamb's stand against authorial domination in art, as elaborated upon in the last chapter.[90] The personality of the artist is not present in the scene to press home his point or to command one's attention; neither does the subject portrayed present itself with any insistence

89 Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism, i, 131-2.
90 L.W., i, 75; see above, pp. 228-9 and 233-4.

to the spectator's gaze but rather seeks, as it were, to withdraw from all notice. As a critic, Lamb has always been accused of exclusivenes: he is held to appreciate the neglected by-ways of literature primarily because of their being neglected.[91] But the quality of reserve in both artist and subject was for him a virtue in its own right; to his mind, surface reserve was more likely than specious declamation to cover a depth of reflection and feeling.[92] Imposing appearances, or an imposing reputation, were suspect, as a potential threat to critical equilibrium. Lamb tried to protect himself from over-exposure to an insistent art which thrust both its subject and its method of presentation upon its audience; he praised instead that art which, through retiring from notice, calls upon the imagination of the discerning critic to realize fully its qualities for himself. A sympathetic imagination is a necessity for the proper appreciation of reserve in art, and to exercise it in such a context is Lamb's highest aesthetic pleasure and his most valuable critical contribution.

In the introduction to Roy Park's recent edition of Lamb's criticism, attention is drawn to an important connection between the essay on Hogarth and the dramatic criticism. The contrast Lamb draws between Hogarth's prints and the popularly acclaimed work of contemporary painters such as

91 See, for example, Hazlitt's accusations in 'On Criticism', H.W., viii, 225-6.

92 See 'Table-Talk by the late Elia', L.W., i, 346, for Lamb's appreciation of Shakespeare's reserve. For accounts of the quality of reserve in Lamb's own writings, see B[arron] F[ield], 'Charles Lamb, Esq.', The Annual Biography and Obituary of 1835, xx (1836), 14; and Pater, Appreciations, The Works of Walter Pater, v, 121.

Henry William Banbury and Edward Penny is compared by Park to the opposition earlier established in the Dramatic Specimens between the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists and those of the later eighteenth-century.[93] In his note on Middleton and Rowley's A Fair Quarrel, Lamb praises the old dramatists for their straightforward representation of human ills and compares their work favourably in this respect with the hypocritical squeamishness of more contemporary productions:

> The insipid levelling morality to which the modern stage is tied down would not admit of such admirable passions as these scenes are filled with. A puritanical obtuseness of sentiment, a stupid infantile goodness, is creeeping among us, instead of the vigorous passions, and virtues clad in flesh and blood, with which the old dramatists present us.... With us all is hypocritical meekness.... Our audiences come to the theatre to be complimented on their goodness. 94

In modern drama, a character bearing some symbols of poverty is treated by the rest of the cast according to the current moral code. Because there is no attempt at any realistic or true-to-life representation, the complacency of the audience is not threatened. They are not called upon to respond to individualized human suffering in the raw. In a further comment in the Specimens, on Rowley's A New Wonder: A Woman never Vext, Lamb returns to the attack, and probes the discrepancy between the old drama and the new to yet more incisive effect. Of the moderns he writes:

93 See Lamb as Critic, ed. Roy Park (1980), pp. 29-31.
94 L.W., iv, 114.

> Our delicacy, in fact, forbids the dramatizing of Distress at all. It is never shewn in its essential properties; it appears but as the adjunct to some virtue, as something which is to be relieved, from the approbation of which relief the spectators are to derive a certain soothing of self-referred satisfaction. We turn away from the real essences of things to hunt after their relative shadows, moral duties: whereas, if the truth of things were fairly represented, the relative duties might be safely trusted to themselves, and moral philosophy lose the name of a science. 95

True representation of genuine suffering would elicit imaginative responses from which authentic, heart-felt moral sensibility might evolve, but when art no longer functions to such vital effect, but rather panders to its audiences, it only reinforces an artificial and sterile code of behaviour.

The same point can be made of the contrast Lamb draws between Hogarth and Penny. Penny's popular paintings reveal a complacency similar to that of the playwrights of his time; their effect is to congratulate society upon its moral self-regard.[96] Hogarth's prints, on the other hand, show 'plenty of poverty and low stuff to disgust upon a superficial view'; accordingly, they cannot properly be estimated except by a sympathetic audience - 'a cold spectator feels himself immediately disgusted and repelled'.[97] But, given a willingness

95 L.W., iv, 126.

96 See ibid., i, 81-2: Lamb writes of Penny's ethical subjects that they are 'pretty things to teach the first rudiments of humanity ... But, good God! is this milk for babes to be set up in opposition to Hogarth's moral scenes, his strong meat for men?'

97 Ibid., i, 73.

to accept his figures in a disinterested and reflective manner, the peruser will find that Hogarth enriches his grasp of reality in the same way as the best works of literature can do. According to Lamb, 'read' in this spirit, Hogarth's prints

> bring us acquainted with the every-day human face, - they give us skill to detect those gradations of sense and virtue (which escape the careless or fastidious observer) in the countenances of the world about us; 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. In this, as in many other things, they are analogous to the best novels of Smollett or Fielding. 98

The 'heart's imagination' needs practice and guiding-lines if it is to fulfil its role as evolver of the individual moral consciousness: for Lamb, art is one field in which it may exercise its capacities. But it can only try out its strength against convincing representations of actual suffering and chaos in life: idealizations may satisfy the mind but they cannot arouse the imagination, or encourage attentiveness to one's fellow men and a discerning eye for their condition. Idealizing systems of thought do not help men to relate more realistically to their actual circumstances and to each other, but rather distance them further through giving to each an exalted sense of intellectual superiority to the common experiences of life.

Although he professes such admiration of their work, Lamb never wrote at any length of the merits of Smollett and

98 L.W., i, 86.

Fielding. By chance, however, he was led to publish an assessment of the works of an earlier novelist, Defoe. Defoe's fictions are praised in terms very similar to those Lamb employed to describe Hogarth's prints. In the letter to Wordsworth of January 1801 quoted in the last chapter, Lamb had praised Robinson Crusoe as one of the 'beautiful bare novels' which provide a contrast to writings full of the oppressive presence of the author, such as Wordsworth's own.[99] Many years later, in 1822, Walter Wilson, a fellow-clerk of Lamb's at the India House, wrote to ask for information on Defoe for his forthcoming book, Memoirs of the Life and Times of Daniel Defoe. Lamb's replies contained detailed criticisms of Defoe, and a passage from the first letters was subsequently published by Wilson. Later, in 1829, a short critical piece, 'Estimate of De Foe's Secondary Novels', was added by Lamb to his epistolary comments and included by Wilson in the Memoir. Lamb admires the novels for the 'appearance of truth in all the incidents and conversations that occur in them':

> The Author never appears in these self-narratives (for so they ought to be called or rather Autobiographies) but the narrator chains us down to an implicit belief in every thing he says.... Facts are repeated over and over again in varying phrases, till you cannot chuse but believe them.... His passion for matter of fact narrative sometimes betrayed him into a long relation of common incidents which might happen to any man, and have no interest but the intense appearance of truth in them, to recommend them. [100]

99 L.L., i, 265-6; see above, p. 225-6.

100 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 352-3, to Walter Wilson 16 December 1822.

In 'Estimate of De Foe's Secondary Novels' this 'extreme homeliness' is compared directly to the work of Hogarth and Fielding, and Lamb closes the piece with the quotation from the close of his Hogarth essay given earlier: Defoe's 'pictures' also 'tend to diminish that "fastidiousness to the concerns and pursuits of common life, which an unrestrained passion for the ideal and the sentimental is in danger of producing."'[101] Like the graphic artist, the unobtrusive novelist can capture and present the experiences of every-day life in such a way as to draw forth the sympathetic imagination of his audience and enhance their appreciation of human realities behind the surface superficiality of existence.

Nor was the poet exempt from commendation or criticism according to his claims to achieve such an effect. Lamb admired the Latin poems of the obscure Vincent Bourne, Cowper's school-master at Westminster, because they were 'unpretending' and 'matter-ful'.[102] In the essay 'The Latin Poems of Vincent Bourne' (1831), he writes of them:

> They fix upon something; they ally themselves to common life and objects; their good nature is a Catholicon, sanative of coxcombry, of heartlessness, and of fastidiousness. [103]

Bourne, too, is compared to Hogarth in his affection for London

101 L.W., i, 327.
102 L.L., iii, 140, to William Wordsworth, 16 April 1815.
103 L.W., i, 341.

and his ability to portray its rich variety.[104] In other cases, Lamb expressed a dislike for some particular poems, or, indeed, for the works of some poets as a whole, because of their exotic and unrealistic locations or unearthly characters. He was unable to like Southey's 'The Curse of Kehama', for example; he found that 'my imagination goes sinking and floundering in the vast spaces of unopened-before systems & faiths, I am put out of the pale of my old sympathies, and my moral sense i[s] almost outraged'.[105] He also disapproved of Southey's 'Vision of Judgement' because of the arrogance with which the poet judged his fellow-men. Commenting on the poem in an 1822 letter to the Quaker poet Bernard Barton, he condemns Southey's 'coxcombry' by associating it with what he took to be a similar trait in Shelley:

> To award his Heaven and his Hell in the presumptuous manner he has done, was a piece of immodesty as bad as Shelleyism. [106]

Shelley's 'immodesty' was his most prominent characteristic for Lamb who found his utterances at best 'oracular', and at worst possessed of 'a miching malice and mischief', but

104 See L.W., i, 337: 'From the streets, and from the alleys, of his beloved metropolis he culled his objects, which he has invested with an Hogarthian richness of colouring'. Cf. 'Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sydney' (1823), ibid., ii, 218. Lamb's fondness for the work of Sidney was due in part to its 'matter-ful' qualities: he found Sidney's poetry 'not rich in words only, in vague and unlocalized feelings' but 'full, material, and circumstantiated'.

