

LAMB'S SELF-REVELATIONS AS "ELIA"

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LAMB'S SELF-REVELATIONS AS "ELIA"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem	
Sources of Information	
Method of Procedure	
II. LAMB'S LOVE FOR MANKIND	5
Lamb's Affection for the Human Race	
Lamb's Selective Gregariousness	
III. LAMB'S LOVE FOR HIS FAMILY: HIS RESPONSIBILITIES AND HIS NEED FOR PRIVACY	49
Lamb's Numerous Burdens	
Lamb's Need for Privacy	
Lamb's Despondence	
IV. LAMB'S NOSTALGIC NATURE	61
Lamb's Love for the Past	
Lamb's Childhood Recollections	
Lamb's References to Deceased Friends	
Lamb's Taste in Literature and in the Fine Arts	
Lamb's Hatred of Sophistication	
Lamb's Ability to Cope with Reality	
V. LAMB'S CRUTCHES	77
Use of Tobacco	
Use of Alcohol	
VI. CONCLUSIONS	85
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Readers have long assumed that the Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia reveal much about the nature of Charles Lamb; the essays apparently contain personal opinions and intimate glimpses of his character which are essential for comprehension of his personality. As George Barnett states, "In nonfictional literary writing, the personality of the writer is all-important. Through his written word, we come to know the man, and the more self-revelatory the writing, the more intimate the acquaintance."¹ If Lamb had never written his Elia essays, the consequences to the world of literature might have been only slight; the results which their absence might have produced upon the study of Lamb's character, however, would have been unfortunate.

Sources of Information

Before concentrating upon the information present within the Elia essays themselves, one should note two matters that

¹George L. Barnett, Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia (Bloomington, 1964), p. 3.

are worthy of special consideration: Lamb's decision to become an essayist and his use of a pseudonym. That there were certain external factors which influenced Lamb's decision to write familiar essays cannot be denied. His merits as a poet and as a dramatist were highly questionable, and his "comparative failures in literary types other than the essay directed him gradually but inexorably toward that medium."² The most influential factor which led Lamb to write essays, however, did not arise from external circumstances. His most powerful connection with the familiar essay was his own personality. Lamb was by nature extremely informal; his mind was introspective, and his humor and wit were automatic and instinctive.³ His decision to express himself through the medium of the personal essay was judicious, for the most prominent characteristics of this medium are informality, spontaneity, and subjectivity.⁴ Lamb's choice reveals his vast self-knowledge, and his success as a familiar essayist was inevitable. Lamb's use of a pseudonym indicates that although Lamb's need for self-expression and self-portraiture

²Ibid., p. 11.

³Alfred Ainger, Charles Lamb, rev. ed. (London, 1926), pp. 74-95.

⁴Barnett, p. 9.

was great, he jealously guarded his privacy. By use of a pen-name Lamb was able to express his innermost feelings yet retain his anonymity; by pretending to assume the identity of "Elia," he was able to achieve intimacy and yet retain distance. He was able to protect both himself and his loved ones.

Just as it is impossible to understand his nature without considering the Elia essays, it is also impossible to comprehend his character on the basis of the essays alone. His tendency to exaggerate, his delight in pretending to be his actual opposite, and his predilection toward omitting unpleasant details combine to make his Elia essays both confusing and misleading at times. For these reasons it is essential that Lamb's letters, biographies of Lamb, and opinions and descriptions of Lamb given by his contemporaries be consulted in order to verify or to disprove the impressions of his nature which prevail in his Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia. Only when his Elia works are viewed in the light of other self-revelations and other biographical information can a clear picture of his inner nature be seen.

Method of Procedure

Since the purpose of this thesis is to determine the nature of Lamb as revealed in his Elia essays, excerpts from

these essays form the major portion of the text. The general procedure for ascertaining what these excerpts indicate is as follows: first, the characteristics of Charles Lamb are determined from a study of the Elia essays; second, these characteristics are considered in relation to information derived from biographies. Careful attention is given to significant discrepancies between the essays and other sources.

CHAPTER II

LAMB'S LOVE FOR MANKIND

Lamb's Affection for the Human Race

Charles Lamb's love for mankind appears evident throughout all of his Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia; as Elia, Lamb presents humanity not only in all its various forms but also with all its multiple foibles. Even small chimney-sweepers¹ and aged beggars² receive tenderness and understanding from Lamb as he presents them through the medium of Elia's pen.

In his essay "Imperfect Sympathies" Lamb expresses the following wish: "I hope it may be said of me that I am a lover of my species."³ This same desire appears in a letter written by Lamb to Mrs. Basil Montagu in 1828. Lamb discusses suitable monuments and tributes to deceased persons,

¹Saxe Commins, editor, The Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb, 1st ed. (New York, 1935), pp. 102-107.

²Ibid., pp. 97-102.

³Ibid., p. 51.

and he states a desired inscription for his own tombstone:

"Here C. Lamb loved his brethren of mankind."⁴

As Lamb desired, his love for mankind did not go unrecognized. His friends and acquaintances were well aware of his sympathy for humanity. Barron Field, a close personal friend, described Lamb as follows: "Not only did he think (to use the language of Terence) nothing human alien from him, but he considered nothing interesting to him but what was human."⁵

Love for mankind was one of his most dominant characteristics. This feeling dictated the very content of his essays--people. His affection for humanity did much more, however, than merely affect his material; it affected his technique and style, and Lamb himself became "the most human of all writers."⁶

Lamb's Selective Gregariousness

However, Charles Lamb does not express an indiscriminate love for all men. As he indicates in the following passage,

⁴Ibid., pp. 947-948.

⁵Edmund Blunden, editor, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by His Contemporaries (London, 1934), p. 223.

⁶Ibid.

though he loves mankind, his gregariousness is quite selective:

I confess that I do feel the differences of mankind, national or individual, to an unhealthy excess. I can look with no indifferent eye upon things or persons. Whatever is, is to me a matter of taste or distaste; or when once it becomes indifferent, it begins to be disrelishing. I am, in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices--made up of likings and dislikings--the variest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies. . . . I can feel for all indifferently, but I cannot feel towards all equally. The more purely-English word that expresses sympathy, will better explain my meaning. I can be a friend to a worthy man, who upon another account cannot be my mate or fellow. I cannot like all people alike.⁷

In spite of Lamb's selectivity, his essays indicate that his friends are numerous and that they are persons of varied professions. In his essay "Christ's Hospital Five-And-Thirty Years Ago," for example, his references to his friends are numerous. He mentions Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Valentine LeGrice, and Lancelot Pepys Stevens as being his school companions, and he indicates what has become of several more of his ex-classmates.⁸

Only once in the Elia essays does Lamb loudly bewail his general lack of friends. This complaint occurs in his "Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia" to Last Essays of Elia,

⁷Commins, p. 51.

⁸Ibid., pp. 20-21.

where under the disguise of a friend he describes the late Elia in an attempt to rid himself of his pseudo-identity. According to the account, "Those who did not like him, hated him; and some, who once liked him, afterwards became his bitterest haters."⁹ The revelations of Lamb's nature are striking, for secondary sources tend to negate both statements. According to biographical information, Lamb was extremely well liked,¹⁰ and only two people are mentioned who displayed a violent dislike of Lamb, Thomas Carlyle¹¹ and Mrs. William Godwin.¹² In addition, secondary sources show that although Lamb sometimes quarreled with his acquaintances, his friendships, once formed, were extremely enduring and constant.

A quarrel with Coleridge, which arose mainly as a result of a third party, Charles Lloyd, serves to indicate that although Lamb and his friends did at times argue violently, reconciliations did take place and friendships remained

⁹Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁰Edmund Blunden, Charles Lamb and His Contemporaries (New York, 1933), pp. 47-49, 65, 68-69.

¹¹Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, pp. 185-187.

¹²Ibid., p. 62.

in fact. The quarrel occurred as a result of Coleridge's jealousy; he resented the growing friendship between Lamb and Lloyd. As a result of his jealousy, Coleridge attempted to ridicule Lamb and Lloyd in his writings. Lamb's estrangement from Coleridge culminated in the spring of 1798, and insulting letters exchanged hands. By 1800, however, the quarrel was mended, though Coleridge became to Lamb "an archangel a little damaged."¹³ In spite of this estrangement, Lamb in a note on Coleridge's death saw fit to write, "He was my fifty-year old friend without a dissension."¹⁴ In the same year, 1834, Coleridge wrote in the margin of his poem "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison," "Ch. and Mary Lamb-- dear to my heart, yea, as it were, my heart. . . ."¹⁵

The manner in which Lamb chose his friends is interesting, and the following description of select companions from his "Preface" is somewhat humorous but accurate. Of Elia Lamb says,

His intimados, to confess a truth, were in the world's eye a ragged regiment. He found them

¹³E. V. Lucas, The Life of Charles Lamb, Vol. I, 3rd edition, 2 vols. (New York, 1907), p. 181. Cf. pp. 175-180.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁵Ibid.

floating on the surface of society; and the colour, or something else, in the weed pleased him. The burrs stuck to him--but they were good and loving burrs for all that. He never greatly cared for the society of what are called good people.¹⁶

Lamb's "regged regiment"¹⁷ was composed of people of various interests and occupations. A complete listing of all Lamb's friends would be extensive, but among the most notable were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, Charles Lloyd, Thomas Manning, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, William Hazlitt, Basil Montagu, Thomas De Quincey, Robert Elliston, Joseph Munden, Henry Crabb Robinson, John Payne Collier, Thomas Love Peacock, Francis Kelly, James Sheridan Knowles, Thomas Hood, William Hone, Walter Savage Landor, and Leigh Hunt.¹⁸ These were some of Lamb's "good and loving burrs,"¹⁹ and Lamb's implication that they were not generally considered "good society"²⁰ can easily be verified.

¹⁶Commins, p. 136.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Lucas, I and II.

¹⁹Commins, p. 136.

²⁰Ibid.

In Lamb's time there were still many prejudices against actors and actresses, and as a result, Robert Elliston, Joseph Munden, and Francis Kelly were looked upon with awe by their public.²¹ In a similar manner most of Lamb's literary friends were ostracized, for society rebelled against any hints of radicalism in politics or theology, and many of Lamb's acquaintances appear to have been extremely outspoken in these areas; as a result, they became "tabooed--that is, consecrated to public hate and scorn."²² Southey²³, Godwin²⁴, Holcroft²⁵, Thelwall²⁶, and Hunt²⁷ were all ostracized and condemned at one time or another for their ideas concerning political and social reform, and Coleridge²⁸, Manning²⁹, and

²¹See "To the Shade of Elliston" for Lamb's satirical treatment of the public's awe of actors. Ibid., pp. 153-154.

²²Lucas, II, 80.

²³Ibid., I, 91.

²⁴Blunden, Charles Lamb and His Contemporaries, p. 39.

