

Leigh Hunt

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My first meeting with Leigh Hunt, some twenty years ago, was for the purpose of offering him the editorship of the *Monthly Repository*, on the part of W. J. Fox (the member for Oldham) and myself. In conjunction with Mr. John Mill we had tried hard some time to disentangle that periodical from its old sectarian associations, but with indifferent success;¹ and our labour was equally wasted afterwards, together with that of Leigh Hunt, Landor, Egerton Webbe, Cowden Clarke, G. H. Lewes, and others. The *Monthly Repository* had once been a sectarian magazine, and with all that array of men who were at least a sufficient sign of a very new dynasty, the intelligent public were determined to regard it as of old, so that poor Leigh Hunt had to add this to his previous long list of unprofitable literary speculations. He alludes to it in the third volume of his *Autobiography* (pp. 240, 241) in his usual bland and pleasant way, though not without a tinge of regret at having first published in the periodical his "Blue Stocking Revels, or The Feast of the Violets," of which "nobody took any notice."

The passage to which I have referred marks the date of my first diurnal acquaintance with one of the most varied or rather variegated and elegantly accomplished intellects of the age, or of any age,

° R. H. Horne was Leigh Hunt's immediate predecessor as editor of the *Monthly Repository*. From 1852 to 1869 he lived in Australia, and it was in the year of Hunt's death that he contributed this two-part memorial essay on Hunt to an Australian newspaper, the *Southern Cross*, in the issues of December 3 and December 10, 1859. The editors of *Books at Iowa* are indebted to Horne's biographer, Ann Blainey of the University of Melbourne, for a copy of the full text of this essay on Leigh Hunt. In the text here presented, 117 years after its newspaper appearance in the *Southern Cross*, punctuation and capitalization have been lightened, and an ellipsis mark indicates the omission of a passage in which Horne repeats a catalogue of 14 titles from one of Hunt's essays. (*Ed.*)

¹ The development of this periodical is traced by Francis E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent: The Monthly Repository, 1806-1838* (Chapel Hill, 1944). (*Ed.*)

and one of the most amiable and widely sympathising men that ever lived. In these respects his works will bear a favourable comparison with those of the philanthropists, poets, moralists, and philosophers who have done most to humanise the world by enlarging the bounds of the heart's reasoning and thereby practically developing the true spirit of Christianity as preached and practised by its Divine Founder. All this will be at once admitted by the great majority of those who were not "out of their element" in his society, and his excellences will be unhesitatingly admitted in the face and memory of an equally unavoidable admission of his shortcomings, his errors, and his faults. These latter were not numerous; they were very few, very provoking, sometimes ridiculous, more frequently ruinous, and perfectly incorrigible.

As it would be impossible to disguise the shades of Leigh Hunt's character, it will be best to deal with them fairly and openly, by which means we shall at any rate assist in preventing darker tints from being given than truth should permit, and show at the same time that some of these shadows, however reprehensible in themselves, were not altogether out of harmony with the amiability of his character and the honesty and ingenuousness of his nature. If he were here now, and sitting opposite while I write this, he would ask no other treatment.

A certain fictitious character is portrayed in one of the works of a mutual friend (Mr. Charles Dickens) which has been pretty widely circulated as a copy from Leigh Hunt.^[2] This is true in a very limited degree; and all the rest, comprising all the important things, is utterly false—there is no similarity whatever. Let this always be borne in mind when such a question is mooted. Besides, Mr. Dickens has himself repudiated the charge. The nature of Leigh Hunt was honest; his principles were honest in all abstract, and in all great public questions whether of politics, theology, literature, ethics, and artistic matters of taste; but in his private life and in his dealings with that circle practically, he seemed to have no fixed principles of any kind. He cared nothing about running into debt, borrowing money to discharge the debts, not doing any such thing, but spending the money and increasing the debts. When the time came to pay, he was surprised and confounded at the unfortunate circumstance; he had never thought of this—he had no means whatever to pay—and he just said so. He considered that this frank statement