105 L.L., iii, 154, to Southey, 6 May 1815. See also, for Lamb's disparaging comments on the exoticism of Collins's 'Oriental Eclogues', 'Ritson Versus John Scott the Quaker', L.W., ii, 220.

106 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 338, to Bernard Barton, 9 October 1822. See also H.C.R., i, 289, entry for 8 January 1823: '[Lamb] reprobated the persecution of The Vision of Judgment by Lord Byron. Southey's Vision of Judgement is more worthy of punishment - for his is an arrogance beyond endurance.'

'for the most part ringing with their own emptiness'.[107] Neither was Shelley's contemporary, Byron, favoured: Lamb had 'a thorough aversion to his character, and a very moderate admiration of his genius'.[108]

Why Lamb was unable to feel more than such a very 'imperfect sympathy' for these two poets is a problem which appears to have worried some of his critics. In the case of Byron, Lamb had reason to feel a personal hostility, for Byron had earlier, in a footnote to his first major satiric poem 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers'(1809), dismissed Lamb, along with Charles Lloyd, as 'the most ignoble followers of Southey and Co.'[109] Shelley, on the other hand, admired Lamb's work; he wrote rapturously of the 'exquisite & complete perfection' of Rosamund Gray.[110] But Lamb was, if anything, more consistently damning in his comments on Shelley than in those on Byron. His critics generally satisfy themselves with seeing Shelley's mind as the complete opposite to Lamb's in all its ideas, and general attitudes; hence the latter's inability to cross the gulf of extreme discrepancy.[111]

107 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 437, to Bernard Barton, 17 August 1824.

108 Ibid., ii, 279, to Joseph Cottle, 26 May 1820. See also, for a similar condemnation, ibid., ii, 426, to Bernard Barton, 15 May 1824.

109 The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1905), p. 105.

110 The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford, 1964), ii, 111-12, to Leigh Hunt, c.20 August 1819.

111 See, for example, on the contrast between Lamb and Shelley, Jack, English Literature 1815-1832, p. 286.

But John I. Ades, in a recent article, goes further and attributes Lamb's condemnation of both Byron and Shelley to his so-called 'middle-class morality', which could not overlook their 'marital irresponsibility'.[112] Lamb's behaviour towards Hazlitt invalidates this argument, however. Hazlitt was regarded with some suspicion and dislike by many of his contemporaries, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, for his troubled and unruly sexual behaviour and his broken marriages. But Lamb defended Hazlitt from calumny till the last, and retained much affection and respect for him throughout their acquaintance.[113] An animosity against the 'man' rather than the 'poet' does appear to have directed Lamb's criticisms of Byron and Shelley, but it probably arose more from his suspicion that they were lacking in fundamental sympathy towards their fellow men in general, than from any reaction to the details of their private lives.

No such antipathetic gulf separated Lamb from the work and personality of another of his contemporaries, Keats. Once again Crabb Robinson's diaries provide useful evidence of Lamb's views. In December 1820, Robinson praises Keats and notes that 'Lamb places him next to Wordsworth - not meaning any comparison, for they are dissimilar'.[114] Earlier, in the summer of that year, Lamb had contributed a review of Keats's Lamia, Isabella,

112 John I. Ades, 'Charles Lamb's Judgment of Byron and Shelley', Papers on English Language and Literature, i (1965), 33. See also, for an earlier similar suggestion, Blunden, Charles Lamb and his Contemporaries, p. 115.

113 See 'Letter of Elia to Robert Southey', L.W., i, 233-4, for Lamb's public defence of Hazlitt; for further details of Lamb's loyalty, see P.P. Howe, The Life of William Hazlitt (1922), pp. 79-80, 171 and 216.

114 H.C.R., i, 258.

Eve of St. Agnes, Hyperion, and Other Poems to the New Times. In it he praises Keats as one who could illuminate every subject he touched with an 'almost Chaucerlike' radiance.[115] For all its early appreciation of Keats's work, this review has been judged unsatisfactory by twentieth-century assessors of Lamb's criticism because it comes to 'the false conclusion' that 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil' is the best poem in the volume.[116] Although Lamb finds much to admire in 'Lamia' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes', both works smack a little too much of the exotic and lavishly fanciful to him; he prefers 'Isabella' on the grounds that 'To us an ounce of feeling is worth a pound of fancy'.[117] The review draws attention in particular to the stanzas which describe Isabella digging for her lover's body: Lamb admires the 'awfully simple' diction and the 'nakedly grand and moving' sentiment by which this harrowing scene is conveyed.[118] To describe a horror starkly, and yet without violence or loss of aesthetic control, was a quality which appealed to Lamb in the work of the Elizabethan dramatists; he finds the same capacity in 'Isabella'. Referring to Lamb's partiality for the Elizabethans, his friend P.G. Patmore suggested in My Friends and Acquaintance that the 'dreadful catastrophe of Lamb's early life' enabled him to appreciate

115 L.W., i, 201.

116 Wellek, The Romantic Age, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, ii, 194.

117 L.W., i, 203.

118 Ibid., i, 201.

the truth and delicacy of such 'death-in-life' scenes, which for so many nineteenth-century readers could only appear 'forced and extravagant'.[119] In the introduction to Lamb's Criticism, Tillyard similarly stressed that in preferring 'Isabella', 'with its greater insistence on action, human feeling and dramatic qualities generally', Lamb responded to Keats's work with 'an instinct perfectly true to himself, though not necessarily truer than the instincts of those who have thought otherwise'.[120] Keats himself foresaw the possibility of critical condemnation for 'Isabella'. As he explained to Richard Woodhouse, in September 1819:

> It is too smokeable ... There is too much inexperience of live [sic], and simplicity of knowledge in it ... There are very few would look to the reality.... Isabella is what I should call were I a reviewer 'A weak-sided Poem' with an amusing sober-sadness about it.... If I may say so, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in Propria Persona I should be apt to quiz it myself... 121

In Lamb, however, Keats found one critic who was ready to 'look to the reality' of the poem, and to 'enter fully into the feeling' according to his own 'dramatic capacity', without being dismayed by its lack of sophistication.

Twentieth-century critical response to the poem has accorded more closely with Keats's prediction: René Wellek appears to find Lamb's partiality for 'Isabella' in itself 'weak-sided' and wrong-headed. Wellek attributes Lamb's

119 P.G. Patmore, My Friends and Acquaintance (1854), i, 76.
120 Lamb's Criticism, ed. Tillyard, p. xii.
121 K.L., ii, 174, to Richard Woodhouse, 21, 22, September 1819.

mistake to his 'emotional romanticism, the view that passion is "the all in all in poetry"'.[122] Wellek's quotation comes from Lamb's note on Chapman in the Dramatic Specimens. Of Chapman's occasional crudity as a writer, Lamb had remarked:

> He seems to grasp whatever words come first to hand during the impetus of inspiration, as if all others must be inadequate to the divine meaning. But passion (the all in all in Poetry) is everywhere present, raising the low, dignifying the mean, and putting sense into the absurd. 123

Here Lamb is not claiming passion as an ideal in poetry sufficient unto itself, passion for passion's sake, although Wellek's use of the quotation would imply that he is. Passion, rather, signifies an intensity of sympathy by means of which the poet grasps the essence and principle of his object and so elevates it, while yet remaining, in his 'feeling' response, true to its tangible properties. A decade later, Keats was to arrive at a similar account of passion, or intensity, and its function in art:

> the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth ... 124

The artist's intense involvement in his object excites a 'momentous depth of speculation' which is capable of 'raising

122 Wellek, The Romantic Age, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, ii, 194.

123 L.W., iv, 83.

124 K.L., i, 192, to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817.

the low, dignifying the mean, and putting sense into the absurd' for both the artist and his audience. Lamb found a similar 'glorious' intensity in the work of Blake, to which he was introduced by Crabb Robinson in 1810.[125] Consequently, for all that he found Blake's work alien‿atingly 'mystical and full of Vision', he yet felt that 'I must look on him as one of the most extraordinary persons of the age', at a time when few were ready to grant the 'madman' such recognition.[126]

As Lamb would be the first to acknowledge, his own poetic output displays little of the full potential of the sympathetic imagination at its most creative. He never attempted to take the poetic talent he had seriously, but composed his occasional poems only as a salutary reminder to himself of domestic responsibilities, or as entertainment for others. Although he took great pains with prose composition and rewrote extensively before publication,[127] Lamb never seems to have tried to achieve a high standard of poetic craftsmanship, and his verse lacks the intensity, and power of conviction, of major poetry. However, on at least two occasions, his poems show him attempting to capture and represent the vital reality of another's existence. The need to do so is occasioned in both cases by the early death of his subjects. Lamb tries through his verse to give substantiality to a

125 For Lamb's reception of Blake's 'Descriptive Catalogue', see The Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, i, 48.

126 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 425, to Bernard Barton, 15 May 1824.