²⁵Lucas, I, 316.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., II, 448-449.

²⁸Ibid., p. 334.

²⁹Ibid., I, 241.

Priestley³⁰ were attacked by society as atheists. Other friends of Lamb were disdained by society because of their personal habits and eccentricities: Hazlitt was classified as extremely anti-social³¹; Montagu was known for his quaint eccentricity³²; De Quincey was abhorred for his practice of eating opium³³; and Peacock's close friendship with Shelley brought about Peacock's social downfall.³⁴

Lamb's description of his friends in his "Preface" reveals more than the fact that they were disowned by good society. First, the terminology employed indicates Lamb's jovial humor toward his associates and his lack of idolatry and hero-worship. Second, Lamb's use of the term "burrs that cling"³⁵ implies that at times his friends inconvenienced him. Third, and perhaps most important, the passage reveals why Lamb chose his friends as he did.

³⁰Ibid., p. 123.

³¹Ibid., p. 344.

³²Ibid., p. 376.

³³Ibid., p. 224.

³⁴Ibid., p. 518.

³⁵Commins, p. 136.

Lamb's whimsical humor and jovial attitude toward his companions are evident in several of his Elia essays. In "Oxford in the Vacation," for example, Lamb gives a capricious sketch of George Dyer, a close friend³⁶, and in "Amicus Redivivus" he humorously describes Dyer's descent into a river.³⁷ Not even Coleridge escapes Lamb's Elian wit, for in "The Two Races of Men" Lamb teases him about his habit of borrowing books.³⁸ Among other essays which vividly display Lamb's humorous attitude toward his friend are "All Fools' Day," "A Quakers' Meeting," "Distant Correspondents," "A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People," "Captain Jackson," "The Wedding," and numbers VII, X, XI, XIII, and XVI of his "Popular Fallacies."³⁹

Evidence of Lamb's whimsical humor toward his friends is present also in his personal correspondence. Two excellent examples of this humor are his letter to J. B. Dibdin, written in September, 1826, and his letter to Crabb Robinson,

³⁶Ibid., pp. 11-12.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 186-189.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 24-25.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 39-45, 93-97, 113-117, 169-172, 209-213, 232-233, 235-243, 245-248.

written in April, 1829. The letter to Dibdin consists almost entirely of Lamb's mischievous attempts to alleviate Dibdin's boredom by describing the numerous entertainments which Lamb is able to enjoy.⁴⁰ In his letter to Robinson, who is suffering from rheumatism, Lamb pretends to have the ailment himself and describes the symptoms at great length.⁴¹

Two anecdotes will also serve to illustrate Lamb's displays of humor regarding his friends. Once, for example, when Coleridge, referring to former clerical activities, asked Lamb if he had ever heard him preach, Lamb replied, "I never heard you do anything else."⁴² Wordsworth, too, felt the sting of Lamb's wit when he asserted that he could write like Shakespeare if he had the mind to do so. Lamb's reply was scathing: "It is clear that nothing is wanting but the mind."⁴³

Within his "Preface" Lamb states that there is something in each individual which attracts him, "the colour,

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 915-916.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 967.

⁴²Lucas, II, 375-376.

⁴³Ibid., I, 394.

or something else."⁴⁴ This assertion is extremely significant, for it indicates Lamb's ability to perceive the individuality of each of his acquaintances and to appreciate the uniqueness and originality of their characters. Lamb's description of his friends in his "Preface" does not indicate precisely, however, what characteristics and traits are especially attractive to him. For this information it is necessary to examine other Elia passages.

In "All Fools' Day," for example, Lamb discusses an important aspect of his selective gregariousness:

I have never made an acquaintance since [childhood], that lasted: or a friendship that answered; with any that had not some tincture of the absurd in their characters. I venerate an honest obliquity of understanding. The more laughable blunders a man shall commit in your company, the more tests he giveth you, that he will not betray or overreach you.⁴⁵

In this passage Lamb professes his preference for people who possess a "tincture of the absurd."⁴⁶ The use of the term absurd, however, must not be taken at face value. As Lamb further explains, he prefers a man who is able to

⁴⁴Commins, p. 136.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁶Ibid.

"commit laughable blunders."⁴⁷ The correct connotation of absurd becomes evident; it refers to a man's being human. The word implies that Lamb's friends are neither above making errors and mistakes nor without the ability to laugh at their own foibles and failures. Lamb's ability to appreciate mankind's fallibility is evident in the above passage, and it is also obvious that he admired this particular insight in his friends.

Lamb's correspondence supports his preference for unusual companions. In a letter to Wordsworth, written March 20, 1822, Lamb makes the following assertion: "Common natures do not suffice me. Good people, as they are called, won't serve. I want individuals. I am made up of queer points, and I want so many answering needles."⁴⁸

Another aspect of Lamb's selective gregariousness is revealed in "The Old and the New Schoolmaster"; Lamb says,

I would not be domesticated all my days with a person of very superior capacity to my own--not, if I know myself at all, from any considerations of jealousy or self-comparison, for the occasional communion with such minds has constituted the fortune and felicity of my life--but the habit of too

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 839.

constant intercourse with spirits above you, instead of raising you, keeps you down. Too frequent doses of original thinking from others, restrain what lesser portion of that faculty you may possess of your own. . . . You get entangled in another man's mind. . . . The constant operation of such potent agency would reduce me, I am convinced, to imbecility.⁴⁹

Lamb's remarks concerning the companionship of those who are beneath him in intellect are also revealing:

As little as I should wish to be always thus dragged upward, as little (or rather still less) is it desirable to be stunted downwards by your associates. The trumpet does not more stun you by its loudness, than a whisper teases you by its provoking inaudibility.⁵⁰

Lamb's desire for intellectual compatibility and his fear of losing his individuality and originality in the company of superior intellects are mentioned also in his personal correspondence. In a letter to Wordsworth, written April 26, 1816, Lamb expresses himself as follows:

Coleridge is absent but four miles, and the neighborhood of such a man is as exciting as the presence of fifty ordinary persons. 'Tis enough to be within the whiff and wind of his genius for us not to possess our souls in quiet. If I lived with him or the Author of the Excursion, I should, in a very little time, lose my own identity, and be dragged along in the current of other people's thoughts, hampered in a net.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 49.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 808.

Likewise, in an earlier letter written to Coleridge in 1796, Lamb attempts to preserve his individuality. Speaking of his poetry, Lamb states:

I love my Sonnets because they are reflected images of my own feelings at different times. . . . they are dear to memory, though they now and then wake a sign or a tear. "Thinking on divers things foredone," I charge you, Coleridge, spare my ewe lambs; and though a gentleman may borrow six lines in an epic poem . . . still, in a sonnet, a personal poem, I do not "ask my friend the aiding verse."⁵²

Passages from his Elia essays and from his letters indicate that Lamb selected his friends upon the basis of their individual merit and that he deeply appreciated a good sense of humor and sought intellectual compatibility. Many of Lamb's contemporaries and present-day critics, however, have misinterpreted the bases of Lamb's various friendships, and they present Lamb as "welcoming wicked, profligate, or dissolute people by preference."⁵³ For example, P. G. Patmore, a contemporary and friend of Lamb, once made the following statement: "To be taken into Lamb's favor and protection you had only to get discarded, defamed, and shunned by everybody else; and if you deserved this treatment, so much the

⁵²Ibid., p. 584.

⁵³Lucas, II, 80.

better!"⁵⁴ Patmore, however, seems to have realized, at least in part, the error of this statement, for he qualified this assertion somewhat by adding:

If I may venture so to express myself, there was in Lamb's eyes a sort of sacredness in sin, on account of its sure ill consequences to the sinner; and he seemed to open his arms and his heart to the rejected and reviled of mankind in a spirit kindred at least with that of the Deity.⁵⁵

Perhaps Thomas De Quincey best explains the reason behind the various misinterpretations of the bases of Lamb's friendships. De Quincey expresses his views in these words:

Perhaps the foundation for the false notion . . . about Lamb's predilections was to be found in his carelessness for social proscriptions which have sometimes occurred in our stormy times with respect to writers, male and female, who set the dominant notions, or the prevailing feelings of men . . . at open defiance. . . . With respect to all these persons, feeling that the public had gone too far or had begun originally upon false grounds, Lamb threw his heart and his doors wide open.⁵⁶

As De Quincey indicates, Lamb loved his friends, not for the very reasons society rejected them, but because they possessed admirable traits which society had relentlessly

⁵⁴Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, p. 147.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Lucas, II, 80-81.

neglected and he had recognized, or because they had aroused his sympathy and affection by their unwarranted isolation. It is De Quincey also who best indicates Lamb's sympathy for his fellow man and his attempts to alleviate human miseries. De Quincey reveals Lamb's self-sacrificing nature in the following observation of Lamb, who

bore with numerous dull people, stupid people, asinine people, for no other reason upon earth than because he knew them, or believed them, to have been ill-used or oppressed by some clever but dissolute man. That was enough.⁵⁷

Within his Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia, Lamb also gives several indications of how he and his friends amuse themselves. In "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist," for example, Lamb describes an evening's entertainment at cards,⁵⁸ and in "--That We Should Lie Down with The Lamb" he refers to the enjoyment he and his company derive from talking and eating into the late hours of the night.⁵⁹ Even in "Confessions of a Drunkard" Lamb describes himself and his friends as "sitters up a-nights," and he speaks of their "midnight

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Commins, pp. 30-35.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 245-246.

joviality."⁶⁰ In addition to these descriptions of evenings enjoyed with friends, Lamb makes various references in his letters to his "house full of company."⁶¹

The best descriptions of the manner in which Lamb and his friends spent their evenings together, however, are not found in Lamb's essays and letters. They are found in accounts related by Lamb's friends in their personal reminiscences. Procter, for example, relates the following information:

When you went to Lamb's rooms on the Wednesday evenings, (his "At Home,") you generally found the card table spread out, Lamb himself one of the players. On the corner of the table was a snuff-box; and the game was enlivened by sundry brief ejaculations and pungent questions, which kept alive the wits of the party present. It was not "silent whist!"⁶²

Procter's remarks concerning Lamb's behavior toward his individual friends are also noteworthy:

It was curious to observe the gradations in Lamb's manner to his various guests; although it was courteous to all. With Hazlitt he talked as though they met the subject in discussion on equal terms; with Leigh Hunt he exchanged repartees; to Wordsworth he was almost respectful; with Coleridge

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 224.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 927.

⁶²Lucas, I, 515.

he was sometimes jocular, sometimes deferring; with Martin Burney fraternally familiar; with Manning affectionate; with Godwin merely courteous, or if friendly, then in a minor degree.⁶³

Procter's description of Lamb's behavior toward his friends is very significant. It reveals that Lamb discriminated even among his closest friends, and it suggests the relationship which existed between Lamb and specific friends. In addition, Lamb's gradations in behavior display his ability to ascertain quickly the temperaments and moods of his various companions and to adapt his actions accordingly.

