Charles Lamb, Elia and the London Magazine

Simon P. Hull

CHARLES LAMB, ELIA AND THE LONDON MAGAZINE: METROPOLITAN MUSE

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BY

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NOTES ON THE TEXT

To underpin and remain consistent to the theoretical premise of this study, as a reading of Elia as a text of the *London Magazine*, the following policies have been adopted.

All quotations from Elia in the *London*, plus Lamb's other writings for this magazine, from 1820–4, are taken from the Routledge/Thoemmes facsimile edition (1994). Where 'n.s.' is prefixed to the volume number, this refers to the New Series, which ran from January 1825 to the magazine's demise in 1829. As the Routledge/Thoemmes edition does not include the New Series, any Lamb texts appearing here are taken from the E. V. Lucas edition of Lamb's *Works* (London: Methuen, 1903–5), with the *London*'s references from F. P. Riga and C. A. Prance's *Index to the London Magazine* (New York and London: Garland, 1978). Unless otherwise stated, all remaining quotations from Charles Lamb's works are taken from Lucas's edition.

As the *London* itself constitutes a primary text, all quotations from other writers appearing in the magazine are also referenced to the Routledge/Thoemmes edition. Following the same pattern for Lamb, the numerous quotations from Hazlitt that do not appear in the *London* are referenced to P. P. Howe's edition of *The Complete Works* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930).

References to writings in the *London Magazine* are given parenthetically within the main text (as *LM*, volume, page).

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INTRODUCTION

In a study that is very much about the essay and its formal effects, I begin with a particularly rich example of the most pertinent of those effects – the power of suggestion. Here is Hazlitt's description of Lamb's most successful literary persona, Elia, from the *Spirit of the Age* essays:

> Mr Lamb has succeeded not by conforming to the Spirit of the Age, but in opposition to it. He does not march boldly along with the crowd, but steals off the pavement to pick his way in the contrary direction. He prefers bye-ways to highways. When the full tide of human life pours along to some festive shew, to some pageant of a day, Elia would stand on one side to look over an old book-stall, or stroll down some deserted pathway in search of a pensive inscription over a tottering door-way, or some quaint device in architecture, illustrative of embryo art and ancient manners.[1]

The first thing to notice is the image of the epochal spirit as the modern metropolis. This indicates that the only recently challenged association of British Romanticism with nature and rural life is linked to a bias towards poetry and against prose such as Hazlitt's and Lamb's. Yet even the alternative focus on the city and urban culture which has gathered momentum over the last ten years, through research into spectacle, theatrical culture and consumerism, as well as projects that more directly discuss the theme of literature and the city,[2] is lacking in the figure especially of Lamb. If Hazlitt himself does not appear to see Lamb as part of the metropolis, he still perceives him in urban terms. Lamb's contrariness to the metropolitan spirit is presented as an alternative sense of the city. The powerful and dominant spirit equates to a metropolis defined by the relentless dynamic of fashion and modernity, a circus of spectacular attraction and mass consumption. Lamb's Elian city is almost pastoral in comparison, defined by the gentle stasis of tradition and antiquity, a living museum of humanistic text that disperses the crowd, and values production over consumption. Furthermore, the vivid impression in Elia of an immediate, corporeal presence within the familiar metropolitan enclosure is insightfully evoked when Hazlitt eventually turns to Lamb's literal representations of the city:

> With what a gusto Mr Lamb describes the inns and courts of law, the Temple and Gray's Inn … the avenues to the playhouses are thick with panting recollections, and Christ's-Hospital still breathes the balmy breath of infancy in his description of it![3]

Hazlitt's sketch is therefore typically astute, his choice of metaphor apt and resonant. Lamb does not steal away from the city altogether but to quieter, unfrequented regions, sequestered areas which enable reflection upon the values of metropolitan life. As an analogy for the genre of Romantic metropolitanism proposed, Lamb is at once detached from that 'crowd' and located, by virtue of the insight afforded by such detachment, at the epicentre.

