

Robin Schofield
reads
*Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth:
Reading Friendship in the 1790s*
(Palgrave, 2008)
by Felicity James

WHEN CHARLES LAMB DIED on 27th December 1834, less than six months after Coleridge, Sara Coleridge recalled the creative community of the 1790s: 'I connect him with my poor father, Wordsworth, Southey, [and] Lloyd. It seems as if two links of a chain were broken, and one is forcibly reminded of [...] the whole'.¹ Felicity James's excellent study shows Lamb's decisive importance within this group and his significant contribution to the 'dynamics of early Romanticism' (4). However, Lamb seemed homely and limited to earlier readers: Victorians stereotyped him as 'a saint [...] a holy fool [...] comfortably set apart in [...] a sweet domestic niche';² in the 1930s he was dismissed as a complacent 'bourgeois', leading to his gradual disappearance 'from school and university syllabuses' (2). In the last thirty years, however, Lamb's 'evasiveness and resistance to categorization' have been received more sympathetically, prompting 'new readings' (2). James follows scholars such as Jane Aaron, Judith Plotz and Mary Wedd, from whose work 'an unsettling, disconcerting, provocative Lamb' has emerged (3). James's case is for the rediscovery of Lamb's early works; for recognition of his crucial importance as 'a friend and shrewd reader' of Coleridge and Wordsworth (3); and as a vital link in the 'chain' of creative friendship from which the literary phenomenon of English Romanticism grew.

The book is divided into three parts ('Idealising Friendship'; 'Doubting Friendship'; 'Reconstructing Friendship') which follow Lamb's personal story from the exuberance of youthful conviviality, through the family tragedy of 1796 and growing disillusion with Coleridge in 1797; to the recovery of a less intense but more enduring view of friendship around 1800, from which the persona of 'Elia' would ultimately emerge. This narrative of Lamb's development starts from the Coleridgean premise that 'some home-born feeling is the centre of the Ball that, rolling on thro' Life collects and assimilates every Congenial Affection' (15). This tenet reflects the influence of Hartley, whose 'theory of vibrations portrays the mind as a subtle mechanism programmed to lead, through an accretion of complex associations, to an ultimate losing of self in God' (40). The immediate sensation of affection for the individual, therefore, 'may gradually expand and transform itself into a wider sympathy' which 'can unlock universal benevolence' (40). Hartleian

¹ Cited in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pages 82-83.

² Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), page 8.

concepts of association, inflected by the influence of Unitarianism, underlie the ideal of friendship formed in late 1794 in the 'little smoky room' of the Salutation and Cat. Lamb's early sonnet, *To My Sister*, suggests the importance also of the 'affective response of sensibility' (43). It brings together 'male and female responsiveness' and implies an ideal of 'reading and writing, shaped both by friendship and by the affective response in literature' (54). The collaborative volume, *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), Lamb's first appearance in print, might have seemed to him 'the natural successor to the warm sociable place of friendship idealised in the "Salutation" days' (55). However, James shows that Coleridge, as collaborator, revised Lamb's poems in ways which subverted congenial friendship. For example, in Lamb's *Effusion xii*, Coleridge replaces 'Lamb's image of story-telling and loving companionship' with an assertion of individual authorial anxiety, influenced by his move to Clevedon and insecurities in his sense of vocation (63). Coleridge's anxiety 'prevents the emphasis on private feeling from being firmly identified with a contented retreat into conservatism, but inhibits creative interaction' (69). Lamb, sympathetic to Coleridge's personal and literary insecurities, 'sets himself up as Coleridge's ideal reader', encouraging him to have faith in the 'continuing power of the sympathetic response—of reading and writing with feeling' (72).