127 For evidence of Lamb's craftsmanship in prose, see Barnett, Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia, pp. 126-89 and 233-44.

brief life, and to provide some framework within which death can be made acceptable. In 1803, the death of a young Quaker, Hester Savory, who had been his neighbour in Chapel Street, Pentonville, affected Lamb strongly. A letter to Thomas Manning contains a copy of the poem which he wrote in her memory; he tells Manning:

> I send you some verses I made on the death of a young Quaker (you may have heard me speak of as being in love with for some years, when I lived at Pentonville, tho' I had never spoken to her in my life). 128

The verses, written in a metre which seems to have been influenced by that of the seventeenth-century lyricists,[129] celebrate the unusual vitality that Hester had enjoyed. Although her parents 'held the Quaker rule, / Which doth the human feeling cool', in Hester gusto was irrepressible:

> A springy motion in her gait,
> A rising step, did indicate
> Of pride and joy no common rate,
> That flush'd her spirit.

Her liveliness and glad participation in existence was manifested by an unladylike and un-Quakerlike curiosity and openness to her environment:

> A waking eye, a prying mind,
> A heart that stirs, is hard to bind;
> A hawk's keen sight ye cannot blind;
> Ye could not Hester's!

The poet is absorbed in the communication of Hester's life:

128 L.L., ii, 107, to Manning, 23 March 1803.

129 Cf., for example, 'Vertue', The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), pp. 87-8; or 'The White Island: or place of the Blest', The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford, 1956), pp. 376-7.

his own existence serves hers as the foil which reflects her brilliancy. In the final stanzas, the effect made upon him by his very brief and transient encounters with the Quakeress is tentatively presented as an emblem of the spiritual life which may overcome material death. Lamb asks of

> My sprightly neighbour! gone before
> To that unknown and silent shore,
> Shall we not meet? as heretofore,
> Some summer morning,
>
> When from thy chearful eyes a ray
> Hath struck a bliss upon the day,
> A bliss that would not go away;
> A sweet forewarning! 130

A friendly glance from a passing neighbour, springing down Chapel Street on a summer morning, has the capacity to cast an aura of bliss over the entire day that follows it, and Lamb implies that if the spirit of love can exert such an influence over mundane life then the possibility of its power over death cannot be altogether dismissed. At any rate, 'the servitude above freedom; the gentle mind's religion; the liberal superstition' remained for Lamb the one sure source of spiritual value and significance after the loss of assured faith in more structured and established religious creeds.

'On an Infant Dying as soon as Born', an 1827 poem of Lamb's, memorialized a yet briefer life.[131] Here again,

130 I follow the text of the letter to Manning, L.L., ii, 107-8; for another copy of the verses in Lamb's holograph, see C.N., i, 1368.

131 See Letters, ed. Lucas, iii, 83-4, to Thomas Hood, April 1827, for the occasion of the poem. The dead infant was Hood's first child.

Lamb recreates the momentary existence of the child, as if in an attempt to give it human consciousness and a voice:

> Extinct, with scarce the sense of dying;
> So soon to exchange the imprisoning womb
> For darker closets of the tomb!
> She did but ope an eye, and put
> A clear beam forth, then straight up shut
> For the long dark: ne'er more to see
> Through glasses of mortality.

No Christian solution or consolation is offered for this short transit through birth, life, and death. The poem asks, however, whether the child's history has not meaning as an image for a pervasive human condition:

> Riddle of destiny, who can show
> What thy short visit meant, or know
> What thy errand here below?
> Shall we say, that Nature blind
> Check'd her hand, and changed her mind,
> Just when she had exactly wrought
> A finish'd pattern without fault?
> Could she flag, or could she tire,
> Or lack'd she the Promethean fire
> (With her nine moons' long workings sicken'd)
> That should thy little limbs have quicken'd? 132

The infant was born perfect in form but insufficiently vitalized by organic life from within: the creative energy and gusto which should have gone to imbue her material substance with life was wanting. Lamb's postulated answer to this 'riddle of destiny' reveals his brooding consciousness of the vulnerability of the miracle of creativity. So marked is his sense of human failure, and of the prevalance of fine conceptions still-born, that here he attributes the same self-conscious malaise to Nature.

132 L.W., v, 50.

In 1900, the Quarterly Review published an account by Edmund Gosse of Ainger's Life and Works of Charles Lamb. The review discusses in passing the consequence of the long years in Lamb's life which were largely barren of any creative output. A glance at the 'Chronology' appended to George L. Barnett's critical biography, Charles Lamb, shows that the existence of such unfruitful years in Lamb's life is undeniable: from 1812 to 1820, for example, the only new publication worth a mention in the 'Chronology' is the 1815 mangled review of Wordsworth's Excursion.[133] Gosse suggests of these years that

> In his prolonged indolence Lamb was ripening the critical judgement and sharpening the wit which was presently to beam and sparkle from the pages of 'Elia'. But we question very much whether this inaction conduced to his own happiness. On the contrary, it must have fostered his constitutional defects, have emphasized his innocent habits of self-indulgence, have strengthened the tap-root of his melancholy. 134

One way in which his indolence presumably aggravated the morbid aspects in Lamb's character was through the burden of self-conscious impotence it imposed. From early on in his career, Lamb had made it clear that he recognized the need for confidence in one's powers, and a capacity to enjoy their workings, if a creative effect in any medium was to live and evoke response. In 1802, when he described the creative, if daemonic, capacities of Shakespeare's Richard III, for example, he stressed Richard's 'habitual jocularity, the

133 See Barnett, Charles Lamb (1976), p. 14.

134 [Edmund Gosse], 'Charles Lamb', Quarterly Review, cxcii (1900), 331.

effects of buoyant spirits, and an elastic mind, rejoicing in its own powers'.[135] That creative potency should depend, even if but in part, on the self-conscious acknowledgement and celebration of one's powers would seem, however, to be a characteristic pertaining more to poets of the 'wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' than to chameleon poets. But, as many of his critics have noted,[136] a glad recognition of his power, and a confidence in his elastic capacity to create a variety of forms, was characteristic of Keats at his poetic best. In a curiously revealing account of Keats's definitions of the sympathetic imagination, an account which highlights the ambiguity of such creative activity, W.J. Bate commented:

> The ability to negate one's own identity, to lose it in something larger or more meaningful than oneself, is what he has in mind, the thought coming almost as self-discovery. [137]

An active agency in Keats's mind is conscious of its own capacity to lose itself in its object. As a consequence, the mind itself is not in fact wholly submerged in its sympathetic functions but enjoys a buoyant vitality of response which gives it the elasticity to move on from one subject of sympathetic

135 'G.F. Cooke in "Richard the Third"', L.W., i, 38. See also, ibid., i, 399-400, for another 1802 review of Cooke's acting, attributed by Lucas to Lamb, which also stresses the need for 'an elasticity of mind, a pliancy of powers' if an imaginative art, in this case that of the actor's, is to prove effective.

136 See, for example, Ball, The Central Self, p. 10: 'Unlike his model Shakespeare, Keats is not content merely to be a chameleon: he is fascinated by the fact of so being, and his art is rooted in this consciousness, which is, paradoxically, a strong self-consciousness.' See also, of Lamb, in contrast, Arnold Henderson, 'Some Constants of Charles Lamb's Criticism', S.R., vii(1968), 106: '[Lamb] is a chameleon who takes on the colours of the authors upon whom he sits in judgement'.

137 Bate, John Keats, p. 18.

contemplation to the next. The poet is not completely submissive and not entirely vulnerable in the face of his involvement with his subject, but retains an intellectual, and even self-conscious, realization of the way in which his own 'shaping spirit' is interpreting, and giving form to, that life his imagination for a time shares.

No such glad energy vitalized Lamb's poetic spirits: against his will, his thoughts were 'apt to brood and hover, in an uneasy slumberousness, over dangerous and intractable questions'; so, at least, Patmore reported in his record of Lamb's later years.[138] Lamb could not always detach himself from his objects of contemplation as readily as he wished: if part of his mind did remain independent, it apparently often lacked sufficient strength to distract him from states bordering upon the obsessive. However, he was aware of this tendency, and attempted to protect himself from destructive over-involvements. In 1816, he wrote to Wordsworth of this potential danger in relation to his acquaintance with Coleridge, and with Wordsworth himself:

> If I lived with him or the Author of the Excursion, I should in a very little time lose my own identity, & be draggged along in the current of other peoples thoughts, hampered in a net.... I hold the personal presence of the two mentioned potent spirits at a rate as high as any, but I pay dearer, what amuses others robs me of my self, my mind is positively discharged into their greater currents... 139

138 Patmore, My Friends and Acquaintance, i, 52.

139 L.L., iii, 215 and 216, 26 April 1816.

Lamb struggles to hold on to his own frame of reference, and to a personal identity, but feels himself in danger of being passively absorbed in the existence of others. A sympathetic identification occurs involuntarily and its intensity is outside his control.

The tendency becomes a yet more perilous one when the identities which threaten to absorb Lamb are not those of poets or philosophers, but of forger‿s, thieves and condemned criminals. During his last years in the East India Office, Lamb's fatigue and general ill-health left him particularly susceptible to obsessive self-identification with miserable and blighted existences. In a letter to Bernard Barton of 1 December 1824, he describes his reactions to the conviction and death-sentence of the forger Fauntleroy:

> I tremble, I am sure, at myself, when I think that so many poor victims of the Law at one time of their life made as sure of never being hanged as I in my presumption am too ready to do myself. What are we better than they? Do we come into the world with different necks? ... I am shocked sometimes at the shape of my own fingers, not for their resemblance to the ape tribe (which is something) but for the exquisite adaptation of them to the purposes of picking, fingering, &c. No one that is so framed, I maintain it, but should tremble. 140

Shared humanity is enough to entail upon Lamb a share in the experiences of all men, and an identification of himself with them however unappealing their condition. There is a horror in this entailment; it is not practised either for the good of the soul, in sentimental fashion, or for art's sake, but constitutes an unforced and unsolicited identification.

