
 CHARLES LAMB

 A Letter to Wordsworth¹

[THE LYRICAL BALLADS OF 1800]

[January 30, 1801]

Thanks for your letter and present. I had already borrowed your second volume. What most please me are the *Song of Lucy*.² "Simon's sickly daughter" in *The Sexton*³ made me cry. Next to these are the description of the continuous echoes in the story of Joanna's laugh,⁴ where the mountains and all the scenery absolutely seem alive—and that fine Shakespearean character of the happy man, in *The Brothers*,

—that creeps about the fields,
Following his fancies by the hour, to bring
Tears down his cheek, or solitary smiles
Into his face, *until the setting sun*
Write fool upon his forehead.

I will mention one more: the delicate and curious feeling in the wish for the Cumberland Beggar, that he may have about him the melody of birds, although he hear them not.⁵ Here the mind knowingly passes a fiction upon herself, first substituting her own feelings for the Beggar's, and, in the same breath detecting the fallacy, will not part with the wish.—The *Poet's Epitaph* is disfigured, to my taste, by the vulgar satire upon parsons and lawyers in the beginning, and the coarse epithet of pinpoint in the sixth stanza. All the rest is eminently good, and your own. I will just add that it appears to me a fault in the Beggar that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct and like a lecture: they don't slide into the mind of the reader while he is imagining no such matter. An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told: I will teach you how to think upon this subject.⁶ This fault, if I am right, is in a ten-thousandth worse degree to be found in Sterne and many many novelists and modern poets, who continually put a signpost up to show where you are to feel. They set out with assuming their readers to be stupid. Very different from *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Roderick Random*, and other beautiful bare narratives. There is implied an unwritten compact between author and reader: I will tell you a story,

1. Written in response to Wordsworth's gift of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, in two volumes. The first volume was a revised version of the first edition of 1798, and the second volume consisted of new poems. Since both Wordsworth and Coleridge were Lamb's close friends, he is faced with the difficult diplomatic task of indicating that he is not equally enthusiastic about all the materials in these volumes. To have picked *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Tintern Abbey*, and *She dwelt among the untrodden ways* for special commendation is a triumph of contemporary critical judgment.

Lamb's reply to Wordsworth's invitation to a sojourn in the Lake District is a reminder that one could be a friend and warm admirer of the great

Romantic poets, yet eminently prefer the abundant life of a great city to what Lamb calls "dead Nature." Cf., by way of contrast, Wordsworth's description of London, *The Prelude*, book 7.

2. *She dwelt among the untrodden ways*, which in a letter written two weeks later Lamb called "the best piece" among those added in 1800.

3. *To a Sexton*, line 14.

4. *To Joanna*, lines 51–65.

5. *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, lines 183–85.

6. Commenting on Wordsworth's poetry in his letter of Feb. 3, 1818, Keats similarly objected to being "bullied into a certain Philosophy. . . . We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us."

and I suppose you will understand it. Modern novels, *St. Leon*⁷ and the like, are full of such flowers as these: "Let not my reader suppose"—"Imagine, *if you can*"—modest!—etc.—I will here have done with praise and blame. I have written so much, only that you may not think I have passed over your book without observation.—I am sorry that Coleridge has christened his *Ancient Mariner* "a Poet's Reverie"⁸—it is as bad as Bottom the Weaver's declaration that he is not a lion but only the scenical representation of a lion.⁹ What new idea is gained by this title, but one subversive of all credit, which the tale should force upon us, of its truth? For me, I was never so affected with any human tale. After first reading it, I was totally possessed with it for many days—I dislike all the miraculous part of it, but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery dragged me along like Tom Piper's magic whistle. I totally differ from your idea that the Mariner should have had a character and profession.¹ This is a beauty in *Gulliver's Travels*, where the mind is kept in a placid state of little wonderments; but the Ancient Mariner undergoes such trials as overwhelm and bury all individuality or memory of what he was, like the state of a man in a bad dream, one terrible peculiarity of which is that all consciousness of personality is gone. Your other observation is, I think, as well a little unfounded: the Mariner from being conversant in supernatural events *has* acquired a supernatural and strange cast of *phrase*, eye, appearance, etc., which frighten the wedding guest. You will excuse my remarks, because I am hurt and vexed that you should think it necessary with a prose apology to open the eyes of dead men that cannot see. To sum up a general opinion of the second vol.—I do not feel any one poem in it so forcibly as *The Ancient Mariner*, *The Mad Mother*,² and the *Lines at Tintern Abbey*, in the first.—I could, too, have wished the critical preface had appeared in a separate treatise. All its dogmas are true and just, and most of them new, *as* criticism. But they associate a *diminishing* idea with the poems which follow, as having been written for *experiment* on the public taste,³ more than having sprung (as they must have done) from living and daily circumstances.—I am prolix, because I am gratified in the opportunity of writing to you, and I don't well know when to leave off. I ought before this to have replied to your very kind invitation into Cumberland. With you and your sister I could gang⁴ anywhere; but I am afraid whether I shall ever be able to afford so desperate a journey. Separate from the pleasure of your company, I don't much care if I never see a mountain in my life. I have passed all my days in London, until I have formed as many and intense local attachments as any of you mountaineers can have done with dead Nature. The lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street; the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, wagons, playhouses; all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden; the very women of the town;⁵ the watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles; life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night; the impossibility of being dull in Fleet Street; the crowds, the very dirt and mud, the sun shining upon houses and pavements, the print shops, the old bookstalls, parsons cheapening⁶ books,

7. *St. Leon* (1799), a didactic novel by William Godwin.

8. Coleridge added this subtitle in the edition of 1800 but fortunately deleted it in a later revision.

9. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.1.37ff.) Bottom suggests that Snug, who is to play the part of the lion, make this reassuring comment.

1. Wordsworth had inserted an apologetic note after Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, remarking that "the poem of my friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct

character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural. . . ."

2. *Her eyes are wild*.

3. In the Preface Wordsworth had written that the volume "was published, as an experiment."

4. "Go"; probably in playful imitation of Wordsworth's north country dialect.

5. Prostitutes.

6. Bargaining over.

coffeehouses, steams of soups from kitchens, the pantomimes—London itself a pantomime and a masquerade—all these things work themselves into my mind and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impels me into night walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fullness of joy at so much life. All these emotions must be strange to you. So are your rural emotions to me. But consider, what must I have been doing all my life, not to have lent great portions of my heart with usury to such scenes?

My attachments are all local, purely local. I have no passion (or have had none since I was in love, and then it was the spurious engendering of poetry and books) to groves and valleys. The rooms where I was born, the furniture which has been before my eyes all my life, a bookcase which has followed me about (like a faithful dog, only exceeding him in knowledge), wherever I have moved, old chairs, old tables, streets, squares, where I have sunned myself, my old school—these are my mistresses. Have I not enough, without your mountains? I do not envy you. I should pity you, did I not know that the mind will make friends of anything. Your sun and moon and skies and hills and lakes affect me no more, or scarcely come to me in more venerable characters, than as a gilded room with tapestry and tapers, where I might live with handsome visible objects. I consider the clouds above me but as a roof, beautifully painted but unable to satisfy the mind; and at last, like the pictures of the apartment of a connoisseur, unable to afford him any longer a pleasure. So fading upon me, from disuse, have been the beauties of Nature, as they have been confinedly called; so ever fresh, and green, and warm are all the inventions of men and assemblies of men in this great city. I should certainly have laughed with dear Joanna.⁷

Give my kindest love *and my sister's* to D.⁸ and yourself, and a kiss from me to little Barbara Lewthwaite.⁹

C. LAMB

Thank you for liking my play!!¹

New Year's Eve

Every man hath two birthdays: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration. The one is that which in an especial manner he termeth *his*. In the gradual desuetude of old observances, this custom of solemnizing our proper birthday hath nearly passed away, or is left to children, who reflect nothing at all about the matter, nor understand anything in it beyond cake and orange. But the birth of a New Year is of an interest too wide to be pretermitted by king or cobbler. No one ever regarded the first of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.