Lamb's failure to give a thorough account in his Elia essays of the manner in which he entertained his friends is significant and reveals indirectly another aspect of his gregarious nature, his desire to preserve the intimacy of his personal relationships. Lamb's reluctance to lay bare the more personal aspects of his numerous associations is evident from his practices and opinions concerning exchanging of gifts; his statements in the essay "---That We Must Not Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth" are at variance with his acts of generosity in actual life. In the essay Lamb humorously reprimands people who give and accept presents of no possible value. According to Lamb, people who give these presents

have one motive only, "to engage you to substantial gratitude."⁶⁴ Those who are foolish enough to accept these gifts "thank them for nothing."⁶⁵ In this essay Lamb acknowledges that he himself has a "tolerable assortment of these gift-horses,"⁶⁶ but he makes no direct reference to his generosity; the reader is left with the impression that only because Lamb resents gift-horses, he is not guilty of presenting them to others.

Within Lamb's personal correspondence, however, there is evidence to indicate that he was extremely generous to his friends and that he was very much concerned with their personal and financial welfare. In a letter to Godwin, written May 16, 1822, Lamb states, "I sincerely feel for all your trouble. Pray use the enclosed £50 and pay me when you can."⁶⁷ Again referring to Godwin in a letter to Haydon, written October 19, 1822, Lamb writes, "We are trying to raise a subscription for him."⁶⁸ Some other acts of Lamb's

⁶⁴Commins, p. 237.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 840.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 845.

generosity which are apparent within his letters are his attempts to get financial aid for the family of his deceased friend Randal Norris;⁶⁹ his recommendation to Edward Moxon for a position in a publishing firm;⁷⁰ his request that Reverend E. Irving aid William Hone, who is "in some present difficulties";⁷¹ his appeal to Moxon to aid P. G. Patmore in disposing of some of his literary endeavors;⁷² his plea to Bernard Barton that he praise and encourage George Darley's poetry;⁷³ and his petition for Wordsworth's recommendation of Louisa Martin as a teacher.⁷⁴

As already noted, Lamb's reticence concerning his relations with his friends and his generosity indicates Lamb's wish to retain the intimacy and privacy of their relationship. Lamb's failure to mention his generosity within the essays, however, reveals other sides of his character, his modesty and his protective nature toward those he loves.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 919.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 933.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 955.

⁷²Ibid., p. 946.

⁷³Ibid., p. 966.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 1021.

He neither boasts of his good deeds nor embarrasses the recipients of his aid.

Though he was by nature gregarious and had many friends, Lamb could not love all men; within his Elia essays those whom he disliked are quite apparent. In his essay "Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia," Lamb states that he does not care for the "society of what are called good people."⁷⁵ In "Imperfect Sympathies," however, Lamb's terminology becomes more specific as he discusses his feelings toward various races and members of religious sects. His opinion of Scotsmen, for example, is quite revealing. He writes,

I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen, and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair. They cannot like me-- and in truth, I never knew one of that nation who attempted to do it. . . . We know one another at first sight.⁷⁶

Within this same essay Lamb proceeds to explain why he dislikes Scotchmen. He asserts that they possess comprehensive minds which do not agree with his suggestive nature; he says that Caledonians are tedious, and he alleges that, in addition, they lack a sense of humor.⁷⁷ While these traits

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 136.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 52-53.

⁷⁷Ibid.

of Scotsmen certainly may have intensified Lamb's dislike, the true reason behind his animosity toward them is to be found in the statement, "They cannot like me. . . ."78 Although Lamb reveals that he would bear any sufferings and sacrifices for his friends, he would not give an inch of ground in the presence of those who he felt disliked him. In their presence he was obstinate, rude, and perverse. If he sensed himself to be in the presence of enmity or animosity, he threw discretion to the winds. As Lamb himself states, he "gave himself too little concern what he uttered, and in whose presence. He observed neither time nor place, and would e'en out with what came uppermost."79

Lamb's dislike of Scotsmen is also apparent in his personal correspondence. In a letter to J. B. Dibdin, written in June, 1826, Lamb describes an incident concerning a Scotsman who

assured me [Lamb] he did not see much in Shakspeare. I replied, I dare say not. He felt the equivoque, looked awkward and reddish, but soon returned to the attack by saying that he thought Burns was as good as Shakspeare. I said that I had no doubt he

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 135.

was--to a Scotchman. We exchanged no more words that day.⁸⁰

Nowhere, perhaps, is Lamb's contempt for Scotsmen more evident than in his relationship with Thomas Carlyle. Lamb and Carlyle first met briefly in July, 1824, but not until Carlyle's visit on November 2, 1831, did these two great men of literature meet in violent opposition. At the time of this meeting, Carlyle was thirty years old; Lamb was fifty-six. The results of the visit were disastrous. As Lamb kept no record of the visit, it must be assumed from Carlyle's account that Lamb's behavior was quite rude and that he allowed his perversity to run rampant.⁸¹

As Lucas states, "Such men as Lamb are born to be misunderstood by such men as Carlyle," and Carlyle's resulting description of Lamb is certainly "a misleading caricature in gall."⁸² He describes Lamb as follows:

Charles Lamb I sincerely believe to be in some considerable degree insane. A more pitiful, rickety, gasping, staggering, stammering Tomfool I do not know. He is witty by denying truisms and abjuring good manners. His speech wriggles hither and thither with an incessant painful fluctuation,

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 911.

⁸¹Lucas, II, 335-337.

⁸²Ibid., p. 337.

not an opinion in it, or a fact, or a phrase that you can thank him for--more like a convulsion fit than a natural systole and diastole. Besides, he is now a confirmed, shameless drunkard; asks vehemently for gin and water in strangers' houses, tipples till he is utterly mad, and is only not thrown out of doors because he is too much despised for taking such trouble with him. Poor Lamb! Poor England, when such a despicable abortion is named genius!⁸³

The above entry did not end Carlyle's abuse of Lamb.

In future conversations with people who referred to Lamb's humor and wit, Carlyle denied that Lamb was ever in possession of any such gifts.⁸⁴ Even thirty years after their fatal visit, Carlyle still smarted from Lamb's treatment, and he again attacked him in his Reminiscences. He terms Charles and Mary Lamb "a very sorry pair of phenomena";⁸⁵ he describes Lamb's talk as "contemptibly small," and he maliciously refers to the insanity present in Lamb's family.⁸⁶

In spite of the abuse contained in these descriptions of Lamb, Carlyle was the one who ultimately suffered from their animosity. As Lucas implies, it was Carlyle who made

⁸³Ibid., p. 336.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 338.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 339.

the false estimate, not Lamb. "Carlyle . . . had been in the presence of a great man . . . and had failed to recognise him; Lamb . . . had been in the presence of a Scotch irreconcilable and had known it instantly."⁸⁷

Within his essay "Imperfect Sympathies" Lamb also describes his feelings toward Jews. He expresses himself as follows:

I have, in the abstract, no disrespect for Jews. They are a piece of stubborn antiquity, compared with which Stonehenge is in its nonage. They date beyond the pyramids. But I should not care to be in habits of familiar intercourse with any of that nation. I confess that I have not the nerves to enter their synagogues. Old prejudices cling about me. I cannot shake off the story of Hugh of Lincoln.⁸⁸ Centuries of injury, contempt, and hate, on the one side,--of cloaked revenge, dissimulation, and hate on the other, between our and their fathers, must and ought to affect the blood of the children. . . . A Hebrew is nowhere congenial to me.⁸⁹

Lamb's bigotry as expressed in the above passage is perhaps debatable, for according to Thomas Hood, Lamb's own home was "a House of Call for All Denominations,"⁹⁰ and

⁸⁷Ibid., pp. 337-338.

⁸⁸A fable which consists primarily of a fictitious account of atrocities Jews inflicted upon a young Gentile.

⁸⁹Commins, p. 54.

⁹⁰Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, pp. 123-124.

there is no evidence that his prejudices against Jews were carried out in his actual life. In view of lack of other evidence, De Quincey's explanation of Lamb's pretended bigotry in this instance is extremely enlightening and highly plausible. He says of Lamb's behavior:

Lamb, indeed, might not be more serious than Shakespeare as supposed to have been in his Shylock; yet he spoke at times as from a station of wilful bigotry, and seemed . . . to sympathize with the barbarous Christian superstitions upon the pretended bloody practices of the Jews, and of the early Jewish physicians. . . . Lamb, however, though it was often hard to say whether he were not secretly laughing, swore to the truth of all these old fables, and treated the liberalities of the present generation on such points as mere fantastic and effeminate affectations, which, no doubt, they often are as regards the sincerity of those who profess them. The bigotry, which it pleased his fancy to assume, he used like a sword against the Jew, as the official weapon of the Christian, upon the same principle that a Capulet would have drawn upon a Montague, without conceiving it any duty of his to rip up the grounds of so ancient a quarrel; it was a feud handed down to him by his ancestors, and it was their business to see that originally it had been an honest feud.⁹¹

As the above passage indicates, Lamb's anti-Semitic attitude expressed in "Imperfect Sympathies" is probably an example of assumed bigotry. Lamb is probably having a joke at his readers' expense by allowing himself to indulge in

⁹¹Ibid., p. 102.

ancient superstitions and myths concerning the Jewish race. He may also be appealing indirectly for a casting off of such idle beliefs and chastising his prejudiced society.

It is also interesting to note that many people believed Lamb to be of Jewish descent. They based this supposition mainly upon his swarthy complexion and gleaming eyes. No evidence has been found to prove that Lamb actually did have "any family interconnexion with Jewish blood," but the mere assumption of Jewish descent in view of his assumed bigotry in his Elia essays is most amusing.⁹²

In the same essay, "Imperfect Sympathies," Lamb describes his attitude toward the Negro race:

In the Negro countenance you will often meet with strong traits of benignity. I have felt yearnings of tenderness towards some of these faces--or rather masks--that have looked out kindly upon one in casual encounters in the streets and highways. I love what Fuller⁹³ beautifully calls--these "images of God cut in ebony." But I should not like to associate with them, to share my meals and my good-nights with them--because they are black.⁹⁴

⁹²Ibid., p. 102.

⁹³"Thomas Fuller was an English prose-writer, a CHARACTER WRITER, and didactic essayist of the last half of the seventeenth century." "Thomas Fuller," The Reader's Encyclopedia, Vol. II (New York, 1948), p. 412.

⁹⁴Commins, p. 55.

Lamb's statement can be interpreted in at least two manners, and the source of confusion lies in Lamb's insertion of the clause "because they are black." First, Lamb may be stating that even though he feels sympathy for Negroes, he does not wish to associate with them because their color repulses him. Second, Lamb may be asserting that although he admires the ebony countenance of the Negro race, this aspect of physical beauty alone is not a sufficient reason for his seeking their company.

