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Lamb, Coleridge and the Poetics of Publication

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Abstract

This essay explores the poetics of Lamb's early letters to Coleridge. I argue for a sharp awareness, on Lamb's part, of the potentially negative effect publication can have on literary writing. Lamb resists this at the level of epistolary form, by entwining his sonnets with the letters into which he writes them. Where Lamb's poems, taken in themselves, remain modest performances, the letter-poem hybrid texts in which they participate are of significant critical interest. Among other things they establish a critique of Coleridge and his paying court to the literary marketplace. These insights, I go on to suggest, can also help us to understand both writers' more mature work, notably the complex lyric-epistolary compound that is Coleridge's 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison'.

Keywords: Lamb, Coleridge, Letters, Epistolarity, Poetics, Friendship

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At a certain moment, circumstances – that is, history, in the person of the publisher or in the guise of financial exigencies, social duties – pronounce the missing end, and the artist, freed by a dénouement of pure constraint, pursues the unfinished matter elsewhere.[1]

The early letters of Charles Lamb to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to which only two of Coleridge's replies survive, centre around Lamb's insightful, often frank, discussions of his friend's early poetry. Lamb also discusses his own poems and reflects upon his motivations as a writer, as well as the pair's joint publishing projects.[2] When we read Lamb's letters of the 1790s, it quickly becomes clear that Lamb placed a strong value on writing that is private or interpersonal in nature. This goes hand-in-hand with a suspicion of publication as a potentially threatening force, one that demands moving beyond privacy in ways that, Lamb felt, jeopardize the authenticity of his writing. I want to suggest that Lamb not only sensed this, but actively opposed it through the composition of his letters and their manner of relating to their hosted poems. Lamb does not simply transcribe poems into letters; he writes poem-letter hybrids that lose much of their critical force if we simply collect the poem out of the letter (as per traditional editorial practice).[3] This can be construed as an act of resistance

[1] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska, 1989), 22.

[2] My essay builds upon three recent studies: Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*, 1798-1804 (Newark, 2002); Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke, 2008); and David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford, 2009).

[3] For an illuminating discussion of letter-poem texts, and the problems they present to the editor, see Daniel Karlin, 'Editing Poems in Letters', in *Letter Writing among Poets*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh, 2015), 31-46. Also see – what is something of a companion piece to the present essay – my '"don't imagine it an a propos des

to publication that is part of a broader critique of Romantic literary culture and its relation to the marketplace. I begin by considering some examples of how Lamb writes between letter and poem as well as some of the theoretical implications of reading in this way: how, for instance, might reading Lamb's poems as aspects of a larger text challenge our assumptions about their quality and their related position in the Romantic canon? This discussion, I will also suggest, has implications for our understanding of Coleridge's development as a poet, notably in the case of 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison', the 'conversation poem' that is often seen as a crucial transition into Coleridge's mature verse.[4]

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As critics have noted, a particularly revealing aspect of Lamb's early letters is their resistance to Coleridge's proposed alterations of his sonnets with joint publication in mind.[5] Clearly Lamb was excited by the prospect of seeing his name in print alongside such an energetic and talented figure as Coleridge. But he also saw publication as a potential threat to the integrity of the work in question. Publication, he recognized with peculiar clarity, is not simply conveying the finished work; it can also determine the shape and content of what is brought before the public. Publication creates an illusion of completeness that serves some combination of contingency, vanity and the marketplace. Of Coleridge's significant rewriting

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bottes"': Poems in Letters and the Romantic Letter-Poem', in *Romanticism and the Letter*, eds Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe (Palgrave, 2019).

[4] Tim Fulford, for instance, describes it as a 'breakthrough poem in which, buoyed by the presence of his friends, he had first perfected the conversational style that appeared to be a spontaneous overflow of feeling'. Tim Fulford, *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries: the Dialect of the Tribe* (Palgrave, 2015), 64.