² This character, Harold Skimpole in Dickens' *Bleak House*, is discussed by Luther A. Brewer, *Leigh Hunt and Charles Dickens: The Skimpole Caricature* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1930). (Ed.)

ought to set the whole matter at rest. The consequences were, that he was never out of debt, therefore never out of difficulties, vexations, troubles, continually put to painful shifts and reduced to the last extremity. Howbeit, these "last extremities" occurred so very often that eventually he came to regard them as a normal condition of his house; and having always ridden over the out-of-door breakers of life, he sat at home in an easy chair under the cheerful belief that he should always ride over his troubles somehow and again shake his feathers in the sun. Certainly Leigh Hunt had no proper feeling about gratitude, often as he was helped through the adverse currents by one friendly hand and another. He could not, metaphysically, be termed ungrateful, because he really did not rightly estimate the feeling known as gratitude. Benefits to him flowed off like water from a duck's back. He never felt them. How could he feel them before they came? How could he feel them after they were gone? There was nothing tangible in the entire transaction. Yet he would have been pained and grieved to have heard it said that he was an ungrateful man, and chiefly pained for the person who made so thoughtless and unjust an accusation. The fact was, in his view of himself he was grateful in the profoundest degree. And so he was, as a matter of sentiment; but ask him to do something, any small service, and then it appeared that nothing of that kind ought to have been expected of him. Moreover he would say that any exaction of the least return, destroyed all the generosity of the service and cancelled the obligation. "If a man does me a service, he does it out of the generosity and kindness of his heart, and it must be a great pleasure to him. If he does this out of mere ostentation, an idea of his own superiority, expecting many thanks and to humble me by the obligation, then he deserves no gratitude at all. If he does it from pure and noble friendship, the pleasure of this consciousness fully repays him." Now I have heard Leigh Hunt talk exactly in this vein; and more hasty persons will be ready to exclaim, "Why, this is just like the character in Mr. Dickens's work!" So it is—that part of it; but that part is one of the smallest constituents of the character of Mr. Leigh Hunt. That it comprises no particle of his best genius or of the influence of his works on literature and the world must be apparent to everyone capable of appreciating them, and to the most casual thinker.

Writing from memory only, and having none of his works within my reach excepting his *Autobiography*, no single book of Leigh Hunt's can be said to display much power. It is in their collective character and influence that they possess great value, and by this only should they be judged. Leigh Hunt was a thoroughly honest,

courageous, and consistent political reformer. He used to say, laughing, "Remember, I was a Radical when there was some danger even in confessing it." Well might he remind us of this, as he was imprisoned two years for saying in the *Examiner* that "George the Fourth was an Adonis of fifty!" Most of his political writings are lost in the mass of journalism of the period, but they did good service in the cause of all liberal institutions. At an early date in his career he also brought himself into great odium for his unorthodox theological opinions, insisting as he did upon the right of discussion and the freedom of the human spirit and conscience. Being uncommonly like some of the primitive Christians, he was of course regarded by many of the improved sort of modern times as a rank infidel. This was very illiberal and untrue, but the opinion was not the less general on that account. All this bad feeling, however, in the public mind has long since died away; his consistent goodness of heart and amiability of pen outlived all odium. His last book, kept in manuscript for many years and not yet published, I believe, is entitled *Christianism, or Belief and Unbelief Reconciled*.³ It was written in Italy and is alluded to in the *Autobiography* (published in 1850) as "the book he held dearer than all the rest" of his works.