The first explanation may be discarded for at least three reasons: (1) Lamb's exclusion of Negroes is not in keeping with his sympathetic and generous character; (2) Lamb's prejudices against other groups of people and specific persons, as will be evident later in this paper, are generally explained in terms of character traits and actions; and (3) Lamb indicates in the same passage that he finds the Negro coloring and countenance quite agreeable. The second explanation, that Lamb thinks the beauty of the Negro race not enough cause for his associating with them, is the more probable. As Lamb confesses in the essay "Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia," "He chose his friends for some individuality of character which they manifested."⁹⁵

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 136.

It is also noteworthy that Lamb states only that he should not like to associate with Negroes; he does not state that he does not associate with them. However, since there is no available evidence that Lamb did mingle with members of the Negro race, it is reasonable to assume that he did practice this racial discrimination.

Lamb also reveals his attitude toward Quakers in "Imperfect Sympathies"; he makes the following assertion:

I love Quaker ways, and Quaker worship. I venerate the Quaker principles. It does me good for the rest of the day when I meet any of their people in my path. When I am ruffled or disturbed by any occurrence, the sight or quiet voice of a Quaker, acts upon me as a ventilator, lightening the air, and taking off a load from the bosom. But I cannot like the Quakers (as Desdemona would say) "to live with them." I am all over sophisticated--with humors, fancies, craving hourly sympathy. I must have books, pictures, theatres, chit-chat, scandal, jokes, ambiguities, and a thousand whims-whams, which their simple taste can do without.⁹⁶

Lamb's admiration for the simplicity of Quaker life and Quaker religion is also present in "A Quakers' Meeting," where he describes their religious assemblies as "true peace and quiet" and "a refuge from the noises and clamours of the multitude."⁹⁷ In addition, Lamb closes the essay with the

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

following statement: "Every Quakeress is a lily; and when they come up in bands to their Whitsun-conferences, whitening the easterly streets of the metropolis, from all parts of the United Kingdom, they show like troops of the Shining Ones."⁹⁸

Lamb's love and respect for Quakers are also shown in his personal correspondence. For example, in a letter written to Bernard Barton, a Quaker poet who was one of Lamb's friends, Lamb apologizes for the levity he expressed at the idea of a Quaker's writing poetry, and he also states, "In feelings and matters not dogmatical, I hope I am half a Quaker."⁹⁹ Moreover, in another letter written to Barton in March, 1833, Lamb expresses his admiration for Quaker courage and his hope that Quakers will soon be emancipated from public stigma and jests.¹⁰⁰

In spite of his expressed affection for the Quaker sect, Lamb clearly indicates in two of his essays that he is quite aware of their flaws and foibles. In "A Quakers' Meeting" Lamb humorously describes "a sample of the old Foxian orgasm"

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 841-842.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 858.

in which he saw a man "shake all over with the spirit," and then confess with remorse his sin of being "a Wit in his youth."¹⁰¹ Again, in "Imperfect Sympathies" Lamb makes the Quakers' astonishing composure the object of his levity as he relates an anecdote in which three Quakers are charged for food which they did not eat.¹⁰²

Certain biographical information also reveals much about Lamb's feelings toward Quakers and religious precepts. For example, the fact that Lamb himself was a Unitarian is significant.¹⁰³ His ability to belong to one religious sect and, at the same time, to appreciate the merits of other sects clearly reveals his open-mindedness and his lack of religious dogmatism. The fact that Lamb eventually became only a "nominal Unitarian"¹⁰⁴ does not indicate that he thought of himself as less of a Christian or more of a skeptic; neither does it indicate that Lamb's religious prejudices increased. Coleridge once described Lamb's Christianity as follows:

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁰³Lucas, I, 124.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

It is curious that he should retain many usages which he learnt or adopted in the fervour of his early religious feelings, now that his faith is in a state of suspended animation. Believe me, who know him well, that Lamb, say what he will, has more of the essentials of Christianity, than ninety-nine out of a hundred professing Christians. He has all that would still have been Christian had Christ never lived or been manifest upon earth.¹⁰⁵

The best explanation of Lamb's religious principles, however, comes from Thomas Hood, who states:

As regards his Unitarianism, it strikes me as more probable that he was what the unco guid people call "nothing at all," which means that he was everything but a bigot. As he was in spirit an Old Author, so he was in faith an Ancient Christian, too ancient to belong to any of the modern sub-hubbub divisions of--Ists,--Arians, and--Inians.¹⁰⁶

Other valuable information concerning Lamb's relations with Quakers is provided by Alfred Ainger, who says that Lamb fell in love in 1800 with a young Quakeress named Hester Savary. Lamb's love for this young woman, however, was without hope of requital, for Lamb never actually spoke to her in his life. In 1803, a month after Hester's death, Lamb sent the poem "Hester" to Thomas Manning in Paris. The poem was a tribute both to her beauty and to her religious nature.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, p. 249.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁰⁷Charles Lamb, pp. 63-64.

The fact that Lamb could describe all Quakeresses as "lilies"¹⁰⁸ twenty years after this unfortunate love affair reveals his lack of bitterness and his courageous attitude toward failure.

In addition to the account in "Imperfect Sympathies" of Lamb's feelings toward Quakers, there is one more noteworthy revelation, Lamb's confession that although he loved Quakers, he could not live with them.¹⁰⁹ Lamb's love of beauty and his interest in material possessions and in unusual companions are evident throughout his life and are clearly expressed in his essays "The Two Races of Men," "My First Play," "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig," and "Old China."¹¹⁰ It is significant that Lamb was able to realize that his love for material things of value and beauty and his unusual array of friends were incompatible with the Quakers' way of life. His assertion that he would not and could not sacrifice these worldly interests for Quakerism is also extremely important. It indicates Lamb's great self-knowledge, and it reveals his tenacious desire to cling to those things which he loved.

¹⁰⁸Commins, p. 44.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 55.

¹¹⁰Ibid., pp. 21-25, 71-74, 108-113, 217-221.

Careful reading of other Elia essays reveals that Scotsmen, Jews, Negroes, and Quakers were not the only people with whom Lamb did not wish to associate in any considerable degree. In "Mackey End, in Hertfordshire," for example, Lamb discusses his feelings toward free-thinkers:

It has been the lot of my cousin [Bridget Elia], oftener perhaps than I could have wished, to have had for her associates and mine, free-thinkers--leaders, and disciples, of novel philosophies and systems; but she neither wrangles with, nor accepts, their opinions.¹¹¹

It is interesting to note here that these free-thinkers whom Lamb describes were not Bridget's¹¹² friends, but Charles Lamb's.¹¹³ His referring to them as Bridget's associates is undoubtedly a jest at the expense of both his sister and his friends. In addition, Lamb's account of Bridget's rather dispassionate behavior while among these guests may be considered an adequate description of Lamb's own disinterest in the somewhat unorthodox theories expounded by his companions.

¹¹¹Ibid., pp. 68-69.

¹¹²Ainger, p. 170. Bridget was Lamb's pseudonym for his sister Mary.

¹¹³Lucas indicates in both volumes of Life of Charles Lamb that although Charles Lamb's visitors respected and admired Mary, it was Charles whom they came to visit.

Evidence of Lamb's unswerving and perhaps obdurate convictions and his tendency to remain unmoved by the various radical outbursts of his friends is easily discernible in his relations with Robert Southey, who was an avid enthusiast and proponent of the great scheme of Pantisocracy; he was also one of Lamb's dearest friends. Although their friendship was enduring and they enjoyed each other's company frequently, Lamb never once became even remotely interested in Southey's Susquehanna dream.¹¹⁴

Lamb sums up his passive behavior in "The Old and the New Schoolmaster": "I verily believe that, while all the world were gasping in apprehension about me, I alone should stand unterrified, from sheer incuriosity and want of observation."¹¹⁵ This explanation, however, is misleading and inadequate, for Lamb's actions indicate neither ignorance nor superficiality; they indicate the sensible behavior of a highly rational man.

Lamb's insusceptibility to the radical schemes and propositions of his free-thinker companions reveals another aspect of his character. Although a lover of mankind and a humanitarian, Lamb was not a reformer. As Ernest Dressel North

¹¹⁴Ibid., I, 91.

¹¹⁵Commins, p. 45.

aptly states,

The writers of Lamb's own time were largely occupied with ideas of reform--religious, moral, and political. He stood aside and watched the procession, marked its irregularities, and punctured its false ideas, all the time noting when it was out of step.¹¹⁶

Within his Elia essays, Lamb makes only two notable proposals for reform; he asks that the sight-seeing fee at Westminster be dropped in order that the poor may visit as often as they wish,¹¹⁷ and he requests that beggars be released from poor-houses and penal institutes and be allowed to once again roam at will.¹¹⁸ His apparent lack of concern for matters of reform is significant; it implies that although Lamb was not satisfied completely with society, he was willing to see it go on as it did because he feared the consequences of extreme changes. In addition, his lack of zeal for reform in his essays gives further evidence of Lamb's sympathetic nature toward his fellowmen. This reticence reveals his deep appreciation for and understanding of mankind's struggle against vice and evil.

¹¹⁶Ernest Dressel North, editor, The Wit and Wisdom of Charles Lamb (New York, 1892), p. viii.

¹¹⁷Commins, pp. 184-186.

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 102-107.

Once, during a dispute between Holcroft and Coleridge concerning the question which was best, "man as he was, or man as he is to be," Lamb fiercely stammered, "Give me man as he is not to be!"¹¹⁹ Charles Lamb saw clearly that mankind was not perfect, but he also realized much more; he understood that men would never be perfect; he thoroughly understood that "to err is human."

In his essay "A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People" Lamb discloses that he dislikes the wives of several of his friends. The reasons for this dislike are also present in this essay. Lamb states that some wives attempt to alienate him from their husbands and that they fail to show proper respect and courtesy to him.¹²⁰

However, writing to Bernard Barton in March, 1826, Lamb says:

So in another thing I talked of somebody's insipid wife, without a correspondent object in my head: and a good lady, a friend's wife, whom I really love (don't startle, I mean in a licit way), has looked shyly upon me ever since. The blunders of personal application are ludicrous.¹²¹

¹¹⁹Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, p. 239.

¹²⁰Commins, pp. 113-117.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 907.

Lamb's integrity in this letter is questionable, for there is valid evidence that he avidly disliked the wives of at least two of his friends, Mrs. Robert Allan and Mrs. William Godwin.¹²² Lamb's reason for disliking Mrs. Godwin is identical with one of the reasons expressed in the essay. In a letter to Manning, Lamb states that she was disagreeable "so much as to drive me and some more old cronies from his house."¹²³

Within several of his Elia essays, Lamb also expresses his attitude toward children and young people. Lamb himself was a bachelor and had no offspring; therefore, most of his impressions of children were gleaned from his experiences with the children of his friends.¹²⁴ The behavior of these various children naturally varied, and as a result, Lamb's attitude toward them also underwent certain changes and alterations. In "The Old and the New Schoolmaster," for example, Lamb writes:

Boys are capital fellows in their own way, among their mates; but they are unwholesome companions for grown people. The restraint is felt

¹²²Lucas, I, 92, 289.