Of all sound of all bells—bells, the music nighest bordering upon heaven—most solemn and touching is the peal which rings out the Old Year. I never hear it without a gathering-up of my mind to a concentration of all the images that have been diffused over the past twelvemonth: all I have done or suffered,

7. In *To Joanna*, mentioned at the beginning of this letter.

8. Dorothy Wordsworth.

9. Wordsworth's neighbor, who plays a role in his

poem *The Pet Lamb*.

1. Lamb had sent Wordsworth a manuscript of his tragedy, *John Woodvil*.

performed or neglected—in that regretted time. I begin to know its worth, as when a person dies. It takes a personal color; nor was it a poetical flight in a contemporary, when he exclaimed,

I saw the skirts of the departing Year.¹

It is no more than what in sober sadness every one of us seems to be conscious of, in that awful leave-taking. I am sure I felt it, and all felt it with me, last night; though some of my companions affected rather to manifest an exhilaration at the birth of the coming year, than any very tender regrets for the decease of its predecessor. But I am none of those who

Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest.²

I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; new books, new faces, new years—from some mental twist which makes it difficult in me to face the prospective. I have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine only in the prospects of other (former) years. I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions. I encounter pell-mell with past disappointments. I am armor-proof against old discouragements. I forgive, or overcome in fancy, old adversaries. I play over again *for love*, as the gamesters phrase it, games, for which I once paid so dear. I would scarce now have any of those untoward accidents and events of my life reversed. I would no more alter them than the incidents of some well-contrived novel. Methinks it is better that I should have pined away seven of my goldenest years, when I was thrall to the fair hair and fairer eyes of Alice W——n,³ than that so passionate a love adventure should be lost. It was better that our family should have missed that legacy, which old Dorrell cheated us of,^{3a} than that I should have at this moment two thousand pounds *in banco*, and be without the idea of that specious old rogue.

In a degree beneath manhood, it is my infirmity to look back upon those early days. Do I advance a paradox, when I say that, skipping over the intervention of forty years, a man may have leave to love *himself*, without the imputation of self-love?

If I know aught of myself, no one whose mind is introspective—and mine is painfully so—can have a less respect for his present identity than I have for the man Elia. I know him to be light, and vain, and humorsome; a notorious——; addicted to——; averse from counsel, neither taking it nor offering it;—besides; a stammering buffoon; what you will; lay it on, and spare not; I subscribe to it all, and much more, than thou canst be willing to lay at his door—but for the child Elia, that “other me,” there, in the background—I must take leave to cherish the remembrance of that young master—with as little reference, I protest, to this stupid changeling of five-and-forty, as if it had been a child of some other house, and not of my parents. I can cry over its patient smallpox at five, and rougher medicaments. I can lay its poor fevered head upon the sick pillow at Christ’s,⁴ and wake with it in surprise at the gentle posture of maternal tenderness hanging over it, that unknown had watched its sleep. I know how it shrank from any the least color of falsehood.—God help thee,

1. Coleridge, *Ode to the Departing Year*, line 8, in the version of 1797.

2. This line occurs in Alexander Pope’s translation of the *Odyssey* XV.84, and again in his imitation of Horace’s *Satires* (II.ii.160).

3. Elia’s Alice Winterton; she may be the Anne Simmons with whom Lamb had been in love when

a youth.

3a. William Dorell, who had witnessed the will of Lamb’s father; Lamb believed he had helped cheat the children of their proper inheritance.

4. Christ’s Hospital school, which Lamb had attended.

Elia, how art thou changed! Thou art sophisticated.^{4a}—I know how honest, how courageous (for a weakling) it was—how religious, how imaginative, how hopeful! From what have I not fallen, if the child I remember was indeed myself—and not some dissembling guardian, presenting a false identity, to give the rule to my unpracticed steps, and regulate the tone of my moral being!

That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause; simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favorite? If these speculations seem fantastical to thee, reader (a busy man perchance), if I tread out of the way of thy sympathy, and am singularly-conceited only, I retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia.

The elders, with whom I was brought up, were of a character not likely to let slip the sacred observance of any old institution; and the ringing out of the Old Year was kept by them with circumstances of peculiar ceremony.—In those days the sound of those midnight chimes, though it seemed to raise hilarity in all around me, never failed to bring a train of pensive imagery into my fancy. Yet I then scarce conceived what it meant, or thought of it as a reckoning that concerned me. Not childhood alone, but the young man till thirty, never feels practically that he is mortal. He knows it indeed, and, if need were, he could preach a homily on the fragility of life; but he brings it not home to himself, any more than in a hot June we can appropriate to our imagination the freezing days of December. But now, shall I confess a truth?—I feel these audits but too powerfully. I begin to count the probabilities of my duration, and to grudge at the expenditure of moments and shortest periods, like misers' farthings. In proportion as the years both lessen and shorten, I set more count upon their periods, and would fain lay my ineffectual finger upon the spoke of the great wheel. I am not content to pass away "like a weaver's shuttle."⁵ Those metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality. I care not to be carried with the tide that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I, and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave.—Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores.⁶ A new state of being staggers me.

Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candlelight, and fireside conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests, and *irony itself*—do these things go out with life?

Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?

And you, my midnight darlings, my Folios!⁷ must I part with the intense delight of having you (huge armfuls) in my embraces? Must knowledge come

4a. In the old sense: adulterated, altered for the worse.

5. Altered from Job 7:6.

6. Italy, so called in the *Aeneid* because Aeneas, after his wanderings, married Lavinia there and founded the Roman race. Since Aeneas trans-

ported his "household gods" with him from Troy to Italy, Lamb's allusion simply means that he is disinclined to wander.

7. The large volumes in which the older English writers were often printed.

to me, if it come at all, by some awkward experiment of intuition, and no longer by this familiar process of reading?

