

Leigh Hunt, Essayist

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Leigh Hunt made a name for himself as poet, critic, journalist, editor, and essayist, but he was probably best, and best known in his own time, as an essayist.¹ As Hunt noted in a letter,² even his friends thought he was superior at writing essays, and, as J. B. Priestley pointed out, "had Hunt not worked side by side with Lamb and Hazlitt, he might have enjoyed a greater reputation as an essayist."³ Unfortunately, it has been the strange fashion, as Priestley illustrates, to diminish the merits of Hunt's essays by emphasizing their inferiority to the essays of his contemporaries. Langland is not depreciated because Chaucer is the greater writer, nor is Jonson because Shakespeare is the greater dramatist, nor is Marvell because Milton is the greater poet. But Hunt frequently suffers such depreciatory comparisons. To make matters worse, the reading of essays, and Hunt's best work is in his essays, is no longer very popular. As a result of these two phenomena, Leigh Hunt's reputation has undergone something of an eclipse. This undeserved disparaging of Hunt's essays is unfortunate because even though one would have to agree with Ian Jack that in the essay Hunt does not "reach the highest class,"⁴ still, as James R. Thompson suggests, the "general quality of his periodical writing was surprisingly high, considering the bulk."⁵

Hunt wrote at least three distinct kinds of essays—critical, political, and familiar. His first essays, those published in the *Traveller* in 1804 over the signature of "Mr. Town, Critic and Censor General," were critical. In 1805 to 1807 he published a number of articles of dramatic

¹ Material used here was gathered with the aid of University of Toledo Research Grants and a Summer Faculty Fellowship.

² Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley dated December 2, 1819 (MS in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library), in which Hunt says in reference to the *Indicator*, "They tell me I am at my best in this work." Charles and Mary Lamb were two friends who felt the *Indicator* contained Hunt's best work. See Nettie S. Tillett, "Elia and 'The Indicator.'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 33 (1934): 307.

³ *Selected Essays by Leigh Hunt* (London: J. M. Dent, 1929), p. vii.

⁴ *English Literature 1815-1832* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 324.

⁵ *Leigh Hunt* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 91.

criticism in the *News*, and, of course, the *Examiner* printed many critical and political articles over the years when Hunt was editor. But the kind of essays that Hunt was master of—perhaps no one in the nineteenth century other than Lamb wrote better ones—were the familiar essays. Many of them appeared in journals of which he was editor: *Reflector* (1811-12), *Indicator* (1819-21), *Liberal* (1822-23), *Companion* (1828), *Tatler* (1830-32), *Leigh Hunt's London Journal* (1834-35), and *Leigh Hunt's Journal* (1850-51). He also published essays in many other journals, but the best of his familiar essays appeared in the *Indicator*, *Companion*, and *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*.

The topics of the familiar essays were wide ranging. No other contemporary essayist wrote on so many. As his son Thornton noted, "Few essayists have equalled, or approached, Leigh Hunt in the combined versatility, invention, and finish of his miscellaneous prose writings."⁶ Hunt wrote of various activities from dancing to pig driving; of people ancient and contemporary, real and imaginary; of everyday life; of holidays; of places from Pisa to St. Paul's; of windows and sticks. He wrote character sketches of old men, old women, maidservants, and washerwomen. He told stories. But mostly he wrote about nature—hot days, cold days, rainy days, Maydays, spring and autumn, daisies and pigeons—and literature—poetry and poets, drama, and dramatists.

One distinctive feature of all the familiar essays is that, as Louis Landré wrote,

Leigh Hunt is always present in his essays, more openly than Hazlitt in his, whether he comments about what he describes or recollects, makes us share in his sentiments and beliefs, or discusses moments of his own life or expresses his views on people he has been acquainted with.⁷

This is different from the traditional eighteenth-century essay, which was Hunt's model, in that the eighteenth-century essayist used a spokesman, or persona. Perhaps Hunt developed the trait from the essays he wrote in his letters where he was, of course, writing in his own person.

