LEIGH HUNT

Selected Writings

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID JESSON-DIBLEY

SELECTED WRITINGS

JAMES LEIGH HUNT was born in Middlesex in 1784 and educated at Christ's Hospital School. His first book of poems appeared when he was seventeen. In 1808 he and his brother founded a radical weekly paper, *The Examiner*. An allegedly libellous article published in the paper about the Prince Regent led to a heavy fine and two year's imprisonment for the brothers. Hunt's wife joined him in prison, from where he continued to edit the paper. Hunt's circle of friends included Byron, Hazlitt and Lamb and he promoted the work of Keats and Shelley in *The Examiner*. In 1821 he travelled to Italy to join Byron and Shelley in launching a new periodical, *The Liberal*. Only four issues were published and he returned to London in 1825. *Lord Byron and his Contemporaries* (1828), an unflattering appraisal that made him unpopular, was based on that experience. In addition to poetry and journalism, Hunt's works include volumes of literary criticism, plays, a devotional work, and his *Autobiography* (1850). He died in 1859.

DAVID JESSON-DIBLEY was the Head of English at Christ's Hospital School before his retirement. He subsequently became a freelance lecturer in English literature, chiefly for the Extra-Mural Department of London University. He is a longstanding member of the Friends of S.T. Coleridge.

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> *Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.*
> *Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,*
> *Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*
>
> from 'Thyrsis'

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LEIGH HUNT AS SEEN BY CONTEMPORARIES

Biographical Introduction

James Leigh Hunt was born in Southgate on 19 October 1784 and died in Putney on 28 August 1859. He was named after James Henry Leigh, nephew of the 3rd Duke of Chandos, to whom his father, Isaac Hunt, a popular preacher, was a tutor.

Following eight years as a pupil at Christ's Hospital School in the City of London, and the publication of his *Juvenilia*, which his father saw through four editions, Leigh Hunt began a life-time career of journalism in 1805, making his precocious mark as a writer of theatrical criticism in *The News*, edited by his brother, John. In 1808, the brothers launched their best known weekly paper, *The Examiner*, with an editorial stance of liberal reform.

A year later, Hunt married Marianne Kent. Seven of their eleven children reached adulthood. Of these, the eldest, Thornton, published a collection of his father's letters after his death. The youngest, Vincent, Leigh Hunt's favourite, died seven years before his father at the age of thirty-one.

In 1813 and for the next two years, Hunt and his brother were obliged to edit *The Examiner* from separate gaols and to pay fines of £500 each for Hunt's alleged libel upon the Prince Regent. Hunt's wife and baby daughter were permitted to join him in Surrey gaol, where he seems to have been comfortably accommodated with wallpaper of his own choosing, his piano, and unlimited visits from admirers and friends, including Byron, Thomas Moore, Hazlitt and Lamb. Before his release he had written the greater part of his longest poem, *The Story of Rimini*, and a masque celebrating the downfall of Napoleon, *Descent of Liberty*.

The next three years were spent in Hampstead, where Hunt established his friendship with Shelley and Keats, commending their poetry to readers of *The Examiner* in 1816. In 1819, Hunt wrote a further appreciation of Keats's poetry for *The Indicator*, a weekly that Hunt sustained for a year and a half. In the same year, Shelley, of all Hunt's friends the most admired, dedicated *The Cenci* to him.

By 1821, the year in which Shelley and Byron invited him to Italy to launch a quarterly magazine, Hunt's reputation was at its peak amongst his own contemporaries, as poet, essayist, writer of political journalism, biographical sketches and literary criticism. His concern then, as throughout his career, was to refine the literary tastes of his readers, to cultivate their sensibilities and to extend their social sympathies. After a much delayed sea voyage, requiring Hunt and his family to winter in Plymouth, Hunt reached Leghorn on 1 July 1822, a week before Shelley was drowned.

The proposed quarterly, *The Liberal*, survived for four issues only. Relations between Hunt and Byron cooled and, after residing in Florence, in 1825 Hunt brought his family back to England and a series of lodgings in London. Eventually they settled in Upper Cheyne Row, Chelsea, where they were neighbours and friends of Thomas and Jane Carlyle from 1833 to 1840.