Shall I enjoy friendships there, wanting the smiling indications which point me to them here—the recognizable face—the “sweet assurance of a look”?⁸

In winter this intolerable disinclination to dying—to give it its mildest name—does more especially haunt and beset me. In a genial August noon, beneath a sweltering sky, death is almost problematic. At those times do such poor snakes as myself enjoy an immortality. Then we expand and burgeon. Then are we as strong again, as valiant again, as wise again, and a great deal taller. The blast that nips and shrinks me, puts me in thoughts of death. All things allied to the insubstantial wait upon that master feeling: cold, numbness, dreams, perplexity; moonlight itself, with its shadowy and spectral appearances—that cold ghost of the sun, or Phoebus’ sickly sister, like that innutritious one denounced in the Canticles.⁹—I am none of her minions—I hold with the Persian.¹

Whatsoever thwarts, or puts me out of my way, brings death into my mind. All partial evils, like humors, run into that capital plague sore.—I have heard some profess an indifference to life. Such hail the end of their existence as a port of refuge; and speak of the grave as of some soft arms, in which they may slumber as on a pillow. Some have wooed death—but out upon thee, I say, thou foul, ugly phantom! I detest, abhor, execrate, and (with Friar John²) give thee to six-score thousand devils, as in no instance to be excused or tolerated, but shunned as an universal viper; to be branded, proscribed, and spoken evil off! In no way can I be brought to digest thee, thou thin, melancholy *Privation*, or more frightful and confounding *Positive*!³

Those antidotes, prescribed against the fear of thee, are altogether frigid and insulting, like thyself. For what satisfaction hath a man, that he shall “lie down with kings and emperors in death,”⁴ who in his lifetime never greatly coveted the society of such bedfellows?—or, forsooth, that “so shall the fairest face appear”?⁵—why, to comfort me, must Alice W——n be a goblin? More than all, I conceive disgust at those impertinent and misbecoming familiarities inscribed upon your ordinary tombstones. Every dead man must take upon himself to be lecturing me with his odious truism that “such as he now is, I must shortly be.” Not so shortly, friend, perhaps as thou imaginest. In the meantime I am alive. I move about. I am worth twenty of thee. Know thy betters! Thy New Years’ days are past. I survive, a jolly candidate for 1821. Another cup of wine—and while that turncoat bell, that just now mournfully chanted the obsequies of 1820 departed, with changed notes lustily rings in a successor, let us attune to its peal the song made on a like occasion, by hearty, cheerful Mr. Cotton.⁶—

The New Year

Hark, the cock crows, and yon bright star
Tells us the day himself’s not far;
And see where, breaking from the night,

8. Altered from Matthew Roydon’s elegy on Sir Philip Sidney.

9. The Song of Solomon 8:8: “We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts.” Elia’s allusion is to the moon, described as the weaker sister of Phoebus, the sun.

1. The ancient Persians were sun-worshippers.

2. A bellicose character in Rabelais’s *Gargantua*.

3. I.e., death as the absence of existence or, more

terrifying still, an actual being. Cf. Coleridge’s *Limbo*, lines 30–33.

4. Job 3:13–14: “Then had I been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth.”

5. Line 9 of *William and Margaret*, a ballad-imitation written in 1724 by David Mallet.

6. Charles Cotton, a genial poet of the mid-17th century.

He gilds the western hills with light.
 With him old Janus doth appear,
 Peeping into the future year,
 With such a look as seems to say,
 The prospect is not good that way.
 Thus do we rise ill sights to see,
 And 'gainst ourselves to prophesy;
 When the prophetic fear of things
 A more tormenting mischief brings,
 More full of soul-tormenting gall,
 Than direst mischiefs can befall.
 But stay! but stay! methinks my sight,
 Better informed by clearer light,
 Discerns sereneness in that brow,
 That all contracted seemed but now.
 His reversed face may show distaste,
 And frown upon the ills are past;
 But that which this way looks is clear,
 And smiles upon the Newborn Year.
 He looks too from a place so high,
 The year lies open to his eye;
 And all the moments open are
 To the exact discoverer.
 Yet more and more he smiles upon
 The happy revolution.
 Why should we then suspect or fear
 The influences of a year,
 So smiles upon us the first morn,
 And speaks us good so soon as born?
 Plague on't! the last was ill enough,
 This cannot but make better proof;
 Or, at the worst, as we brushed through
 The last, why so we may this too;
 And then the next in reason should
 Be superexcellently good:
 For the worst ills (we daily see)
 Have no more perpetuity
 Than the best fortunes that do fall;
 Which also bring us wherewithal
 Longer their being to support,
 Than those do of the other sort:
 And who has one good year in three,
 And yet repines at destiny,
 Appears ungrateful in the case,
 And merits not the good he has.
 Then let us welcome the New Guest
 With lusty brimmers of the best;
 Mirth always should Good Fortune meet,
 And renders e'en Disaster sweet:
 And though the Princess turn her back,
 Let us but line ourselves with sack,⁷

7. A former name for sherry and other strong white wines from Spain and the Canary Islands.

We better shall by far hold out,
Till the next Year she face about,

How say you, reader—do not these verses smack of the rough magnanimity of the old English vein? Do they not fortify like a cordial; enlarging the heart, and productive of sweet blood, and generous spirits, in the concoction? Where be those puling fears of death, just now expressed or affected?—Passed like a cloud—absorbed in the purging sunlight of clear poetry—clean washed away by a wave of genuine Helicon,⁸ your only spa for these hypochondries—And now another cup of the generous! and a merry New Year, and many of them to you all, my masters!

1821

*From On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*¹

The Artificial Comedy, or Comedy of Manners, is quite extinct on our stage. Congreve and Farquhar² show their heads once in seven years only; to be exploded and put down instantly. The times cannot bear them. Is it for a few wild speeches, an occasional license or dialogue? I think not altogether. The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test. We screw everything up to that. Idle gallantry in a fiction, a dream, the passing pageant of an evening, startles us in the same way as the alarming indications of profligacy in a son or ward in real life should startle a parent or guardian. We have no such middle emotions as dramatic interests left. We see a stage libertine playing his loose pranks of two hours' duration, and of no after consequence, with the severe eyes which inspect real vices with their bearings upon two worlds. We are spectators to a plot or intrigue (not reducible in life to the point of strict morality), and take it all for truth. We substitute a real for a dramatic person, and judge him accordingly. We try him in our courts, from which there is no appeal to the *dramatis personae*, his peers. We have been spoiled with—not sentimental comedy—but a tyrant far more pernicious to our pleasures which has succeeded to it, the exclusive and all-devouring drama of common life; where the moral point is everything; where, instead of the fictitious half-believed personages of the stage (the phantoms of old comedy), we recognize ourselves, our brothers, aunts, kinsfolk, allies, patrons, enemies—the same as in life—with an interest in what is going on so hearty and substantial, that we cannot afford our moral judgment, in its deepest and most vital results, to compromise or slumber for a moment.

8. A mountain on which flowed springs sacred to the Muses. A "spa" is a mineral spring, here thought of as curing morbid depression ("hypochondries")
1. This essay, a defense of the moral man's privilege to enjoy the gay immoralities of Restoration comedy, has been the occasion of much discussion and controversy. Thomas Babington Macaulay, for instance, said that Lamb was mistaken because comedy is (in the terms of neoclassic criticism) "an imitation, under whatever conventions, of real life," and therefore subject to ordinary moral criteria. Lamb overstated his case in implying that the profligate society in Restoration plays had no counterpart in reality, but his central theoretical claim

has become an important premise in modern criticism. He proposes that the "artificial comedies" are unlike realistic drama in that they do not imitate the real world, but create "a world of themselves"; the spectator, taking a kind of moral holiday, adapts himself to the conditions of this artificial world and enjoys its characters and events by a suspension of his ordinary sensibilities.
2. William Congreve, Restoration dramatist whose *The Way of the World* is the most brilliant comedy of the period. George Farquhar (1678–1707), author of a number of comedies; the best known is *The Beaux' Stratagem*.

