

## *"Mild Singing Clothes": The Poetry of Leigh Hunt*

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As has been repeatedly noticed, Leigh Hunt's reputation as a writer is inextricably bound up with the great poets of his time. This is not the place to recall all those occasions on which, as a result, he has been unfairly used. For his patience, hospitality, kindness, generosity of spirit, love of genius, and unstinting advocacy of creative merit, he has paid a high price: in some cases cruel exposure of his failure to achieve major poetic stature, in other cases condescension, more generally disregard. Starting in his own age, he has been repeatedly accused of, in Keats's words, artistic "self delusion"<sup>1</sup>—a vice of which he was never guilty. Hunt was, in fact, uncommonly humble and candid about his talents and accomplishments. He took pride, not in his many achievements, but in his gift for appreciation, in the good fortune of his time and place, and in his friendships. He was, among other things, a perceptive critic; as surely as he recognized talent where others denied or ignored it, so he knew his own limitations and freely acknowledged them. "I do not believe," he said wryly, "that other generations will take the trouble to rake for jewels in much nobler dust than mine."<sup>2</sup>

Yet dislike it as much as we may, the company of great men which has inevitably brought with it invidious comparisons and ungenerous attention has undoubtedly helped keep his memory alive—however much it may also have led to its abuse. To be remembered along with Shelley and Keats, even at the expense of his own real virtues, would have satisfied Hunt and it will simply have to satisfy those of us who admire him.

But the question of Leigh Hunt's reputation as a poet is also linked to that of his great peers in yet another, more general way. Our relationship with the Romantic poets has changed regarding our actual poetic

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<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>*The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. xvii. All subsequent quotations of Hunt are from this edition; page numbers are given in parentheses following the quotation.

taste and reading habits, even as it has changed again regarding our evaluation of their contribution to English literature. When earlier in this century the great task of reassessment began—the “rescue” of the Romantic generation from the hostile assessments of such worthies as T. S. Eliot and other neoclassicists—Romantic poetry was still deeply rooted in popular taste and, consequently, in the curriculum of our public schools. Now, when scholars need no longer apologize for their preoccupation with Romantic literature, public taste has changed and the larger audience is virtually gone. It was that audience that cherished and perpetuated Hunt’s poetry.

## I

What, then, can we now say of Hunt’s contribution to English poetry? We can of course continue earlier critical habits and locate its usefulness in the illumination of Hunt as an important literary personality. We can study its significance in the evolution of English poetical and metrical form. More importantly, we can examine the uses to which it can be put as an index of the Romantic sensibility. Obviously only the first of these approaches is of questionable value; for instance he clearly played a major role in the opening up of the couplet, and many of his poems offer us more accessible examples of Romantic thought and practice. But none of these approaches responds directly to the intrinsic value in, say, “The Story of Rimini” or “The Choice,” or to the question of whatever enduring literary satisfactions may remain in reading the Hampstead sonnets or “Rondeau.”

We can start by quickly saying what kind of attractions Hunt’s poetry does not, for the most part, provide. It is not intellectual; it does not engage us conceptually as do, in their different ways, the works of Shelley and Byron. It offers us no overwhelming vision, as does the poetry of Blake. It provides no brilliant formal or imagistic possibilities, as does Keats’s work. And there is nothing haunting or evocative about his creations, as one expects from Coleridge. Yet having said this we must immediately remind ourselves that few minor Romantic poets do match any of these qualities and that when they do—as in the case of Thomas Lovell Beddoes for instance—there are corresponding liabilities not found in Hunt.

Poetry in the “highest sense,” Hunt argued, “belongs exclusively to such men as Shakespeare, Spenser, and others, who possessed the deepest insights into the spirit and sympathies of all things.” But if such is the case, he remained confident that poetry, “in the most comprehensive application of the term,” is “the flower of any kind of experience, rooted in truth, and issuing forth into beauty.” He insisted that “poetry, like

the trees and flowers, is not of one class only," and that even the "humblest poetry stands a chance of surviving" if it is true to itself. Hence "all that the critic has a right to demand of it, according to its degree, is, that it should spring out of a real impulse, be consistent in its parts, and shaped into some characteristic harmony of verse" (p. xviii). This reasonable argument provides a justification for our continuing admiration of any good minor poet. Does Hunt's own work meet the test?