On ethical and other social questions Leigh Hunt took his own views and always maintained them—to the injury of his worldly interests, in most cases, as they generally damaged his popularity, which was precarious at the best of times. By way of a good case in point, let us take his beautiful play of *The Legend of Florence*. A tyrannical, selfish, and remorseless husband (Agolante) torments, with no real cause, and almost drives into her grave, a most amiable and unoffending wife. She had given up a lover who possessed her affections, in obedience to parental wishes, and her subsequent conduct was a model of virtue and patient suffering. In the last act, Agolante is killed in a violent quarrel with some friend of his wife's family who had ventured to interfere in her behalf. The play was first produced by Madame Vestris. "Now Mr. Hunt," said the manageress, "if you will alter the conclusion of the last scene and give her back to her husband, suggesting that he will become another man, your play will run a hundred nights." Otherwise the success, even on the first night, she declared to be doubtful. But Leigh Hunt was not to be persuaded. Such a husband as Agolante, he argued, never *could* become "another man." This point, then, was settled.

³ *Christianism* was published privately in 1832 in an edition of 75 copies and led to Leigh Hunt's friendship with Thomas Carlyle. An enlarged edition, *The Religion of the Heart*, appeared in 1853. (Ed.)

"But," pursued Vestris, "when Agolante is killed, his wife faints, and her former lover catching her as she is falling, the curtain descends with a suggestion that he will possess her after all." "Well," said Hunt, with humorous gravity, "how am I to help what nature ordains or Providence renders extremely probable!" A lady engaged in the piece (Mrs. Brougham, I think) suggested that as the wife would have become a widow, there was nothing to object to in the supposition. But the manageress understood the morality of a British audience and she knew that the *effect* upon the imagination at the moment would be that the death of Agolante was, somehow or other, brought about by his wife's early lover, perhaps with her tacit concurrence. So the lover was not allowed to catch her as she was falling, but she sank into her father's arms, very much against the wish of Leigh Hunt. As to the limited success, Vestris was right. Instead of a hundred, or even fifty nights, the play only ran twelve. It has never been popular, because, as Hunt used to say jocosely, the tyrannical husbands, he was afraid, were always in a majority among most audiences. He might have added that the "angel wives" were not always on the side of their own sex. In fine, there was here a great chance of popularity as a dramatic author, which would have led to further successes and great profit, all of which Leigh Hunt sacrificed without a moment's hesitation and without a single regret in after years.

The foregoing points in the genius and character of Leigh Hunt being less known than the rest, it seemed best to commence with them. By his literary and critical works he is chiefly and, with many, exclusively regarded among the "spirits of the age." Concerning the latter, with some other reminiscences of his habits and private conversation, a few further remarks shall be offered.

Among those who have assisted in creating and diffusing a taste in the public mind for literature, poetry, and the fine arts in all their branches, we must undoubtedly place Leigh Hunt in the foremost rank. He began his career very early and was "in print" as an author long before any of the present race of us was born. As he commenced, so he continued, devoting the labours of his whole life to poetry, general literature, and whatever was beautiful in nature and art. Their idealisms were to his mind the most tangible of realities. A beautiful poem, picture, piece of sculpture, print, or piece of music were to him "riches fineless" and could never be exhausted. Each of these presented a fund to his imagination from whence he could draw any amount of elaborate criticism and pleasure, just as the rare possession of a twenty pound note assured him that he could pay all his debts and have several five pound notes to

spend besides. On this principle he was often apt to carry his critical speculations too far, and yet there are few even of his farthest-fetched and minute disquisitions and niceties of analysis or synthetical appreciation with which one would willingly part. All general readers of the English language in the present day are more indebted to him than perhaps they may be aware for such taste as they possess in the range of literature and art above indicated. As an example and a proof, take one essay in the *Round Table* (which volumes he wrote in conjunction with Hazlitt), and let it be his article entitled "A Day by the Fire," with all its elegant bits of quotation from Chaucer, Spenser, Drayton, Milton, and Dryden and its graceful fragments of translation from Horace, Theocritus, Homer, and Tasso, all seeming to happen to his pen in the most appropriate manner and at the very moment they should drop. In a similar spirit, but of far deeper and more elaborate range, we may refer to his book entitled *Imagination and Fancy*. Many young men of the present period who have never read any of Leigh Hunt's writings, nor perhaps heard very much about them except the old stereotyped phrase that he was "a light graceful writer," have been beneficially influenced by the writings and lectures of those whose early studies were directed and assisted by this most genial, amusing, instructive, and elegant author. He was not full of taste himself, but the "cause of taste in other men."