Being something of a child prodigy, Hunt apparently was always able to write a finished first draft. This is evident from his letters, which all maintain a high level of writing, and yet few of them seem to have been rewritten, and corrections are relatively rare. Indeed, parts of many of the letters could have been published as essays. The ability to write rapidly and well certainly contributed both to his success as a journalist and as an essayist who was constantly forced to write for money. But

⁶ Thornton Hunt, "A Man of Letters of the Last Generation." *Cornhill Magazine* 1 (January, 1860): 92.

⁷ Leigh Hunt, p. 143.

it may also have contributed to the unevenness of the essays which has usually been ascribed to such things as the fact that Hunt had no time for revision, that he frequently had no control over the choice of topic, that his interests were so many that he spread himself too thin.⁸ The fact is, that the mere ability to write so well without correction may have discouraged Hunt from doing the hard work of revision. After all, when the draft was of such high quality, even the most rigorous revision could achieve only minimal improvement which, to Hunt, could consequently seem not worth the trouble, even if he had had the time. It thus may be that, as Priestley (p. x) has said, "It is doubtful that a more leisurely method of production would have made him a better essayist."

Whether the essays would have been improved by giving them a formal unity is also a question. As it is, any unity is to be sought in the subjective unity of free association which Hunt used. Indeed, essays may not stick to any one subject or to any one tone. They tend to skip about freely, now serious, now humorous, touching on points that seem only slightly related to the announced topic, which is begun and written about until the required space is filled with seemingly no particular end in mind. Even so, one does not sense a lack of unity, and there is always a pleasantness, a cheerfulness, frequently a gaiety about the essays. Many have what Watson calls "a spontaneity, a vivacity, a good-naturedness that characterize much of Hunt's writing."⁹ In short, the essays seem to have been written primarily to give pleasure, and despite all the flaws and weaknesses that have been attributed to them, most of the essays are enjoyable.

For the most part critics of Hunt's essays have been satisfied merely to comment on the essays with slight illustration from them. It would seem good, therefore, especially since much of the previous criticism has been critical of the essays, to follow Hunt's practice in writing criticisms of authors and quote amply from his writings. Besides, some extended quotations illustrating various characteristics in the essays should demonstrate, among other things, that, first, for years before the earliest familiar essay was published, Hunt had been practicing the technique in his personal letters, and, second, that the essays are much better than they are usually thought to be, that indeed Hunt could be a fine essayist.

Though Hunt's earliest published familiar essays appeared in the *Reflector* in 1811, he had been writing essays as early as 1803 in his letters

⁸ See Priestley, p. viii; Thompson, pp. 18, 91.

⁹ Melvin R. Watson, "The *Spectator* Tradition and the Development of the Familiar Essay," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 3 (1946): 205.

to Marianne Kent, who was to become his wife in 1809. Of course, there was a tradition from the eighteenth century of writing essays in letter form, and some of Hunt's published essays follow the tradition. But, that he was consciously writing essays within his letters is demonstrated by the fact that Hunt abruptly stopped sometimes in the middle of a letter to say that he had drifted into writing an essay. Moreover, the essays in the letters, as they may be called, contain various notable characteristics found in Hunt's published essays, such as descriptions of places, character sketches, anecdotes, and narratives. A comparison between passages from early letters and from later published essays demonstrates their similarity of technique and mood. It is to be noted, for example, that parts of some of the letters, particularly those describing trips to Oxford, Cambridge, Lincoln, and Nottingham, have very much the tone, movement, and vivid description of the depictions of places in later published essays. Indeed, the descriptions in letters and essays both follow Hunt's suggestion of the ideal way to describe places, as stated in a letter to J. W. Dalby in which Hunt was commenting on Dalby's method of writing in the *Northampton Mercury*.