140 Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 447.

Nevertheless, it remains an act of sympathy. Although Lamb's humanity becomes more burdensome to him through his recognition of its unavoidable connection with that of Fauntleroy and his life, at the same time Fauntleroy's humanity and his claims for sympathy from his fellows as one of their own kind, only erring as they may well err, are highlighted. It was this letter that Thackeray apparently once pressed to his forehead,murmuring 'Saint Charles!'. Lucas, when he relates this anecdote in his notes to the letters, suggests as the cause of Thackeray's exclamation a rather sentimental postscript addressed to Barton's daughter.[141] More probably, Thackeray was responding to the body of the letter and to the manner in which Lamb there, half in jest and half in earnest, feels compelled, through the common ties of humanity, to take upon himself the sins and the anguish of the unfortunate forger.[142]

The 1825 essay 'The Last Peach' contains a similar complaint of uncontrollable identification with the convicted 'F-'. 'Suspensarus', as the writer of the essay signs himself,

141 See Letters, ed. Lucas, ii, 448. See also, in Lucas's notes to this letter, a quotation from Memories of Old Friends, being Extracts from the Journals and Letters of Caroline Fox, 25 October 1839: 'Soon after Fauntleroy was hanged, an advertisement appeared, "To all good Christians! Pray for the soul of Fauntleroy." ... at one of Coleridge's soirées it was discussed for a considerable time; at length, Coleridge, turning to Lamb, asked "Do you know anything about this affair?" "I should think I d-d-d-did," said Elia, "for I paid s-s-s-seven and sixpence for it!"'

142 See 'Going to See a Man Hanged' (July 1840), Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, Oxford edn. (1908), iii, 189-205, for evidence of Thackeray's sympathy with condemned men, a sympathy perhaps influenced by Lamb.

dwells upon his similarity with the felon:

> I was tenderly and lovingly brought up. What then? Who that in life's entrance had seen the babe F-, from the lap stretching out his little fond mouth to catch the maternal kiss, could have predicted, or as much as imagined, that life's very different exit? The sight of my own fingers torments me; they seem so admirably constituted for - pilfering. Then that jugular vein, which I have in common - ; in an emphatic sense may I say with David, I am 'fearfully made'. 143

The essay closes with an address to the Editor in which 'Suspensarus' asks for advice on 'this painful heart-malady' and wonders whether the editor has ever felt a similar 'itching'. The malady is an affair of the heart in that it is occasioned by the bonds of sympathy which can irresistibly and quite irrationally connect men in their crimes as well as in their kindnesses. Just as the chameleon poet 'has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen',[144] so Lamb creates within himself the experiences and sensations of a Fauntleroy as well as a Coleridge or a Hester. As he lacks the full creative vitality to give an independent existence and a finished aesthetic form to all such pressing personalities, he cannot wholly detach himself from absorption in them. Lamb has received praise as one who could comprehend and do justice to modes of life apparently very different from his own:[145] his case seems at

143 L.W., i, 285.

144 K.L., i, 387, to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818.

145 See, for example, Walker, The English Essay and Essayist, p. 232.

times to be more one of complete inability to regard any form of human existence as alien from his own. In Book xii of The Prelude, Wordsworth, having arrived to his satisfaction at 'knowledge of what makes / The dignity of individual Man', asks

> Why is this glorious Creature to be found
> One only in ten thousand? What one is,
> Why may not many be? 146

Lamb's question is the same, but it is posed in an opposite context: he regards the most degraded of men and asks 'What one is, / Why may not many be?'

The effect of Lamb's writing at its strongest is to break down the barriers against sympathy which men erect between each other. By means of classification and incrimination, some who 'fall' are thrust out of the sphere of social regard: Lamb would reincorporate those 'damned' on the grounds that, just as a character like Richard III manifests by his knowledge of the nature of others that he too had in him 'the good seed',[147] so every law-abiding, pious citizen bears within him latent 'bad seed' which he should recognize in himself before he hastens to condemn others. De Quincey's 'Recollections of Charles Lamb' (1838) contains an anecdote illustrative of the manner in which Lamb attempted to impress this truth upon his acquaintance in conversation, as well as in his writing.

146 Prelude, xii, 82-3, 90-2.

147 See L.L., ii, 9, to Robert Lloyd, 26 June 1801: 'Richard must have felt, before he could feign so well; tho' ambition choked the good seed.'

Given De Quincey's expansive style the tale is not briefly told, but the lively and characteristic light it throws on its subject makes it deserving of being quoted in full. De Quincey records of Lamb:

> The case of insincerity, above all others, which moved his bile was where, out of some pretended homage to public decorum, an individual was run down on account of any moral infirmities, such as we all have, or have had, or at least so easily and naturally may have had that nobody knows whether we have them or not. In such a case, and in this only almost, Lamb could be savage in his manner. I remember one instance, where many of the leading authors of our age were assembled - Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, &c. Lamb was amongst them; and, when -- was denounced as a man careless in the education of his children, and generally reputed to lead a licentious life - 'Pretty fellows we are,' said Lamb, 'to abuse him on that last score, when every one of us, I suppose, on going out this night into the Strand, will make up to the first pretty girl he sees.' Some laughed; some looked grim; some looked grand; but Wordsworth, smiling, and yet with solemnity, said - 'I hope, I trust, Mr. Lamb, you are mistaken, or, at least, you do not include us all in this sweeping judgment?' 'Oh, as to that," said Lamb, 'who knows? There's no telling: sad Josephs are some of us in this very room.' Upon which everybody laughed, and Lamb amongst them; but he had been indignant and sincere in this rebuke of the hypocritical sacrifice to decorum. He manifested a fervour of feeling in such cases; not of anger primarily to the assailant - that was but a reaction; his fervour was a movement of intense and conscientious justice towards the person assailed, as in one who felt that he himself, if not by the very same trespasses,had erred and was liable to err; that he also was a brother in human infirmity, and a debtor to the frailty of all flesh, though not possibly by the same overt acts or habits. 148

Such an anecdote negates any critical suggestion of 'moral

148 De Q.W., iii, 52-3.

squeamishness' or 'middle-class morality' in Lamb's work, and provides evidence to support contrary assessments of his character. Bertram Jessup, for example, in an article entitled 'The Mind of Elia', claimed for Lamb a wide acceptance of human infirmities, and a mind 'which accepts in principle everything, even the socially ugly and the privately sore'.[149] And when Coleridge said of Lamb that, for all his abandonment of conventional religion, he yet retained 'all that would still have been Christian had Christ never lived or been made manifest upon earth',[150] he may well have had in mind Lamb's refusal to condemn and his attempts to prevent others from condemning. In so doing, Lamb was motivated not so much by sympathy _for_ the afflicted sinner as by sympathy _with_ him; he felt ready, and even compelled, to participate imaginatively in the acts committed, along with their effective causes and consequences, and to acknowledge the kinship entailed by the possibility of such imaginative participation.

But, in relation to his career as a writer, Lamb's all-embracing sympathy placed two difficulties in the way of successful productivity. First, too close and too pressing an identification with his object wearied him, and made it more difficult to order and shape his impressions of that object. Secondly, he himself, in order to maintain his connection with

149 Bertram Jessup, 'The Mind of Elia', _Journal of the History of Ideas_, xv (1954), 257.

150 _The Table-Talk and Omniana of S.T. Coleridge_, p.421.

the common mass of humanity, apparently often checked his utterances, and modelled his behaviour on that which was expected of him. Hazlitt wrote of Lamb in his essay 'On Coffee-House Politicians', from the second volume of Table-Talk (1822):

> He is the creature of sympathy, and makes good whatever opinion you seem to entertain of him. He cannot outgo the apprehensions of the circle; and invariably acts up or down to the point of refinement or vulgarity at which they pitch him. 151

Earlier, in 1811, Crabb Robinson in his diary had recorded that Hazlitt imputed Lamb's puns to humility;[152] Lucas, in commenting upon this entry in his Life of Charles Lamb, takes it to mean

> that Lamb often had wiser things to say than he would utter, but, fearing perhaps that he might go beyond the apprehension of certain of the company and make them uncomfortable, he preferred to maintain a lower and friendlier level by indulging in nonsense. 153

If Lamb did indeed censor his more startling and original expressions, an obituary which he published in 1811 is evidence that he did not do so unconsciously. In 'Memoir of Robert Lloyd', Lamb commemorates his friend as single-mindedly affectionate and appreciative of the virtues of others but blind to his own; 'he seemed absolutely to have no self-regards at all'. Lloyd's selfless observance of the nature and needs of his companions often led him to restrain his own abilities, as Lamb records:

> he oftentimes let fall, in his familiar talk, and in his letters, bright and original illustrations

151 H.W., viii, 202.
152 H.C.R., i, 28.
153 Lucas, Life, i, 309.

> of feeling, which might have been mistaken for genius, if his own watchful modest spirit had not constantly interposed to recall and substitute for them some of the ordinary forms of observation, which lay less out of that circle of common sympathy, within which his kind nature delighted to move. 154

In a letter to Manning of 17 May 1800, however, Lamb had earlier judged Lloyd to be 'a good Being, but a weak one'.[155] An excess of sympathy with others is as debilitating to the effective realization of talent as excessive self-absorption. The latter results in dogmatism, sterility, and an over-bearing system-mongering; the consequences of the former are fragmentary writings, reserve, and silence. Through their exploration of the nature of the imagination, Lamb's contemporaries distinguished and differentiated between these contraries, and presented them as two different means by which the subject, the perceiving consciousness, imaginatively apprehends its object, the sensory phenomenon from the outside world. The age also appears to have provided types and characters to represent the two different modes of relation. If the later works of Wordsworth can be taken to exemplify the excesses of the 'egotistical' approach, then Lamb's pre-Elian work, which only exists at all due to the promptings of his friends, or occasionally, in the early years, of his pocket,[156] represents a 'negative capability' so pronounced and entrenched as to approach to

154 L.W., i, 132-3.

155 L.L., i, 204.

156 See Samuel McKechnie, 'Charles Lamb of the India House', N. & Q., cxci (1946), 178-80, 204-6 and 225-30, for details of Lamb's indigency in his early years at the East India Office.

the condition of 'positive incapability'.