It is not my purpose, nor could space be here afforded, to enter upon any criticism on Mr. Leigh Hunt's poetry. His volumes are before the world, and everybody who has read them has long since made up his mind upon the matter. His poems are certainly not powerful, but they are for the most part graceful, tender, and flowery, very often elegantly humorous and graphic, and sometimes both pathetic and charming. But anything of a patent, grand, or highly impassioned kind was not much to his taste, with a few exceptional passages among old authors. Such things seemed rather to make him uncomfortable. Witness nearly all his extracts from Marlowe, Webster, and Chapman, whose minor pieces, as in the case of Shelley, are almost exclusively extracted or noticed. It must have been a feeling of the kind just mentioned which inspired him to write the poetry entitled "Power and Gentleness" in which he endeavours to display "power" as something only savage and devastating. The poem, however, regarded from his special point of view, is one of undeniable beauty and fine feeling.

The wit and humour of the present day is no improvement, to my thinking, on those qualities as displayed by Leigh Hunt. With him there is no slang, no sarcasm, no vulgarity, no burlesque of higher

things, no ridicule of sentiment, no puns (or very rarely), and never any bitterness. His humour is playful, full of enjoyment, profuse, suggestive, and irresistible. He would often lavish it upon the most unpromising subjects—a chapter on Hats, an essay “On Walking-sticks,” the “Old Gentleman,” etc. The opening chapter of his *Indicator and Companion* is “On christening a book. . . .”

As a translator of several of the Greek, Latin, and Italian poets who have hitherto had but indifferent justice done to their peculiar excellences, Leigh Hunt shone beyond most authors. It is to be regretted that no publisher should have thought of applying to him with a view to some regular series. Certain critics used to say that his translations would always savour too much of his own individuality, but this was by no means a necessary circumstance. A modernized edition of Chaucer’s poems (which may rank under the head of works requiring translation) having been projected, and proposals having been made to myself among others, I at once deduced that, bearing in mind all the unscrupulous paraphrases that had been previously perpetrated in the name of the glorious Father of English Poetry, I would have nothing to do with the matter unless it were distinctly understood that he should be considered as doing his work the best who could retain the most of the original words of the author, altering the spelling only, and retaining his rhythm as well as the rhymes as much as practicable. William Wordsworth, hearing of this, insisted that the work should be edited by me, and agreed to contribute. So also did Messrs. Barrett Browning, Robert Bell, Monckton Milnes, and Leigh Hunt. From the pen of the latter proceeded a modernization of the Ranciple’s Tale, the Friar’s Tale, and the Squire’s Tale, and done with the greatest and most reverent care, generally flowing and graceful while retaining the original quaintness of style and, for the most part, line for line with the original. Several unforeseen circumstances prevented our engaging upon a second volume, which I venture without any affectation of modesty or vanity to regret deeply as a loss to the literature of England, inasmuch as such a “staff” for the undertaking will not soon be found again. The contributions of Wordsworth to this volume were “Cuckoo and the Nightingale” and extracts from “Troilus and Cressida,” while Mrs. Barrett Browning did “Queen Annelida and False Arcite,” all being most beautifully, skillfully, and most faithfully rendered.

In regretting that Leigh Hunt was never engaged upon the translation of fine poems which have not yet had any fair-play in our language, I at the same time still more regret that the dramatic genius he had developed late in life should have had no sufficient

encouragement from the stage. He gives his own account of the causes. They are only too true, and reject the experience of others. The drama has got completely into the hands of speculating managers, with whom the drama, as an art, is not taken at all into the question, in most cases from sheer ignorance of the art but always with very different objects. Sometimes a superior actor obtains possession of a theatre, and then his views are governed by the principle of using and reusing all the old stock of dramas because they cost nothing to be paid to the author, though prodigal sums are devoted to the decorators, machinists, costumiers, archaeological sepulchre-painters, and "revivers." So poor Leigh Hunt fared like the rest of the living dramatic authors of England. "They manage matters better in France."