[5] For a detailed account of this see James, 56-62 and Fairer, Chapter 8.

of Lamb's sonnet 'Effusion XII', for instance, Lamb tells his friend that 'I had rather have seen what I wrote myself, tho' they bear no comparison with your exquisite line, "On rose-leafd beds amid your faery bowers' &c. – I love my sonnets because they are the reflected images of my own feelings at different times'.[6] In the Horatian-Johnsonian tradition the fidelity of writing to lived experience is seen as fundamental to good literature. But Lamb isn't standing on such lofty ground and acknowledges that at least one of Coleridge's lines is an improvement (although how far he really means this is another question). Lamb thus proposes two ways of valuing his poem. One is based on its fitness for publication, its likelihood of impressing and pleasing contemporary readers and thus being successful. Here Coleridge, if we take Lamb's words at face value, has intervened to good effect, even if the intervention is not entirely appreciated. The other is private and to do with Lamb's pleasure in his writing as a record of his own feelings, which in turn plays a role in his friendship with Coleridge, something, at this stage of his life, which was of almost unparalleled value to Lamb.

This unusually strong sense of the poem as double, as having non-identical private and public identities, recognizes, in resisting, certain historical developments relating to modern lyric poetry. As Virginia Jackson notes, 'the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading'.[7] Such poetry, with which Lamb in the 1790s was clearly uncomfortable, is dissevered from its original conditions of production, physical, textual and emotional. Emily Dickinson, as Jackson's fine study demonstrates, is a special case because of the unique ways and places in

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[6] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (3 vols, Ithaca, 1975-1978), i. 20. Hereafter *LL.* Marrs gives Coleridge's alterations in his notes.

[7] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: a Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, 2005), 7.

which she drafted her poems. The conventional edition tends to assume that whatever resists print – the manner of a draft's handwriting, the fact that a poem was composed on the back of an envelope, or on scented writing paper, or in the margins of another work – is of secondary significance; it may be worthy of a footnote, but is not integral to the poem's meaning. The modern lyric poet is a creature of the reproducible printed page. Her modes of practice and reception fall into line with this abstracted state and thus naturalize the process Jackson describes. The 'intentional fallacy' and the death of the author, in particular, are influential theoretical imperatives that insist upon the idea that the 'occasion of its reading', subsequent to its appearance in print, is sufficient context for the poem to be understood.[8] Lamb, like Dickinson in Jackson's reading, is a more interesting poet if we dissociate our reading from such directives. To explore this claim we now need to look in more detail at precisely how Lamb, in his letters, enacts his resistance to publication.

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Lamb's scepticism about publication is not directly theorized but is felt behind his opposition to Coleridge's interventions in his poetry. As I've suggested this resistance takes a particular form involving the relation between letter and poem in his early correspondence. Lamb writes his poems into his letters in ways that emphasize and maintain connections that publication will inevitably sever. It is as if Lamb's letters are determined to hold onto the sonnets of which they are partly made. The first extant letter to Coleridge, written on May 27, 1796, contains one sonnet, Coleridge's reception to which is pre-empted. 'The sonnet I send

[8] Compare Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh, 1992), 25 and *passim.*

you', writes Lamb, 'has small merit as poetry but you will be curious to read it when I tell you it was written in my prison house in one of my lucid Intervals

to my sister

If from my lips some angry accents fell,
Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,
Twas but the Error of a sickly mind,
And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well,
& waters clear, of Reason: & for me
Let this my verse the poor atonement be,
My verse, which thou to praise: wast ever inclined
Too highly, & with a partial eye to see
No Blemish: thou to me didst ever shew
Fondest affection, & woudst oftimes lend
An ear to the desponding, love sick Lay,
Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay
But ill the mighty debt, of love I owe,
Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend –
With these lines, and with that sisters kindest remembrances to C –
I conclude –

Yours Sincerely

Lamb

(*LL*, I, 4)

As a published lyric, Lamb claims, his lines would be of limited value. Their importance derives from their circumstances of composition, the fact that he wrote them during a period of confinement for madness. How far this frank self-assessment is inflected by false modesty may be a matter of debate. What is clear is that if we evaluate the sonnet without knowledge of its containing letter, we risk making evaluative judgements without all the relevant evidence being available. This would be to assume a default evaluative perspective that is not readily admitted by the writing addressed.

The sonnet, of course, does exist as an independent poem, and has been read and evaluated as such. It was included, with Lamb's consent, and with no significant alterations to the letter version, in the mixed bag that is *Poems*, *by S. T. Coleridge* (Second Edition)*: To which are now Added Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd* (Bristol, 1797). Here it appears as 'Sonnet VI', one of eight sonnets contributed to the volume by Lamb. Yet where in the letter to Coleridge the direct address to Mary in the final line works to break down the distinction between familiar and formal writing, here, in published form, it strikes a discordant note. This is remedied, to an extent, by Lamb dedicating his section of the volume to Mary, but this in turn leaves the 'Anna' sonnets, which express a sentimental romantic attachment, and which begin and dominate Lamb's section of the volume, looking oddly out of place. The sonnets, which were at home in the letters to Coleridge, never quite sit comfortably on the printed page.