Lamb will never admit that he, personally, has shaped and ordered a vital creative work; the power and the glory of achieved art is never his own. Either he attributes any vitality in his representations of life to the object represented rather than to his portrayal, as in the case of his poem 'Hester'; or, if, in a more characteristically Romantic frame of mind, every-day appearances seem to him hopelessly chaotic and mundane, then he attributes to the poets he admires the capacity to create harmony and significance out of their own imaginations. Thus Shakespeare is represented as one who 'fetched' his characters, 'those images of virtue and of knowledge', 'from his own mind' rather than from amongst his commonplace acquaintance,[157] although his characterizations are so apparently natural and convincing that he

> makes us believe, while we are among his lovely creations, that they are nothing but what we are familiar with, as in dreams new things seem old: but we awake, and sigh for the difference. 158

But it was this comment, made by Lamb in assessing Thomas Heywood's A Woman Killed by Kindness, which provoked Keats to write in the margin of his copy of the Dramatic Specimens:

> This is the most acute deep sighted and spiritual piece of criticism ever penned.... To write a few such things is perhaps as well as shining, a distinguish'd literary Character. 159

157 L.W., i, 102-3.

158 Ibid., v, 95.

159 See Helen E. Haworth, 'Keats's Copy of Lamb's Specimens of English Dramatic Poets', Bulletin of the New York Public Library, lxxiv (1970), 422.

Lamb's writings, for all their fragmentary and unsystematic nature, remain valuable primarily because they are frequently illuminated by such concentrated flashes of insight, rising directly out of his intuitive sympathy with art and with life.

Chapter Seven

'Sanity of True Genius'

If the situation delineated in the last chapter is in any way an accurate assessement of Lamb's case, then the mere existence of the Elia essays stands in need of some explanation. At the age of forty-five Lamb commenced to write a series of magazine articles, continued to produce them regularly for the next six years, and became through them a popular writer in his own day and a living author for future generations. Initially, as with so many of his other authorial ventures, a friend's encouragement set Lamb upon producing the essays. In 1820, Hazlitt, who was at the time writing his Table-Talk essays for the London Magazine, introduced Lamb to the new journal,[1] and brought about a renewal of his acquaintanceship with its editor, John Scott.[2] Scott seems to have been, by all accounts, an exemplary editor, one who had 'a profound respect for human personality - his own, his contributor's, his reader's, and his competitor's';[3] he was also gifted with 'a rare power of aesthetic appreciation'.[4] He admired Lamb's work from the first; in September 1820, in a review of Keats's Lamia, Isabella, the

1 See Talfourd, Final Memorials of Charles Lamb, ii, 1, for an account of Lamb's introduction to the London Magazine.

2 See the editor's notes, L.W., i, 449, for details of Lamb's earlier association with Scott in 1814.

3 Josephine Bauer, The London Magazine 1820-29, Anglistica, i (1953), 69.

4 T.R. Hughes, '"The London Magazine" (1820-1829)' (Oxford University, unpublished B.Litt. dissertation, presented 1931), p. 30.

Eve of Saint Agnes, and other Poems, he recommended to 'the author of Endymion', and to the London's readers in general, 'that most beautiful Paper ... in our last number, on the "ledger-men," of the South Sea House'. The 'Paper' was the first of the Elia essays; Scott acclaims it as an 'elegant reproof' of 'short-sighted views of character' and 'idle hostilities against the realities of life'.[5] Such enthusiastic admiration from a particularly discerning editor must have been very encouraging to Lamb.

Scott's period of editorship was short-lived, however, due to his involvement in a bitter dispute with the editors of Blackwood's Magazine. The feud culminated in a duel fought in February 1821, and Scott's consequent death.[6] But during his editorship Scott had established a community of subscribers which continued to support and encourage Lamb after this catastrophic event. John Taylor, Scott's successor, although by no means as discerning an editor, succeeded in furthering the subscribers' tendency to regard themselves as a 'body corporate' by holding London Magazine dinners which worked to establish the disparate contributors as members of one society closely bound together in communal understanding and purpose.[7] In his memoir of Lamb, B.W. Procter wrote of the London dinners:

5 [John Scott] London Magazine, ii (September 1820), 317.

6 For a detailed account of the quarrel and its consequences, see Hughes, op. cit., pp. 61-71.

7 For an account of these gatherings, see Timothy Chilcott, A Publisher and his Circle, the life and work of John Taylor, Keats's publisher (1972), p. 145. See also Jack, English Literature 1815-1832, p. 287, for the connection between Lamb's happiness as a member of the London community and his nostalgic memories of having once been part of the 'body corporate' of Christ's Hospital school-boys; see 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', L.W., i, 146, and above, p.106.

> These meetings were very social; all the guests coming with a determination to please and to be pleased.... the hearts of the contributors were opened, and with the expansion of the heart the intellect widened also.... All the fences and restraints of authorship were cast off, and the natural human being was disclosed. 8

Typical attendants at these dinners were Hazlitt, De Quincey, John Clare, John Hamilton Reynolds, and Procter himself. In such essentially sympathetic company, of minds congenial to his own and stimulating, but not overpoweringly impressive, like Coleridge's or Wordsworth's, Lamb found a literary and social environment well suited to his peculiar needs and very appreciative of his gifts. His exterior circumstances, then, provided at this time every inducement and encouragement for sustained literary output.

But the problem of form, the question of how to order and objectify his impressions of life, remained. Given his incapacity for plotting an extended structure, essay contributions to periodical journals represented one of the few forms through which Lamb could hope to express himself; but this medium, too, demanded some unifying characteristics if a series of essays was to have coherence. In his review of the first volume of Hazlitt's Table-Talk (1821), a review only recently published, Lamb demonstrated his understanding of the essayist's obligations:

> A series of Miscellaneous Essays, however well executed in the parts, if it have not some pervading character

8 [Procter] Charles Lamb: A Memoir, p. 156.

> to give a unity to it, is ordinarily as tormenting to get through as a set of aphorisms, or a jest-book. 9

The 'personal peculiarities' of an essayist can serve effectively to give the necessary characteristic tone of voice to his work. Montaigne's essays, for example, have been preserved because of the appealing personality they disclose, according to Lamb,[10] and he goes on to refer to Johnson's periodical work as well, as an example of an effective personal tone unifying a series of essays. Johnson professes to concern himself with argument rather than personal opinion and with universal truths rather than particular views of life, but in fact his own personality imbues all his work, and constitutes much of its charm and power.

For a writer who appreciated the function of personal reference in essay series, but preferred to maintain at least a semblance of anonymity, another feasible solution remained:

> Another class of Essayists, equally impressed with the advantages of this sort of appeal to the reader, but more dextrous at shifting off the invidiousness of a perpetual self-reference, substituted for themselves an ideal character; which left them a still fuller licence in the delivery of their peculiar humours and opinions, under the masqued battery of a fictitious appellation.

Lamb gives Richard Steele's work as an example of this type

9 Lamb as Critic, ed. Park, p. 300. For a critical account of this review, see George L. Barnett, 'An Unpublished Review by Charles Lamb', M.L.Q., xvii (1965), 352-6.

10 Lamb as Critic, p. 300, and see also 'Table-Talk in The Examiner' (1813), L.W., i, 153: 'Montaigne is an immense treasure-house of observation ... besides that his own character pervades the whole, and binds it sweetly together.'

of essay, but he could, of course, have cited his own writing. From the composition of the 1801 'Londoner' onwards, all Lamb's more personal journalistic pieces, as opposed to his criticism, are pseudonymous. When the 'Londoner' first appeared, Lamb's friend Thomas Manning suggested that were he to write 'a volume of Essays in the same stile' he might be sure of its succeeding,[11] and subsequent critics have seen in Elia the eventual realization of Manning's suggestion.[12] But the 'Londoner' itself never did develop into a series as Lamb had originally planned, and for the next twenty years his familiar writings remained isolated episodes, rather than contributions to a whole.

In the long interim between the 'Londoner' and Elia, Lamb's pseudonymous articles characteristically take the form of dramatic monologues spoken in the first person by a distinctive 'character' or type.[13] The essays of 1811-13, 'Edax on Appetite', 'Hospita on the Immoderate Indulgence of the Pleasures of the Palate', 'A Batchelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People' and 'Confessions of a Drunkard' all follow this plan. Apart from the 'Confessions', in which no egotism blinds the narrator to his condition, these essays also develop and

11 The Letters of Thomas Manning to Charles Lamb, ed. G.A. Anderson (1925), p. 74, 6 April 1802.

12 See, for example, Jack, English Literature 1815-1832, p. 289: 'A descendant of "The Londoner", Elia is the "picture of my humours" that had been in Lamb's mind when he wrote that essay.'