Nevertheless, Hazlitt's sense of Lamb as an oppositional figure is particularly problematic when applied to Elia's relationship to concurrent literature. *The Spirit of the Age* suggests that Lamb's successful deviation from the zeitgeist involves opposition to the metropolis and the cultural values associated with it. Such a reading seems oblivious to the fact that the Elia essays were, in the main, written purposely and primarily for the *London Magazine*, a quintessentially, consciously metropolitan periodical dedicated to translating into a lively miscellany the dynamism and hurly-burly of London life. As such, under the editorship of John Scott, the *London* announced itself in January 1820 as a revival of the highly successful eighteenth-century magazine of the same name that had discontinued in 1785. As Josephine Bauer's still unsurpassed book about the later magazine demonstrates, 'London itself forms the subject or locale of many of the essays and poems' that appear, and

> the reader is never allowed to forget that [quoting from the magazine itself]: 'London is the metropolis, not merely of England, but of the whole British Empire; an empire which … considering its wealth, knowledge, intellectual energy, commercial enterprise, and the consequent moral and physical power, perhaps unequalled by any, ancient or modern'.[4]

Elia is moreover publicly treasured by the *London*, as 'Our ELIA … the pride of our magazine',[5] a privileged position evidenced by frequent, deferential or affectionate referencing from the magazine's other contributors. John Clare's 'Sonnet to Elia' (August 1822) provides an obvious example, as do supportive exclamations from John Scott and Janus Weathercock (T. G. Wainwright). Influence is even apparent in essays such as Barry Cornwall's 'The Cider Cellar' (October 1820) and 'The Memoir of a Hypochondriac' (September 1822). Both openly reference specific Elia essays in the course of attempting what might be termed an 'Elian' style: the familiar, conversational tone, the indulgence in consumerist pleasure and the affective, confessional pose. Far from opposing the metropolitan spirit of the age, therefore, Lamb participates in it. Elia's unfashionable antiquarianism is reconciled with the modern metropolis through his conception for, and celebrated contributions to, the periodical project of the *London*.

More than this, because of the unique extent to which Lamb invests the self in the periodical text, I will argue for his position at the vanguard of a Romantic metropolitanism which includes also Pierce Egan, Leigh Hunt, Thomas De Quincey and Hazlitt himself.

Hazlitt's is perhaps a telling omission, indicative of a prevailing anxiety over authorial identity amid the collaborative enterprise and uncertain cultural status of the new miscellaneous magazine, epitomized by the *London*. Discussed in Chapter 1, this is an anxiety fundamentally concerned with a self-destructive, elitist hostility to 'low' metropolitan culture from within the profession itself, a virulent state of *anti*-metropolitanism which is defused by Lamb's self-conscious appropriation of the periodical writer. The traditional bias against the city in Romantic studies is therefore bound up with an equal prejudice against periodical writing, as criticism until the late 1980s *uncritically* inherited the Romantic's own sense of unease over the genre. As such, this anti-metropolitan tendency in criticism provides a further example of Jerome McGann's oft-used notion of the 'Romantic ideology', in which: 'The scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated ... by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations'.[6] In her book on Victorian journalism Laurel Brake convincingly rationalizes this critical phenomenon, a prejudice that, as I am arguing, has its roots in Romantic theory and its hostility to the perceived low-culture, metropolitan values of transience, topicality and novelty. These features – plus another, 'plurality of discourse, including literary and political' – are, according to Brake, imputed to 'journalism', so that 'it has normally been seen by critics ... as "subliterary"': this has led in turn to the 'retrospective foregrounding of the novel as the dominant literary form of the nineteenth century', an emphasis 'predicated on the exclusion of the nonfictional prose that appeared so prodigiously in periodicals and newspapers in the forms of essays, reviews, leaders, and correspondence'.[7]

In the case of Lamb, as in that of other periodical writers, because the context of periodical publication does not feature in the studies of Elia that take the collected versions of the essays as their primary text – the *Essays* (1823) and *Last Essays* (1833) – these studies by definition preclude a full recognition of the author's involvement in metropolitan culture. A historicist approach, or sense of immediate socio-cultural or political context, is eschewed for those of the formal or autobiographical variety.[8] This is not to say, of course, that these latter studies have proved valuable only by negative example. They have served, on the contrary, to identify the defining authorial traits and literary features of Lamb that appropriate, through Elia, the periodical context: the self-belittling reflex (Frank); the othering of the self (Aaron); the use of an educative reader, part imagined, part implied (Nabholtz); and the habitual translation of peer-group relations into literary discourse (Monsman and McFarland).[9] Only by reading

Elia as a figure created *by* Lamb, but *for* the *London Magazine*, however, can the full metropolitan implications emerge of this figure's dual identity as magazine-writer and trading-house clerk.