Despite this, the sonnet to Mary was one of two poems reproduced in a generally positive *Literary Gazette* review of Lamb's collected works of 1818, where it is noted:

> The poetry generally turns upon some common or domestic subject. Upon this "familiar matter of to-day," Mr Lamb has exhausted much sweetness and sentiment, and often awakens the mind to a perception of rare and recondite beauties, which otherwise, as mere matters of ingenuity, would be passed over, perhaps, or forgotten.[9]

The allusion to Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' associates Lamb, as was common, with the so-called Lake School and its interest in Rousseauian potencies. To engage this everyday-astonishing subject matter, the reviewer believes, is the basis of Lamb's achievement. His writing will be valued where there is inclination to preface 'ingenuity' with 'mere'. Yet such inclinations would become increasingly rare as the mores of the nineteenth century gave way to the very different strictures of Modernism. Lamb's is a poem of its own century and its own century was kinder to it.[10] Publication, in the end, was just too strong for Lamb's sonnets. They had a certain contemporary currency, but now are mainly interesting to readers who want to know about Lamb's earlier life, perhaps because they have come to admire the charismatic personality manifest in the later essays of Elia.[11]

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[9] *The Literary Gazette*, *and Journal of Belles Lettres*, *Arts*, *Sciences*, etc., 134 (Saturday, August 16, 1819), 516.

[10] As Joseph E. Riehl notes, the 'generation between the wars thought [Lamb] decadent and bourgeois' and increasingly viewed his writing as 'desultory, incomplete, or trivial' and lacking in 'true seriousness'. Joseph E. Riehl, *That Dangerous Figure: Charles Lamb and the Critics* (Columbia, 1998), 10-11, 1.

[11] After Lamb's death the sonnet to Mary was thought good enough to be included in the fourth volume of *Select Works of the British Poets, in a chronological series from Southey to Croly with biographical and critical notices* (Philadelphia, 1845), 63. More recently, it was selected for *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival 1750-1850*, ed Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson (Oxford, 1999), 72.

This twentieth-century perspective on ‘to my sister’ is well represented by Winifred Courtney:

> The poem to Mary is sentimental (‘weeping my sorrows’) and sometimes laboured (‘My verse, which thou to praise: wast ever inclined / Too highly’; ‘harsh reproof unkind’), sometimes trite (‘desponding’, love sick Lay’) – and, for the reader familiar with Lamb’s life, quite moving.[12]

Agreeing with Lamb, Courtney dismisses the sonnet as a literary performance. She also follows her subject in proceeding to claim a localized interest for it, an affective power only discernible to those who have emotionally invested in Lamb’s biography. Lamb’s original reader, Coleridge, is generalized into the biographer’s own assumed cohort of readers. Courtney thus reclaims an emotional value for the poem in denying it a literary one. This seems reasonable, but it is also freighted with evaluative assumptions that in this particular case require consideration because they are the very assumptions that Lamb’s letter-poem text actively works to destabilize. True, the sonnet can’t hold against one of Milton’s and it would look sadly deficient placed alongside any short lyric of Yeats. But it wasn’t written to hold or stand in any such way. To dismiss it from the point of view of evaluative literary criticism would be to demonstrate a lack of critical self-awareness. It would be to enforce historically determined critical values – specifically about the autonomous, printed and published poem – that the sonnet itself appears to challenge. My claim here is not that the poem deserves to be reclaimed as some underappreciated masterpiece, and I entirely accept its manifest modesty as a literary performance. But I also think that it offers a pronounced,

[12] Winifred F. Courtney, *Young Charles Lamb: 1775-1802* (London, 1982), 108-09.

although by no means a unique, opportunity to reflect upon some of the assumptions we typically make in setting out to judge the quality of a poem. This is because it offers a significantly more rewarding reading experience when read in its pre-published form, in conjunction with those aspects of its original production that publication either obscures or relegates to footnote status.