What is *there* transacting by no modification is made to affect us in any other manner than the same events or characters would do in our relationships of life. We carry our fireside concerns to the theater with us. We do not go thither, like our ancestors, to escape from the pressure of reality, so much as to confirm our experience of it; to make assurance double, and take a bond of fate. We must live our toilsome lives twice over, as it was the mournful privilege of Ulysses to descend twice to the shades.³ All that neutral ground of character, which stood between vice and virtue; or which in fact was indifferent to neither, where neither properly was called in question; that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning—the sanctuary and quiet Alsatia of hunted casuistry⁴—is broken up and disfranchised, as injurious to the interests of society. The privileges of the place are taken away by law. We dare not dally with images, or names, of wrong. We bark like foolish dogs at shadows. We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder, and fear a painted pustule. In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout⁵ of precaution against the breeze and sunshine.

I confess for myself that (with no great delinquencies to answer for) I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience—not to live always in the precincts of the law courts—but now and then, for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions—to get into recesses, whither the hunter cannot follow me—

secret shades
Of woody Ida's inmost grove,
While yet there was no fear of Jove.⁶

I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it. I wear my shackles more contentedly for having respired the breath of an imaginary freedom. I do not know how it is with others, but I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's—nay, why should I not add even of Wycherley's⁷—comedies. I am the gayer at least for it; and I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland. Take one of their characters, male or female (with few exceptions they are alike), and place it in a modern play, and my virtuous indignation shall rise against the profligate wretch as warmly as the Catos of the pit⁸ could desire; because in a modern play I am to judge of the right and the wrong. The standard of *police* is the measure of *political justice*. The atmosphere will blight it; it cannot live here. It has got into a moral world, where it has no business, from which it must needs fall headlong; as dizzy, and incapable of making a stand, as a Swedenborgian bad spirit that has wandered unawares into the sphere of one of his Good Men, or Angels.⁹ But in its own world do we feel the creature is so very bad?—The Fainalls and the Mirabells, the Dorimants and

3. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses visited Hades to interview the shade of the blind soothsayer, Tiresias. He descended a second time, of course, at his death.

4. "Alsatia" was a district near White-friars which, until 1697, served as a legal sanctuary for debtors. Lamb's point is that the comedy of manners offers a sanctuary for man, eternally harried by "casuistry" (logical consideration of the problems of right and wrong).

5. Long and heavy overcoat.

6. Milton, *Il Penseroso*, lines 28–30. Ida is a mountain in Crete where Jove was said to have been born.

7. William Wycherley (1640–1716), whose comedies (e.g., *The Country Wife*) were considered profligate even by Restoration standards.

8. Cato (234–149 B.C.) was noted for his opposition to the luxury and decadence of Rome. The "pit," in an English theater, is that part of the auditorium which is on the main floor, below the stage.

9. Emanuel Swedenborg, the 18th-century Swedish scientist and mystic, held that there are several heavens and hells, peopled by corresponding good and evil spirits.

the Lady Touchwoods,¹ in their own sphere, do not offend my moral sense; in fact they do not appeal to it at all. They seem engaged in their proper element. They break through no laws, or conscientious restraints. They know of none. They have got out of Christendom into the land—what shall I call it?—of cuckoldry—the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom. It is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is. No good person can be justly offended as a spectator, because no good person suffers on the stage. Judged morally, every character in these plays—the few exceptions only are *mistakes*—is alike essentially vain and worthless. The great art of Congreve is especially shown in this, that he has entirely excluded from his scenes—some little generousities in the part of Angelica² perhaps excepted—not only anything like a faultless character, but any pretensions to goodness or good feelings whatsoever. Whether he did this designedly, or instinctively, the effect is as happy, as the design (if design) was bold. I used to wonder at the strange power which his *Way of the World* in particular possesses of interesting you all along in the pursuits of characters, for whom you absolutely care nothing—for you neither hate nor love his personages—and I think it is owing to this very indifference for any that you endure the whole. He has spread a privation of moral light, I will call it, rather than by the ugly name of palpable darkness, over his creations; and his shadows flit before you without distinction or preference. Had he introduced a good character, a single gush of moral feeling, a revulsion of the judgment to actual life and actual duties, the impertinent Goshen³ would have only lighted to the discovery of deformities, which now are none, because we think them none.

Translated into real life, the characters of his and his friend Wycherley's dramas are profligates and strumpets—the business of their brief existence, the undivided pursuit of lawless gallantry. No other spring of action, or possible motive of conduct, is recognized; principles which, universally acted upon, must reduce this frame of things to a chaos. But we do them wrong in so translating them. No such effects are produced, in *their* world. When we are among them, we are amongst a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our usages. No reverend institutions are insulted by their proceedings—for they have none among them. No peace of families is violated—for no family ties exist among them. No purity of the marriage bed is stained—for none is supposed to have a being. No deep affections are disquieted, no holy wedlock bands are snapped asunder—for affection's depth and wedded faith are not of the growth of that soil. There is neither right nor wrong—gratitude or its opposite—claim or duty—paternity or sonship. Of what consequence is it to Virtue, or how is she at all concerned about it, whether Sir Simon or Dapperwit steal away Miss Martha; or who is the father of Lord Froth's or Sir Paul Pliant's children?⁴

The whole is a passing pageant, where we should sit as unconcerned at the issues, for life or death, as at a battle of the frogs and mice. But, like Don Quixote, we take part against the puppets, and quite as impertinently. We dare not contemplate an Atlantis,⁵ a scheme out of which our coxcombical moral sense is for a little transitory ease excluded. We have not the courage to imagine a state of

1. Characters in Restoration comedies: Fainall and Mirabell in Congreve's *Way of the World*, Dorimant in Etherege's *Man of Mode*, and Lady Touchwood in Congreve's *Double-Dealer*.

2. In Congreve's *Love for Love*.

3. In Exodus 8:22, the place the Jews dwelt, immune from the swarms of flies with which the

Lord plagued the Egyptians.

4. Sir Simon, Dapperwit, and Martha are in Wycherley's *Love in a Wood*; Lord Froth and Sir Paul in Congreve's *Double-Dealer*.

5. A mythical island in the western ocean which is supposed to have sunk beneath the sea.

things for which there is neither reward nor punishment. We cling to the painful necessities of shame and blame. We would indict our very dreams.

Amidst the mortifying circumstances attendant upon growing old, it is something to have seen the *School for Scandal* in its glory. This comedy grew out of Congreve and Wycherley, but gathered some allays of the sentimental comedy which followed theirs. It is impossible that it should be now *acted*, though it continues, at long intervals, to be announced in the bills. Its hero, when Palmer⁶ played it at least, was Joseph Surface. When I remember the gay boldness, the graceful solemn plausibility, the measured step, the insinuating voice—to express it in a word—the downright *acted* villainy of the part, so different from the pressure of conscious actual wickedness—the hypocritical assumption of hypocrisy—which made Jack so deservedly a favorite in that character, I must needs conclude the present generation of playgoers more virtuous than myself, or more dense. I freely confess that he divided the palm with me with his better brother; that, in fact, I liked him quite as well. Not but there are passages—like that, for instance, where Joseph is made to refuse a pittance to a poor relation—incongruities which Sheridan was forced upon by the attempt to join the artificial with the sentimental comedy, either of which must destroy the other—but over these obstructions Jack's manner floated him so lightly that a refusal from him no more shocked you than the easy compliance of Charles gave you in reality any pleasure; you got over the paltry question as quickly as you could, to get back into the regions of pure comedy, where no cold moral reigns. The highly artificial manner of Palmer in this character counteracted every disagreeable impression which you might have received from the contrast, supposing them real, between the two brothers. You did not believe in Joseph with the same faith with which you believed in Charles. The latter was a pleasant reality, the former a no less pleasant poetical foil to it. The comedy, I have said, is incongruous; a mixture of Congreve with sentimental incompatibilities; the gaiety upon the whole is buoyant; but it required the consummate art of Palmer to reconcile the discordant elements.⁷ ***

