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Poetical, Political and Personal Epistolary Thoughts of Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge [1]

"Thank you for your frequent letters: you are the only correspondent and I might add, the only friend I have in the world." [2]

Katy Beavers

BOTH CHARLES LAMB and Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote voluminous quantities of letters to a wide range of people, the majority of which have now been published. These letters tell us the story of their lives as they saw them, and we see opinions and quirks of personality otherwise unrevealed. Intimate things could be said in letters which could not be elsewhere discussed, and which would otherwise have been lost to us.

On a much broader scale, their letters are also a very good way of appreciating the difficulties of living through the turbulent years of the late 18th Century. For both men, these years also marked a time of great uncertainty and flux in their personal lives. Although firm childhood friends, they lost touch when they left Christ's Hospital—Lamb remained in London to work, and Coleridge went up to University in Cambridge in 1791. Although they had met up again by 1795, there is no published correspondence between Lamb and Coleridge before 27 May 1796. Lamb removed many of Coleridge's letters from his home during an acute personal crisis in 1796:

> Your own judgement will convince you not to take any notice of this yet to your dear wife. You look after your family; I have my reason & strength left to take care of mine. I charge you, don't think of coming to see me. Write. I will not see you if you come. God Almighty love you.[3]

Lamb and Coleridge's formative years coincided with a great period of international social unrest. The period 1772-1797 was punctuated by independent revolutionary uprisings across the world, all of which shared the common factor of the attempted, but not always successful, seizure of power from the authorities by the oppressed, to claim it for their own. The major political, social and economic crises occurring during this period were the first shocks of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the American War of Independence (1775-1783), the French Revolution (1789), and the English war with France (1793-1815). For politically radical young men such as Coleridge, the storming of the Bastille in 1789 was a key event in the French Revolution. For him, this was the trigger which set in motion all of the

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1 From an invited paper for the Ernest Crowsley Memorial Lecture given at the Charles Lamb Society on 8 October 2005.

2 p581, Letter to STC, 10 June 1796, *The Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb* , New York: The Modern Library (Random House Inc.) (1963) 2nd edition.

3 p593, Letter to STC, 27 September 1796, ibid

Revolution's subsequent political and social events. At this time, there was also the very real possibility, and significant worry, that the French revolutionaries would decide to invade England. Revolutionary fervour was already rife in England, as demonstrated in 1794 by the arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent Treason Trials of a group of radicals, amongst whom were John Thelwall, John Horne Tooke, and Thomas Hardy, Secretary of the London Corresponding Society. After a lengthy trial, a verdict of not guilty was brought in and the charges against all remaining prisoners (some 800 arrest warrants had been drafted) were dropped. [4]

In 1794, it was precisely the ideals of political and religious liberty so tempting to the early settlers in America, which also tempted the Pantisocrats (Southey, Coleridge, Lovell and the Fricker sisters), in defiance of slavery, to consider emigration. Southey and Coleridge wanted the Pantisocrats to be completely self-sufficient, living off their own homegrown produce, and educating their children at home. It is interesting to note that Southey and Coleridge's notions of Pantisocratic equality meant that all Pantisocratic men would be equal. The women's position was less clear. Southey and Coleridge expected the female Pantisocrats to take on the majority of the domestic chores, including chopping wood, cooking, cleaning, and helping on the farm: most of which would be done whilst they were pregnant, since they were also to raise and educate the next generation of Pantisocrats. With the women doing the lions' share of the work in the new settlement, the men expected to be able to work for approximately three hours per day, leaving the rest of the day to writing, and discussions of philosophy and literature.

To fund both the project, and his impending marriage to Sarah Fricker, Coleridge needed to raise a considerable amount of money quickly. His first plan was to get the verse drama *The Fall of Robespierre* published, which Coleridge and Southey had written very quickly, soon after reports of Robespierre's death reached England. Benjamin Flower, the radical Unitarian, published an edition of 500 copies in October 1794, which not only brought Coleridge some much-needed money and public recognition, but it also broadcast the Pantisocratic message. However, Coleridge was careful to make sure that he received more recognition than Southey for this joint work, by not including Southey's name on the title-page. He sent this particularly unconvincing explanation in a letter to Southey:

> I shall put my Name—because it will sell at least an hundred copies at Cambridge – It would appear ridiculous to put two names to *such* a work.[5]

The financial pressure on Coleridge and Southey was now immense. These

[4] p738, *Part Two—Alphabetical Entries*, McCalman, Iain (General Editor*), An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001).

