

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 Shakspearean 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

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.

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, and I suppose you will understand it. Modern novels, *St. Leons*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

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."

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. . . ."

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, 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

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.

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

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

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*.

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.

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 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

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).

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).

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 ebbeth!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 disfurnishment; 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 accom-

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.

panying 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

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 offspring³ 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

2. Adapted from Milton’s *Comus* 152.

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.”

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—itself an Ascapart!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 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 Anat-

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).

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.

omy of Melancholy, in sober state. There loitered the Complete Angler; quiet as in life, by some stream side. In yonder nook, John Bunclé, 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?—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

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 Bunclé, 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.

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 Brook⁸ — 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

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.

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

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

1. Samuel Daniel (1562–1619), poet.