¹²³Ibid., p. 289.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 548.

no less on the one side than on the other." --Even a child, that "plaything for an hour," tires always.¹²⁵

In another essay Lamb continues as follows:

When I consider how little of a rarity children are, --that every street and blind alley swarms with them,--that the poorest people commonly have them in most abundance,--that there are few marriages that are not blest with at least one of these bargains,--how often they turn out ill, and defeat the fond hopes of their parents, taking to vicious courses, which end in poverty, disgrace, the gallows, etc.--I cannot for my life tell what cause for pride there can possibly be in having them.¹²⁶

From these two passages, the implications are that Lamb held no affection for children and that he disliked to be in their company. However, in the essay "Dream Children: A Reverie" Lamb imagines himself a loving father who tells his children stories about their relatives,¹²⁷ and in "The Child Angel; A Dream" his description of the Babe Angel borders on adoration.¹²⁸

Because of the opposing attitudes expressed in the essays, it is necessary to consult other sources in order to determine Lamb's true feelings toward children. Incidents

¹²⁵Commins, p. 48.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 114.

¹²⁷Ibid., pp. 90-93.

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 221-223.

within Lamb's life indicate that he felt great affection toward children and that he enjoyed their company immensely. From Victoria Novello, daughter of Vincent Novello, a close friend of Lamb, there is an interesting account of Lamb's carrying a jar of preserved ginger to the Novello nursery, and Kate Perry, child of another of Lamb's friends, discloses that Lamb frequently played blind man's bluff with her and her sister.¹²⁹

Further evidence of his love for children can be seen in the works which Lamb and his sister wrote especially for children. Poetry for Children and Mrs. Leicester's School are excellent examples of their ability to discern what things interest children, and throughout both works the Lambs strive to impress upon their youthful readers the virtues of charity, tolerance, and thoughtfulness.¹³⁰

The most striking indication of Lamb's affection toward children, however, occurred in 1823, for in this year Charles Isole died, and Charles and Mary Lamb adopted his daughter Emma. From 1823 until her marriage to Edward Moxon in 1833,

¹²⁹Lucas, I, p. 548.

¹³⁰Ibid., pp. 405-406.

Emma Isola was treated as a daughter by the Lambs, and great care and love were apparent in her upbringing.¹³¹

In spite of his great love for children, as Lamb's essays indicate, he sometimes lost patience with them. When ill-mannered children upset Lamb, he naturally disliked to be among them, and when they provoked him, his comments became humorous but biting. An excellent example of Lamb's consternation when plagued by youthful menaces is provided by Lucas. According to Lucas, "once when Lamb had been annoyed for several hours by a noisy family, he rose and proposed a toast to the health of the 'm-m-much ca-calumniated good King Herod.'"¹³²

Lamb's Elia essays reveal not only his dislike of certain people, but also his abhorrence of two specific character traits, hypocrisy and affectation. Lamb attacks hypocrisy most vehemently in his essays "Modern Gallantry" and "--That the Poor Copy the Vices of the Rich." In "Modern Gallantry" Lamb centers his assault upon deception and falsity in the social graces as practiced in his day. According to Lamb, true gallantry must be extended to women of all stations and

¹³¹Ibid., II, 42, 240, 360.

¹³²Ibid., I, 549.

ages, and the discrimination employed by his contemporaries indicates insincerity.¹³³ In "--That the Poor Copy the Vices of the Rich" Lamb states that sanctimony and hypocrisy are responsible for rich people asserting that they must be good so that the lower classes may look upon them as good examples, and he cites numerous instances which clearly reveal that the "poor are not quite such servile imitators as they [the rich] take them for."¹³⁴

Lamb's hatred of affectation can be illustrated effectively by likewise citing two of his essays. In "The Genteel Style in Writing," for example, Lamb compares the writing styles of Lord Shaftesbury and Sir William Temple. According to Lamb,

Nothing can be more unlike, than the inflated finical rhapsodies of Shaftesbury and the plain natural chitchat of Temple. The man of rank is discernible in both writers; but in the one it is only insinuated gracefully, in the other it stands out offensively. The peer seems to have written with his coronet on, and his Earl's mantle before him; the commoner in his elbow-chair and undress.¹³⁵

Lamb's preference for the unassuming and the modest is evident.

Lamb's aversion to pretentiousness and affectation is also obvious in his "Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia."

¹³³Commins, pp. 75-77.

¹³⁴Ibid., pp. 230-231.

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 177.

In this "Preface" Lamb describes himself as follows:

He had a horror, which he carried to a foible, of looking like anything important and parochial. He thought he approached nearer to that stamp daily. He had a general aversion from being treated like a grave or respectable character.¹³⁶

This abhorrence of pomposity and self-conceit is also present in Lamb's personal correspondence. In a letter to Bernard Barton, written in October, 1822, Lamb criticizes Byron and Shelley, whom he neither liked nor admired:

Lord Byron opens upon him [Shelley] on Monday in a parody (I suppose) of the Vision of Judgment, in which latter the Poet I think did not much show his. To award his Heaven and his Hell in the presumptuous manner he has done, was a piece of immodesty as bad as Shelleyism.¹³⁷

In both his Elia essays and in his letters there is ample indication that Lamb was a modest and unassuming person. In addition, Lamb indirectly suggests that he admires modesty in others. Neither his essays nor his letters, however, reveal the extent to which Lamb was willing to go in order to insure that modesty and humility did prevail among his companions. As previously indicated in the discussion of Lamb's whimsical humor, he would attack even Coleridge

¹³⁶Ibid., pp. 136-137.

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 845.

and Wordsworth when he felt that they expressed egotistical or pompous views. One of the best descriptions of Lamb's attitude toward affectation and hypocrisy is given by Thomas Hood. According to Hood,

Lamb, whilst he willingly lent a crutch to halting humility, took delight in tripping up the stilts of pretension. . . . In fact, no politician ever laboured more to preserve the balance of power in Europe, than he did to correct any temporary preponderances.¹³⁸

¹³⁸Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, p. 124.

CHAPTER III

LAMB'S LOVE FOR HIS FAMILY: HIS RESPONSIBILITIES AND HIS NEED FOR PRIVACY

Lamb's Numerous Burdens

Charles Lamb's love for mankind and his understanding of and sympathy toward man's imperfect nature are quite evident in his relations with his family. Charles Lamb's love for his family is obvious in several of his Elia essays. In "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," "My Relations," and "My First Play," for example, Lamb affectionately describes several of his relatives; his sense of family pride is obvious.¹ Comparison of character sketches in his essays with biographical sketches of his family reveals, however, that the true significance of these descriptions of relatives lies not in what Lamb discloses about his family, but in what he fails to divulge. Lamb's descriptions of James and Bridget Elia, actually John and Mary Lamb,² will serve as excellent examples to illustrate the importance of Lamb's omissions.

¹Commins, pp. 63-74.

²Ainger, p. 17.

In "My Relations" Lamb refers to his brother as "inexplicable"³ and states that John seems to be "made up of contradictory principles."⁴ The examples which Charles Lamb gives to illustrate his brother's odd behavior are numerous. John Lamb has a "hundred fine notions chasing one another hourly in his fancy," yet he is startled by romantic tendencies in others; John has a great love for works of art, yet he pretends to purchase them only to re-sell them.⁵ He is quick at inventing arguments, yet he cannot follow the logic of others; he pretends to be against humor and laughter, yet he "crows like Chanticleer" at times.⁶ In addition, although John Lamb has great love for several people, he has "but a limited sympathy" with what these people feel or do.⁷ According to Charles Lamb, "He lives in a world of his own, and makes slender guesses at what passes in your mind."⁸ In spite of these idiosyncrasies, however, Charles Lamb affirms

³Commins, p. 64.

⁴Ibid., p. 65.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 66.

⁷Ibid., p. 67.

⁸Ibid.

that he does not desire John to be "in one jot or tittle other than he is. . . ."9

Throughout the essay Lamb humorously chides his brother, but in no instance does the tone of the essay become sarcastic or bitter. Biographical information, moreover, reveals that Charles Lamb had more than adequate justification to be hostile and bitter toward John. John Lamb was a selfish and egotistical dilettante who cared little or nothing about the welfare of his parents or of his brother and sister. He failed Charles not once but twice; he allowed full responsibility for the care of his aging parents to fall upon Charles; he also refused to share the burden imposed by Mary's mental condition and recommended that she be placed in an asylum for life.¹⁰ In addition, when John was Charles's guest, he made little effort to be congenial or even courteous to his brother's friends. Crabb Robinson, a frequent visitor, referred to John Lamb as "grossly rude and vulgar," and in an argument on the merits of the colors of Holbein and Vandyke, John Lamb once knocked William Hazlitt to the floor.¹¹

⁹Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁰Ainger, pp. 18-20.

¹¹Lucas, II, 107.

Charles Lamb's reticence concerning his brother's faults and his failure to mention John's harsh indifference in time of family trouble are significant. The mild rebukes in "My Relations" and the fond admiration expressed for John in "Dream Children: A Reverie"¹² reveal much about Charles Lamb's character. His ability to sympathize with the failings of mankind is obvious, and his forgiving nature and talent for sighting virtue among vice are apparent. In addition, this mild treatment indicates Charles Lamb's vast sense of family pride; because of "the understanding that should be between kinsfolk,"¹³ he would not publicly ridicule his brother.

In his essay "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire" Lamb describes his sister Mary under the pseudonym Bridget Elia. Within the essay Lamb indicates Mary's taste in literature and in companions; he also describes her education.¹⁴ In addition, he discusses their own relationship. According to Charles Lamb, he and Mary exist "in a sort of double single-ness" which allows for harmony and general agreement as well as differences and occasional bickering.¹⁵ He describes their

¹²Commins, p. 92.

¹³Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 68-69.

¹⁵...

life together not as idyllic but as congenial, and he asserts that "in a season of distress, she is the truest comforter," though in trivial perplexities her assistance is questionable.¹⁶ Nowhere in his essays does Lamb even remotely suggest the reason for his living with his sister; nowhere in his essays does he even partially indicate the suffering and pain which she caused him to endure.