These were years of indigence and domestic disorder. Hunt was not in the best of health and his reputation had suffered through the publication of a candid appraisal of Byron, based on personal experience, in *Lord Byron and his Contemporaries*. Twenty years later, he was to stand by his myth-undermining observations, though conceding that their publication had been ill-timed.

Hunt's *Collected Poems* were published in 1832 and in 1844, the year in which he published his most substantial works of literary criticism, *Imagination and Fancy* and the essay, *What is Poetry?* By then he was almost at the end of his versatile though not very distinguished career as a poet. He had shown himself to be a modest innovator in narrative style with a commentator's keen eye for detail, a vigorous slapdash writer of burlesque and satire, a competent sonneteer, an easy exponent of conversational epistolary verse and an able translator of Greek, Roman, Italian and French poetry. In Rossetti's judgement, he was 'the greatest translator England had produced'. In addition, he had turned his hand to playwriting with *A Legend of Florence*, a verse drama staged with success at Covent Garden in 1840 and revived ten years later at Sadlers Wells and, by royal command, at Windsor

Castle. His late comedy, *Lover's Amazements*, was performed at the Lyceum in 1858, and seemed set for success, but the theatre went bankrupt.

In 1847 Hunt's domestic situation was relieved financially by the award of a pension of £200 a year, initiated by Lord John Russell, and the receipt of £440 raised by Charles Dickens and other friends, the profits of two public performances of Ben Jonson's *Everyman in his Humour*.

In prose, Hunt's later years were given over largely to his *Autobiography* (1850) and *The Religion of the Heart* (1853), the enlargement of earlier work to form a devotional handbook, which was widely read and valued. The *Autobiography*, Hunt's best known prose work, is an engagingly narrated memoir, the greater proportion of it dwelling upon his life prior to 1825.

The Hunts came to the last of their numerous residences in London – Cornwall Road, Hammersmith – in 1853, the year in which Vincent Hunt died and in which Hunt suffered the social embarrassment of identification with Henry Skimpole in Dickens's *Bleak House*. The breach was healed privately and three months after Hunt's death, Dickens made a public denial of intent in an article entitled *Leigh Hunt: A Remonstrance*. Marianne, who had been bedridden throughout her years in Hammersmith, died two years before her husband. During these last years, Hunt shared his home with two of his daughters and grandchildren. In 1859, he died peacefully in a friend's house in Putney at the age of seventy-five.

Though his talents were not of the highest order and were too widely dispersed, Hunt's unflagging commitment to humane social values and to the sharing of his literary insights and enthusiasms with receptive companions merit him the title of Ambassador Extraordinary of Literature during the first half of the nineteenth century. He outlived all the poets and essayists of his generation who, in reputation and distinctiveness, overshadowed him: Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Hazlitt, Lamb. But all owed a debt to his advocacy and editorial facility, as indeed did the leading poets of the next generation,

Tennyson and Browning. When, if ever, his letters are collected and published, the range of his interests and the warmth of his friendships will be more fully appreciated.

While writing for *The Indicator,* Hunt admitted: 'Hard is it for one who has grown up in the hope of being a poet, to confess that the best things he has done have been written in prose.' A modest conclusion and a sound one, though there is much pleasure to be had from his diverse poems. As for 'the best things' in his prose, not the least is his ready ability to share with his readers this enjoyment of literature and the pleasures of being alive. His aims were well summarized by his son, Thornton: 'To promote the happiness of his kind, to minister to the more educated appreciation of order and beauty, to open more widely the door of the library, and more widely the window of the library looking put upon nature, – these were the purposes that guided his studies and animated his labour to the very last.'

In literature, he holds a unique if not outstanding place as poet, Critic, translator, journalist, essayist, anthologist and mediator to his reading public of literary values, enthusiasms and taste.

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1816 *The Story of Rimini*, a Poem
(3rd edn. 1819)

1819 *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*
(further volumes 1832, 1844, 1862)

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(2nd edn. 1839, 3rd edn. 1849)

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In Five Acts.