13 See Allie Webb, 'Charles Lamb's Use of the Character', Southern Quarterly, i (1963), 273-84, for the historical context of Lamb's character portrayal.

exercise a subtle and flexible form of irony. In each case, the narrating persona dicloses his character traits in a spirit of self-congratulation, but the reader observes the self-deception and selfishness thus dramatically revealed. Edax, for example, complains at length of the burdens imposed upon his humane and loving spirit by his excessive appetite. He recollects his school-days, and

> the horror I used to feel, when in some silent corner retired from the notice of my unfeeling playfellows, I have sat to mumble the solitary slice of gingerbread allotted me by the bounty of considerate friends, and have ached at heart because I could not spare a portion of it, as I saw other boys do, to some favourite boy; - for if I know my own heart, I was never selfish, - never possessed a luxury which I did not hasten to communicate to others; but my food, alas! was none; it was an indispensable necessary; I could as soon have spared the blood in my veins, as have parted that with my companions. 14

The reader to whom he pleads for sympathy is more likely to respond with derisive scorn to the character thus unwittingly disclosed. 'Reminiscences of Juke Judkins, Esq., of Birmingham' (1826) provides a fuller portrayal of the 'Edax' type. Judkins reveals himself to be a miser of the first order, although his prodigious conceit and complacency blind him to the self-condemnatory nature of his autobiography.[15] As dramatic monologues, these essays are livelier and more effective than Lamb's more conventional dramatic works; as forms of irony,

14 L.W., i, 120.

15 For a further account of Judkins's unintentional self-revelations, see Charles I. Patterson, 'Charles Lamb's Insight into the Nature of the Novel', P.M.L.A., lxvii (1952), 381.

it has been suggested that they influenced the poetry of Robert Browning and led to the composition of such masterpieces as 'My Last Duchess'.[16] For Lamb, the form was useful because it allowed him to present an unappealing personality from his own and others' points of view without violating the principle of sympathy. The character is free to account for his life in his own words, and is at no point judged by a didactic author, yet the reader discerns his condition and is enabled to evaluate him morally.

One of the 1811 articles, 'A Batchelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People', was later reproduced by Lamb as an essay in the Elia series. Other idiosyncratic 'characters' are newly created and subsumed under the signature of 'Elia'. If the 'Batchelor' discloses a personality unwittingly embittered by loneliness and disappointment, then 'The Convalescent' is a veiled presentation, in the first person, of the hypochondriac type, and the 'Popular Fallacy' 'That a Sulky Temper is a Misfortune' is disputed by a persona with markedly paranoid characteristics. However, a striking contrast exists between the 1811 reprinted essay and the other two more authentically Elian productions, a contrast which highlights one of the important combining characteristics of the Elia essays as a whole. No change occurs in the personality and self-perception of the 'Batchelor' during the progress of that essay, but, in the case of the Convalescent and the 'Popular

16 See Tillotson, 'The Historical Importance of Certain Essays of Elia', Some British Romantics, pp. 95-6.

Fallacies' paranoid, their misanthropic tendencies are shattered by revelations of their folly, which break in upon their accounts and leave them at the close much more sympathetically and unselfishly inclined towards their fellows. The convalescent Elia, for example, at first contemplates his deposition from the throne of sickness to the shrunken mediocrity of an 'ordinary personage' with some chagrin;[17] he desires the retention of that state of 'supreme selfishness' permissable to an invalid who may keep 'his sympathy, like some curious vintage, under trusty lock and key, for his own use only'.[18] But, for all that the essay commences 'Expect no healthy conclusions from me this month, reader',[19] before its close Elia has in fact resigned himself with some relief to a 'wholesome weaning from that preposterous dream of self-absorption'. A note from the London Magazine editor, requesting an article, cuts across the Convalescent's solipsistic state, and the summons 'seemed to link me on again to the petty business of life, which I had lost sight of'. He now views his former elevation critically:

> The hypochondriac flatus is subsiding; the acres, which in imagination I had spread over - for the sick man swells in the sole contemplation of his single sufferings, till he becomes a Tityus to himself - are wasting to a span; and for the giant of self-importance, which I was so lately,

17 L.W., ii, 186.

18 Ibid., ii, 184.

19 Ibid., ii, 183.

> you have me once again in my natural pretensions - the lean and meagre figure of your insignificant Essayist. 20

Similarly, 'That a Sulky Temper is a Misfortune' commences as a paean in praise of 'the true PLEASURES OF SULKINESS'. The paranoid personality is encouraged to

> Imag·e yourself to yourself, as the only possible friend in a world incapable of that communion.... Think of the very idea of right and fit fled from the earth, or your breast the solitary receptacle of it, till you have swelled yourself into at least one hemisphere; the other being the vast Arabia Stony of your friends and the world aforesaid. To grow bigger every moment in your own conceit, and the world to lessen: to deify yourself at the expense of your species; to judge the world - this is the acme and supreme point of your mystery ... 21

But before the close of the essay the unsolicited kindness of one of the paranoid's maligned friends interrupts his self-aggrandizing reveries, and forces him to relinguish his lofty eminence, and give up the role of the sublimely isolated for a more realistic and sociable communion with the actualities of life.

As this thesis has previously illustrated, such studies of the reintegration of the outsider are characteristic of Lamb's work, from the tales of Mrs. Leicester's School to the dramatic farces. The Elia essays are exceptional, however, for the facility and joy with which they accomplish this reincorporation. Elia himself moves easily through different facets of experience and different roles, as if he were an

20 L.W., ii, 186-7.
21 Ibid., ii, 274.

accomplished actor, speaking in many voices, not caught in the limitation of one point of view.[22] It is as if Lamb demonstrated in the composition of Elia the truth, and the sanity, of one of Folly's maxims from Erasmus' In Praise of Folly:

> Now the whole life of mortal men, what is it but a sort of play, in which various persons make their entrances in various costumes, and each one plays his own part until the director gives him his cue to leave the stage? Often he also orders one and the same actor to come on in different costumes, so that the actor who just now played the king in royal scarlet now comes on in rags to play a miserable servant. True, all the images are unreal, but this play cannot be performed in any other way. 23

Lamb would have been familiar with such ideas from his reading of Shakespeare, if not from Erasmus himself:[24] he would also have come across similar sentiments in the pages of another of his favourite seventeenth-century authors, Thomas Fuller. In Book III of The Holy State and the Profane State (1642), Fuller suggests that if a man is to live contentedly he

> ought to be like unto a cunning Actour, who if he be enjoyned to represent the person of some Prince or Nobleman, does it with a grace and comelinesse; if by and by he be commanded to lay that aside, and play the Begger, he does that as willingly and as well. 25

22 See A.G. van Kranendonk, 'Notes on the Style of the Essays of Elia', E.S., xiv (1932), 9, for corroboration of Lamb's dramatic proclivities.

23 Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly, trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven and London, 1979), pp. 43-4.

24 See, for example, Jacques's well-known account of the world as a stage in As You Like It, II, vii, 139-66.

25 Thomas Fuller, The Holy State and the Profane State, ed. Maximilian Graff Walten (N.Y., 1938), ii, 198.

In the 'Preface' supposedly 'by a Friend of the late Elia' which introduces the second volume of Elia essays, Lamb attempts to clear his persona of the charge of egotism by maintaining that he is forever playing different roles, and 'shadowing forth' under the guise of the first-person narrator the experiences of quite disparate characters. The essays have been pronounced egotistical

> by some who did not know, that what he tells us, as of himself, was often true only (historically) of another ... If it be egotism to imply and twine with his own identity the griefs and affections of another - making himself many, or reducing many unto himself - then is the skilful novelist, who all along brings in his hero, or heroine, speaking of themselves, the greatest egotist of all; who yet has never, therefore, been accused of that narrowness. 26

A recent article in the Charles Lamb Bulletin suggests that the two roles which Elia assumes most frequently in the course of his essays are those of the child and the fool.[27] 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple', for example, demonstrates how a return to the child's view of the world can act to revitalize jaded adult perception and to evoke the wonder and imaginative exaggeration of early visions.[28] The fool, too, disports himself outside the limited circle of responsibility and mature decorum; in the essay 'All Fools' Day', Elia assures

26 L.W., ii, 151. See also, Peter A. Brier, 'Lamb, Dickens and the Theatrical Vision', C.L.B., x-xi (1975), 65, for the suggestion that in Lamb's 'playing' of characters in the Essays of Elia 'we see the drama turning into the novel'.

27 John E. Stevens, 'Charles Lamb, the Romantic Humourist', C.L.B., xxii (1978), 113-29.

28 L.W., ii, 82-90.

his readers of his affection for fools and aligns himself with them.[29] Both the child and the fool escape the tedium of the every-day world as completely as the poet of visionary sublimity; they do so not by transcending the common lot, but by dodging it. In the Elia essays, the attempt is made to involve the reader also in the process towards enfranchisement through the childlike or foolish. Consequently, the apparent irresponsibility and escapism of the essays have made them vulnerable to criticism, but they have also been praised for fulfilling more perfectly than any other examples one possible aesthetic goal of the essay form, that of establishing and sharing the imaginative independence of the individual.[30]

'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', for example, attacks the stifling moral judgements of nineteenth-century theatre audiences and their inability to free themselves from a rigidly Puritan point of view.[31] A seemingly frivolous and even foolish argument provides the vehicle for Elia's presentation of the theme: he wishes to persuade his readers that the world of Restoration Comedy never at any time reflected an accurate picture of real life, and that therefore there is no need for contemporary audiences to bring their 'coxcombical'

29 L.W., ii, 42-4. For an account of the enfranchising capacity of foolery, see Enid Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary History (1935), pp. 314-23.