Of Leigh Hunt's quarrel with Lord Byron enough has long since been written. Simply, therefore, I add my opinion to that of the party who consider Hunt had not very great cause to be grateful to Lord Byron, and yet that certain members of his family ought to have behaved differently. Nor should he have permitted their personalities. The great benefactor of Hunt was Shelley, who made him princely gifts to pay his debts, but all to no purpose. Of Shelley and Keats the most affectionate memories were always exhibited by Leigh Hunt, and he delighted in writing appreciating criticisms on their genius. I am not aware that he ever wrote in so admiring a vein during their lives, neither am I sure that he ever fully estimated Shelley, either before his death or since; and I am obliged to add that he often seemed impatient on hearing great praise of any living poets. There was time enough for those premature birds. Adverting to this impression one day when talking on Tennyson, he told me he was well aware of it, and subsequently Browning said the same. There was time enough "for us youths." Hunt's appreciation of all the best living prose writers was as laudatory as it was genuine. Possibly his affections, far more than his self-love, operated in rendering him indisposed to admit the claims of contemporaneous poets. Shelley and Keats were gone but they were ever living in his heart.

The conversational power, or rather table-talk, of Leigh Hunt was very great, full of information, very diversified, very kindly, often instructive, and generally amusing and abounding in poetic or humorous ideas. He also at times developed profound and subtle views of moral philosophy and psychology. When in good health, and not unfrequently when much out of health, his ordinary disquisition or monologue was like the best parts of his best books. I have heard of the extraordinary powers in this way possessed by

Coleridge and the late William Hazlitt (who listened as well as spoke), but it has never been my fortune to hear any author in habitual conversation equal to the best parts of his writings, excepting Leigh Hunt, Carlyle, and Dickens. Of the three, Hunt was the most flowing while the most discursive. He seldom concentrated, but like a bee settled with continuous murmur first on one sunny flower, then on another near at hand, then went chanting on his wayward course to find "fresh fields and pastures new."

Owing to a light and familiar style and a frequent tendency to dwell upon trifles, many a reader has fancied himself very superior to Leigh Hunt, who in that respect egregiously deceived himself. But that our author would often delight to dally with prettinesses and conceits is obvious. He was not only disposed to be "pleased with a feather—tickled with a straw," but he would have announced it to the public as a happy state of mind and temperament worthy to be classed among the minor virtues. For why, would he have argued, if he had written an essay on the subject, should a man refuse to be pleased with anything so peculiarly and almost indescribably lovely as a feather from the plumage of hundreds of birds that might be named?—and why should he not relish the unalloyed reality of kindly laughter because his little daughter's hand, or any other pretty fingers, used a straw as the medium of the mirth? Having proved his case in a literal sense, he would then have proceeded to point and adorn "the morals." Possessing an enjoying temperament, he availed himself of every means of innocent pleasure that came in his way. He was habitually a great source of merriment in his own family circle, as among friends or strangers out of doors—a very rare adornment. It is probable that he never was known to utter a harsh word to his wife, his sons, or his daughters during his whole life. This is my impression, and I have resided several days at a time beneath his roof, and, let me add, I have known him severely tried. To supersede any erroneous impressions, to the injury of others, it is proper to state that this last remark alludes to a certain son of Leigh Hunt, about my own age, who wasted his talents in a disgraceful manner and died rather suddenly some ten years ago.