Statistically speaking, much of his work does not meet these demands.<sup>3</sup> He loved poetic composition above all other literary endeavors, but he was first of all a prose man—the professional writer and editor whose bread and butter was earned in the continual production of attractive essays, reviews, editorials, critiques, introductions. He wrote poetry, even his satires, as a kind of therapy; the poem's primary significance lay in the act of creation itself. But if that motive frequently led to slackness and to various forms of self-indulgence and escapism which ignored the need for "consistency in its parts," it is equally true that his first requirement—that poetry "should spring out of a real impulse"—is nearly always met in his work.

Hunt's usual fidelity to the genuine poetic impulse results in a number of characteristics and attractive qualities for which we may still admire his poetry. He is capable, for instance, of considerable metrical fluidity and stylistic grace, both of which he usually provides. He excels at vivid description, ranging from the humble and domestic world all around him to the exotic landscape of his imagination. He offers a vigorously sensuous and mythologized nature—half-real, half-imagined—a sort of Huntian version of Keats's world of "Flora, and old Pan." Similarly, he is the master of mood and atmosphere: from the then-rural Hampstead to the woods of Arcady, from contemporary London to Renaissance Italy.

These qualities are brought to bear on a variety of experiences in much the same manner as in his personal essays. In fact, a major charm of Hunt's poetry is the play of an engaging mind over those experiences which happen to come his way or which his taste causes him to seek out. The subtitle of one poem<sup>4</sup>—"An 'Indicator' in Verse," which of course refers to the title of his best journal—perfectly captures this aspect of his poetry; our pleasure comes not from an integrated analysis of experience but from sharing the authorial perspective. The organizational logic in such poems is associational. Our delight comes from sharing

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<sup>3</sup>Hunt reprinted only a third of his poems in the 1832 edition and it should be noted how frequently Milford marks "not reprinted" after the original publication information in his collected edition of Hunt's poetry.

<sup>4</sup>The poem is "Thoughts in Bed Upon Waking and Rising."

the pleasure of one “whom Love and no unloving need / Have taught the treasures found in daily things” (p. 258). Such treasures are, perhaps, inherently valuable; in poetry as in the essay Hunt often captures moments which in our nostalgia we would preserve. But typically the value is intrinsic; it is located in the intensity of his perception and the grace with which he communicates it. We come to value what he values through the force of his affection and genuine sentiment. This characteristic of the poet as familiar essayist also frequently marks those poems whose subjects fall in other categories. Hunt’s mind is not compartmentalized; he can move between orders of experience with ease.

More generally, the reader of Hunt’s poetry finds himself in the company of a writer whose own nature and whose persona are characterized by gentleness, good humor, warmth, and generosity of spirit—a friendly mind through which the world is kindly observed. Keats’s description of Hunt as “he . . . of the social smile” in his sonnet “Great Spirits Now on the Earth Are Sojourning” is very apt; Hunt’s poetry always projects not the private and egoistic experience but rather the human relationship of which he feels himself a part. Such openness naturally extracts its price; he is often left vulnerable to readers whose own joy in such a community of pleasure is severely restricted. Like other Romantic writers as different as Wordsworth and D. H. Lawrence, he is unprotected by irony. But by the same token, when Hunt is at his best he draws out the reader’s own most kindly and tolerant response and, on those occasions, the reader, by the “treasures found in daily things,” is momentarily liberated from the grimmer preoccupations with life; this is especially true for the twentieth-century reader.

Indeed, Hunt’s personality as much as the world observed is the subject of his poetry. Here we must be frank; Hunt’s reputation can in no way trade on our current tendency to value that from the past which seems to foreshadow the darker shades of the present. Hunt’s vision cannot even entertain the tragic, let alone flatter our own apocalyptic gloom. In a world where terms like *angst*, *alienation*, and *existential despair* are often used, not as descriptions but as signs of merit, Hunt offers us an open, forward-looking, optimistic mind supported not by some orthodox belief but by its own witness to the affirmative potential in human nature, by a sense of a healthy social reality, and by faith in the cosmos itself. As a result there is room here for us to appreciate some aspect of reality obscured by modern experience but dramatized daily all the same; Hunt no more invents the good which he sees man as capable of than he invents the beauty of the natural world which so much delights him. But, in addition to the legitimacy of his witness, there is his right as an artist. Wordsworth taught us to see the world

as half-created and half-perceived; Hunt's creation offers us the pleasure of any imaginatively realized and interpreted world.