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Edmund Blunden
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Ann Blainey

Selection from Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography*, his most substantial prose work, has been limited here, as it merits either a reissue of Professor Morpurgo's edition of 1949 (Cresset Press, London), or a fresh one.

From the Preface to *The Story of Rimini*

Poetry, in its highest sense, belongs exclusively to such men as Shakspeare, Spenser, and others, who possessed the deepest insight into the spirit and sympathies of all things; but poetry, in the most comprehensive application of the term, I take to be the flower of any kind of experience, rooted in truth, and issuing forth into beauty. All that the critic has a right to demand of it, according to its degree, is, that it should spring out of a real impulse, be consistent in its parts, and shaped into some characteristic harmony of verse. Without these requisites (apart from fleeting and artificial causes), the world will scarcely look at any poetical production a second time; whereas, if it possess them, the humblest poetry stands a chance of surviving not only whatever is falsely so called, but much that contains, here and there, more poetical passages than itself; passages that are the fits and starts of a fancy without judgment – the incoherences of a nature, poetical only by convulsion, but prosaic in its ordinary strength.

Thus, in their several kinds, we have the poetry of thought and passion in Shakspeare and Chaucer; of poetical abstraction and enjoyment in Spenser; of scholarship and a rapt ambition in Milton; of courtliness in Waller (who writes like an inspired gentleman-usher); of gallantry in Suckling; of wit and satire in Pope; of heartiness in Burns; of the 'fat of the land' in Thomson; of a certain sequestered gentleness in Shenstone; and the poetry of prose itself in Dryden: not that he was a prosaic writer; but that what other people thought in prose, he could think in verse; and so made absolute poems of pamphlets and party-reasoning.

The first quality of a poet is imagination, or that faculty by which the subtlest idea is given us of the nature or condition of any one thing, by illustration from another, or by the inclusion of remote affinities: as when Shakspeare speaks of moonlight *sleeping* on a bank; or of nice customs *curtseying* to great kings (though the reader may, if he pleases, put this under the head of wit, or imagination in miniature); or where Milton speaks of towers *bosom'd* in trees, or of motes that *people* the sunbeams; or

compares Satan on the wing at a distance, to a fleet of ships *hanging* in the clouds; or where Mr. Shelley (for I avoid quoting from living writers, lest it should be thought invidious towards such as are not quoted) puts that stately, superior, and comprehensive image, into the mouth of a speaker who is at once firm of soul, and yet anticipates a dreadful necessity –

'I see, *as from a tower*, the *end of all:*'

or lastly, where Mr Keats tells us of the *realmless eyes* of old Saturn (as he sits musing after his dethronement); or of the two brothers and *their murdered man*, riding from Florence; that is to say, the man whom they were *about* to murder; or where, by one exquisite touch, he describes an important and affecting office of the god Mercury, and the effects of it upon the spectators in the lower world – calling him 'the *star* of Lethe;' by which we see that he was the only bright object which visited that dreary region. We behold him rising on its borders.

In proportion to the imagination, is the abstract poetical faculty: in proportion to extent of sympathy (for passion, which is everywhere in poetry, may be comparatively narrow and self-revolving), is the power of universality: in proportion to energy of temperament and variety of experience, is the power of embodying the conceptions in a greater or less amount of consistent and stirring action, whether narrative or dramatic. The greatest poets have the greatest amount of all these qualities conjoined: the next greatest are those who unite the first two: the next, those whose imagination is exquisite as far as it goes, but is confined to certain spheres of contemplation: then come the poets, who have less imagination, but more action – who are imaginative, as it were, in the mass, and with a certain vague enjoyment allied to the feelings of youth: then the purely artificial poets, or such as poetize in art rather than nature, or upon conventional beauty and propriety, as distinguished from beauty universal: and then follow the minor wits, the song-writers, burlesquers, &c. In every instance, the indispensable requisites are truth of feeling, freedom from superfluity (that is, the absence of forced or unfitting thoughts), and beauty of result; and in proportion as these

requisites are comprehensive, profound, and active, the poet is great. But it is always to be borne in mind, that the writers in any of these classes, who take lasting hold of the world's attention, are justly accounted superior to such as afford less evidences of power in a higher class. The pretension is nothing; the performance every thing. A good apple is better than an insipid peach. A song of Burns is (literally) worth half the poets in the collections.