I hope also you will ramble & peregrinate on paper till your readers tell you to stop; which they will be in no hurry to do, if they are of my mind; for an enjoyment of localities, after that fashion, combines the novelty of the particular portrait with the expression of feelings common & delightful to us all,—at least all who are capable of delight; & I know of very few kinds of writing indeed that are more desirable.¹⁰

As an example of the description of a place in a letter, Hunt wrote to Marianne on February 13, 1806, describing Lincoln as

an ancient and populous city rising on a hill and built originally in the Gothic style or rather in the Saracenic; for the architecture usually supposed to be borrowed from the Goths, or northern nations of Europe, was first introduced into Spain by its conquerors the Saracens. The city is overlooked by a noble cathedral, the inside of which has been newly beautified, that is, whitened and spoiled. The outside is covered with that curious minute ornament and fretwork which you have seen on Westminster Cathedral and which always appears to me like so much useless lace-work. This intricate cutting and carving however certainly adds to the venerable aspect of such structures, probably from the same reason that wrinkles adorn a fine old face. Some of the ornaments nevertheless astonished me: they were such as I had never seen and certainly never expected in these holy edifices, and consisted of a range of grotesque faces, just like the hideous masks of a pantomime: some grinned at you with cheeks puckered up and mouths wide open, others shut their eyes and twisted their noses as if they were mocking the holy doings within, the others hung their heads and poked out their jaws as if they were afflicted with the tooth-ache. These comic

¹⁰ MS letter in the Brewer Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries, MsL/H94d/No. 1.

visages mingled with swelled-cheeked cherubims and long-bearded saints with now and then a little devil peeping over a pillar presented a singular mixture of celestial and infernal ideas, and it seemed as if the architect had wished to express his contempt for superstition by introducing its champions into such company.¹¹

A comparison with a similar description in the essay "Genoa" which appeared in 1822 shows not only the same careful attention to detail, but also the same sense of a personality behind the words as found particularly in the occasional commentary on the scene described.

Genoa is truly "Genoa the Superb." Its finest aspect is from the sea, and from the sea I first beheld it. Imagine a glorious amphitheatre of white houses, with mountains on each side and at the back. The base is composed of the city with its churches and shipping; the other houses are country seats, looking out, one above the other, up the hill. To the left are the Alps with their snowy tops; to the right, and for the back, are the Apennines. This is Genoa. It is situate at the very angle of the pointed gulf, which is called after its name, and which presents on either side, as you sail up it, white villages, country seats, and olive groves. . . . In Genoa, after passing through Goldsmith-Street, and another that leads up from it, you come out by the post-office upon the Piazza delle Fontane Amoroze—the Place of the Amorous Fountains. There is a magnificent mansion in it, containing baths, and another, adorned on the outside with paintings of festive women. But here all the houses begin to be magnificent mansions, and you again recognize "Genova la Superba." From the Piazza delle Fontane Amoroze you turn into the Strada Nuova, which leads round through another sumptuous street into the Strada Balbi, fit, says Madame de Stael, for a congress of kings. . . . The three streets are literally a succession of palaces on each side the way; and these palaces are of costly architecture, and are adorned inside with the works of the Italian masters. Marble is lavished every where. It is like a street raised by Aladdin, to astonish his father-in-law the Sultan. Yet there is one lamentable deficiency. Even these streets are narrow. I do not think the Strada Nuova is wider than Bond Street *without* the pavements. "A lane!" you cry. Yes, a lane of Whitehalls, encrusted with the richest architecture.¹²

Hunt's character sketches with their precise details and subtle humor also had their antecedents in his letters. For example, in a letter to Marianne dated July 24, 1806, Hunt gives a character sketch of a Mr. Oom, the Russian husband of the sister of one of Hunt's old school friends.¹³

The man is goodnatured and hospitable, and seems very fond of his wife; but he is not glowing with youth and with fancy, he is not a poet, he is not a painter, he is not a musician, in short he ought not

¹¹ MS letter in the British Library, Ashley 3393, ff. 1-4.