Finally, a major virtue of Hunt's poetry is its unpretentiousness, its freedom, as someone has said, from fustian. Though he revered the high rhetoric of the great poets, he found his own analogy in an earlier minor poet, John Pomfret. Speaking of Pomfret's *The Choice* (1700), Hunt applauded the earlier poet as one "who knows / The charm that hollows the least thing from prose, / And dresses it in its mild singing clothes" (p. 340). Hunt's approval is based on his fundamental principle of poetic classes cited earlier—that regardless of the order of imagination, poetry must "spring out of a real impulse" and if it is true to that impulse, no matter how humble, the result must be recognized for its value. Such is the case with the best of Hunt's poetry.

## II

*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, that impressive arbiter of taste and determiner of the English canon in American schools and universities, includes just two of Hunt's poems: "The Fish, the Man, and the Spirit" and "Rondeau." Both choices, in their different ways, are very appropriate and, of course, one must respect the implacable laws of economy that rule over the publication of such a volume. However, there are other works which are equally impressive, and neither is the best example of Hunt's "mild singing clothes."<sup>5</sup> But his truly fine poems are only a handful, and the qualities we have been describing are more typically found scattered throughout his collected works. In the space remaining I would like to glance briefly at six of those poems which should retain our interest and which represent in a more concentrated way the virtues of his verse.

*The Story of Rimini* is the largest and most ambitious of Hunt's poems. Although it became very popular and provided him with a reputation, it also opened him up to intense abuse. The story of the fatal love triangle was borrowed from Dante; however, Hunt wrote not out of a sense of tragic inevitability but rather to celebrate high feeling and to enshrine the pathos of misdirected love. Following Wordsworth he attempted to move closer to the language men actually speak; as a result, he frequently blundered into an inappropriate glibness. Consequently, the poem has been viewed as a perfect index of Hunt's poetic failure, a classic example of his moral and imaginative inadequacy.

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<sup>5</sup>One's major objection to Hunt's treatment by the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* is not the limited space assigned him but rather the way the headnote perpetuates the usual air of condescension and invidious comparison. It also concludes by implying that the label "Cockney School of Poetry" was justified.

But, insofar as the poem itself suggests it, what was his actual impulse and what did he achieve? Clearly Hunt's interest is not in Aristotle's imitation of serious action; rather, the entire poem is designed as a stage on which to mount an operatic tour de force. Not linear but mosaic in design, it renders a series of vivid tableaux, starting with a gorgeous wedding procession and ending with a gloomy death march. In between is a series of juxtaposed and vividly depicted scenes, each of which dramatizes, in the theatrical sense, situations or states of mind involving two princely brothers and Francesca, who loves the younger brother Paulo and is married to Giovanni, the elder.

Hunt's vivid tableaux are often graced by such fine lines as one describing how in Ravenna's streets "with heaved-out tapestry the windows glow" or how its fountain "shakes its loosening silver in the sun" (p. 2). But it is not so much these local successes that give the poem its characteristic flavor as it is a general accumulative glamor. Hunt's poem moves with speed and rapidly piles up visual experience: the poem's opening in a Ravenna spring with its excitement of sight and sound as the impressive procession from Rimini arrives, the bridal journey with its gradually more ominous overtones, the paradisiacal garden where Francesca and Paulo eat the apple, the confrontation of a guilty Paulo by the implacable Giovanni and the ensuing fratricidal combat, the journey of the lovers' bodies back to Ravenna for joint burial—almost everything in the poem is designed to delight not the analytical mind but the popular imagination.

The poem, then, is valuable not only for its oft-noted contribution to metrics and prosody—the opening up and freeing of the couplet form as a medium for other poets—but as a pleasant experience in its own right. Whatever the failures of taste here, however undeveloped the characters (and some readers find characterization much more subtle than is commonly acknowledged), the poem's impulse is honest and well achieved; all is color, light, sound, emotion. If we do not expect Hunt to be a Dante we are well rewarded; *The Story of Rimini* offers the reader serious entertainment.