In the shock of bereavement and family devastation, following Mary's killing of their mother in September 1796, Lamb's 'immediate reaction' was to 'abjure poetry and particularly the "poetry of sensibility"' (85). In November 1796, he asked Coleridge 'not to call his sonnets "love sonnets"',³ declaring that love 'is a passion of which I retain nothing'.⁴ He turned to Coleridge, not for literary companionship, but to sustain his Unitarian faith. Coleridge's letter of consolation, informed by the same imagery and structure as *This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison*, suggests 'ways in which Lamb's troubles may lead him to "quietness", allowing him an apprehension of "heavenly bliss"' (87). Initially, Lamb found this letter 'an inestimable treasure' (87); though his considered response 'reveals a gradual emergence of doubts about Coleridge's friendship', rooted in reservations about his metaphysical thinking, which Lamb characterized as 'the pride of speculation' (88). Another Unitarian writer, Anna Letitia Barbauld, had warned Coleridge away from 'the maze of metaphysic lore' (78).⁵ Lamb's reservations about Coleridge's metaphysical assumptions would be reflected in his objections to *This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison*: to the way he is portrayed—"gentle-hearted Charles" angrily answers back as a "drunken dog"—and to the vision which Coleridge projects onto him: 'the unintelligible abstraction-fit about the manner of the Deity's making spirits perceive his presence' (109). Lamb's objections subvert Coleridge's attempt to

³ Edoardo Zuccato, *Petrarch in Romantic England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), page 100.

⁴ Charles Lamb, Letter to S.T. Coleridge, 8 November, 1796. *The Letters of Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb*, Vol 1, ed. Edwin W. Marrs. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), page 60.

⁵ The phrase is from Barbauld's poem, *To Mr ST Coleridge*, written in September 1797 and published in the *Monthly Magazine*, September 1799. James draws attention to it as a text which may be 'read alongside' Lamb's responses to Coleridge during the same period (78).

‘create a unified whole’, showing the ‘difficulty of putting the “home-borne feeling” into practice’ (110).

The tone of Lamb’s letters to Coleridge changed following his visit to Stowey in July 1797,⁶ as Coleridge, absorbed by his developing friendship with the Wordsworths, distanced himself from Lamb and Lloyd. Lamb now uses ‘allusion and rewriting as a reproof’ (111). He rebukes Coleridge for having failed to write to Lloyd and himself, and prompts him to send the ‘Great coat’ he had left at Stowey: ‘I wish you would send me my Great coat—the snow & the rain season is at hand & I have but a wretched old coat, once my father’s, to keep ’em off [...] I shall remember where I left my coat—meek emblem wilt thou be, old Winter, of a friend’s neglect—Cold, cold, cold’ (111). Lamb’s ‘wretched old coat’ recalls the ‘tattered vest’ of Coleridge’s *To An Old Man*, which arouses the poet’s pity, prompting him to offer his ‘own garment’ (112). Coleridge’s impulse of generosity is now contradicted by his neglect of Lamb, leaving Lamb ‘cold, cold, cold’: James reminds us that the phrase alludes to *Osorio*: the moment at which Osorio ‘suffers a pang of remorse as he thinks of Albert’s “murder”’ (113). Lamb’s implied ‘comparison of Coleridge’s neglect with Osorio’s cruelty’ marks a breaking of friendship, while revealing Lamb’s intimate understanding of Coleridgean divisions, in the complex operation of ‘self-identification and self-contradiction’ in the play’s characterization (113). Coleridge would himself use rewriting and allusion in his ‘Nehemiah Higginbottom’ poems to reject earlier narratives of friendship and announce a transition in style. These parodies, as Jane Stabler has argued, show Coleridge adopting ‘an “anti-jacobin” mode of satire’,⁷ and represent a decisive separation of ‘Coleridge’s later work from that of his former collaborators’ (119). Similarly, Lamb, in *Blank Verse* (1798), a collaborative volume with Charles Lloyd, declared his ‘literary independence’ from Coleridge’ (121). *Blank Verse* presents images of desolate loneliness, as in *The Old Familiar Faces*, in which sociable community is nostalgically recalled in a narrative of loss. In *Living Without God in the World*, Lamb warns against pride—‘putting too much [...] faith on idols of flesh and blood’—and counters the visions of universal harmony in Coleridge’s conversation poems with images of ‘destruction’ (136).

Through 1798, Lamb sought to reconcile disappointment in the failure of the friendship ideal with his continuing belief in affectionate sociability as a wider principle. In his short novel *Rosamund Gray*, and his play *John Woodvil*, Lamb developed a new approach to friendship and community, based on reading and writing as the media of sociability. These works are redemptive and reconciliatory, marking a decisive stage in Lamb’s development. *Rosamund Gray*, addressing the same themes as Wordsworth’s *Ruined Cottage*, ‘offers an

⁶ Of Lamb’s visit to Stowey in July 1797, F.V. Morley writes: ‘No reading of the letters can enable one to feel that the visit was much of a success. When his week was up, Lamb departed hurriedly, leaving his great-coat behind him. Indeed, to an erstwhile “brother-confessor” [...] the visit meant a pretty complete humiliation’. F.V. Morley, *Lamb Before Elia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), pages 181 - 182.