[5] p106, to Robert Southey, Fri Sept 9th 1794 (Griggs).

were exactly the conditions which Coleridge needed to enable him to excel. His published output was prolific, and his reputation grew. As well as having *The Fall of Robespierre* published, Coleridge was successful in getting his "Sonnets on Eminent Characters" published weekly in the "Morning Chronicle" in December 1794 and January 1795, and "To a Young Ass", published in the "Morning Chronicle" on December 30th, 1794. This poem expressed the fraternal notions of Pantisocracy, but it was perhaps unfortunate that Coleridge chose to address an ass, for Byron among others, ridiculed the expression of Coleridge's ideas through such an ignoble subject:

> … none in numbers can surpass
> the bard who soars to elegise an ass.
> So well the subject suits his noble mind,
> He brays the laureate of the long-ear'd kind.[6]

Charles Lamb contributed towards Coleridge's poetic efforts of this time, providing sound critical advice and a friendly ear to sympathise with Coleridge's financial difficulties. He also contributed at least one of Coleridge's series of *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, in the form of the Sonnet to Mrs Siddons, who evoked in him some of his night horrors as a child:

> Even such the shiv'ring joys thy tones impart,
> Even so thou, SIDDONS! meltest my sad heart![7]

This sonnet was subsequently credited to Lamb, and published in Coleridge's *Poems* of 1796 under the title "Effusion VII", along with three other "Effusions" by Lamb. In his adult life, Lamb always found it very easy to recall how he had felt as a child. Both Lamb and Coleridge used to experience night horrors as children, although in Lamb's case, they started before he was sent to Christ's Hospital, whilst he was a very young child still living with his family in the Temple. He relates his memories of this experience through his alter-ego, Elia, in an essay called *Witches and Other Night Fears*, published in the *Essays of Elia* in 1823:

> I was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors. The night-time solitude and the dark were my hell. The sufferings I endured in this nature would justify the expression. I never laid my head on my pillow, I suppose, from the fourth to the seventh or eighth year of my life (so far as memory serves in things so long ago) without an assurance, which realized its own prophecy, of seeing some frightful spectre.[8]

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6 p114, "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers", *The Works of Lord Byron* , Ware: Wordsworth Poetry Library (Wordsworth Editions Ltd) (1994

7 p73, Sonnets on Eminent Characters: 8. To Mrs Siddons, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems,* London: Penguin Classics (1997, reprinted 2004).

8 p750, from *Witches and Other Night Fears*, in Wu, Duncan, *Romanticism: An Anthology Third Edition*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2006) 3rd edition.

Despite all their efforts, Southey and Coleridge's Pantisocratic scheme fell through before it could be fully realised. Coleridge and Southey were forced to find other means of raising money quickly. In January 1795 they moved into a house in Bristol. Living and working in close proximity to each other for eight months took its toll on their friendship. Coleridge, Southey and George Burnett's finances were so bad that they had to borrow money from Coleridge's publisher, Joseph Cottle, for the rent, and for food. Despite these problems, Coleridge managed to write a well-received series of lectures.