This is the ontological basis which defines Lamb as 'metropolitan', as opposed to an author like Blake or Wordsworth who writes, more simply, to a greater or lesser degree *about* the metropolis. In the *London*, as in other miscellaneous magazines, literary items – poems, travel writing, traditional tales, essays and reviews – appear alongside business columns on agriculture and other forms of commerce, including reports on new patents, bankruptcies, markets and stocks. Such a proximity of imaginative to material items suggests the commercial exigencies involved in the production and dissemination of *all* literature, but more specifically reflects the periodical text's inevitable implication with 'other' commercial products: to use the ever reflexive Elia's own list, 'indigos, cottons, raw silks, piece-goods, flowered or otherwise' (*LM*, 2, p. 365).

The work of Lamb's peers in essayistic prose, Hazlitt, Hunt and De Quincey, is similarly characterized by this periodical mode of metropolitanism. In individual essays from each can be found a microcosm of the periodical text's capacity for juxtaposing material with transcendent items, or ostensibly high and low subject matter, and also the degree of detachment, verging at times on callousness,[10] which is simultaneously necessary to the essayistic persona and life lived amid the city's intense concentration of humanity.[11] As in the discussed essay 'On Getting Up on Cold Mornings', Hunt's earlier essay for the *Reflector*, 'Account of a Familiar Spirit, who Visited and Conversed with the Author ...' (1811), evokes the egalitarian, carnival spirit of the city by comically domesticating great artistic and historical figures. Also configuring urban consumerism, Hunt's great men, potentates and eminent literati alike are reduced to gluttons punished for excessive eating by the 'spirit' of indigestion. Ubiquitous in Lamb too, as we shall see, the food motif occurs to similar, carnivalizing effect in Hazlitt's essays. In 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (*Liberal*, April 1823), Wordsworth's gait is comically evocative of his own Peter Bell character, as he enters the room instantly to devour a hunk of cheese lying on the table. 'The Fight' (*New Monthly Magazine*, 1822) is awash with food- and drink-fuelled conversation, congruent, moreover, with Hazlitt's juxtaposing of the mock-heroic idiom with the slang terminology of boxing, in the author's unlikely foray into the emergent, popular genre of sports journalism.[12] De Quincey's metropolitanism is identified in the present study in the mutual and reciprocal relationship of narrative and flânerie in the opium-eater's periodicalized 'Confessions', but it exists more subtly in the blasé tone of his 1827 essay, 'On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts'. Sympathizing with the same social vogue that he identifies, De Quincey confesses here to a preference for the aesthetic over the moral approach: like a consumer item, murder can be an expression of 'good taste', in which 'Design, gentlemen,

grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment'[13] are deemed necessary to the most affective performance.

The very term 'table talk', of course, as used by Hazlitt for the title of two collected volumes of essays, conjures the image of a convivial repast of dinner and lively, free-ranging conversation, an ideal site where material consumption, urbane wit and literary criticism harmoniously coexist. The essay-writing – or rather, the essayistic mode – of these four authors, Lamb, Hazlitt, Hunt and De Quincey, is collectively, therefore, sufficient to constitute a genre of Romantic metropolitanism (or metropolitan Romanticism). This genre as such stands squarely as an urban counterpart to the Lake School. Included also is Pierce Egan, an author who on artistic merit seems not to belong with the above company. There would appear to be no more 'metropolitan' a text than *Life in London*, however, both in terms of its subject and a style that exhibits the same essayistic qualities of immediacy and detachment used by Egan's more illustrious peers. Yet as the discussion in Chapter 3 of Egan's city-as-theatre aesthetic suggests, his work clearly lacks the penetration or insight of either Lamb, Hazlitt, Hunt or De Quincey, the aforementioned dialogue between the material and the abstract, and the shady or dark areas that offset the 'light' of more whimsical moments. *Life in London* seems indeed to be all light and no shade, hence of inferior quality as literature. But if, as it must be, metropolitanism is applied here as a neutrally descriptive term, concerned with type or kind and not quality, Egan surely deserves to be included, just as Lamb's placement at the centre of Romantic metropolitanism does not necessarily argue that he is a 'better' writer than Hazlitt, Hunt or De Quincey. Then again, it is not so easy to separate quality from kind where metropolitanism is concerned. Lamb warrants his centrality against Egan's more marginal position by virtue of an appropriation, not a perpetuation, of concepts such as the city-as-theatre and, in relation to all the authors discussed, through a preternatural degree of exchange between self and other that is at once quintessentially metropolitan and the stuff of literary achievement.