In order to grasp the total relationship between Charles and Mary Lamb, it is necessary to consult other sources, and the information revealed in biographical accounts is startling. On September 22, 1796, Mary Lamb's sanity collapsed under the dual strain of "mantua-making"¹⁷ and the constant demands placed upon her by her aged and invalid parents.¹⁸ While in a frenzy, she stabbed and killed her mother and wounded her father. As a result of her actions, she was sent to an asylum in Broadmoor and was threatened with lifelong confinement. In order to spare his sister such a harsh fate, Lamb made the most momentous decision of his life; he promised the Home Secretary that he would place Mary under his own roof and

¹⁶Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁷Mantua-making involves tedious needlework. Lucas, I, 477.

¹⁸Blunden, p. 52.

that he would care for her for life.¹⁹ This decision, meant, in turn, that Lamb would have to continue to work at the East India House for the greater part of his life. Lamb's job, however, was not the only burden which his decision placed upon him, for throughout the remainder of her life Mary Lamb was subject to fits of insanity, and their impact upon Charles Lamb was tremendous.²⁰

In his personal correspondence there is evidence of the strain which attending Mary placed upon Lamb. As Mary's health improved or failed, Charles Lamb's spirits rose or sank accordingly. Writing to Wordsworth in May, 1833, Lamb states that Mary is again ill, and he describes their relationship as follows: "In short, half her life she is dead to me, and the other half is made anxious with fears and looking forward to the next shock."²¹ In another letter written in 1834 to Miss Fryer, an old schoolfellow of Emma Moxon,²² Lamb's spirits appear to rise, and he says, "I could be nowhere happier than under the same roof with her [Mary]."²³

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 52-53.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Commins, p. 1011.

²²Lucas, II, 365.

²³Commins, p. 1020.

In view of biographical information, Lamb's description of his sister and their relationship is strikingly one-sided, and his failure to indicate the true basis of their relationship is extremely significant. Lamb's kind treatment of Mary in his essays reveals his sympathetic nature quite clearly. In addition, Lamb shows his desire to spare his sister all possible embarrassment and to keep her illness a guarded secret known only to their trusted friends. The description of his sister in his Elia essays also reveals his optimistic tendencies and his true modesty. Furthermore, his failure to speak of his mother anywhere in his Elia essays reveals his protective attitude toward his sister and his desire to spare her pain and remorse.

Lamb's Need for Privacy

Although Lamb's Elia essays reveal that he was by nature gregarious, they also indicate that at times he greatly preferred solitude to company. In "Oxford in the Vacation," for example, Lamb expresses his enjoyment of solitary walks,²⁴ and in "--That Home is Home Though It Is Never So Homely" Lamb asserts:

²⁴Ibid., p. 10.

There is yet another home, which we are constrained to deny to be one. . . . It is--the house of a man that is infested with many visitors. . . . At our time of life, to be alone sometimes is as needful as sleep.²⁵

This desire for solitude is expressed many times in Lamb's personal correspondence. In a letter written to Mrs. Wordsworth in February, 1818, for example, Lamb states, "I am saturated with human faces. . . . I am never C. L., but always C. L. and Co."²⁶ Again, in a letter of 1806 written to Hazlitt, Lamb describes his attempts "to avoid my nocturnal, alias knock-eternal visitors."²⁷ His wish for occasional solitude can be easily explained. First, constant companionship and conviviality were serious threats to Lamb's health. Second, Mary Lamb's attacks of insanity frequently rendered both brother and sister unable to cope with visitors. Third, Lamb's own restless nature led him to seek an occasional release from the company of his contemporaries.²⁸

Lamb's Despondence

The Elia essays also reveal that during periods of despondence, Lamb easily became dissatisfied with his friends.

²⁵Ibid., p. 240.

²⁶Ibid., p. 819.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 751-752.

²⁸Ainger, pp. 61-62.

In "Valentine's Day," for example, Lamb laments the fact that a knock at the door seldom turns out to indicate a person one wants to see,²⁹ and in "--That You Must Love Me and Love My Dog" Lamb complains, "We could never yet form a friendship . . . without the intervention of some third anomaly, some impertinent clog affixed to the relation--the understood dog in the proverb."³⁰

In the same manner Lamb reveals temporary discontent with his associates in his correspondence. Writing to Coleridge in 1797 Lamb complains,

Alas! the great and good go together in separate herds and leave such as I to lag far, far behind in all intellectual, and, far more grievous to say, in all moral accomplishments. Coleridge, I have not one truly elevated character among my acquaintance; not one Christian; not one but undervalues Christianity.³¹

Much later, in another letter to Coleridge written in 1825, Lamb continues:

Do you know any poor solitary human that wants that cordial to life, a true friend? I can spare him twenty: he shall have 'em good cheap. I have galipot's of 'em--genuine balm of cares--a going, a going, a going!³²

²⁹Commins, p. 62.

³⁰Ibid., p. 241.

³¹Ibid., p. 615.

Such complaints as these are frequent throughout Lamb's letters.

Lamb's Elia essays also indicate that when he desired solitude and became dissatisfied with his friends, he indulged in extreme self-pity. Three of his essays are especially noteworthy because of the insight which they provide regarding Lamb's self-love.

In "The Convalescent," for example, Lamb describes in detail the "regal solitude" of the sick-bed, and he states that the only duty of a sick man is "supreme selfishness." He draws a vivid picture of the sick man's self-pity and confesses that he himself has just recently recovered from such indulgence.³³ His correspondence reveals that he did actually base his essay upon a recent attack of illness, and such statements as "I write in misery," and "I am an invalid," are common in letters to his friends.³⁴

In "--That We Should Rise With The Lark" Lamb appeals to his readers for sympathy and pity. He poses the following question:

Why should we get up? we have neither suit to solicit, nor affairs to manage. . . . We have nothing here to expect, but in a short time a sick bed, and

³³Ibid., pp. 164-167.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 835, 837, 900.

a dismissal. We are already half acquainted with ghosts. We were never much in the world.³⁵

It is within the essay "---That A Sulky Temper Is A Misfortune," however, that Lamb most strikingly reveals his first-hand knowledge of self-pity and self-love. According to Lamb, a sulky temper is a misfortune only to a man's friends; it is a blessing and distinct pleasure to the person who possesses it. In Lamb's opinion, one of the most gratifying of all experiences to one's ego is to imagine oneself slighted and misused. Lamb writes:

Think 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--these the true PLEASURES of SULKINESS.³⁶

Lamb's love for solitude, his discontent with his sphere of friends, and his self-pity as expressed in his Elia essays shed a great deal of light upon Lamb's true nature. While these traits do not indicate that Lamb was a misanthrope, they do reveal that he was merely human and that as a human

³⁵Ibid., p. 244.

³⁶Ibid., p. 248.

being he too possessed common faults and made common blunders. Charles Lamb, lover of mankind, neither loved all men nor loved constant companionship.

CHAPTER IV

LAMB'S NOSTALGIC NATURE

Another prominent characteristic of Charles Lamb, his nostalgic nature, is evident within many of his Essays of Elia and his Last Essays of Elia, and it is displayed in numerous forms. Foremost among the multiple guises which Lamb's nostalgia assumes are his love for the past, his recollections of childhood, his references to departed friends, his antiquated taste in literature and in the fine arts, his attitude toward his vocation, and his attacks upon sophistication in himself, his contemporaries, and his society.

Lamb's Love for the Past

Lamb displays his love for antiquity and his interest in the past in several of his essays, but nowhere are these characteristics more vividly exhibited and explained than in "Oxford in the Vacation." In this essay Lamb poses the following question and answers it:

Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? that, being nothing art everything! When thou wert, thou wert not antiquity--then thou wert nothing, but hadst a remoter antiquity, as thou calledst it, to look back to with blind veneration; thou thyself being to thyself flat,

jejune, modern! What mystery lurks in this retroversion? or what half Januses are we, that cannot look forward with the same idolatry with which we for ever revert! The mighty future is as nothing, being everything! the past is everything, being nothing!¹

The last sentence warrants careful consideration; it is paradoxical and must not be taken at face value. To the superficial reader, Lamb's assertion that the future is unimportant because it is all-important, and that the past is all-important because of its unimportance, may appear nonsensical and even slightly foolish. However, to one who is familiar with the facts of Lamb's life and his superior intelligence and understanding, these assertions are extremely significant and can be interpreted in several ways.

First, Lamb's statement, "The mighty future is as nothing, being everything! the past is everything, being nothing!"² may be another example of Lamb's whimsical humor. Perhaps he is attempting to mislead his readers and to enjoy a joke at their expense. This explanation appears reasonable, for as previously indicated, Lamb occasionally dupes his readers.³

¹Commins, p. 10.

²Ibid.

³See Chapter II.

This explanation, however, is probably not correct; throughout the essays the tone which Lamb uses in describing antiquity is almost reverential; there is no indication that he ever regarded the past humorously.

Second, Lamb's paradoxical assertions may be interpreted as another example of his great understanding of human nature. Perhaps Lamb is describing mankind's apprehensiveness and fear of the unknown; he may be stating that man's love for the past is based upon assurance and familiarity, and that man's seeming unconcern for the future is based upon his fear and ignorance of what is yet to come. Lamb's comprehension of his fellowmen and his acceptance of their faults make this explanation both possible and probable.

Third, Lamb's attitude toward the future and the past may be interpreted as a revelation of Lamb's resignation and cynicism. When Lamb wrote "Oxford in the Vacation," he was neither young nor naive. He was forty-five years of age and had coped with numerous disappointments and failures. He had been forced to discontinue his education at Christ's hospital because of a speech impediment; he had been forced to accept employment which he detested; he had assumed care of his mentally ill sister, and he had seen several of his beloved works condemned by severe criticism.⁴ With these

⁴Barnett, pp. ix-x.

facts in mind, one can more easily interpret Lamb's description of the future "as nothing, being everything!"⁵ Lamb neither expected nor hoped for future success; therefore, the promises of the future were false. The future was empty; it was nothing. Likewise, Lamb's description of the past as "everything, being nothing!"⁶ can be readily explained. The past, though it did not fulfill Lamb's desires and expectations, represented his youthful optimism; the past, at least, was filled with visions and dreams that might have been; it was to Lamb everything. As he states in "New Year's Eve,"

I have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine
only in the prospects of other (former) years.
I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions.
I encounter pell-mell with past disappointments.
I am armour-proof against old discouragements.⁷

Lamb's letters also reveal his love for antiquity. In a letter to B. W. Procter, written in January, 1829, Lamb complains that "the age is to be complied with."⁸ Again, in another letter to Procter, written in January, 1829, Lamb continues:

⁵Commins, p. 10.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 26.

⁸Ibid., p. 961.

I am born out of time. I have no conjecture about what the present world calls delicacy. . . . I have lived to grow into an indelcent character. When my sonnet was rejected, I exclaimed, "Damn the age! I will write for antiquity."⁹

The above passage, in addition to indicating Lamb's love for antiquity, suggests another possible reason for this devotion. It reveals that Lamb may have felt ill at ease in his contemporary society. He may have blamed the age for his failures and disappointments and considered himself a misfit. Since he could not predict the future, perhaps he sought solace in the past.