1822

Witches, and Other Night Fears

We are too hasty when we set down our ancestors in the gross¹ for fools, for the monstrous inconsistencies (as they seem to us) involved in their creed of witchcraft. In the relations of this visible world we find them to have been as rational, and shrewd to detect an historic anomaly, as ourselves. But when once the invisible world was supposed to be opened, and the lawless agency of bad spirits assumed, what measures of probability, of decency,² of fitness, or proportion—of that which distinguishes the likely from the palpable absurd—could they have to guide them in the rejection or admission of any particular testimony?—That maidens pined away, wasting inwardly as their waxen images consumed before a fire—that corn was lodged,³ and cattle lamed—that whirlwinds uptore in diabolic revelry the oaks of the forest—or that spits and kettles only danced a fearful-

6. Jack Palmer, famous comic actor of the late 18th century, especially noted for his playing of Joseph Surface.

7. The remainder of the essay is a critique of some of the actors who had appeared in the old comedies

of manners.

1. Wholesale; without exception.

2. I.e., appropriateness to the circumstances.

3. Beaten down.

innocent vagary about some rustic's kitchen when no wind was stirring—were all equally probable where no law of agency was understood. That the prince of the powers of darkness, passing by the flower and pomp of the earth, should lay preposterous siege to the weak fantasy of indigent eld⁴—has neither likelihood nor unlikelihood *a priori* to us, who have no measure to guess at his policy, or standard to estimate what rate those anile⁵ souls may fetch in the devil's market. Nor, when the wicked are expressly symbolized by a goat, was it to be wondered at so much, that *he* should come sometimes in that body, and assert his metaphor.—That the intercourse was opened at all between both worlds was perhaps the mistake—but that once assumed, I see no reason for disbelieving one attested story of this nature more than another on the score of absurdity. There is no law to judge of the lawless, or canon by which a dream may be criticized.

I have sometimes thought that I could not have existed in the days of received witchcraft; that I could not have slept in a village where one of those reputed hags dwelt. Our ancestors were bolder or more obtuse. Amidst the universal belief that these wretches were in league with the author of all evil, holding hell tributary to their muttering, no simple Justice of the Peace seems to have scrupled issuing, or silly Headborough⁶ serving, a warrant upon them—as if they should subpoena Satan!—Prospero in his boat, with his books and wand about him, suffers himself to be conveyed away at the mercy of his enemies to an unknown island.⁷ He might have raised a storm or two, we think, on the passage. His acquiescence is in exact analogy to the nonresistance of witches to the constituted powers.—What stops the Fiend in Spenser from tearing Guyon to pieces—or who had made it a condition of his prey, that Guyon must take assay of the glorious bait⁸—we have no guess. We do not know the laws of that country.

From my childhood I was extremely inquisitive about witches and witch stories. My maid, and more legendary⁹ aunt, supplied me with good store. But I shall mention the accident which directed my curiosity originally into this channel. In my father's book-closet, the *History of the Bible*, by Stackhouse,¹ occupied a distinguished station. The pictures with which it abounds—one of the ark, in particular, and another of Solomon's temple, delineated with all the fidelity of ocular admeasurement, as if the artist had been upon the spot—attracted my childish attention. There was a picture, too, of the Witch raising up Samuel,² which I wish that I had never seen. We shall come to that hereafter. Stackhouse is in two huge tomes—and there was a pleasure in removing folios of that magnitude, which, with infinite straining, was as much as I could manage, from the situation which they occupied upon an upper shelf. I have not met with the work from that time to this, but I remember it consisted of Old Testament stories, orderly set down, with the *objection* appended to each story, and the *solution* of the objection regularly tacked to that. The *objection* was a summary of whatever difficulties had been

4. Old age (archaic term).

5. Old-womanish.

6. Village constable.

7. Prospero, Duke of Milan, who possessed magical powers, had been abandoned at sea in a decrepit boat by his traitorous brother, Sebastian, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (l.ii. 144–51).

8. The fiend, Mammon, tempts Sir Guyon to pluck golden apples from a tree in the Garden of Proserpina, "To which if he inclined had at all, / That dreadfil feend, which did behind him wayt, / Would

him have rent in thousand peeces stray" (*Faerie Queene* II.vii.63–64).

9. I.e., devoted to legends and superstitions.

1. Thomas Stackhouse's *New History of the Holy Bible from the Beginning of the World to the Establishment of Christianity* (1737).

2. At King Saul's request, the Witch of Endor called up the dead prophet Samuel, that Saul might question him about an impending battle with the Philistines (1 Samuel 28).

opposed to the credibility of the history, by the shrewdness of ancient or modern infidelity, drawn up with an almost complimentary excess of candor. The *solution* was brief, modest, and satisfactory. The bane and antidote were both before you. To doubts so put, and so quashed, there seemed to be an end forever. The dragon lay dead, for the foot of the veriest babe to trample on. But—like as was rather feared than realized from that slain monster in Spenser—from the womb of those crushed errors young dragonets would creep, exceeding the prowess of so tender a Saint George as myself to vanquish.³ The habit of expecting objections to every passage, set me upon starting more objections, for the glory of finding a solution of my own for them. I became staggered and perplexed, a skeptic in long coats.⁴ The pretty Bible stories which I had read, or heard read in church, lost their purity and sincerity of impression, and were turned into so many historic or chronologic theses to be defended against whatever impugners. I was not to disbelieve them, but—the next thing to that—I was to be quite sure that someone or other would or had disbelieved them. Next to making a child an infidel, is the letting him know that there are infidels at all. Credulity is the man's weakness, but the child's strength. O, how ugly sound scriptural doubts from the mouth of a babe and a suckling!—I should have lost myself in these mazes, and have pined away, I think, with such unfit sustenance as these husks afforded, but for a fortunate piece of ill fortune, which about this time befell me. Turning over the picture of the ark with too much haste, I unhappily made a breach in its ingenious fabric—driving my inconsiderate fingers right through the two larger quadrupeds—the elephant, and the camel—that stare (as well they might) out of the two last windows next the steerage in that unique piece of naval architecture. Stackhouse was henceforth locked up, and became an interdicted treasure. With the book, the *objections* and *solutions* gradually cleared out of my head, and have seldom returned since in any force to trouble me.—But there was one impression which I had imbibed from Stackhouse, which no lock or bar could shut out, and which was destined to try my childish nerves rather more seriously.—That detestable picture!