There is, of course, nothing new in analyzing texts in non-published states. Nothing, moreover, is written in a vacuum. Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty', we are told, is 'about' Mrs. Constance Spencer Smith. Yet while the reader who knows nothing of this may be deficient in background facts, he or she hardly seems at a disadvantage when it comes to experiencing the lyric's power and beauty. Arguably, having no acquaintance with Mrs. Smith is a benefit in these terms. This testifies to the fact that Byron's performance, while by no means a gold mine for the close reader, is superbly at home on the printed page. Lamb's early sonnets are not; they occupy a very different paradigm and respond to different modes of analysis and evaluation. There is something about them that resists the published state, a sense that in being born – into print – they give up the prospect of an enduring life.

But what might critical reading from such a pre-defeated perspective look like? What might it mean to read against the grain of publication, to identify different kinds of subtlety to those we are trained to hear amidst the inflections of poetry's printed voice? One striking aspect of Lamb's sonnet, given its stated autobiographical basis, is how little Lamb's sad predicament, at the time of writing (his incarceration for lunacy), takes centre stage in the poem: aside from a reference to his 'sickly mind', Lamb is mainly concerned with praising the loyalty and selflessness of his sister, Mary, a more acute and chronic sufferer of mental illness. This seems designed to impress upon Coleridge Lamb's lack of egotism, his own loyalty, and his

gratitude to those from whom he derives emotional sustenance. A major function of the letter-poem, which is lost in the translation to standalone lyric, is thus to invite or draw Coleridge into this strong, familial nexus of feeling. As for Coleridge's willingness to participate, however, Lamb is taking nothing for granted: his 'you will be curious', which sounds like the perspective of the Bedlam tourist as much as the sympathetic friend, is notably insecure. Here the letter's signatory flourish, in binding together poem and letter, and the apparent physical presence of Mary, sending her best wishes, become integral to the poem's meaning. The sonnet is an artefact, made and deployed according to a stated purpose ('With these lines…'). If it has not succeeded especially well as a lyric poem, it is rather more successful as a social act, as a function of its containing letter. Arguably, the failure here is key to the success: the poem's social purpose, that is, depends upon its acknowledged – and uncontested – mediocrity as literary art. Were it a brilliant performance, motivated by angling ambition, the overall effect, from Coleridge's perspective, would be insincere, perhaps even threatening. This sense of the poem as necessarily humble is even suggested by the appearance of the manuscript letter: Lamb, who in general wrote with a spacious, fairly fluent hand, doesn't leave enough room at the bottom of his sheet to insert the sonnet, and ends up cramming it into an inadequate space. A poem written in a 'prison house', and concerned with mental disturbance, makes its appearance in a cramped, confined and spidery hand.[13]

[13] My thanks to the Huntington Library for sending me scans of the original.

Literary close readers might decide to steer clear of Lamb's apparently unprecedented rhyme scheme (ABBACCBCDEFFDE), and as far as I can see they have.[14] At a push we could suggest that the breakdown of form reflects the inmate's confused state of mind, but this would be wishful close reading. The poem is genuinely beffudled rather than carefully crafted to give the impression of befuddlement. When we read Shelley's *Ozymandias* we feel certain that its innovative structure and slant rhymes are deliberate deviations, calculated for particular effects by a master of his art. Lamb's eccentricities suggest no such control: his poem is not a work of art in dishevellment; it is a dishevelled poem that muddles along with, rather than adorns, a letter. This is what we mean when we conclude that the poem is not very good. Searchers for allusion, the skillful bringing into play of previous writers' words, are also likely to be disappointed. One of the sonnet's more musical lines, 'Let this my verse the poor atonement be', does have a Shakespearean feel,[15] although as far as I can see it is not an allusion as such; it is nothing like, for instance, the staged allusion through which the opening of *The Prelude* takes up the baton from the end of *Paradise Lost*. As such it might well be passed over by the literary critic, who understandably prefers concrete to speculative evocations. That an allusion is clearly demonstrable, however, is not in itself a reason to prefer it to a slight, potential echo. The former is simply a more reliable device for the poet to deploy and the critic to identify and reflect upon. Our general preference for undeniable –

[14] My thanks to Professor Nicholas Roe for drawing my attention to this. In general, the rhyme scheme of Lamb's early sonnets is erratic – there is a preference for the Italianate ABBA quatrain, but the sestet in particular is unpredictable.