Suckling's *Ballad on a Wedding* is a small and unambitious, yet unmisgiving and happy production, of no rank whatsoever considered with reference to the height of poetry; but so excellent of its kind for consistency, freshness, and relish, that it has survived hundreds of epithalamiums, and epics too; and will last as long as beauty has a lip, or gallantry frankness.

Shenstone's *School-mistress* is a poem of a very humble description in subject, style, and everything, except its humane and thoughtful sweetness: yet being founded in truth, and consistent, and desiring nothing but truth and consistency, it has survived in like manner. Compared with greater productions, it resembles the herbs which the author speaks of in its cottage-garden; but balm and mint have their flourishing, as well as the aloe; and like them, and its old heroine, it has secured its 'grey renown,' clean as her mob-cap, and laid up in lavender. Crashaw is a poet now scarcely known except to book-worms. Pope said of him, that his writing was 'a mixture of tender gentle thoughts and suitable expressions, of forced and inextricable conceits, and of needless fillers-up to the rest.' Crashaw had a morbid enthusiasm, which sometimes helped him to an apprehensiveness and depth of expression, perhaps beyond the voluntary power of his great critic; yet Pope, by writing nothing out of what the painters call 'keeping', or unworthy of himself, is justly reckoned worth a hundred Crashaws. Random thoughts and fillings-up are a poet's *felo de se*.

Far am I, in making these remarks, from pretending to claim any part or parcel in the fellowship of names consecrated by time. I can truly say, that, except when I look upon some others that get into the collections, consecrated by no hands but the book-

jobbers, I do not know (after I have written them) whether my verses deserve to live a dozen days longer. The confession may be thought strong or weak, as it happens; but such is the fact. I have witnessed so much self-delusion in my time, and partaken of so much, and the older I grow, my veneration so increases for poetry not to be questioned, that all I can be sure of, is my admiration of genius in others. I cannot say how far I overvalue it, or even undervalue it, in myself. I am in the condition of a lover who is sure that he loves, and is therefore happy in the presence of the beloved object; but is uncertain how far he is worthy to be beloved. Perhaps the symptom is a bad one, and only better than that of a confident ignorance. Perhaps the many struggles of my life; the strange conflicting thoughts upon a thousand matters, into which I have been forced; the necessity of cultivating some modesty of self-knowledge, as a set-off to peremptoriness of public action; and the unceasing alternation of a melancholy and a cheerfulness, equally native to my blood – and the latter of which I have suffered to go its lengths, both as an innocent propensity and a means of resistance – have combined in me to baffle conclusion, and filled me full of these *perhapses*, which I have observed growing upon my writings for many years past. *Perhaps* the question is not worth a word I have said of it, except upon that principle of 'gossiping' with which my preface sets out, and which I hope will procure me the reader's pardon for starting it. All that I was going to say was, that if I cannot do in poetry what ought to be done, I know what ought not; and that if there is no truth in my verses, I look for no indulgence...

...I took up the subject of the *Story of Rimini* at one of the happiest periods of my life; otherwise I confess I should have chosen a less melancholy one. Not that melancholy subjects are unpopular, or that pain, for any great purpose, is to be avoided; much less so sweet a one as that of pity. I am apt enough to think, with the poet's good-natured title to his play, that 'All's well that ends well'; and am as willing as any man to bear my share of suffering, for the purpose of bringing about that moral to human story. My life has been half made up of the effort.

Neither is every tragical subject so melancholy as the word might be supposed to imply; for not to mention those balms of beauty and humanity with which great poets reconcile the sharpest wounds they give us, there are stories (*Hero and Leander* is one of them), in which the persons concerned are so innocent, and appear to have been happy for so long a time, that the most distressing termination of their felicity hardly hinders a secret conviction, that they might well suffer bitterly for so short a one. Their tragedy is the termination of happiness, and not the consummation of misery.