For Coleridge, the final nail in the Pantisocratic coffin was that, on the eve of his departure for Portugal, Southey secretly married his Pantisocratic bride, Edith Fricker, not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but because they were passionately in love with each other, something that Coleridge could only pretend for Sara Fricker. At this point it must have been very easy for Coleridge to feel that he had not only lost any chance of making something of his life, but also that he had been outdone by Southey. His letter of 13 November 1795 vents his frustrations:

> You have left a large Void in my Heart – I know no man big enough to fill it. Others I may love equally and esteem equally: and some perhaps I may admire as much. But never do I expect to meet another man, who will make me unite attachment for his person with reverence for his heart and admiration of his Genius! I did not only venerate you for your own Virtues, I prized you as Sheet Anchor of mine![9]

Enter Charles Lamb, with whom Coleridge had re-established contact in 1794. Charles Lamb's adolescence and early adulthood was also a period of great turmoil, although, unlike Coleridge, this was due to events which forced themselves on Lamb, rather than being of his own making. Always of a slightly nervous disposition, even as a child, the crescendo of Charles Lamb's misfortunes began when he was still a pupil at Christ's Hospital. Lamb's school friends (including Coleridge) all attained the rank of Grecian – a privileged position within the school, denoting boys who were destined to go on to University, to prepare for a career in the Church. Lamb was only made up to Deputy Grecian. This was through no reflection on his intellectual abilities, but rather because of a speech impediment the School authorities considered him unsuitable to undertake a career in the Church.

This decision made on his behalf not only robbed him of the opportunity to continue his formal education by going to University, but also ensured that Charles Lamb's destiny would be markedly different from that of most of his contemporaries. For a sensitive, easily impressionable teenager, such as Lamb was at this time, this decision by the School authorities must have had a

[9] Ibid.

devastating impact.

Whilst Lamb was bound up with his own personal concerns in 1789, the 16-year old Coleridge was beginning to become interested in the world outside. This was largely due to the fact that his position in life at this time allowed him the time to do this. He was secure in the knowledge that he would go to University, from which he could realistically expect to leave with a degree, and enter a secure career in the Church. Lamb's position was much more uncertain, as he was already aware that he would have to rely on his own hard work to support both himself and his family. In France, the Bastille was stormed on 14 July 1789, opening the floodgates for the attempted overthrow of French authority.

The effects of this revolution so deeply impressed themselves upon the young Coleridge, then still a pupil at Christ's Hospital, that he recorded the event in an early poem—*The Destruction of the Bastile.* Coleridge draws heavily on a style of language found in prayer books and the King James Bible, very much in the manner of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, yet the poem's general tone is overly descriptive, very clumsy and unnecessarily wordy:

> While Anguish rais'd the desperate hand
> For silent death; or lost the mind's control,
> Thro' every burning vein would tides of frenzy roll[10]

What *The Destruction of the Bastile* does show, however, is the 16 year old Coleridge's grasp of the enormity of this event, and its possible knock-on consequences across the world. The poem also emphasises Coleridge's belief at this time that the French Revolution would succeed, and the oppressive ruling-classes would be overthrown. As a teenager, Coleridge also believed that the revolution would spread through England and the rest of the world. *The Destruction of the Bastile* continues:

> … wider yet thy influence spread,
> Till every land from pole to pole
> Shall boast one independent soul![11]

Although *The Destruction of the Bastile* is clearly a juvenile poem, it does show the extent to which, even at this age, Coleridge is willing to experiment with his poetic style. Ultimately, several years later, this readiness to experiment led him to develop his own distinct poetic voice. In contrast to this, Lamb's *Sonnet to Mrs Siddons*, written several years after Coleridge's *Destruction of the Bastile* is a very orthodox sonnet:

> As when a child on some long Winter's night
> Affrighted clinging to its Grandam's knees

[10] lines 18-20, Destruction of the Bastile, p10, *STC Works*.
[11] ibid, lines 35-38.

> With eager wond'ring and perturb'd delight
> Listens strange tales of fearful dark decrees[12]

Coleridge was much more daring in his poetic style than Lamb, and it was some years before Lamb would realise his true literary vocation, as an essayist.

After leaving School during the winter of 1789, Lamb worked for Joseph Paice as a Clerk for a year. He then took up another temporary position, for about a year, in the South Sea House. From there, in 1792, Lamb moved to the Accounts Department of the East India Company, where he was to remain for the next thirty-three years. No doubt feeling extremely deflated by the decision of his School Masters not to send him to University, at home Lamb was also quickly thrust into the role of main provider for his family, which at the time consisted of his aging mother, father and Aunt Hetty, a young servant girl and his sister Mary. Their mother was an elderly invalid by this time, requiring Mary's care twenty-four hours a day, which was taking its toll on her mental health, as well as on her efforts to provide extra money for the family as a dress-maker.