[15] The phrase 'my verse' occurs eleven times in Shakespeare's sonnets, typically with reference to the poetry's apparent inadequacy ('Why is my verse so barren of new pride, / So far from variation or quick change?' (Sonnet 76)) or, more frequently, its commemorative role in resisting the ravages of time: 'My love shall in my verse ever live young' (Sonnet 19); 'my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand' (Sonnet 60). Quoted from *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (Penguin, 1986).

after we have revealed them – allusions is part of a poem's pre-coding for its future state as published, and critically evaluated, work. The situation changes, however, when a poem is attached to a specific correspondence and informed by a degree of scepticism about publication. Here a clear allusion might appear crass, an impertinent grasping after public approval and thus a failure of intimacy. With a reader such as Coleridge, who, when it came to Shakespeare, would have needed nothing more than the slightest of hints, this may be especially the case.

A particularly complex example of the letter-poem dynamic is Lamb's letter to Coleridge of May 30th, 1797, which contains four sonnets linked by prose reflecting upon their composition, as well as more general critical and personal matters. Lamb demonstrates the flexibility of the letter form by turning it into a mini annotated edition. The letter begins: 'I am in such violent pain with the head ach that I am fit for nothing but transcribing, scarce for that' (*LL*, I, 6). Not writing, even though he can hardly write, is not seen as an option: the sonnets thus begin to mean before they are read, as a commitment to friendship. They are also identified as filler, as a bulking up of the letter Lamb cannot properly write. In any traditional ranking of literary forms, the sonnet looks down from some height on familiar correspondence, but not here.

This is the first sonnet transcribed into the letter:

The lord of light shakes off his drowsy hed:*
Fresh from his couch up springs the lusty Sun,
And girds himself his mighty race to run.
Meantime, by truant love of rambling led,

I turn my back on thy detested walls,
Proud City, & thy sons I leave behind,
A selfish, sordid, money-getting kind,
who shut their ears, when holy Freedom calls.
I pass not thee so lightly, humble spire,
That mindest me of many a pleasure gone,
of merrier days, of love and Islington,
Kindling anew the flames of past desire;
And I shall muse on thee, slow journeying on
To the green plains of pleasant Hertfordshir[e.]
(*LL*, I, 7)

Where 'to my sister' has a persistent social and emotional value based in its rigorous integrity, this sonnet is undermined by the questionable idea that Lamb detests London, hates its people, and prefers fields to streets. It was published in the *Monthly Magazine* for December 1797, with significant alterations (to the letter version), including a newly unfortunate opening: 'The Lord of Life shakes off his drowsihed / And 'gins to sprinkle on the earth below'.[16] Not surprisingly, Lamb never printed it again. Typically, the sonnet becomes more interesting when read in conjunction with its containing letter. The asterisk at the end of the letter version's first line takes us to a note: 'drowsy hed I have met with I think in Spencer'. The letter he is barely writing reasserts itself after only a single line of verse. It cannot quite let the poem be, intervening to admit its borrowings and construct the framework within which the sonnet is intended to be read. The note also merges the

[16] *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (8 vols, London, 1912), iv. 16. Hereafter *WCML*.

grandness of tradition with the familiarity of correspondence: ‘met with’ recalls Felicity James’s emphasis on Lamb as a social writer for whom intertextuality is not public performance but a way of imagining tradition as attainable sociality. Spenser, rather than a revered, pedestalled precursor, becomes an acquaintance accidently bumped into on the street. Coleridge may also have noticed the interplay of ‘drowsy hed’ with the letter writer’s ‘head ach’, which brings the unglamorous poet into ironic alignment with the splendid ‘lord of light’. In this context, ‘Fresh from his couch up springs the lusty Sun’ (which was cut for the published version, presumably to facilitate the light/life alteration) is more than rank poetic diction; it could be read as a joke at the poet’s own expense. There will be nothing lusty or springy about Charles Lamb as he shambles and squints his way to the office the following morning.

Lamb is at pains to point out his derivativeness, resuming the letter after the sonnet with another acknowledgment of debt:

> The last line is a copy of Bowles’s “to the green hamlet in the peaceful plain.” Your ears are not so very fastidious – many people would not like words so prosaic and familiar in a sonnet as Islington and Hertfordshire (*LL*, I, 7).

This recognizes, in transgressing, the traditional boundary between the heightened language of verse and the ‘prosaic and familiar’ language typically associated with the letter. ‘Hertfordshire’ and ‘Islington’, Lamb suspects, will be considered as insufficiently refined, ungainly presences by the general reader. Coleridge, however, will not be so ‘fastidious’. Again, publication is conceived of less as an echo of inception, or fulfilment of the creative act, but as a choice about how the work positions itself in relation to public taste. This implies

a criticism of publication as servant of the marketplace, which by the late eighteenth century had expanded sufficiently to engulf the bulk of printed literature. On the other hand, it is a conservative maneuver because it ties innovation to the private sphere. Lamb's sonnet is prepared to take risks, but only in safe (letters to Coleridge) or relatively safe (the *Monthly Magazine*) places.