But besides the tendency I have from animal spirits, as well as from need of comfort, to indulge my fancy in happier subjects, it appears to me, that the world has become experienced enough to be capable of receiving its best profit through the medium of pleasurable, instead of painful, appeals to its reflection. There is an old philosophic conviction reviving among us as a popular one (and there could not be one more desirable), that it is time for those who would benefit their species, to put an end to recriminations, and denouncements, and threats, and agree to consider the sufferings of mankind as arising out of want of knowledge rather than defect of goodness, – as intimations which, like the physical pain of a wound, or a galling ligament, tell us that we are to set about removing the causes of pain, instead of venting the spleen of it.

Agreeably to this conviction, and to the good-nature of it, it appears desirable, that tragical stories should be so written, as to leave no chance of misconception with regard to the first discernible causes of the error that produced the tragedy. Now what is this first cause in the story which stands at the head of the present volume? Is it the crime committed by the father, in entrapping his daughter into a marriage unfit for her? No: it is not even that. It is the habit of falsehood which pervaded society around him, and which therefore enabled and encouraged him to lie for that purpose: in other words, it was the great social mistake, still the commonest among us, arising from want of better knowledge, and producing endless mistake, confusion, and a war of principle,

in all the relations of life. Society lied, and taught lying, with contradictory tenets that drove the habit to desperation; and then, with the natural anger of inconvenienced folly, and after the fashion of the brute beasts we read of, who sit clawing their wounds, it took the last guilty sufferer for the first: and this it has been doing, more or less, ever since half-knowledge took itself for whole, or a partial perception of its ignorance exasperated and degraded it into spleen and bigotry. A secret uneasiness has accordingly pervaded all moral criticism, especially where the critic has not been wanting in a good measure of natural benevolence; nay, where the temperament has been violent, and the will greater than the reason, it has sometimes exasperated him and made him inhuman, in proportion to his very desire of sympathy. I remember I was never more astonished, than when some of the critics of the poem in question (not altogether impartial, however, on the political score), found out, that the hero and heroine had not suffered enough for the cause of good morals, and that they were too amiable! What would such critics have? Is it the unamiable alone who suffer, or who require to be warned against the perils they undergo? Or is it none but the amiable who are weak and thoughtless? Or must the cruellest temptations into which duplicity and error can bring people, be kept out of sight, purely to please the morbid fancies and social bad consciences of those who perpetuate them? Lastly, I would ask, whether a long train of misery, and a tragical death, are no calamities, or 'nothing to speak of'? I cannot answer, either for the misgivings of false morals, or for the strange fascinations of those, who might choose, for aught I know, to go and disobey their parents, and take to drinking poison, because last night they had seen the play of *Romeo and Juliet*, or the *Orphan*! But this I know, that I thought the catastrophe a very dreadful one when I wrote it, and the previous misery still worse; and that although I certainly intended no moral lesson, or thought about it, when I was led by the perusal of the story in Dante to attempt making a book of it, the subject gradually forced upon me the consideration of those first causes of error, of which I have been speaking.

I thought of putting for a motto to the second edition, a passage out of the *Orlando Innamorato*:

'Bisogna ben guardare
Al primo errore, ed inconveniente.'

'Guard well against the first, unfit mistake.'

But so little did I suspect that any one could remain unimpressed with the catastrophe, that I doubted whether the motto itself would not be mixed up too exclusively with the principal sufferers. I am glad to think it is now likely to be otherwise, and that to those who choose to reflect on the tragedy of Dante's story, no link in the chain of moral causes need be lost sight of. It would be idle to reply, that, by bringing out a first cause, we cease to absorb attention upon the second, and endanger a just dread of it. Society only becomes the more bound to see into that first evil, without the existence of which we should not have so many others.

It is a great pleasure to me to reflect, that, before I had become aware of the inestimable value of the love of truth, as the foundation of every thing finally good, in poetry, philosophy, and the government of the world, I had unconsciously been giving a lesson upon it in a poetical form... 1832

The Story of Rimini[1]

Time, the close of the thirteenth century; –
Scene, first at Ravenna, afterwards at Rimini

CANTO I

The coming to fetch the Bride from Ravenna

The sun is up, and 'tis a morn of May
Round old Ravenna's clear-shewn towers and bay,
A morn, the loveliest which the year has seen,
Last of the spring, yet fresh with all its green;