⁷ Jane Stabler, *Guardians and Watchful Powers: Literary Satire and Lyrical Ballads’ in 1798 in 1798: The Year of The Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), page 206.

alternative vision of recovery and “renovation” (146). Lamb’s method is to use ‘allusive language with particular meaning to specific readers’ (146). The novel’s language and narrative work simultaneously on a range of levels: it is ‘a love story about the love of reading, and about the love of friends, who will themselves be readers of the novel’ (146). Lamb’s allusions to published poems and personal letters create a consolatory text which may foster mutual memories and affection. In effect, Lamb’s allusive style is an expression of the pantisocratic ideal—a community ‘realised through the written word’, in which the medium of personal attachment is shared enjoyment of ‘old stories’ and ‘old poetry’, and ‘books read and commented on, together’ (165). In *Rosamund Gray*, Lamb transcends the regret expressed in *Blank Verse*: the novel ‘puts into practice’ an ideal of sympathetic reading, bringing together ‘the text and its intended readers’ (166).

Lamb’s radical affiliations are implicit in the social setting of *Rosamund Gray*, centring on the condition of the ‘poor or dispossessed’ (156). *John Woodvil*, begun in 1798 and published in 1802, with its Restoration setting of republican virtue in conflict with courtly excess, should likewise be ‘read in the context of Lamb’s Dissenting sympathies’ (179). John Clare recognized its radicalism: in his sonnet, *To Charles Lamb*, he celebrates Lamb’s using ‘the language of the old poets as a way of voicing dissent’ (179). The flight of the old Republican knight, Sir Walter, to Sherwood Forest, accompanied by his loyal younger son, Simon, recalls ‘older ideals of English liberty’ (180). While his father and younger brother are political fugitives, the elder brother, John, has taken possession of Woodvil Hall and ‘grown proud upon the favours of the Court’.⁸ The play’s crucial moment is a violation both of domestic affection and political integrity, when John drunkenly betrays his father: this ‘deep disgrace of treachery’⁹ kills Sir Walter. John’s essential sin is not drunkenness, as Anya Taylor suggests,¹⁰ but pride, which causes him to reject personal ties of affection in pursuing ‘favours of the Court’. John is ultimately redeemed by the ‘sisterly-figure, Margaret’, who begins the play as victim of John’s boorish pride to become the ‘regenerative source of family affection’ (169): her healing presence enables John to achieve peace through recollection of childhood experience. John enters the village church and kneels in the ‘family pew’, where he recalls praying as an infant by his father’s side: he feels the ‘guilt of blood passing’ from him and, ‘in the act and agony of tears’, all his ‘sins forgiven’.¹¹ Lamb draws Coleridge into this redemptive moment: the church in which John experiences absolution is that of

⁸ *The Works of Charles Lamb*, Vol 4, *Poems and Plays*, ed. E.V. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1912), page 166.

⁹ *The Works of Charles Lamb*, Vol 4, *Poems and Plays*, page 188.

¹⁰ Anya Taylor, *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999). Taylor writes that *John Woodvil* shows ‘in theme, in voice, and in skittishness of purpose that drink magnifies personal fragmentation (...) Lamb reveals his alcoholism in the fractured surface of his evasions’ (page 82). Taylor defines John Woodvil’s sin as follows: ‘the hero’s drunkenness (...) removes the consistent springs of moral action’ (page 85).

¹¹ *The Works of Charles Lamb*, Vol 4, *Poems and Plays*, page 198.

Saint Mary Ottery, my native village
In the sweet shire of Devon.

(173)

Lamb uses a similar strategy in *Rosamund Gray*, ‘where Allan is a composite figure of Coleridge and Lamb’, anticipating the ‘playful slippage’ of his *Elia* Christ’s Hospital essay, where the narrator blends Coleridge’s and Lamb’s experiences, but is ‘neither’; participating, ‘like the reader’ as ‘an external observer’ (173). The style of *John Woodvil*, described by Lamb as a ‘medley’, a composite of different tones, forms, allusions, periods, also anticipates the *Elia* work. The exploitation and subversion of determinate genres and styles reflects ‘Lamb’s aversion to fixed absolutes’ and categorization, indicating his dissent from the ‘manliness and authoritarianism’ in the ‘value systems’ of his day (174).