¹² *The Liberal, Verse and Prose from the South*, I (1822), 269, 276.

¹³ A Mr. Papendieck, whose sister Charlotte was married to Mr. Oom.

to have married Charlotte Papendieck, or I should say, Charlotte Papendieck ought not to have married him; every man is in the right to get as good a wife as he can, but that is no reason why a woman should put up with an indifferent husband. I wonder we never heard, amidst all the celestial intrigues, of the Loves of Venus and a Dutch tobacconist.¹⁴

A similar touch of humor among the details, along with the same balance and parallel structure, is found in Hunt's description of "The Monthly Nurse" published in 1840.

She takes snuff ostentatiously, Drams advisedly, tea incessantly, advice indignantly, a nap when she can get it, cold whenever there is a crick in the door, and the remainder of whatever her mistress leaves to eat or drink—provided it is what somebody else would like to have.¹⁵

Hunt has not only a pleasant and finished way of telling anecdotes which he occasionally inserted into his essays but a way of creating a realistic sense of dialogue. Again, he had previous practice in his letters as when he included an anecdote about actor and comic Samuel Foote in a letter written sometime before July 1809 to an unknown correspondent.

I'll tell you an anecdote of Foote; he was very ill for a week or more, and some medical friend sent him a phial of physic: his friend called on him a day or two after.

How d'ye do, Mr. Foote? Eh, you look a little better. Pray did you follow my prescription?

Follow your prescription, Doctor? God forbid? It would have been my death!

Been your death? How So?

Why, man, I threw it out o'window.¹⁶

An example of an anecdote from a published essay, "Beds and Bedrooms," shows similar simplicity, polish, and humor.

The most sordidly ridiculous anecdote we remember of a bedchamber, is one in the life of Elwes, the rich miser, who, asking a visitor one morning how he had rested, and being told that he could not escape from the rain which came through the roof of the apartment, till he had found out one particular corner in which to stow the truckle-bed, said laughingly, and without any sense of shame, "Ah, what! you found it out, did you? Ah! that's a nice corner, isn't it?"¹⁷

But Hunt also included extended narratives in his essays, and the amusing story he wrote to Marianne on June 11, 1808, about his journey

¹⁴ MS letter in the Brewer Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries, MsL/H94hum/No.7.

¹⁵ *Heads of the People* (London: Robert Tyas, 1840), pp. 105-12.

¹⁶ MS letter in Stanford University Library.

¹⁷ *The British Miscellany* 1 (1841):69-76.

by coach to Harborough in Leicestershire might have been included in any number of his essays.

All yesterday I was jammed up in a hot coach with a silent farmer, a sleepy lipping young man, and a Reverend Wigsby of the usual dimensions, who railed against the Unitarians, and what was worse, gave me no room for my legs. These three youths soon went to sleep, and I must own I had no snoring, but the parson by way of caution against cold had almost entirely pulled up both the coach-windows; my legs felt as if they were in the stocks; and his huge beaver, as he nodded, not only played up & down before my face in a manner that almost made me laugh, but tumbled off upon me every now and then, so that I expected his wig to follow every instant. However I waked him with much civility to return his hat, and then he used to start, and grin, & snore, & smile at me, I suppose by way of apology. I longed to have all their faces in a vice, as usual. Once, I fondly imagined he was going to be polite, for he made me change sides with him and I looked upon this as no small generosity, as he was on the best seat; but lo, when I altered my situation, I found the sun coming full upon my face. Nothing could have been better done. Oh Mr. Parson!¹⁸

Because of his adeptness at telling a tale, which he did occasionally in his essays, it is surprising that Hunt wrote only one novel, and that a not very successful one.¹⁹ An example of a characteristic tale, which incidentally also demonstrates Hunt's dictum that a perfect tale should have "a moral utility,"²⁰ is the ghost story he tells of a Bavarian whose frequent angry outbursts had finally worn to death his sweet and patient wife. She returned to life when remorse caused him to lose his rage, and for two years they lived peacefully. But then gradually his fits of temper began to reassert themselves. Hunt finishes the tale.