Hunt wrote a number of other long poems including the mythological romances "Hero and Leander" and "Bacchus and Ariadne," the medieval romances "The Gentle Armour" and "The Palfrey," and the moving anti-war poem "Captain Sword and Captain Pen." These poems, with their different motives, offer some of the pleasure of *Rimini*. And though Hunt's talent is perhaps better realized in the shorter, lyrical forms, another group should be represented by "Thoughts in Bed upon Waking and Rising." This work and others, such as "Our Cottage" and "A Rustic Walk and Dinner," embody the previously discussed virtues of Pomfret's *The Choice* as Hunt described them in his own poem by that title: the

“mild singing clothes” of an author who recognizes that there can be lesser kinds of excellence too—“there’s a skill in pies, / In raising crusts as well as galleries” (p. 340).

All four poems possess the favored Huntian ambience, the sense of a world rural enough to offer the homely charms of the countryside and urban enough to provide the civilized graces. It is an especially English world, yet even more characteristic of Hunt whose ideal environment includes books, pictures, treasured friends, and a well-domesticated nature which can be easily translated at any moment into his version of the pastoral.

The titles of these poems at once alert us to the presence of the poet as familiar essayist, and it is “Thoughts in Bed” whose subtitle we cited earlier as perfectly symbolizing this general quality to be found in much of Hunt’s poetry: “An ‘Indicator’ in Verse,” or, as he says in a footnote, “an original *verse essay*, written in the spirit of the paper under that name” (p. 257). The gentle grace of this peculiarly Huntian genre is well illustrated in the poem’s opening lines.

’Tis dawn; nay, day-light certain; I know not  
If bright or dull; but the white window shows  
Difference from darkness, and the world goes round  
In order, safe within the force of God,  
And gentle light is sweet for its own sake. (p. 257)

In this quietly contemplative state Hunt goes on to consider that moment between waking and rising—the way it poises one between tranquil security and the daily commitment to ordinary life. His mind plays over a range of associations and we take pleasure in following its course. And here, as in “A Rustic Walk” and “Our Cottage,” we are offered not the couplet form of *Rimini* but Hunt’s natural and attractive blank verse, a flexible medium nicely suited to his casual observations on the world around him.

We have largely spoken here of Hunt’s success in the more extensive forms, but like many good minor poets he is better known for a cluster of memorable shorter works. Among his 40-odd sonnets, for instance, there are several that, like “Description of Hampstead” and “To the Grasshopper and the Cricket,” retain an undeniable charm. Two pieces—“The Fish, the Man, and the Spirit” and “The Nile”—demand pride of place, however. Those poems are marked by precision of metaphor and image, tightly controlled tone, and unity of subject and form. Though specifically focused, they yet possess a genuine resonance, an imaginative suggestiveness that implies some simple profundity. They are, in short, richly evocative.

“The Fish, the Man, and the Spirit” is cast in three linked sonnets as a dialogue between two mutually uncomprehending orders of percep-

tion. The first two sonnets provide contradictory views and the tone is alert and witty. Fish, those “astonished-looking, angle-faced, / Dreary-mouthed, gaping wretches of the sea,” in the eyes of man “legless, unloving, infamously chaste,” have their own view of what is ludicrous. They are appalled by man’s “flat and shocking face,” a creature condemned to “a split body and a most ridiculous pace / Prong after prong, disgracer of all grace” (p. 250). As bemused by the incomprehensible nature of human life as man is by the submerged existence of the fish, the latter wonders at existence in the “unbreathable, sword-sharp air” (p. 251).

Hunt’s ability to imagine the point of view of the fish produces a remarkably amusing perception, and the first two sonnets suggest that the poem is intended only as a witty exercise. But in the third sonnet the fish is metamorphosed into a spirit and when he speaks again, the poem’s tone modulates from playful wit to metaphysical speculation. With “no hate, no pride, beneath nought, nor above,” the speaker has now become “a visitor of the rounds of God’s sweet skill.” He must understand the nature and value of difference, and he urges that man “loathe, but with a sort of love; / For difference must its use by difference prove” (p. 251). The third sonnet concludes with a sestet of considerable beauty and a kind of prolonged reverberation.