I was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors. The nighttime 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 specter. Be old Stackhouse then acquitted in part, if I say, that to his picture of the Witch raising up Samuel—(O that old man covered with a mantle!) I owe—not my midnight terrors, the hell of my infancy—but the shape and manner of their visitation. It was he who dressed up for me a hag that nightly sate upon my pillow—a sure bed-fellow, when my aunt or my maid was far from me. All day long, while the book was permitted me, I dreamed waking over his delineation, and at night (if I may use so bold an expression) awoke into sleep, and found the vision true. I durst not, even in the daylight, once enter the chamber where I slept, without my face turned to the window, aversely from the bed where my witch-ridden pillow was.—Parents do not know what they do when they leave tender babes alone to go to sleep in the dark. The feeling about for a friendly arm—the hoping for a familiar voice—when they wake

3. Saint George, the dragon-slayer, patron saint of England, was the prototype of Spenser's Redcrosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene*. After the Redcrosse Knight has slain the dragon, some onlookers fear

that dragonets may issue from the dead dragon's womb (I.xii.10).

4. I.e., in an infant's clothes.

screaming—and find none to soothe them—what a terrible shaking it is to their poor nerves! The keeping them up till midnight, through candlelight and the unwholesome hours, as they are called—would, I am satisfied, in a medical point of view, prove the better caution.—That detestable picture, as I have said, gave the fashion to my dreams—if dreams they were—for the scene of them was invariably the room in which I lay. Had I never met with the picture, the fears would have come self-pictured in some shape or other—

Headless bear, black man, or ape⁵—

but, as it was, my imaginations took that form.—It is not book, or picture, or the stories of foolish servants, which create these terrors in children. They can at most but give them a direction. Dear little T.H.⁶ who of all children has been brought up with the most scrupulous exclusion of every taint of superstition—who was never allowed to hear of goblin or apparition, or scarcely to be told of bad men, or to read or hear of any distressing story—finds all this world of fear, from which he has been so rigidly excluded *ab extra*, in his own “thick-coming fancies;”⁷ and from his little midnight pillow, this nurse-child of optimism will start at shapes, unborrowed of tradition, in sweats to which the reveries of the cell-damned murderer are tranquility.

Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimeras—dire stories of Celaeno and the Harpies⁸—may reproduce themselves in the brain of superstition—but they were there before. They are transcripts, types—the archetypes are in us, and eternal. How else should the recital of that, which we know in a waking sense to be false, come to affect us at all?—or

—Names, whose sense we see not,
Fray us with things that be not?⁹

Is it that we naturally conceive terror from such objects, considered in their capacity of being able to inflict upon us bodily injury?—O, least of all! These terrors are of older standing. They date beyond body—or, without the body, they would have been the same. All the cruel, tormenting, defined devils in Dante—tearing, mangling, choking, stifling, scorching demons—are they one half so fearful to the spirit of a man, as the simple idea of a spirit unembodied following him—

Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.¹

5. From the verse *Abstract of Melancholy* prefaced to Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): “my fantasy / Presents a thousand ugly shapes, / Headless bears, black men, and apes.”

6. Thornton Hunt, oldest son of the essayist and critic Leigh Hunt, whom Lamb elsewhere called his “favorite child.”

7. Lady Macbeth “is troubled with thick-coming fancies” in *Macbeth* V.iii.38. “*Ab extra*”: from outside (Latin).

8. “Gorgons, Hydras, and Chimeras dire” (*Paradise Lost* II.628.) “Gorgons” were snaky-haired women, the sight of whom turned beholders to stone;

“hydras” were poisonous water-snakes with multiple heads; “chimeras” had a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a dragon’s tail. When Aeneas and his followers sat down to feast, Celaeno and the other Harpies plundered and befouled their food (*Aeneid* III.209 ff.) (harpies were filthy, malign creatures, part woman and part bird).

9. Spenser, *Epithalamion*, lines 343–44: “Ne let hob Goblins, names whose sense we see not, / Fray us with things that be not.” “Fray”: Frighten.

1. “Mr. Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*” [Lamb’s note]; lines 446–51.

That the kind of fear here treated of is purely spiritual—that it is strong in proportion as it is objectless upon earth—that it predominates in the period of sinless infancy—are difficulties, the solution of which might afford some probable insight into our ante-mundane condition,² and a peep at least into the shadow-land of preexistence.

My night fancies have long ceased to be afflictive. I confess an occasional nightmare; but I do not, as in early youth, keep a stud³ of them. Fiendish faces, with the extinguished taper, will come and look at me; but I know them for mockeries, even while I cannot elude their presence, and I fight and grapple with them. For the credit of my imagination, I am almost ashamed to say how tame and prosaic my dreams are grown. They are never romantic, seldom even rural. They are of architecture and of buildings—cities abroad, which I have never seen, and hardly have hope to see. I have traversed, for the seeming length of a natural day, Rome, Amsterdam, Paris, Lisbon—their churches, palaces, squares, marketplaces, shops, suburbs, ruins, with an inexpressible sense of delight—a maplike distinctness of trace—and a daylight vividness of vision, that was all but being awake.—I have formerly traveled among the Westmoreland fells⁴—my highest Alps—but they are objects too mighty for the grasp of my dreaming recognition; and I have again and again awoke with ineffectual struggles of the inner eye, to make out a shape in any way whatever, of Helvellyn. Methought I was in that country, but the mountains were gone. The poverty of my dreams mortifies me. There is Coleridge, at his will can conjure up icy domes, and pleasure-houses for Kubla Khan, and Abyssinian maids, and songs of Abara, and caverns,

Where Alph, the sacred river, runs,⁵

to solace his night solitudes—when I cannot muster a fiddle. Barry Cornwall has his tritons and his nereids gamboling before him in nocturnal visions, and proclaiming sons born to Neptune⁶—when my stretch of imaginative activity can hardly, in the night season, raise up the ghost of a fishwife. To set my failures in somewhat a mortifying light—it was after reading the noble *Dream* of this poet, that my fancy ran strong upon these marine spectra;⁷ and the poor plastic power, such as it is, within me set to work, to humor my folly in a sort of dream that very night. Methought I was upon the ocean billows at some sea nuptials, riding and mounted high, with the customary train sounding their conchs before me, (I myself, you may be sure, the *leading god*) and jollily we went careering over the main, till just where Ino Leucothea⁸ should have greeted me (I think it was Ino) with a white embrace, the billows gradually subsiding, fell from a sea-roughness to a sea-calm, and thence to a river-motion, and that river (as happens in the familiarization of dreams) was no other than

2. I.e., our condition before we were born into this world.

3. A group of breeding-horses (with a pun on “nightmare”).

4. Hills. Lamb had visited Wordsworth’s Westmoreland county, in the Lake District, in 1802, and “Helvellyn” (below) was one of Wordsworth’s favorite mountains. Lamb pays quiet tribute to his friend by alluding in his phrase “the inner eye” to Wordsworth’s *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*: “They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude.”

5. *Kubla Khan*, line 3; Lamb altered “ran” to “runs.”

6. “Barry Cornwall” was the pen name of Bryan Waller Procter (1787–1874), poet and dramatist,

who was Lamb’s friend. Lamb’s reference is to Cornwall’s poem *A Dream* (1819), in which the narrator fantasizes the appearance of various mythological figures from the ocean depths; the dreamer is awakened by a noisy celebration of the birth of a son to Neptune. “Tritons”: sea gods, represented with a man’s body and fish’s tail, and carrying a trident (three-pronged fish-spear) and a shell trumpet; “nereids”: sea nymphs.