In *What is Jacobinism?*, an article of June 1801, Lamb ‘attacks the very need to categorize or name’ (180). Lamb’s target is the *Anti-Jacobin* and its arousal of ‘unreflective hostility’ based on prejudiced stereotyping (181). Lamb exposes those reviewers who ‘launch “malign attacks on persons and objects most *foreign* to politics”, such as Methodist meetings, Sunday Schools, and [...] Unitarian Christianity. Most indefensible are their attacks on Sunday newspapers’ (181). Lamb argues that newspaper reading is educative and fosters a ‘sociable mode of connection’ (182). He is engaging directly with Wordsworth’s view that ‘rapid communication of intelligence’ creates a ‘craving for extraordinary incident’; in Lamb’s urban perspective, however, newspapers ‘teach their readers to be men’ (181). This growing intellectual independence coincided with the fulfilment of a long-awaited wish: Lamb’s setting up home with Mary, in March 1801, ‘in the cloistered Inner Temple of their childhood’ (185). In a letter to Wordsworth of this period, which James rightly regards as ‘a key Romantic text’, Lamb develops his response to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and ‘exposes the contradiction between Wordsworthian theory and practice’ (188). Lamb particularly liked the ‘Lucy’ poems, James reminds us, and regarded ‘She dwelt among th’ untrodden ways’ as the ‘best piece in the volume’ (189). She argues that the ‘difficulties’ of the Lucy poems, ‘resisting interpretative closure’, and ‘the uncertainties of grief they present’, are central to Lamb’s ‘reading practice’, which strikingly anticipates the experience of twenty-first century readers (190).¹² *The Brothers*, another favourite of Lamb’s, treats ‘the way in which stories of the dead may be contained in landscape and memory’: Wordsworth, in his *Preface*, describes its celebration of ‘the strength of fraternal, or [...] moral attachment when early associated with the great and beautiful objects of nature’ (193). This insistence on a ‘divine language of nature’ that ‘cannot be misinterpreted [...] imposes strictures on the nature of reading’, which, James shows, Lamb

¹² Frances Wilson, for example, writes of the ‘Lucy poems’ that their ‘poignancy and profundity are increased by the fact that we cannot agree on what their subject might be’. Frances Wilson, *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), page 6.

‘confronts and subverts’ in a ‘double movement of sympathy and difference [...] which privileges the individual’s capacity for response’ (193). For Lamb, therefore, Wordsworth’s *Preface* has a diminishing effect on the poems, which, of themselves, ‘allow [...] room for indeterminacy and ambiguity’ (195).

Lamb’s celebration of the urban is central to his rejection of Wordsworth’s limiting interpretative framework: ‘The lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, wagons, play houses, all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, the Watchmen, drunken scenes [...] all these things work themselves into my mind and feed me without a power of satiating me’ (196). In this ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’,¹³ Lamb rejects Wordsworth’s insistence on the moral force of mountains and rural settings; but, affirming his ‘attachments’ to be ‘all local, purely local’ (197), he puts into practice Wordsworth’s ideas about memory, association and the formation of creative affections.¹⁴ James’s fine critical analysis demonstrates, moreover, that Lamb’s poetic prose ‘loosely’ imitates ‘the cadences of blank verse poems in *Lyrical Ballads*’, thereby supporting Wordsworth’s contention ‘that there is no essential difference between poetry and prose’ (200). Lamb’s urban response assures Wordsworth ‘that he will continue to have “a second life” in the sympathetic—although different—reading of others’ (200). Lamb met Wordsworth’s irascible response with relaxed good-humour: he had ‘grown adept at using reading and writing as a tool of healing and reconciliation’ (200).

Lamb channelled his engagement with Wordsworthian theory into *The Londoner*, his first published essay, which appeared in the *Morning Post* in February 1802. *The Londoner* celebrates the urban vision and seeks to befriend the reader, while emphasizing the ‘waywardness of personal feeling’: Lamb simultaneously ‘invites and questions the personal response’, demonstrating the ‘indeterminacy’ which avoids authorial direction of the reader (202). Although Lamb would produce essays only intermittently over the ensuing two decades, and would not settle into ‘the voice of Elia’ until 1820, his Elia essays would reflect the outlook and tone of *The Londoner*, and, while addressing ‘contemporary topics’, they would ‘also continue the debates and ideals of the 1790s’ (203). In *The South-Sea House*, for example, Elia ‘is fascinated by the power of personal affections in shaping environment’, and ‘maps personal

¹³ Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802). *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, paperback edition), page 598.