30 See Huntington Brown, Prose Styles: Five Primary Types (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 82.

31 See above, pp.266-7, for an account of Lamb's earlier expressions of dislike for contemporary theatre audiences in the notes to the Dramatic Specimens.

moral realism to bear upon it.[32] The essay commences with the figure of Elia in close association with that of his nineteenth-century reader:

> We have no such middle emotions as dramatic interests left.... We substitute a real for a dramatic person, and judge him accordingly. 33

But once the trusting reader has established a relation with Elia, the trickster changes back to 'the first person (his favourite figure)' and carries with him, to a more individual and idiosyncratic view of the case, the reader's previously claimed sympathy:

> 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-while 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. 34

The fool dodges away from moral judgement of the plays and enjoys them for their own sake, in a self-confessedly escapist state of mind. But the fresh perspective gained on the former point of view through this change allows Elia to criticize with some severity its limitations. He still uses the pronoun

32 For Macaulay's strictures against Lamb's argument in 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', see The Complete Works of Lord Macaulay, ix, 342-6, and above, pp. 9-10. Walter E. Houghton, Jr., 'Lamb's Criticism of Restoration Comedy', E.L.H., x (1943), 61-72, has since defended the essay on the grounds that Lamb never called the world of Restoration drama 'unreal', except in comparison with the 'common life' drama of the early nineteenth-century theatre.

33 L.W., ii, 141.

34 Ibid., ii, 142.

'we', but now does so to allot blame:

> We dare not contemplate an Atlantis, a scheme, out of which our coxcombical moral sense is for a little transitory ease excluded. We have not the courage to imagine a state of things for which there is neither reward nor punishment. We cling to the painful necessities of shame and blame. 35

Elia functions in the essay as an archetypal exponent of the free play of the imagination, forever contriving to shatter the barriers of perceptual limitation which men erect between each other and their potential for imaginative sympathy.[36]

'Poor Relations' effects a liberation of a similar nature through the use of the child figure. The conventional attitude towards the Poor Relation - an attitude which is implied in the very components of the phrase - denies to him or her an unquestioning and generous acceptance into the common domestic circles of human life. Like the Drunkard or the Jacobin, the Poor Relation is damned by name, and consequently in reality; his family is unready to consider 'what the thing is' as opposed to 'the name'.[37] The Elia essay opens with a string of humorous phrases through which Elia appears to associate himself with the conventional point of view. The Poor Relation is referred to as

> the most irrelevant thing in nature ... a perpetually recurring mortification ... a death's head at your banquet ... 38

35 L.W., ii, 144.

36 For a similar account of Elia's function, see Stuart M. Tave, The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries (Chicago, 1960), p. 177.

37 L.W., i, 133, and see above, p. 97.

38 Ibid., ii, 157-8.

After a lengthy, light-hearted introduction, Elia proceeds to relate a sobering anecdote illustrating 'the disadvantages, to which this chimerical notion of affinity constituting a claim to acquaintance, may subject the spirit of a gentleman.'[39] Overwhelmed by the shame of his lowly connections, a promising young man, in order to flee the country and his family, accepts a commission in a regiment and is killed in the Peninsular War. The reader is encouraged to see such shame as a misplaced emotion by the final section of the essay, in which Elia recollects his personal acquaintance as a child with an impoverished relation:

> The earliest impressions which I received on this matter, are certainly not attended with anything painful, or very humiliating, in the recalling. At my father's table (no very splendid one) was to be found, every Saturday, the mysterious figure of an aged gentleman ... He seemed above human infirmities and passions. A sort of melancholy grandeur invested him. 40

The Elian household treats this relation with 'an habitual general respect', and the child wonders at and is profoundly impressed by the dignity and presence of the old man. He also notices that when on one unfortunate occasion the old man is inadvertently slighted, he reacts with strong feeling and is clearly acutely sensitive to his status and the opprobrium it may bring upon him.[41] The Poor Relation is thus displayed as a person with as strong a claim upon one's

39 L.W., ii, 159.
40 Ibid., ii, 161.
41 See ibid., ii, 162.

sympathy as any other, if not more. The essay had opened with the words 'A Poor Relation - is the most irrelevant thing in nature'; it closes, after the description of the old man, with the sentence 'This was - a Poor Relation.'[42] The idea of what it means to be a Poor Relation, rather than what it is to have a Poor Relation, has by now been so strongly impressed upon the mind that it comes as a shock to be reminded of the easy, slighting mockeries with which we had light-heartedly acquiesced at the commencement of the essay. The general effect of the whole is to bring about an ethical reform and advance, without arousing feelings of either bitter shame at the original barbarism or complacent pride in the amelioration.

In the 'Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia', it was said in defence of the essayist and as an explanation of his idiosyncrasies, that

> The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood. 43

Both 'Poor Relations' and 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century', along with other similar essays, represent Elia's warfare against 'the impertinence of manhood'. The attack is carried through by means of a gently persuasive and barely perceptible process rather than by any didactic or

42 L.W., ii, 157 and 163.
43 Ibid., ii, 153.

aggressive means; but it is all the more effective for that.[44] The roles of child and fool are used to subvert the conventional adult point of view.[45] Elia never plays the part of Master, Teacher or Wise Man. He makes no attempt to control the independence of mind of the individual reader, and yet succeeds in revolutionizing it, through encouraging an imaginative process towards a more humane and sympathetic recognition of the self and of one's relation to others.

For all the prevalence and importance of role-playing in the Elia essays, however, they have always been considered to represent a self-portrait of their author. According to Pater, for Lamb, as for Montaigne 'the desire of self-portraiture is, below all more superficial tendencies, the real motive in writing at all';[46] later critics have expressed a ready agreement with Pater's opinion.[47] Elia appears to be a figure of extreme ambivalence, representing contradictory ideas to different people. Lamb once remarked that the name 'Elia' formed an anagram of 'a lie', and apparently he himself pronounced it Elía, or 'a liar'.[48] A trickster from his conception, Elia has certainly succeeded in baffling many and

44 For a further account of Lamb's use of the shifting point of view, see Violet Khazoum, 'The Novel and Characters in the Essays of Elia', S.E.L., xvi (1976), 563-77.

45 See Donald H. Reiman, 'Social and Political Satire in "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig"', C.L.B., xv (1976), 138-41, for a discussion of the child's role as a social satirist.

46 Pater, Appreciations, Works of Walter Pater, v, 117.

47 See, for example, Herbert Read, English Prose Styles (1928), p.177

48 See George L. Barnett, 'The Pronunciation of Elia', S.R., v (1965), 51-2.

still remains in many ways an enigma. But a clarification of some problematic aspects of the persona comes with the realization that what Lamb has brought about in the figure of Elia is an egotistic presentation of some of his personal character traits which are in themselves not in any way egotistic, but quite the opposite. Lamb appeared to many of his friends as essentially childlike,[49] and he also played the fool in every-day life, at times very effectively:[50] neither of these stances has much in it that smacks of egotism. As the last chapter has delineated, Lamb also evinced throughout his life a sympathetic imagination which similarly results in the weakening of any egotistic tendencies. He accepts and sympathizes with all human phenomena. In Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats, Walter Jackson Bate defined negative capability as

> an acceptance ... of the particular, a love of it and a trust in it; and an acceptance, moreover, with all its 'half-knowledge,' of the 'sense of Beauty,' of force, of intensity, that lies within that particular ... 51

The Elia essay 'Imperfect Sympathies', in accounting for the dissimilarities between the Caledonian intellect and Elia's,

49 See H.C.R., i, 185, entry for 13 July 1816: 'How Lamb confirms the remark of the childlikeness of genius'.

50 See, for example, The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon, ed. Willard Bissell Pope (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-3), ii, 174-5, entry for 28 December 1817, for a description of the encounter between Lamb and the Comptroller of Stamps who inhibited Wordsworth. Through playing the fool Lamb mocks the pomp of office.

51 Walter Jackson Bate, Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. 66.

presents a striking portrayal of a habit of mind which many critics have asserted to be Lamb's own;[52] other Lamb scholars have also added that this portrayal depicts, very fully and vividly, the characteristics of negative capability.[53] Elia writes of the type of 'imperfect intellect' which is 'in its constitution' 'essentially anti-Caledonian':

> The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to, have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess fairly) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of Truth. She presents no full front to them - a feature or side-face at the most. Hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they pretend to.... The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting: waxing, and again waning. 54

The passage as a whole, and especially in its concluding sentence, is remarkably reminiscent of Lamb's 1800 pastiche of Burton, quoted at length in the third chapter of this thesis.[55] In the second 'Fragment' of the pastiche, Lamb had suggested that 'Truth absolute on this planet of ours is scarcely to be found, but in her stede Queene Opinion

52 See, for example, Jules Derocquigny, Charles Lamb: sa vie et ses oeuvres (Lille, 1904), p. 302: 'C'est lui-même, c'est son propre esprit qu'il peint quand il observe ce que l'Ecossais n'est pas.'

53 See, for example, Roy Park, Lamb as Critic, pp. 11-12,and Robert Frank, Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!, p. 32. But see also, for the opinion that Lamb accepts himself as a partial creature, incapable of full Shakespearean negative capability, a review of recent Lamb publications, by Willis Buck, W.C., x (1979), 272.