Lamb's essays themselves support the theory that Lamb's feeling of alienation from his society caused him to retreat into the past for preservation of his self-image and ego. His essays contain antiquated phraseology and abound in stylistic anachronisms, yet when criticized for employing these devices, Lamb apparently viewed the censure not as an attack upon his literary talents, but as a personal affront. His reply to his critics is as follows:

Crude they [Elia's works] are, I grant you--a sort of unlicked, incondite things--villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases. They had not been his, if they had been other than such; and better it is, that a writer should be

⁹Ibid., pp. 962-963.

natural in a self-pleasing quaintness, than to affect a naturalness (so called) that should be strange to him.¹⁰

The implication of the above passage is clear. Lamb is not explaining the bases of his style of writing; he is defending the quaintness inherent within his own personality. He is retaliating against the age under the cover of a thinly veiled literary criticism; he is, in effect, displaying his sensitivity.

Lamb's Childhood Recollections

As previously mentioned, Lamb's sentimentality and nostalgia for the past also appear within many of his essays in the form of childhood recollections and youthful reminiscences. In fact, many of Lamb's Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia are composed mainly of his recollections and reminiscences. Among these essays are "The South-Sea House," "Oxford in the Vacation," "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist," "The Old and the New Schoolmaster," "Witches and other Night Fears," "My Relations," "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," "My First Play," "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," "Dream Children: A Reverie," "On Some of the Old Actors," "Blakesmore in

¹⁰Ibid., p. 135.

H_____shire," "Poor Relations," "The Old Margate Hoy," "Captain Jackson," "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago," and "Old China."¹¹

The sheer volume alone of Lamb's reminiscences in his essays indicates his preoccupation with the past, but comprehension of his nostalgic sentiments necessitates careful investigation of specific essays.

In "The South-Sea House," for example, descriptions of the magnificence and splendor of antiquated buildings indicate Lamb's love of beauty and reveal that his admiration for the past was based, at least in part, upon its physical attractiveness.¹² His allusion in "The Old and the New Schoolmaster" to "the pleasant sensation which all persons feel at revisiting the scenes of their boyish hopes and fears"¹³ is also significant. This example suggests that boyhood sites evoked tender memories from Lamb. In addition, this reference to the agreeable effects of returning to familiar places may indicate Lamb's understanding of Coleridge's theory of the Primary and Secondary Imagination as given in

¹¹Ibid., pp. 3-21, 30-35, 45-50, 57-60, 63-75, 78-85, 90-93, 117-126, 138-146, 158-164, 169-172, 196-201, 217-221.

¹²Ibid., pp. 3-4, 138-141.

¹³Ibid., p. 50.

the Biographia Literaria. Lamb's numerous re-creations of past events certainly reveal the powerful genius of his imaginative faculties, and, in addition, the words pleasant sensation seem to echo Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of emotion" and indicate Lamb's familiarity with Wordsworth's definition of poetry as expressed in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads".

In "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" and "New Year's Eve" Lamb reveals other aspects of his nostalgic nature: his abhorrence of change and his inadaptability. In "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" Lamb complains that time has wrought monstrous changes upon the sites of his oldest recollections. Not only have sundials been replaced by clocks, but artificial fountains are vanishing rapidly.¹⁴ In "New Year's Eve" he describes himself as "shy of novel-ties," and states, "My household gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood."¹⁵

Lamb's feeling for his childhood and youth is also expressed in his essays of reminiscence. In "Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" Lamb asks,

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 78-80.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 26, 28.

Why must everything smack of man and mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and the best some of the child's heart left, to respond to its earliest enchantment?¹⁶

In the same essay Lamb bewails the loss of his imaginative powers and asserts that he himself prefers the world of fairies and legends to the world of harsh realities.¹⁷

His nostalgic nature as revealed in his essays of reminiscence appears frequently in his letters, and the following passage from a letter written to Bernard Barton, in August, 1827, is an excellent illustration of Lamb's nostalgia and despondence:

Would I were buried in the peopled solitude of one [old mansion] with my feelings at seven years old! Those marbled busts of the Emperors, they seemed as if they were to stand forever, as they had stood from the living days of Rome, in that old marble hall, and I to partake of their permanence. Eternity was, while I thought not of Time. But he thought of me, and they are toppled down, and corn covers the spot of the noble old dwelling and its princely gardens. I feel like a grasshopper that, chirping about the grounds, escaped his scythe only by my littleness. Even now he is whetting one of his smallest razors to clean wipe me out, perhaps. . . .¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 928.

Lamb's References to Deceased Friends

Lamb's references in his essays to deceased friends and relations also reveal his nostalgia for the past and his sentimentality. Because these references are numerous and similar in tone, individual consideration is not necessary. In addition, the effect which the deaths of Lamb's friends produced upon him is clearly revealed in his "Preface" and in the essay "--That We Should Rise With The Lark." In describing the late Elia in his "Preface" Lamb states, "He felt the approaches of age and while he pretended to cling to life, you saw how slender were the ties left to bind him."¹⁹ In "--That We Should Rise With The Lark" Lamb says, "We willingly call a phantom our fellow, as knowing we shall soon be of their dark companionship. Therefore, we cherish dreams."²⁰ As both passages indicate, Lamb's love of life was strongly connected with his love of his friends. As his various friends died, Lamb's desire to live diminished accordingly. He sought refuge in dreams of days gone by, and he became depressed and despondent.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 136.

²⁰Ibid., p. 245.

Lamb's correspondence further echoes the despondence and remorse which he expresses in his essays at his friends' deaths. In a letter written to Bernard Barton, in July, 1829, Lamb reveals his feelings as follows:

But town . . . is not what it was. The streets, the shops are left; but all old friends are gone! . . . I have ceased to care almost about anybody. The bodies I cared for are in graves, or dispersed.²¹

Lamb's Taste in Literature and in the Fine Arts

Lamb's taste in literature and in the fine arts as expressed in the essays gives further indication of his nostalgic tendencies and fondness for the past. Concerning his taste in literature, Lamb admits in "The Old and the New Schoolmaster," "My reading has been lamentably desultory and immethodical. Odd, out of the way, old English plays, and treatises, have supplied me with most of my notions, and ways of feeling."²² Again, in "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," Lamb states his preference for antiquated works as he describes his interest in "old Burton, or one of his strange contemporaries" and in "the beautiful obliquities of the Religio Medici."²³ Lamb's archaic taste in art and

²¹Ibid., p. 971.

²²Ibid., p. 45.

drama is apparent also in his essays. In the essay "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art" Lamb's admiration for the works of Titian, Raphael, and Hogarth is evident.²⁴ In the essay "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" Lamb's fondness for the old comedies of Congreve and Wycherley is stated.²⁵ Lamb's musical taste, however, is not easily discernible in his essays, for in "A Chapter on Ears" Lamb asserts, "I have no ear [for music]." In addition, he describes himself as "organically incapable of a tune."²⁶

Biographical information substantiates Lamb's antiquated taste in literature²⁷ and in art,²⁸ and numerous quotations and borrowings within his essays indicate his preference for the works of the older dramatists.²⁹ Lamb's assertion that he has no ear for music, however, is questionable. Lamb's close friendship with Vincent Novello, a contemporary

²⁴Ibid., pp. 201-208.

²⁵Ibid., p. 127.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 35-36.

²⁷Lucas, II, 425-457.

²⁸Ibid., I, 512, 537.

²⁹Barnett, pp. 226-227.

composer, and his frequent presence at Novello's musical evenings tend to contradict his affirmation that he was unable to appreciate music.³⁰ In addition, several of Lamb's letters to Novello indicate that Lamb's musical knowledge and ability were quite advanced.³¹ Perhaps Edmund Blunden's explanation of Lamb's statement of having no ear is the most plausible. According to Blunden, "Lamb's 'no ear' was one of his pretences. . . . There are many intimations in his Works that he had a passion for some music; but he was not going to be bullied into the fashionable worship of prescribed composers."³²

Lamb's Hatred of Sophistication

Although Lamb's numerous reminiscences in his Elia essays clearly indicate his love for the past, the intensity of Lamb's nostalgia appears most striking in his attacks upon sophistication and worldliness in himself, his contemporaries, and his society. In the essay "New Year's Eve," for example, Lamb's torrent of self-abuse and self-criticism is extremely harsh.

³⁰Lucas, I, 543.

³¹Commins, p. 921.

³²Blunden, *Charles Lamb*, p. 100.

If I know aught of myself, no one whose mind is introspective--and mine is painfully so--can have a less respect for his present identity than I have for the man Elia. I know him to be light, and vain, and humoursome; a notorious * * * ; addicted to * * * * ; averse from counsel, neither taking it nor offering it;-- * * * besides; a stammering buffoon; what you will; lay it on, and spare not: I subscribe to it all, and much more than thou canst be willing to lay at his door;--but for the child Elia, that "other me," there, in the background--I must take leave to cherish the remembrance of that young master--with as little reference, I protest, to this stupid changeling of five-and-forty, as if it had been a child of some other house, and not of my parents. . . . God help thee, Elia, how art thou changed!--Thou art sophisticated. . . .³³

Lamb's numerous assaults upon sophistication and worldliness in his contemporaries and his society are more subtle than his self-criticism, but his belief that sophistication is degrading is still evident. In "Modern Gallantry," for example, he suggests that the manners of his contemporaries are not only inferior to those of an elderly gentleman he has known, but that these manners are based upon hypocrisy and deceit.³⁴

Lamb's Ability to Cope with Reality

Lamb's Elia essays, however, show that his love of the past neither blinded him to reality nor robbed him entirely

³³Commins, pp. 26-27.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 75-77.

of his optimism. In "New Year's Eve," for example, he attempts to rationalize his fondness for retrospection; he refers to his nostalgia as a "symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy," and he suggests that it results from his having neither wife nor children.³⁵ In the same essay he appears to rally his spirits, and he professes his love for life and "intolerable disinclination to dying."³⁶ In addition, Lamb's essays which contain recollections of his service as a clerk and scrivener also reveal Lamb's realistic tendencies. In "Oxford in the Vacation" and "The Superannuated Man," for example, Lamb illustrates his ability to discern between nostalgic fantasy and true fact as he discusses the various hardships and sacrifices entailed in his vocation.³⁷ The best example of Lamb's practicality, however, appears in "Old China." In this essay it is Bridget Elia who reminisces, and Elia who copes with reality. Bridget recalls their younger days and states, "I wish the good old times would come again, when we were not quite so rich."³⁸ Elia replies

³⁵Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 28-29.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 8-9, 172-177.