The question of literary value neatly returns us to periodical writing. For all the problems with studying it, such as how to reconcile it with the concept of the author and handling its sheer miscellaneousness, we can no longer say that it represents a neglected area in Romantic studies. Following Jon Klancher's seminal study, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832*, in 1987, a body of research into early nineteenth-century print culture has developed to establish the importance of a vibrant periodical market to the dissemination and reception of literature, and formation of the canon. This trend has involved, notably in the respective studies by Mark Schoenfield and Mark Parker, challenging the above tendency to read literature initially produced for periodicals – mainly essays – primarily as collected or anthologized texts. But a further problem arises

from this theoretical shift, typified as it is by Parker's approach, of 'dissolving the figures of Elia and the author of Table-Talk into the ground of Scott's *London*'.[14] The very idea of a metropolitan author that includes the periodical (con)text is surely a contradiction in terms. Reading Elia as a figure of the periodical text, but one that writes itself in terms of resistance to this 'historical embedding', Peter J. Manning argues that 'resituating Lamb within the pages of the *London Magazine*', as do the cited studies by Schoenfield and Parker, 'risks circumscribing [Lamb's] effects in the exact proportion that one recovers their original richness'.[15] If metropolitanism derives to a large extent from the periodical text, with its 'plurality of discourse', or definition by, as Schoenfield's deconstructive reading of Elia argues, a 'particularly telling heteroglossia',[16] then how can such a destabilizing feature be attributed to the author? The author and metropolitanism, as periodical text, thus become once more separated, or indeed mutually opposed.

Furthermore, a historicist reclamation of Lamb such as Manning's presents the same opposition from the reverse angle. Focusing on 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading', Manning's article proposes that Elia associates himself with books rather than magazines – as if in keeping with the aforementioned mood of anxiety pervading the new periodical milieu. However, Elia's character as an avid reader of books rather than magazines is surely congruent with rather than opposed to periodical writing itself, as part of the literary aspiration of magazines like the *London, Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review*. Such an attempt at a historicist approach that still manages to reclaim Lamb from the corporate, collaborative body of the metropolitan text, ironically relies therefore on the author's elision of that context. For all the above attempts to historicize Lamb, therefore, criticism on this author seems not to have progressed much beyond the cosy, insular image presented by Malcolm Elwin in his introduction to the 1952 Macdonald edition of *Elia*: 'There is nothing of religion or politics to inflict the discomforting embarrassment of controversial or speculative thought … This is the abiding charm of Elia. He is the prince of escapists.'[17] To thus see Lamb as successfully escaping the world of religion and politics is to ignore his metropolitanism because it is through his knowing engagement with metropolitan culture that Lamb is historically embedded. Still more recently than Manning, however, James Treadwell seems to offer the most balanced study yet, one in which Lamb's metropolitanism resides not simply in Elia's patently 'urban attachments' and the 'social space' he occupies (his 'comfortably ordinary, middle-class pursuits'), but in a mode of consciousness that simultaneously assimilates the essay form, the periodical text and the city: Elia's 'world', Treadwell notices, 'is miscellaneous, heterogeneous, ordered not by the sequences of narrative or chronology but by the multifarious accidents of a crowded city'.[18] Elia's desultory observations and fragmentary or disjointed narrative style, as an articulation of the essay

form itself, therefore capture the very dynamic of urban spectatorship. This is an instance of what Julian Wolfreys identifies as the essence of the 'urban text', whereby, 'in its play of images it maps the condition of the city onto the text itself, so that the text assumes in a variety of ways the shape, the contours, the architecture and the "ebbs and flows" of the city'.[19] Lamb consequently embraces instead of resists the marginalizing condition of writing for periodicals. Both from within and outside the essays, in skits and correspondence, he 'plays games … with Elia's merely pseudonymous being', games which 'all depend on the fact that he is literally bookish, a figure of writing (or of print) only'. This notion of an empowering investment of the self in the periodical text contradicts the assertion made in periodical-based readings (including Treadwell's own) that Elia is 'subject to readers' interventions', and 'partially overwritten' by other texts, 'as part of the overall discursive field which creates Elia'.[20] Game-playing implies the empowerment of an elusive presence, the 'catch-me-if-you-can' teasing of the player who leaves his desire-creating mark in the place of a real, physical presence. Elia thus emerges as the over-writer, not the overwritten. The clearest example in the present study occurs in the parodic relationship of the 'Witches and other Night-Fears' and 'Confessions of a Drunkard' essays to De Quincey's concurrent text in both the *London Magazine* and book-form, the 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater'.