54 L.W., ii, 59.

55 Ibid., i, 33-4, and see above, p. 132.

predominates, governs, whose shifting and ever mutable Lampas, me seemeth, is man's destinie to follow.' If 'Very Truth' is 'extant indeede on earth' she manifests herself not to the rational thinkers and scholars but 'on a sudden', 'with a shyning lyghte', to 'the silly man expecting no such matter'. The fragment, in effect, unites the two disparate functions generally subsumed under the term 'negative capability'. In adopting Burton's style so convincingly, Lamb shows his capacity to enter into the mind of another writer and to speak as with his tongue; he lends his soul out to antiquity and reanimates the past through the sympathetic function of the imagination. At the same time, in taking as his theme the impossibility of ever establishing 'how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning',[56] Lamb also presented his readers with a most Keatsian portrait of the receptive mind in process seventeen years before Keats first defined negative capability.

In developing over the years his idea of 'negative capability', Lamb may well have been influenced by his appreciative reading of Robert Burton, and of another seventeenth-century prose writer, Sir Thomas Browne,[57] both of whom may be

56 K.L., i, 185, to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.

57 For studies of Lamb's debt to Browne and to Burton, see Joseph Seeman Iseman, A Perfect Sympathy: Charles Lamb and Sir Thomas Browne (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), and Bernard Lake, 'A General Introduction to Charles Lamb. Together with a special study of his relation to Robert Burton, the Author of the "Anatomy of Melancholy"', Inaugural-Dissertation (Leipzig, 1903).

characterized by their amalgamation of disparate experience, and by the manner in which they 'let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts'.[58] A recent critical study of Browne directly connects his ability to 'yoke heterogeneous ideas together' with the concept of negative capability, Keats's definition being used as the motto for the study.[59] No such assessment exists as yet of Burton's work, but much of what The Anatomy of Melancholy has to say of the function of the imagination is markedly similar to Romantic ideas. In Part 1, section 2, for example, Burton specifically comments on the Protean or chamelion activity of the imagination and its capacity to 'take all shapes'.[60] Browne, more characteristically, appears to be prefiguring in his writings the 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' of negative capability: in the Hydriotaphia, he shows himself capable of contemplating 'without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'[61] dark visions of 'the night of time' which 'far surpasseth the day'.[62]

A similar acceptance of the darkness that limits men's vision is admirably presented in the Elia essay 'A Quaker's Meeting'. Writing in praise of Quaker practices, Elia celebrates

58 K.L., ii, 213, to the George Keatses, 24 September 1819.
59 Joan Bennett, Sir Thomas Browne (Cambridge, 1962).
60 Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy (1932), i, 257.
61 K.L., i, 193,to George and Tom Keats, 27 December 1817.
62 The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1928, rev. edn., 1964), i, 167.

the manner in which 'Silence her sacred self' 'is multiplied and rendered more intense by numbers, and by sympathy.' He continues, in Silence's praise:

> She too hath her deeps, that call unto deeps. Negation itself hath a positive more and less; and closed eyes would seem to obscure the great obscurity of midnight. 63

Here, in Lamb's account of the meeting, the expected pattern of Quaker worship is completely subverted. The worshipper does not close his eyes and preserve a silence in order to contemplate a 'light within', a reflection of God's outer universal light. Rather, the closing of human eyes represents the only possible form of action or defence for men lost in a 'great obscurity' which no light can fathom. No inner guidance is hoped for; the closed eyes only seem to obscure the surrounding darkness and offer nothing in its place except the negative action itself. Yet, in characteristically Elian fashion, the context of this minimal action gives to it a 'positive more or less'. The Quaker worshipper, whatever his beliefs or doubts, is blessed in his sympathetic association with his fellows and shares with the rest of the community a mute acceptance of the human condition.

Another earlier writer, but one much closer to Lamb's own age than Browne and Burton, wrote in similar vein of the impenetrable darkness circumscribing human life. In The Life and Adventures of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, Sterne, through the person of Shandy, suggests that

63 L.W., ii, 45.

> we live amongst riddles and mysteries - the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works. 64

Northrop Frye, in his seminal essay 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', saw in Tristram Shandy and its incessant flow of associations, 'an unusually pure example' of 'literature as process' as opposed to 'literature as product'.[65] Frye considers 'literature as process', with its brief and fragmentary utterance and its maintenance of 'emotion at a continuous present', as characteristic of the Age of Sensibility; 'literature as product' he sees as more in tune with the confident assertions of Romanticism. As this chapter has previously indicated and as other critics of Lamb have pointed out,[66] the Elia essays also function through involving the reader in imaginative processes rather than through assertively presenting a complete product. Other hints and suggestions in Elia also connect Lamb with the previous century rather than with his own. In the essay 'The Old Margate Hoy', he describes himself as being ill at ease on the open shore, exposed to the boundlessness of the sea; he returns with relief to London and the community of men.[67] Similarly, Imlac, in

64 Lawrence Sterne, The Life and Adventures of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, ed. James Aiken Work (N.Y., 1940), pp. 292-3.

65 Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', Eighteenth-Century English Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. James L. Clifford (N.Y., 1959), p. 312.

66 See Nabholtz, 'Drama and Rhetoric in Lamb's Essays of the Imagination', S.E.L., xii (1972), 683-703.

67 L.W., ii, 181-3.

Johnson's Rasselas, can only tolerate the 'barren uniformity' of the sea for short periods and prefers the variety of human life.[68] Again, in 'Blakesmoor in H-shire', Elia recollects his unadventurousness as a child exploring the house and gardens of Blakesmoor:

> So far from a wish to roam, I would have drawn, methought, still closer the fences of my chosen prison; and have been hemmed in by a yet securer cincture of those excluding garden walls. 69

In Rasselas, Nekayah and Pekuah, when they first emerged from the Happy Valley and were faced with 'nothing to bound their prospect', 'considered themselves as in danger of being lost in a dreary vacuity' and were full of fears.[70] Johnson's approval of the 'narrow round' without a 'void' which circumscribed the life of his friend Dr. Robert Levet,[71] appears to find an echo in some of Elia's less Romantic themes. And Elia's stress upon the importance of taking individual circumstances into account when assessing others, rather than seeing them in terms of names or categories, can be compared with the sentiments of another eighteenth-century writer of conservative bias: Edmund Burke, in Reflections on the French Revolution, wrote against any tendency to 'give praise or blame to anything

68 Samuel Johnson, The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abyssinia, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Brian Jenkins (1971), p. 23.

69 L.W., ii, 155.

70 Johnson, The History of Rasselas, p. 42.

71 Samuel Johnson, The Poems of Samuel Johnson, ed. David Nichol Smith and Edward L. MacAdam (2nd edn., Oxford, 1974), p. 234.

which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction'.[72]

It would appear, then, that the Elia essays, in both their form and their content, have about them fewer of the characteristic features and tones of Romanticism than Lamb's earlier critical pieces. Yet this assumption is questionable. In relation to the essays' form, for example, it might be said that Lamb's deliberate use of the concept of literature as process manifests his ability to play a part in the Romantic achievement of developing, defining and consciously controlling the ideas and literary techniques which originated in the Age of Sensibility. In the last chapter, it was suggested that Keats's ability to define 'negative capability' showed a self-possession and a grasp of the functions of the imagination that could hardly be evinced by a poet existing in a pure state of self-annihilating sensibility.[73] As the unpublished review of Hazlitt's Table-Talk reveals, Lamb was well aware of the need for such a deliberately unifying construction as the persona of Elia. In overcoming the difficulties which he found in sustaining a literary output, Lamb also achieved a more conscious control over his sensibilities

72 Edmund Burke, Reflections on the French Revolution, ed. W. Alison Phillips (Cambridge, 1912), p. 7.

73 See above, pp. 282-3.

and imagination, a control which further increased his confidence and capacity to produce a unified body of work rather than scattered fragments.

What is more, not all the Elia essays by any means display ideas and themes unconnected with the spirit of Lamb's age. 'Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art' is the most assertively Romantic of all Lamb's writings. Composed in 1833, when even the second generation of English Romanticists had ceased to give utterance, and when the social realism of the mid-nineteenth century was beginning to predominate in art, it celebrates the imagination as a symbolizing and unifying power. The 'great masters of painting' had recorded not

> actual appearances, that is, all that was to be seen at any given moment by an indifferent eye, but only what the eye might be supposed to see in the doing or suffering of some portentous action.

In so doing, they had caught and eternalized 'that eclipsing moment, which reduces confusion to a kind of unity' 'when the senses are upturned from their proprieties, when sight and hearing are a feeling only'.[74] For Lamb, the celebrated painters of his own age were incapable of achieving such vitally imaginative effects; as if to correct and balance the naturalism of the new age, he composes this swan song in praise of high Romantic sublimity.

'The greatness of wit ... manifests itself in the admirable

74 L.W., ii, 230-1.

balance of all the faculties', Elia wrote in the essay 'Sanity of True Genius'.[75] As if to balance out the more extreme tendencies of the Romantic imagination, Lamb was wont to criticize and to mock its more prophetic and didactic utterances. Yet he understood and appreciated the achievements of his age, and his work as a whole can serve to proportion our general impression of early English Romantic literature. The earliest productions of both Wordsworth and Coleridge are as much characterized by a sympathetic imagination as by visionary or sublime expressions, and, had Keats lived longer and produced more, typical assumptions of the nature of a Romantic poet might have been quite subverted. As it is, a study of the descriptions and the functions of the imagination in the works of Charles Lamb may help to redress the balance.

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75 L.W., ii, 187.

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