³⁸Ibid., p. 218.

that he, too, enjoyed their youthful poverty, and that he believes their struggles brought them closer together. He does not, however, wish for a reduction in income at their age. His reason is extremely practical: He and his cousin are no longer young. They cannot withstand the pressures of poverty.³⁹

Lamb's ability to cope with reality in spite of his nostalgic and sentimental nature appears within his letters, but biographical information offers the most striking evidence of his rationality. At the age of twenty-four Lamb assumed full responsibility for the care of his mentally ill sister, Mary. He fulfilled this obligation for thirty-five years, until his death in 1833.⁴⁰

³⁹Ibid., pp. 217-221.

⁴⁰Barnett, pp. ix-xi.

CHAPTER V

LAMB'S CRUTCHES

Use of Tobacco

Lamb's Elia essays reveal that at times in order to cope with reality, he made use of two crutches, tobacco and alcohol. In his "Preface, by a Friend of the late Elia," for example, Lamb discusses his smoking habits. Of Elia, he writes:

He was temperate in his meals and diversions, but always kept a little on this side of abstemiousness. Only in the use of the Indian weed he might be thought a little excessive. He took it, he would say, as a solvent of speech. Marry--as the friendly vapour ascended, how his prattle would curl up sometimes with it! the ligaments which tongue-tied him, were loosened, and the stammerer proceeded a statist!¹

This passage is extremely revealing; it not only shows that Lamb smoked, but it also indicates the extent of his indulgence and the underlying reason behind it. Lamb's disclosure that his smoking habits exceed moderation is noteworthy on two accounts. First, and most obvious, this disclosure reveals Lamb's intemperance in the use of tobacco. Second, this disclosure indicates his self-knowledge and his ability

¹Commins, p. 136.

to judge rationally his own actions: He is able to perceive that his smoking habits are immoderate, and he makes no deceitful attempt to classify them otherwise.

Lamb's assertion that he smoked in order to alleviate his stammering is likewise worthy of special consideration on at least two points. First, it indicates Lamb's sensitivity concerning his speech defect. Biographical information reveals that Lamb was born with this speech impediment, and that he stammered throughout his life. In addition, Lamb's stammering caused him numerous disappointments: He was prevented from continuing his education beyond the rank of Deputy Grecian, and his ability to communicate in conversation was seriously hindered.² Lamb's sensitivity concerning his speech impediment was natural, but it was also extremely regrettable. Furthermore, it reveals another paradoxical aspect of his nature. It appears that Lamb, though he could overlook and sympathize with the failures and defects of others, was unable to accept such flaws in himself.

Second, the mere presence of Lamb's assertion that he smoked in order to alleviate his stammer is significant. It reveals his tendency to rationalize certain aspects of

²Ainger, pp. 6, 15-16, 79.

his behavior, and it suggests his defensive nature. Though Lamb was extremely self-critical, he resented criticism from others.

The above passage from Lamb's "Preface," though it reveals that Lamb's smoking was immoderate, does not indicate the extent to which Lamb labored to overcome this habit. For this information it is necessary to consult another of his essays, "Confessions of a Drunkard." In this essay Lamb states:

I should repel my readers, from a mere incapacity of believing me, were I to tell them what tobacco has been to me, the drudging service which I have paid, the slavery which I have vowed to it. How, when I have resolved to quit it, a feeling as of ingratitude has started up; how it has put on personal claims and made the demands of a friend upon me. How the reading of it casually in a book. . . . has in a moment broken down the resistance of weeks. How a pipe was ever in my midnight path before me. . . . How from illuminating it came to darken, from a quick solace it turned to a negative relief, thence to a restlessness and dissatisfaction, thence to a positive misery. How, even now, when the whole secret stands confessed in all its dreadful truth before me, I feel myself linked to it beyond the power of revocation. Bone of my bone--.³

In the above passage Lamb's struggles against tobacco are obvious. Although his indulgence in smoking is no longer enjoyable and has become harmful and degrading, Lamb still

³Commins, pp. 225-226.

participates in his use of the "Indian weed."⁴ He is able to perceive the evils of tobacco, yet he is not capable of discarding it; he is no longer in control of his smoking habits; the "Indian weed" controls him. This passage clearly indicates two paradoxical aspects of Lamb's nature: his ability to recognize a precarious situation and his failure to react in accordance with his better judgment. Perhaps it was this very flaw in Lamb's nature, his inability to correct his own faults, which made him so sympathetic toward the imperfect nature of mankind.

Evidence of Lamb's struggle to give up tobacco is also present in his correspondence. For example, in a letter to Thomas Hood, written in 1823, Lamb states, "I design to give up smoking; but I have not yet fixed upon the equivalent vice."⁵ This statement clearly substantiates Lamb's assertions in his essays that he has tried to quit smoking, and it also reveals another aspect of his character, his ability to grasp the humor in even the saddest situations. Lamb was able to recognize that his indulgence in tobacco had become a serious vice, yet he was able to joke about it.

⁴Ibid., p. 136.

⁵Ibid., p. 888.

Use of Alcohol

In his Elia essays Lamb's descriptions of his drinking habits are significant, but their veracity is questionable. In "Confessions of a Drunkard," for example, Lamb says that he first used alcohol as an "artificial aid" to raise his spirits when in company,⁶ but that he has eventually become an alcoholic and an utter sot. He further asserts that although he yearns for the health and vigor of his earlier years, he is unable to stop drinking. Alcohol has robbed him of friends and worthy interests, but he cannot relinquish his pot of ale or his bottle of gin.⁷

Lamb's assertion that he first began to drink in order to raise his spirits and to make himself more convivial is quite plausible, for as previously mentioned in Chapter III, his life was fraught with numerous failures and disappointments. Lamb's description of himself as a sot and alcoholic, however, is extremely misleading, and sources other than his Elia essays must be consulted in order to comprehend the extent of Lamb's drinking habits.

⁶Ibid., p. 224.

⁷Ibid., pp. 223-228.

Lamb's correspondence reveals much about his alcoholic indulgences, for throughout many of his letters there are frequent allusions to his drinking habits. For example, he states that he "suffers from the festivities of the season [Christmas]"⁸ and that he has an "illness of his own procuring."⁹ In other letters Lamb's terminology becomes more specific; he describes himself as feeling "like a giant refreshed with the leaving off of wine,"¹⁰ and he declares, "I am calm, sober, happy. . . . I am turning over a new leaf. . . ."¹¹ In addition, he frequently brags that he "got away quite sober"¹² and returned home from visits "half as sober as a judge."¹³ These excerpts from Lamb's correspondence clearly indicate that Lamb did have a drinking problem and that he made numerous unsuccessful attempts to overcome his desire for alcohol. His letters, like his essays, tend to confirm the theory that Lamb was a drunkard; in this respect they too are misleading.

⁸Ibid., pp. 850-851.

⁹Ibid., p. 875.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 926.

¹¹Ibid., p. 1015.

¹²Ibid., p. 873.

Not all of Lamb's letters, however, support the theory that he was a sot. His letter to Robert Southey, written November 21, 1823, stands out in striking opposition to this theory. Lamb states:

I have been fighting against a shadow. That accursed Q.R. [Quarterly Review] had vexed me by a gratuitous speaking, of its own knowledge, that the Confessions of a Drunkard was a genuine description of the state of the writer. Little things, that are not ill-meant, may produce much ill. That might have injured me alive and dead. I am in a public office, and my life is insured. I was prepared for anger, and I thought I saw, in a few obnoxious words, a hard case of repetition directed against me. I wished both magazine and review at the bottom of the sea.¹⁴

This letter is of utmost importance. It indicates that Lamb wrote "Confessions of a Drunkard" in a vein of exaggeration, and it reveals his indignation and anger aroused when the essay was interpreted as autobiographical by his critics. In addition, it clearly discloses why Lamb could not have been a sot and a drunkard; he served in a public office. Lamb's employment as a clerk in the East India House from 1792 to 1825 and his retirement with a pension of £450 a year would have been impossible if he had been an alcoholic.¹⁵ If Lamb had been a drunkard, he could not have fulfilled his

¹⁴Ibid., p. 871.

¹⁵Barnett, pp. ix-x.

obligations as a clerk, and as a result, he would have been speedily dismissed from office.

Perhaps the best explanation of Lamb's drinking habits is given by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke. They state:

As so much has of late years been hinted and loosely spoken about Lamb's "habit of drinking" and of "taking more than was good for him," we will avail ourselves of this opportunity to state emphatically--from our own personal knowledge--that 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." We have seen him make a single tumbler of moderately strong spirits-and-water last through a long evening of pipe-smoking and fireside talk; and we have also seen the strange suddenness with which but a glass or two of wine would cause him to speak with more than his usual stammer. . . . As to Lamb's own confessions of intemperance, they are to be taken . . . with more than a "grain of salt."¹⁶

¹⁶Blunden, Charles Lamb: His Life Recorded by his Contemporaries, p. 176.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The Essays of Elia and the Last Essays of Elia reveal much about the nature of Charles Lamb. These essays indicate that although Lamb loved mankind, his gregariousness was extremely selective. They suggest that although Lamb was devoted to his family, he suffered greatly because of the obligations which his parents, his brother, and his sister placed upon him. The essays reveal that although Lamb had intense nostalgic tendencies, he was able to cope with reality; the essays imply that Lamb had certain crutches, his use of tobacco and of alcohol, to enable him to meet the various difficulties which plagued him during his lifetime.

Lamb's Elia essays display "vistas of Lamb's mind, heart, and personality."¹ They are, in addition, the central and highest point in his literary achievement.² The reason for their success is obvious: "It is the man, Charles Lamb, that constitutes the enduring charm of his written words."³

¹Worth, p. vii.

²Edmund Blunden, Charles Lamb (London, 1954), p. 9.

³Ainger, p. 123.

Lamb's Elia essays give his readers a sense of personal acquaintance with the author, for Elia is much more than a pseudonym or even a personality for the purpose of these writings; Elia is Charles Lamb.⁴ "He was but one person to his friends and to his readers."⁵

However, as Lamb himself states in the essay "Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," one should not "receive the narratives of Elia for true records."⁶ At times Lamb tells of himself through Elia, but at times he also does the opposite.⁷ At times Lamb expresses his true opinions, but at times he presents views which vary greatly from his own. Because of this circumstance it is essential that other sources be consulted in order to verify or to discredit various statements made in the Elia essays.

Nevertheless, Lamb's Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia reveal more about him than any other of his works. Even when he assumes false identities and pretends to voice opinions alien to his real nature, he indirectly reveals

⁴Blunden, Charles Lamb, p. 28.

⁵North, p. vii.

⁶Commins, p. 85.

⁷Ainger, p. 29.

much about himself. He expresses his whimsicality and his mischievous humor.

No one can pretend to know the man Charles Lamb without reading his Elia essays. It is virtually impossible to grasp Lamb's true nature without considering his Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia. These essays are Lamb; they are the written thoughts and actions which comprised his actual existence; they are outward manifestations of his inner self.

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