Lamb's remarks to Coleridge about poetic language here have a prescient quality when we consider the future direction of Coleridge's poetry, notably his 'conversation poems' and his involvement in *Lyrical Ballads*, a self-conscious experiment in merging poetic and ordinary discourse in verse. It would be in a literary-familiar style, too, that Lamb would make a lasting name for himself as a public writer, in essays such as 'Mackery End, in Hertfordshire'. These mature writings are far more successful than the early poems of Lamb (and to some extent Coleridge) because, among other things, they convincingly dissolve the either/or choice between private and public that Lamb had previously mitigated by strongly entwining his early poems with letters. Lamb's essays stand on their own, where his early poems often do not, because they skillfully reconstruct the figure both of author and imagined reader. Where the former is disburdened of the more disabling aspects of his privacy,[17] the

[17] For instance Elia, Lamb's semi-fictional alter ego, writes that 'Brother, or sister, I never had any – to know them' (In the essay 'My Relations', which is a companion piece to 'Mackery End' and which, in later versions, quotes the sonnet just discussed (see *WCML*, iv, 17)). In this alternate reality Mary and John Lamb become Elia's cousins, Bridget and James Elia. In fact, the Lambs had seven children, of whom only John, Mary and Charles survived childhood. It appears that in order to encounter his public, Lamb needed to strip out the hardest parts of his autobiography, although Elia does keep one sister, Elizabeth, who died in childbirth, thus the caveat 'to know them' (there were in fact two Elizabeths among Lamb child mortalities). E. V. Lucas gives this as 'an excellent example of ['Lamb's] whimsical blending of truth and invention', although I think the blending is rather more than 'whimsical'. It involves a complex balancing of necessary fiction and necessary truth to self.

latter is given some of the status of correspondent and friend – a status to which we, in our post-epistolary age, are less receptive. Rather than setting private and public against each other, as Lamb the poet-correspondent was inclined to do, Lamb the essayist works between the private and public spheres, exploiting their points of contact as they occurred within his own culture.[18] Through these strategies he keeps in play the different elements of the letter-poem hybrid text, but in a form that is sustainable beyond publication. Publication may raise threats against the integrity of the work, but it also brings challenges and opportunities that test and confirm a writer's skill. Rising to these challenges is key to Lamb's achievement as an essayist, but it is also fundamental to Coleridge's 'breakthrough' poem, 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison', a fine lyric poem that is strongly grounded in familiar experience and epistolary discourse. In concluding, I'll briefly consider Coleridge's poem in this light.

During their early correspondence, Lamb saw more clearly than Coleridge that publication, however desirable, is a serious test for the integrity of the literary work. Publication, he recognized, makes far more bad writing than it does good. 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison' is a 'breakthrough' poem because it marks Coleridge's own recognition and bringing into control of this situation. The poem semi-erased epistolary origins are evident in its subtitle (when published in the *Annual Anthology*, 1800): 'A Poem Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India House, London', which, by the standards of the day, would have been a

[18] As Clare Brant has noted, letter writing in the eighteenth century was by no means a strictly private affair, and correspondence typically ranged along a private-public spectrum. See Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Palgrave, 2006), 3-6. Letters were thus readily adaptable to coterie readerships such as that of the *London Magazine*, the general sympathies of which Lamb knew well. Lamb's essay 'On Distant Correspondents' is a notable instance because it developed out a personal letter (to Lamb's friend Baron Field).

functional, if unusual, postal address.[19] Before its publication Coleridge sent early versions of the poem in letters to Southey and Charles Lloyd. In the Southey letter of July 17th, 1797, which is the first existing manuscript version, Coleridge outlines the well-known, bathetic circumstances behind the poem's composition:

> Charles Lamb has been with me for a week [at Nether Stowey, July 7-14]. He left me Friday morning. The second day after Wordsworth came to me, dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole of C. Lamb's stay and still prevents me from all *walks* longer than a furlong. While Wordsworth, his sister, and Charles Lamb were out one evening, sitting in the arbour of T. Poole's garden which communicates with mine I wrote these lines, with which I am pleased.[20]

When the poem appeared in print this comic account written for Sara's brother-in-law was replaced by an anonymized and more formal prefatory note:

> some long-expected Friends paid a visit to the author's cottage; and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the garden-bower.