7. Ocular images. “Plastic”: formative, creative.

8. Ino threw herself into the sea to escape her maddened husband, and was transformed by Neptune into a sea goddess with the name Leucothea, “the white goddess.”

the gentle Thames, which landed me, in the wafture of a placid wave or two, alone, safe and inglorious, somewhere at the foot of Lambeth palace.⁹

The degree of the soul's creativeness in sleep might furnish no whimsical criterion of the quantum¹⁰ of poetical faculty resident in the same soul waking. An old gentleman, a friend of mine, and a humorist,¹¹ used to carry this notion so far, that when he saw any stripling of his acquaintance ambitious of becoming a poet, his first question would be—"Young man, what sort of dreams have you?" I have so much faith in my old friend's theory, that when I feel that idle vein returning upon me, I presently subside into my proper element of prose, remembering those eluding nereids, and that inauspicious inland landing.

1821, 1823

The Two Races of Men¹

The human species, according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, *the men who borrow*, and *the men who lend*. To these two original diversities may be reduced all those impertinent classifications of Gothic and Celtic tribes, white men, black men, red men. All the dwellers upon earth, "Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites,"² flock hither, and do naturally fall in with one or other of these primary distinctions. The infinite superiority of the former, which I choose to designate as the *great race*, is discernible in their figure, port, and a certain instinctive sovereignty. The latter are born degraded. "He shall serve his brethren."³ There is something in the air of one of this cast, lean and suspicious; contrasting with the open, trusting, generous manners of the other.

Observe who have been the greatest borrowers of all ages—Alcibiades—Falstaff—Sir Richard Steele—our late incomparable Brinsley⁴—what a family likeness in all four!

What a careless, even deportment hath your borrower! what rosy gills! what a beautiful reliance on Providence doth he manifest—taking no more thought than lilies!⁵ What contempt for money—accounting it (yours and mine especially) no better than dross! What a liberal confounding of those pedantic distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*!⁶ or rather, what a noble simplification of language (beyond Tooke),⁷ resolving these supposed opposites into one clear, intelligible pronoun adjective! What near approaches doth he make to the primitive *community*⁸—to the extent of one half of the principle at least!

He is the true taxer who "calleth all the world up to be taxed";⁹ and the distance is as vast between him and *one of us*, as subsisted betwixt the Augustan

9. London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury on the southern bank of the Thames.

10. Amount.

11. In the old sense: whimsical.

1. This essay is a small masterpiece in the tradition of the mock encomium, or ironic praise of the unpraiseworthy, such as Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*: Lamb's oldest and closest friend, Coleridge, figures twice in the essay: in the role of heroic borrower of books almost never returned, he is "Comberbatch"—a private joke, for the name was identifiable only by Coleridge and a few initiates; in his second role, in which he returns books with the lavish interest of his extraordinary marginalia, he is S. T. C.—initials by which he was already known to

many readers.

2. Acts 2.9.

3. Noah's curse on his youngest son, Ham, in Genesis 9.25.

4. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), dramatist, producer, and statesman.

5. I.e., than "the lilies of the field" of Matthew 6.28 and Luke 12.26–27.

6. "Mine" and "thine" (Latin).

7. John Horne Tooke, author of *The Diversions of Purley* (1786–98), a book on philology.

8. The community of the Apostles, who held all their possessions in common (Acts 2.44–45).

9. The call that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (Luke 2.1).

Majesty and the poorest obolar¹ Jew that paid it tribute-pittance at Jerusalem! His exactions, too, have such a cheerful, voluntary air! So far removed from your sour parochial or state-gatherers—those ink-horn varlets, who carry their want of welcome in their faces! He cometh to you with a smile, and troubleth you with no receipt; confining himself to no set season. Every day is his Candlemas, or his Feast of Holy Michael.² He applieth the *lene tormentum*³ of a pleasant look to your purse—which to that gentle warmth expands her silken leaves, as naturally as the cloak of the traveler, for which sun and wind contended! He is the true Propontic which never ebbehth!⁴ The sea which taketh handsomely at each man's hand. In vain the victim, whom he delighteth to honor, struggles with destiny; he is in the net. Lend therefore cheerfully, O man ordained to lend—that thou lose not in the end, with thy worldly penny, the reversion⁵ promised. Combine not preposterously in thine own person the penalties of Lazarus and of Dives!⁶—but, when thou seest the proper authority coming, meet it smilingly, as it were half-way. Come, a handsome sacrifice! See how light *he* makes of it! Strain not courtesies with a noble enemy.

Reflections like the foregoing were forced upon my mind by the death of my old friend, Ralph Bigod, Esq,⁷ who departed this life on Wednesday evening; dying, as he had lived, without much trouble. He boasted himself a descendant from mighty ancestors of that name, who heretofore held ducal dignities in this realm. In his actions and sentiments he belied not the stock to which he pretended. Early in life he found himself invested with ample revenues; which, with that noble disinterestedness which I have noticed as inherent in men of the *great race*, he took almost immediate measures entirely to dissipate and bring to nothing: for there is something revolting in the idea of a king holding a private purse; and the thoughts of Bigod were all regal. Thus furnished, by the very act of disbursement; getting rid of the cumbersome luggage of riches, more apt (as one sings)

To slacken virtue, and abate her edge,
Than prompt her to do aught may merit praise,⁸

he set forth, like some Alexander, upon his great enterprise, “Borrowing and to borrow!”⁹

In his periegesis, or triumphant progress throughout this island, it has been calculated that he laid a tithe¹ part of the inhabitants under contribution. I reject this estimate as greatly exaggerated—but having had the honor of accompanying my friend, divers times, in his perambulations about this vast city, I own I was greatly struck at first with the prodigious number of faces we met, who claimed a sort of respectful acquaintance with us. He was one day so obliging as to explain the phenomenon. It seems, these were his tributaries; feeders of his exchequer; gentlemen, his good friends (as he was pleased to express himself), to whom he had occasionally been beholden for a loan. Their multitudes did no way disconcert him. He rather took a pride in numbering them; and, with Comus, seemed pleased to be “stocked with so fair a herd.”²

1. Possessing an obolus, a Greek penny.

2. Feb. 2 and Sept. 29—English quarter-days, when rents fall due.

3. “The gentle spur”; said by Horace about wine (*Odes* 3.21.13).

4. See *Othello* 3.3.453–56.

5. The right of future possession; this is “promised” if you cast your bread upon the waters (*Ecclesiastes* 11.1) or lend to the poor (*Proverbs* 19.17).

6. Dives, the “rich man,” finds when he dies that he

is in hell, while Lazarus, who had been a beggar on earth, after death goes to dwell in “Abraham’s bosom” (*Luke* 16.19–26).

7. John Fenwick, editor of a newspaper, *Albion*.

8. Milton, *Paradise Regained* 2.455–56.

9. Playing on Revelation 6.2, “and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.”

1. One-tenth. “Periegesis”: tour.

2. Adapted from Milton’s *Comus* 152.

With such sources, it was a wonder how he contrived to keep his treasury always empty. He did it by force of an aphorism, which he had often in his mouth, that “money kept longer than three days stinks.” So he made use of it while it was fresh. A good part he drank away (for he was an excellent tosspot), some he gave away, the rest he threw away, literally tossing and hurling it violently from him—as boys do burrs, or as if it had been infectious—into ponds, or ditches, or deep holes—inscrutable cavities of the earth; or he would bury it (where he would never seek it again) by a river’s side under some bank, which (he would facetiously observe) paid no interest—but out away from him it must go peremptorily, as Hagar’s off-spring³ into the wilderness, while it was sweet. He never missed it. The streams were perennial which fed his fisc.⁴ When new supplies became necessary, the first person that had the felicity to fall in with him, friend or stranger, was sure to contribute to the deficiency. For Bigod had an *undeniable* way with him. He had a cheerful, open exterior, a quick jovial eye, a bald forehead, just touched with gray (*cana fides*).⁵ He anticipated no excuse, and found none. And, waiving for a while my theory as to the *great race*, I would put it to the most untheorizing reader, who may at times have disposable coin in his pocket, whether it is not more repugnant to the kindness of his nature to refuse such a one as I am describing, than to say *no* to a poor petitionary rogue (your bastard borrower), who, by his mumping visnomy⁶ tells you, that he expects nothing better; and, therefore, whose preconceived notions and expectations you do in reality so much less shock in the refusal.