Their father was going senile, and Aunt Hetty was infirm due to her advanced age. Unsurprisingly, under these pressures, Charles Lamb sought solace and escapism in the evenings in the company of friends and acquaintances in the taverns of London. One of these friends was Coleridge, who early in 1794 was staying at the Salutation and Cat Tavern in Newgate Street under the official excuse of trying to raise Pantisocratic funds. In actual fact he was running away from his responsibilities in Bristol. As Lamb wrote to Coleridge in a later letter of 1796, after Coleridge's marriage to Sarah Fricker:

> I shall half wish you unmarried (don't show this to Mrs C.) for one evening only, to have the pleasure of smoking with you and drinking egg-hot in some little smoky room in a pot-house, for I know not yet how I shall like you in a decent room and looking quite happy. My best love and respects to Sara not withstanding.[13]

During this happy time together Lamb and Coleridge discussed poetry and literature, amongst other subjects. As they gradually rediscovered their childhood intimacy, their subjects of conversation then broadened to include, amongst other things, their loves and woes, and plans for the future. Coleridge was "preaching Pantisocracy" at this point to anyone who would listen (and presumably, also to many who wouldn't). As Lamb's immediate concerns were so completely different to those of Coleridge, it is not surprising that Coleridge did not manage to encourage Lamb to join the expedition. As permanent sole provider, Lamb was indispensable to his family, with responsibilities that

[12] p73, Sonnets on Eminent Characters: 8. To Mrs Siddons, *STC works*.
[13] p589, Lucas, E. V., *Letters of Charles Lamb in Two Volumes with 50 Illustrations: Volume One 1775-1817* , London: Methuen & Co. (1905).

Coleridge could not imagine. These responsibilities were weighing heavily on Lamb:

> … at 21 years of age… his troubles began to more and more affect his spirits, his gaiety flagged, and, with it, his sociability. When not at his office, he began to withdraw into solitude… [14]

In February 1792 Samuel Salt, the family's benefactor died, which meant that the family had to leave the Temple where Charles and Mary had grown up, and move to a new home in Little Queen Street, which was off Holborn. During 1794/5 Lamb became depressed, which was not helped by Coleridge being dragged back to Bristol by Robert Southey to "do his duty" to Sarah Fricker, which had the effect of making Lamb drink even more. Lamb tells Coleridge of his depression in a letter of 10th June, 1796:

> When you left London I felt a dismal void in my heart. I found myself cut off, at one and the same time, from 2 most dear to me… In your conversation you had blended so many pleasant fancies that they cheated me of my grief. But in your absence the tide of melancholy rushed in again & did its worst mischief by overwhelming my reason. I have recovered, but feel a stupor which makes me indifferent to the hopes and fears of this life.[15]

The Lamb children were all prone to bouts of mental illness. In 1795 Charles was taken into a mental institution. In his first surviving letter to Coleridge (dated 27 May 1796), Lamb briefly relates the experience, but still shows evidence of his usual sense of humour:

> The 6 weeks that finished last year and began this, your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a madhouse, at Hoxton. I am got somewhat rational now, & don't bite anyone.[16]

The tone of Lamb's early surviving letters to Coleridge is very tender and gentle, almost like a man writing love-letters to his absent lover. This is partly due to the familiar style of late 18th Century correspondence, but it is also very expressive of Lamb's newly rediscovered genuine affection for Coleridge.

> … Coleridge, it may convince you of my regards for you when I tell you my head ran on you in my madness… [17]

This may also be a classic case of absence making the heart grow fonder. Coleridge's haphazard and impulsive lifestyle was almost the opposite of

[14] p54, Cecil.
[15] p572, , *Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb.*
[16] p573, ibid.
[17] p574, ibid.

Lamb's enforced conformity at this point in his life (with the exception of the episode of madness), and it is interesting to consider, had the two spent much more time in each other's company, whether Lamb may not eventually have become irritated by Coleridge's inability to manage his own money or affairs.