At length, one day, some strong rebuff which he had received from an alienated neighbour, threw him into such a transport of rage, that he gave way to the most bitter imprecations, crying with a loud voice—"This treatment to *me* too! To *me*! To me, who if the world knew all"—At these words, his wife, who had in vain laid her hand upon his, and looked him with dreary earnestness in the face, suddenly glided from the room. He, and two or three who were present, were struck with a dumb horror. They said, she did not walk out, nor vanish suddenly; but glided, as one who could dispense with the use of feet. After a moment's pause, the others proposed to him to follow her. He made a movement of despair; but they went. There was a short passage, which turned to the right into her favourite room. They knocked at the door twice or three times, and received no answer. At last,

¹⁸ MS letter in the Brewer Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries, MsL/H94hum/No. 10.

¹⁹ *Sir Ralph Esher, or, Adventures of a Gentleman of the Court of Charles II* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1832).

²⁰ "A Tale for a Chimney Corner," Leigh Hunt, *The Indicator and Companion: A Miscellany for the Fields and Fire-side* (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), I, 107.

one of them gently opened it; and looking in, they saw her, as they thought, standing before a fire, which was the only light in the room. Yet she stood so far from it, as rather to be in the middle of the room; only the face was towards the fire, and she seemed looking upon it. They addressed her, but received no answer. They stepped gently towards her, and still received none. The figure stood dumb and unmoved. At last, one of them went round in front, and instantly fell on the floor. The figure was without body. A hollow hood was left instead of a face. The clothes were standing upright by themselves.

That room was blocked up for ever, for the clothes, if it might be so, to moulder away. It was called the Room of the Lady's Figure. The house, after the gentleman's death, was long uninhabited, and at length burned by the peasants in an insurrection. As for himself, he died about nine months after, a gentle and child-like penitent.²¹

Thus some of the most characteristic features in Hunt's familiar essays—descriptions of places, character sketches, anecdotes, and narratives—were anticipated in his early letters. But there are other significant qualities which make Hunt's essays better than they are generally given credit for being. For one thing he was a very close observer, and he caught essences in detailed and vivid descriptions of people such as that of an old gentleman reading the newspaper.

If alone after dinner, his great delight is the newspaper; which he prepares to read by wiping his spectacles, carefully adjusting them on his eyes, and drawing the candle close to him, so as to stand sideways betwixt his ocular aim and the small type. He then holds the paper at arms' length, and dropping his eyelids half down and his mouth half open, takes cognizance of the day's information."²²

Equally vivid is Hunt's exact description of the poor, tired hackney-coach horse.

Can any thing better illustrate the poet's line about

—Years that bring the philosophic mind,

than the still-hung head, the dim indifferent eye, the dragged and blunt-cornered mouth, and the gaunt imbecility of body dropping its weight on three tired legs in order to give repose to the lame one? . . . Fatigue and the habit of suffering have become as natural to the creature, as the bit to its mouth. Once in half an hour it moves the position of its leg, or shakes its drooping ears. The whip makes it go, more from habit than from pain. Its coat has become almost callous to minor stings. The blind and staggering fly in autumn might come to die against its cheek.²³

Hunt's nature descriptions, also because of the close attention to detail, create effective images and demonstrate in a convincing way Hunt's

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 110-12; first published in the *Indicator* December 15, 1819.

²² "The Old Gentleman," Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 192; first published in the *Indicator* February 2, 1820.

²³ "Coaches," Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 57; first published in the *Indicator* August 30, 1820.

love of nature. For example, in one essay he describes the trees and flowers in springtime.