When I think of this man; his fiery glow of heart; his swell of feeling; how magnificent, how *ideal* he was; how great at the midnight hour; and when I compare with him the companions with whom I have associated since, I grudge the saving of a few idle ducats, and think that I am fallen into the society of *lenders*, and *little men*.

To one like Elia, whose treasures are rather cased in leather covers than closed in iron coffers, there is a class of alienators⁷ more formidable than that which I have touched upon; I mean your *borrowers of books*—those mutilators of collections, spoilers of the symmetry of shelves, and creators of odd volumes. There is Comberbatch;⁸ matchless in his depredations!

That foul gap in the bottom shelf facing you, like a great eyetooth knocked out—you are now with me in my little back study in Bloomsbury, reader!—with the huge Switzerlike⁹ tomes on each side (like the Guildhall giants, in their reformed posture, guardant of nothing) once held the tallest of my folios, *Opera Bonaventurae*, choice and massy divinity, to which its two supporters (school divinity also, but of a lesser caliber—Bellarmine, and Holy Thomas), showed but as dwarfs—itsself an Aspart!¹ that Comberbatch abstracted upon the faith of a theory he holds, which is more easy, I confess, for me to suffer by than to refute, namely, that “the title to property in a book (my Bonaventure, for instance), is in exact ratio to the claimant’s powers of understanding and appreciating the same.” Should he go on acting upon this theory, which of our shelves is safe?

The slight vacuum in the left-hand case—two shelves from the ceiling—scarcely distinguishable but by the quick eye of a loser—was whilom the

3. Ishmael, the son of Hagar, in Genesis 21.9ff.

4. Public treasury.

5. “Hoary trustworthiness,” i.e., of his gray hair; the phrase is in Virgil’s *Aeneid* 1.292.

6. Dialect for “mumbling physiognomy.”

7. Those who alienate property—i.e., transfer it to another.

8. Coleridge had left college for a brief and disastrous career as a cavalryman in the Light Dragoons,

under the alias of Silas Tomkyn Comberbache.

9. “Switzers” are Swiss guardsmen, selected for their imposing stature.

1. A giant, in the 14th-century verse romance *Bevis of Hampton*. “*Opera Bonaventurae*”: the theological Works of St. Bonaventure (1221–1274). “Bellarmine”: St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). “Holy Thomas”: St. Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225–1274).

commodious resting place of Browne on *Urn Burial*. C. will hardly allege that he knows more about the treatise than I do, who introduced it to him, and was indeed the first (of the moderns) to discover its beauties—but so have I known a foolish lover to praise his mistress in the presence of a rival more qualified to carry her off than himself. Just below, Dodsley's dramas want their fourth volume, where Vittoria Corombona is! The remainder nine are as distasteful as Priam's refuse sons, when the Fates *borrowed* Hector.² Here stood the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in sober state. There loitered the *Complete Angler*; quiet as in life, by some stream side. In yonder nook, John Buncler, a widower-volume, with "eyes closed," mourns his ravished mate.³

One justice I must do my friend, that if he sometimes, like the sea, sweeps away a treasure, at another time, sealike, he throws up as rich an equivalent to match it. I have a small under-collection of this nature (my friend's gatherings in his various calls), picked up, he has forgotten at what odd places, and deposited with as little memory as mine. I take in these orphans, the twice-deserted. These proselytes of the gate are welcome as the true Hebrews. There they stand in conjunction; natives, and naturalized. The latter seem as little disposed to inquire out their true lineage as I am. I charge no warehouse-room for these deodands,⁴ nor shall ever put myself to the ungentlemanly trouble of advertising a sale of them to pay expenses.

To lose a volume to C. carries some sense and meaning in it. You are sure that he will make one hearty meal on your viands, if he can give no account of the platter after it. But what moved thee, wayward, spiteful K,⁵ to be so importunate to carry off with thee, in spite of tears and adjurations to thee to forbear, the Letters of that princely woman, the thrice noble Margaret Newcastle?⁶—knowing at the time, and knowing that I knew also, thou most assuredly wouldst never turn over one leaf of the illustrious folio—what but the mere spirit of contradiction, and childish love of getting the better of thy friend? Then, worst cut of all! to transport it with thee to the Gallican land—

Unworthy land to harbor such a sweetness,
A virtue in which all ennobling thoughts dwelt,
Pure thoughts, kind thoughts, high thoughts, her sex's wonder!⁶

—hadst thou not thy playbooks, and books of jests and fancies, about thee, to keep thee merry, even as thou keepest all companies with thy quips and mirthful tales? Child of the Greenroom,⁷ it was unkindly done of thee. Thy wife, too, that part-French, better-part Englishwoman!—that *she* could fix upon no other treatise to bear away, in kindly token of remembering us, than the works of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke⁸—of which no Frenchman, nor woman of France, Italy, or England, was ever by nature constituted to comprehend a tittle! *Was there not Zimmerman on Solitude?*⁹

2. I.e., the remaining nine volumes of Dodsley's *Collection* are rated as low by the lender as (in Homer's *Iliad*) Priam's remaining sons were rated by the Trojan king, after his greatest son, Hector, had been killed in battle.

3. The books in this paragraph: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial* (1658); Robert Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744); John Webster's tragedy *The White Devil, or Vittoria Corombona* (ca. 1608); Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler* (1653); Thomas Amory, *John Buncler, Esq.* (1756–66)—a novel about a man who

successively married seven wives, each of whom died within a few years.

4. In English law, objects that are forfeited to the crown (because they have caused a human death).

5. James Kenney (1780–1849), an actor, who borrowed and took to France the *Sociable Letters* (1664) of Margaret Cavendish, duchess of Newcastle.

6. Possibly composed by Lamb himself.

7. The room where actors await their cues.

8. Sir Fulke Greville, Baron Brooke (1554–1628).

9. J. G. von Zimmerman's *Solitude* was translated into English about 1791.

Reader, if haply thou art blessed with a moderate collection, be shy of showing it; or if thy heart overfloweth to lend them, lend thy books; but let it be to such a one as S. T. C.—he will return them (generally anticipating the time appointed) with usury; enriched with annotations, tripling their value. I have had experience. Many are these precious MSS of his (in *matter* oftentimes, and almost in *quantity* not unfrequently, vying with the originals) in no very clerkly hand—legible in my Daniel;¹ in old Burton; in Sir Thomas Browne; and those abstruser cogitations of the Greville, now, alas! wandering in Pagan lands. I counsel thee, shut not thy heart, nor thy library, against S. T. C.

1820

1823

1. Samuel Daniel (1562–1619), poet.