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[19] The subtitle is omitted in *Sibylline Leaves* (1828) and thereafter. Much of the lyrical, descriptive matter in the first thirty lines of the published versions are not in either of the MS letter versions. See *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (Penguin, 1997), 90. Coleridge's poetry is quoted from this edition.

[20] *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (2 vols, London, 1895), i. 224-25.

This account was necessary to explain the narrator's exclusion from the action of the poem, which is the basis of its philosophical account of the imagination. The alternative would have been to abandon the idea of a preface and describe his situation within the poem itself. That Coleridge considered this is suggested by the second line of the Southey letter version, where the poet describes himself as 'Lam'd by the scathe of fire, lonely and faint'. Understandably, Coleridge never allowed this fussy victimhood to see print, and wrote the short preface to supply the necessary information for the poem to make sense. What he recognizes here is that the poem cannot be translated, wholesale, to the lyric mode, into the terms of absolute publication, without losing something essential to it integrity. We end up trading real human epistolary experience for poetic diction of the kind that lames much of Coleridge's juvenilia. This is a version of what Lamb recognizes in protesting against Coleridge's amendments to his early poems. What was needed, Coleridge now saw, is a more nuanced and profitable trade-off between private and public, a truth to origin that does not prevent wide dissemination. What he thus trades in is precise comic detail: the skillet and the hapless in-law, wincing away in another (richer) man's garden. This is replaced, in the prefatory note, by the opaque 'accident' and 'the author', the latter figure situated in a 'garden-bower', which the unknowing reader will likely assume to be his. In exchange for comic familiarity we get a Romantic poet, a fiction, but a more credible figure out of which to develop the poem's lyric and philosophical interests.

Alongside the prefatory note, the key structural device through which this intellectually potent semi-fiction retains a basis in familiar discourse is, appropriately, an outworking of the Lamb-Coleridge correspondence. One of the poem's voices is directly epistolary, addressing its internal correspondent, 'My gentle-hearted Charles!', who, apparently, has 'pined / And

hunger'd after Nature, many a year, / In the great City pent' (28-30). This is another fiction, originally Lamb's own, the Charles of the sonnets who turned his back on London's 'detested walls'. The real Charles was not impressed, and let Coleridge know, in no uncertain terms, in a letter of August 6th, 1800:

> For God's sake (I never was more serious), don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print, or do it in better verses. It did well enough five years ago [three in fact] when I came to see you, and was moral coxcomb enough at the time you wrote the lines, to feed upon such epithets; but, besides that, the meaning of gentle is equivocal at best, and almost always means poor-spirited […] My *sentiment* is long since vanished […] I should be ashamed to think that you could think to gratify me by such praise, fit only to be a cordial to some green-sick sonneteer (*LL*, I, 217-18).

Lamb recognizes in the poem an earlier version of himself, the 'green-sick sonneteer', a figure he was complicit in scripting, but which he has now apparently outgrown. Once again, we see Lamb's keen sensitivity to publication as a potential source of inauthenticity. Yet the situation here is different to Coleridge's earlier amendments, not least because in this case Coleridge is writing at a significantly higher level, and with much greater control over the private/public dynamics of his work. Simply put, the real Charles is not required for the poem's purposes or success, a fact that may help to explain Lamb's intemperate response. In the case of Coleridge's amendments to Lamb's sonnets, the balance of sympathy is with Lamb because it is hard to see much literary gain in the sacrifice of authenticity. In this case, however, Lamb's strict equation of literary value with faithfulness to actual relations restricts

his ability to perceive Coleridge's achievement in adapting, and moving beyond, the terms of familiar, epistolary verse.

In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge describes Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* as being tasked with 'awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us'. Poetry must have the capacity to pierce the 'film of familiarity' that has come to obscure our most fundamental acts of perception.[21] Charles Lamb was the first reader of 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison' to feel that poem's defamiliarizing power, and he didn't like it. What he wanted, needed even, was to remain within the familiar but exclusive precincts of epistolary exchange, and for poetry to remain true to this private space. Coleridge, however, was concerned with developing new forms of literary art that draw on familiar writing, including his correspondence with Lamb, but which also engage and familiarize the unfamiliar reader created at the point of publication**.**

[21] *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Bollingen Series, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), ii. 7.