¹⁴ Sara Coleridge understood, though did not share, Lamb’s preference for the city over lakes and mountains; and recognized his concurrence with the Wordsworthian principle of the power of personal association and memory: ‘I agree to your criticism on Lamb, and sympathise most entirely in your preference of field, and grove, and rivulet, to square, garden, street, and gutter. I always feel so particularly *insecure* in a street. Nevertheless I can quite understand Lamb’s feeling. A man is more especially alone, very often, in a crowd. Nowhere can an individual be so isolated, so independent as in London. Nowhere else can he see so much and be so little observed. This, I think, is the “sweet security of streets” which the old eccentric bachelor delighted in. And then he had been educated at Christ’s Hospital, all his boyish recreations, when life was new and *lifesome*, had passed in streets, and we all know the circumstances of our childhood give the prevailing hue to our involuntary tastes and feelings for the rest of our lives. I cannot picture to myself a Paradise without lakes or mountains’. Letter to Mrs H.M. Jones, 1835, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (London: Henry King, 1873), 2 Vols. Vol 1, page 133.

affection onto an urban landscape, as he remembers clerks such as Evans, who himself is distinguished by his desire to commemorate old and new London—the site of old theatres, churches, streets gone to decay’ (204). James contends that the ‘very form of the familiar essay’ develops the ‘drive towards the “real language of men”’ and regards the Elia essays as representing ‘a symbiosis of the experiential and the ideal’; which, as Coleridge’s conversation poems, focus intensely on specific details in attempting to open up the ‘one and indivisible’ (205). The essays show an awareness that such attempts inevitably fall short, but, like *Rosamund Gray* and *John Woodvil*, assert the importance of ‘benevolent community’, even if this can be ‘realised only imaginatively, or through reading’: the essays, like the earlier novel and play, create ‘this community by encouraging active connection between reader and text’ (205).

In her concluding pages, James indicates areas for further investigation: Lamb’s ‘role as mediator between “first” and “second” generation Romantics’, for example, and ‘the full story of the connections between Lamb and Keats’ (208).¹⁵ She also draws intriguing parallels between Lamb’s pleasurable loss of identity in the city, Baudelaire’s concept of modernity,¹⁶ and Virginia Woolf’s account of ‘rambling the streets of London’ in the essay *Street-Haunting: A London Adventure*.¹⁷ Such parallels uncover ‘hidden channels between the sensibility of the eighteenth century and the modern urban perspective’ (214). Furthermore, these ‘different readings of the city are linked to different ways of reading—an emphasis [...] on an emotional, individual response’, which may question ‘rigid definitions and canonical boundaries’, pointing the way to ‘an alternative narrative of Romanticism’: the sociable textual community of the 1790s, in which Lamb was profoundly engaged, opens into ‘into wider meanings’ (214). Felicity James’s book is a significant contribution to our understanding of Lamb and his place in English Romanticism. A model of scholarly erudition conveyed with admirable clarity of style, it is a pleasure to read; while the excellent notes for each chapter facilitate, indeed encourage, further study. That the work was undertaken with congenial personal commitment to the subject is clear from the outset; reflected in the author’s generous acknowledgement of ‘the Elia friendliness, good humour and learning of all the members of the Charles Lamb Society’ (xi).

¹⁵ James reminds us, also, that ‘a copy of Lamb’s earlier work, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived About The Time of Shakespeare*, counted as one of Keats’s most treasured possessions’, which, in August 1820, he ‘inscribed to Fanny Brawne’ (209).

¹⁶ Baudelaire defined ‘modernity’ as ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’ (239).

¹⁷ In the essay, Woolf writes: ‘the greatest pleasure of town-life in winter—rambling the streets of London [...] The evening hour [...] gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves’ (213). She describes entering a second-hand bookshop: her fascination with its variety of books ‘recalls Lamb’s love of searching among “the old Book stalls”’ (214).