Then the young green. This is the most apt and perfect mark of the season,—the true issuing forth of the Spring. The trees and bushes are putting forth their crisp fans; the lilac is loaded with bud; the meadows are thick with the bright young grass, running into sweeps of white and gold with the daisies and buttercups. The orchards announce their riches, in a shower of silver blossoms. The earth in fertile woods is spread with yellow and blue carpets of primroses, violets, and hyacinths, over which the birch-trees, like stooping nymphs, hang with their thickening hair. Lilies-of-the-valley, stocks, columbines, lady-smocks, and the intensely red piony which seems to anticipate the full glow of summer-time, all come out to wait upon the season, like fairies from their subterraneous palaces.²⁴

Hunt not only delineates external details well, but he is capable of revealing in a brief space rather complex emotions. An example is his description of a young man eating an orange on an omnibus. Hunt catches well not only the humor of the situation, but the young man's embarrassment as the eating in front of young ladies whom he wishes to impress does not proceed smoothly.

Enter an unreflecting young gentleman who has bought an orange and must eat it immediately. He accordingly begins by peeling it, and is first made aware of the delicacy of his position by the gigglement of the two young ladies, and his doubt where he shall throw the peel. "He is in for it," however, and must proceed; so being unable to divide the orange into its segments, he ventures upon a great liquid bite, which resounds through the omnibus, and covers the whole of the lower part of his face with pip and drip. The young lady with the ringlets is right before him. The two other young ladies stuff their handkerchiefs into their mouths, and he into his own mouth the whole of the rest of the fruit, "sloshy" and too big, with desperation in his heart, and the tears in his eyes. Never will he eat an orange again in an omnibus. He doubts whether he shall even venture upon one at all in the presence of his friends.²⁵

There are many merits in his essays, but Hunt is no doubt at his best in his humorous descriptive essays such as "Getting Up on Cold Mornings" in which essay he describes and rationalizes his reluctance to get out of bed on a cold morning.

On my first movement towards the anticipation of getting up, I find that such parts of the sheets and bolster, as are exposed to the air of the room, are stone-cold. On opening my eyes, the first thing that meets them is my own breath rolling forth, as if in the open air, like smoke out of a chimney. Think of this symptom. Then I turn my eyes

²⁴ "Spring and Daisies," Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 257; first published in the *Indicator* April 19, 1820.

²⁵ "The Inside of an Omnibus," *The British Miscellany* 1 (1841):14-22.

sideways and see the window all frozen over. Think of that. Then the servant comes in. "It is very cold this morning, is it not?"—"Very cold, Sir."—"Very cold indeed, isn't it?"—"Very cold indeed, Sir."—"More than usually so, isn't it, even for this weather?" (Here the servant's wit and good-nature are put to a considerable test, and the enquirer lies on thorns for the answer.) "Why, Sir,—I think it *is*." (Good creature! There is not a better, or more truth-telling servant going.) "I must rise however—get me some warm water."—Here comes a fine interval between the departure of the servant and the arrival of the hot water; during which, of course, it is of "no use?" to get up. The hot water comes. "Is it quite hot?"—"Yes, Sir."—"Perhaps too hot for shaving: I must wait a little?"—"No, Sir; it will just do." (There is an over-nice propriety sometimes, an officious zeal of virtue, a little troublesome.) "Oh—the shirt—you must air my clean shirt;—linen gets very damp this weather."—"Yes, Sir." Here another delicious five minutes. A knock at the door. "Oh, the shirt—very well. My stockings—I think the stockings had better be aired too."—"Very well, Sir."—Here another interval. At length everything is ready, except myself.²⁶

Given such a delectable example, and there are several such, one wonders why Hunt's essays are so often patronized. They may be uneven. They may lack depth. They may not have Lamb's humor and pathos. But many are so delightful that even in an age that does not appreciate essays, they are to be enjoyed.

²⁶ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 185-86; first published in the *Indicator* January 19, 1820.