Man’s life is warm, glad, sad, ‘twixt loves and graves.  
Boundless in hope, honoured with pangs austere,  
Heaven-gazing: and his angel-wings he craves:—  
The fish is swift, small-needing, vague yet clear,  
A cold, sweet, silver life, wrapped in round waves,  
Quickened with touches of transporting fear. (p. 251)

The other fine poem, Hunt’s splendid sonnet “The Nile,” is clearly his most successful short work and justifiably admired. The poem was composed during a short sonnet-writing contest with Keats and Shelley and the very fact of such contests tells us something about Hunt’s attitude toward poetic composition. To Keats’s friend of the “social smile,” even the act of creation—sometimes given almost religious significance by the Romantics—could become a pleasant social activity, another occasion to share with talented friends, what for Hunt was an essential human experience.

But despite such creative spontaneity, in “The Nile” Hunt’s control over the metrical and rhetorical structure of the Italian sonnet is complete. The poem possesses an almost stately dignity, the result of some unusual sureness, inspired perhaps by his great competitors; there is none of the dictional impropriety that not infrequently mars his work. The octet magnificently calls up the ancient world, starting with the great river which “flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands, / Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream” and ends with the brilliant and re-

markably economical evocation of a very Shakespearean Cleopatra: “the laughing queen that caught the world’s great hands” (p. 248). Edmund Blunden saw in the poem the “shadowy infinitudes of Blake,”<sup>6</sup> and it is clear that eternity, not history, is the work’s true subject—eternity embodied in Egypt’s ageless past and in the poem’s last line brought down to us in “our own calm journey on for human sake” (p. 248). This theme lends the poem an impressive seriousness which, could Hunt have sustained it, would have led to a far more significant achievement.

“The Nile” is better than Hunt’s usual best; two other short works, perhaps still more widely appreciated by the largest possible audience, are more characteristic of his usual achievement. “Abou ben Adhem” is the 18-line story of a good man who, refused a place in an angel’s list of those who loved the Lord, would yet be content if she would but “write me as one that loves his fellow-man” (p. 93). The line is as well-known as any in his poetry, and summarizes Hunt’s own strongest feelings. Ben Adhem’s God, at least, recognizes the gesture for what it is and has his name placed at the head of the list of those who love Him. The theme is the Blakean thesis that to love man is to love God, since they are the same. But in Hunt this concept is much more accessible, and the poem’s appeal can be found in the memorable simplicity of the moral apologue.

The same stark and moving simplicity and resultant memorable quality marks Hunt’s best-known poem, “Rondeau,” whose eight lines could once have been quoted by countless thousands. If “Abou ben Adhem” can claim something in common with a poem like Burns’s “For A’ That and A’ That,” then “Rondeau” has something in common with “Western Wind.”

Jenny kissed me when we met  
    Jumping from the chair she sat in;  
Time, you thief, who love to get  
    Sweets into your list, put that in:  
Say I’m weary, say I’m sad,  
    Say that health and wealth have missed me,  
Say I’m growing old, but add,  
    Jenny kissed me. (p. 368)

Jenny is actually Carlyle’s vivacious wife Jane and the poem celebrates a warm friendship. But its enduring success has nothing to do with its autobiographical origins—rather the opposite; its attraction is located precisely in its archetypal situation which grants us all equal access to the emotion. Hunt captures a moving and poignant memory, one that makes a direct appeal to our own experience.

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<sup>6</sup>Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930), p. 119.

Neither “Abou ben Adhem” nor “Rondeau” is conceptually profound or artistically striking. Their hold on the collective imagination derives from a sense of shared experience and sentiment (not sentimentalism) residual in our culture, a feeling which Hunt communicates with unaffected simplicity. Both the moral fable and the nostalgic recollection spring out of a timeless poetic impulse, and both—along with many of Hunt’s other poems—deserve their moment of enjoyment and praise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I have not attempted to speak here of Hunt’s satires, poetic drama, or translations, the last of which includes some excellent work. For a comprehensive and somewhat more detailed treatment of Hunt’s poetry see James R. Thompson, *Leigh Hunt* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), pp. 26-59.