Hunt was considered what is known as a "great talker" abroad, and he was habitually much the same at home. He was always impatient of any rival talker, and, in argument, it was not amusing to observe his inability to listen to any reply, as he invariably interrupted it. Any adverse opinion was cut short with the most amiable and irresistible apologies. Nobody, therefore, could enter into any argument with him, except it were a child. When a child spoke at all to the point, he stopped in a moment and listened with great atten-

tion. He took peculiar interest in all good sayings and in unanswerable questions of very young children. He once manifested extraordinary delight at a story I told him of a little girl we knew, saying to her mamma with an earnest look, on first seeing a man pass who wore a cocked-hat, "Mamma, dear! is that a headache?"

Leigh Hunt had a fine taste in music and sang with great expression, accompanying himself on the pianoforte.^[4] One day a literary friend, hearing he was very unwell, went to see him. It was winter. Arriving at the door, he heard the sick man singing a joyous Italian air to his own accompaniment. The friend, entering the room, found Hunt had wheeled the pianoforte with its back close in front of a blazing fire so that he could sit with his legs stretched out underneath it and his feet upon the fender, to the certain injury of the instrument. The friend made a remark to that effect. "Let us hope not!" said Hunt gaily, "but if it does, the pianoforte, you know, will not feel it—and I *must* toast my feet."

The daily, indeed the yearly, routine of Leigh Hunt's life since 1850—at which period he had completed his sixty-sixth year—will be understood from the following extract, which may be regarded as an excellent epitome. Every line tells a prolonged and varied tale, pathetic even in its allusion to a jest, and making one read as slowly and softly as if in the presence of his Shade.

With the occasional growth of this book [his *Autobiography*], with the production of others from necessity, with the solace of verse, and with my usual experience of sorrows and enjoyments, of sanguine hopes and bitter disappointments, of bad health and almost unconquerable spirits (for though my old hypochondria never returns, I sometimes undergo pangs of unspeakable will and longing, on matters which elude my grasp), I have now passed, in one sequestered tenor of life, almost the whole lapse of years since I lost my friend in Italy.

Of course he alludes to his one friend Shelley—and how silent and tearful the passage seems.

The same unvaried day sees me reading or writing, ailing, jesting, reflecting, rarely stirring from home but to walk, interested in public events, in the progress of society, in the "New

⁴ On Leigh Hunt's musical interests, see David R. Cheney, "Leigh Hunt's Efforts to Encourage an Appreciation of Classical Music," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, XVII (1968), pp. 89-96; also Theodore Fenner, *Leigh Hunt and Opera Criticism* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1972). (*Ed.*)

Reformation" (most deeply), in things great and small, in a print, in a plaster-cast, in a hand-organ, in the stars, in the run to which the sun is hastening, in the flower on my table, in the fly on my paper while I write.

He crosses words, of which he knows nothing; and perhaps we all do as much every moment, over divinest meanings.

It is a relief to me to notice that the length of this paper is a warning to throw down the pen. I cannot suppose that others will find the above passage so pathetic as it is to me—so rife with strange emotions that confuse the present with the past. Many tender memories of words and ideas crowd upon me, so like those just quoted, that I can now see him as he sat—his long iron-grey locks hanging over the back of his chair—and hear him, as I then heard, blandly discoursing in the evening light—while I am at the opposite surface of the earth, above or beneath his grave, writing a sort of prolonged and unsatisfactory epitaph. Perhaps I have set down more of his private faults than there was need to do, with the doubtful excuse that they were already known, misunderstood, or exaggerated, and had to be "met." They were not likely to be much known here. I should probably erase them if it were in my power; but the mail had my first paper last week, and "what I have writ, I have writ."



Presentation volumes from the Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection. At the left is a copy of R. H. Horne's tragedy *The Death of Marlowe* (1837) inscribed from Leigh Hunt (the dedicatee) to G. H. Lewes. Next to it is a copy of Leigh Hunt's play *The Legend of Florence* (2nd. ed., 1840) inscribed to Horne "from his affectionate friend, the author," with the inserted bookplate of the critic Edmund Gosse.