Despite being such good friends, Lamb and Coleridge had very different personalities. This was perhaps due to both a combination of their own natures, and their different life-experiences. Both were great British eccentrics, but their eccentricities were revealed in different ways. Throughout his life, Lamb could find humour in most situations, and was a very enthusiastic and appreciative observer of people and their peculiarities and character traits. He retained a life-long fascination with the individuality and strangeness of human nature. This was perhaps largely as a result of his early observations of members of his own family. Whilst Coleridge also had a sense of humour, he took himself far more seriously than Lamb, which was shown by his regular unplanned monologues on a wide range of subjects. Whilst Lamb could also be serious on occasion, in company he was more likely to be found punning and cracking jokes than theorising on philosophy and metaphysics. Lamb's powerful sense of humour nearly always shone though, as evidenced in some of the extracts from his letters quoted earlier:

> The conclusion of your Religious Musings, I fear, will entitle you to the reproof of your beloved woman, who wisely will not suffer your fancy to run riot, but bids you walk humbly with your God.[18]

He was never guilty of taking himself too seriously, unlike Coleridge, who at the time of Pantisocracy really believed that himself and Southey could stage a bloodless cultural revolution on the banks of the Susquehannah. Lamb, on the other hand, was fully aware that the most important role he could undertake in his life-time was that of provider for his family, and provider and carer for his troubled sister Mary. One of the few times when Lamb's sense of humour deserted him in his letters to Coleridge was shortly after the death of Mrs Lamb, on the day which Lamb was subsequently to refer to as the "day of horrors". The letter informing Coleridge of the events of 22 September 1796 retained Lamb's customary eloquence, but his usually verbosity was missing. The letter was short, and to the point:

> … my friends, or the public papers, by this time may have informed you of the terrible calamities that have fallen on our family. I will only give you the outlines: —My poor dear, dearest sister, in a fit of insanity, has been the death of her own mother. I was at hand only time enough to snatch the knife out of her grasp… God has preserved me to my senses… My poor father was slightly wounded,

[18] p578, Letter II, June 1796, ibid

> and I am left to take care of him and my aunt.[19]

Even immediately after such a devastating event at such an early point in his life, Lamb knew exactly what he had to do to "do his duty". This was a decision he reached alone, and with absolute certainty, unlike Coleridge's agonies over his engagement to Sarah Fricker, which he had discussed so often and in such depth with Robert Southey, before reaching the conclusion that he, too, must "do his duty". This is evidence of Lamb's great strength of character, as opposed to Coleridge's irresponsible and impulsive outlook on life. Further evidence of this was Lamb's decision, later in life, to concentrate on writing prose, when the opportunity was offered to him. Whilst not a bad poet, Lamb was aware that his poetry was not of the same calibre as that of the other Romantics, such as Coleridge and Wordsworth. This realisation resulted in Lamb turning himself into, arguably, one of the most accomplished essay writers in the English language. His prose works were quirky, and full of character, and observations of the human condition (including his own):

> 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 on me.[20]

In terms of critical reception, as the essay became a less and less fashionable medium outside academic circles, Lamb began to recede into the background, behind the Romantics who were remembered for their poetry, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Lamb's outlook and politics were certainly less controversial than those of the above named poets (which may also have been a contributory factor), but to the people who knew and appreciated Lamb, he was not less significant. His contemporaries knew of the practically impossible domestic circumstances through which he lived, and the bravery and devotion with which he resigned himself to the life of an office clerk, in order to protect and provide for his sister. Lamb, and his works, do not fit into the same "Romantic" stereotype as his contemporaries, which could potentially signal a danger of losing sight of just how interesting, and what a necessary presence in the Romantic movement, Charles Lamb really was.

[19] p593, Letter VIII, September 27, 1796, ibid.
[20] p297, *Confessions of a Drunkard, The Essays of Elia by Charles Lamb*, London: Everyman's Library (JM Dent & Sons Ltd) (1906, reprinted 1909).