As indicated at the beginning, moreover, the power of suggestion within the essays creates a volume of meaning which belies their diminutive physical scale, and overall impression of triviality and escapism. Suggestion is the primary function, or the *modus operandi*, of Elia. As in any text suggestion works through a precise economy of language, and is typically achieved in Elia by the use of fragmentary syntax and the one-sentence paragraph, as illustrated in the following response to the chimney-sweep: 'I have a kindly yearning toward these dim specks – poor blots – innocent blacknesses –' (*LM*, 5, p. 405).

Immediately following as it does a highly materialistic, seemingly heartless description of the sweep's physical characteristics, the reader seizes upon this minimalistic expression of sympathy and becomes aware of the irony of Elia's metropolitanism, hence the social awareness belying it. Indeed, attention is drawn all the more towards the pregnant remark because of the converse use of an emphatic, comparative style where similes, metaphors and cognates are luxuriously accumulated, as in the descriptions of the Caledonian, the beggar and the poor relation. Sometimes the casual, throwaway phrase, not thus isolated but incorporated into the body of a long, often desultory paragraph, is easier to overlook, but no less important. Such a phrase is used to describe the legless beggar in 'A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis': 'a grand fragment, as good as an Elgin marble' (*LM*, 5, p. 535). Discussed in Chapter 4, here is an urban appropriation of the Romantic fragment to a practical, social

cause, an appropriation which not only questions a value system that treasures classical art over civil liberty, but in the process mocks the trendiness of the fragment as an aesthetic principle. The fragment and other contemporary Romantic ideas therefore play in diverse ways an important role in Elia's composition. The sense of negative capability which Lamb shares with Keats, and the willingness to suspend disbelief he shares with Coleridge, his general interest in the twilight realm between knowledge and superstition, seem all of a piece with a preternaturally essayistic style in which meaning itself assumes an allusive, phantasmal and ultimately compelling quality. The fragmentary aspect of the periodical text accommodates this metropolitan form to Romanticism, just as the figure of Elia appropriates that text to the self.

Lamb's achievement of metropolitan authorship therefore occurs principally through an appropriation to the self of the very conditions of the periodical text: commodification, fragmentariness and anonymity, conditions that normally undermine such a monolithic concept as author. This 'return' of the author is articulated both through a notion of self *within* the essays that is actually predicated on dialogic exchange with the other, and Elia's *extra*-essayistic ontology in the *London Magazine*. The former is evident most obviously in the occasional references to 'L', and 'Mr Lamb' in the essays, but occurs on a more sophisticated level in the auto-critical reflex discussed primarily in Chapter 1. Here, the frequent puncturing within the one essay of previously assumed egoistic types such as the hypochondriac and the intolerant or prejudicial figure, argues, in the process, against the tendency to competitive excess in the metropolis, and for the democracy and enlightened cosmopolitanism of the utopian model. This latter, extra-essayistic dimension can be attributed to the agency of 'paratext', providing as it does in Elia a 'threshold … between text and off-text … a privileged place of pragmatics and … of an influence on the public … that is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it': deceptively peripheral in appearance, the Elian paratext is a 'fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text'.[21] This ontology is both encapsulated and enacted in the mock obituary by 'Phil-Elia', who likens his supposedly deceased 'friend', ironically enough, to the 'skilful novelist', whose curiously inverted 'egotism' allows him 'to imply and twine with his own identity the griefs and affections of another – making himself many, or reducing many unto himself' (*LM*, 7, p. 119). Other extra-essayistic manifestations appear in postscript or correspondence-page dialogue – crucially, always as Elia himself – that assert Elia's freedom from the corporeal, fixed identity of book authorship, or indeed, the ennui of quotidian life. The freedom of identity variously espoused from *within* essays such as 'Recollections of the South-Sea House', 'Oxford in the Vacation', 'Jews, Quakers, Scotchmen, and other Imperfect Sympathies' or the 'old actors' series is thus supplemented by Elia's extra-essayistic appropriation of

the periodical, metropolitan text. Such a pervasive, phantasmal ontology seems indeed to echo the positive, emancipatory model of the city proposed by Iris Marion Young: 'of relative anonymity, heterogeneity, openness, and change, in which otherness can become unfixed from any totalizing sense of community or self-identity'.[22] It is therefore more helpful in this context to refer to 'Elia' rather than the 'Elia essays', to emphasize the emancipative agency of the essayistic figure over the formal confines of Lamb's text. Accordingly, the readings of the essays in the present study are highly attentive to any changes in meaning caused by revisions subsequently made for the collected versions. Involving the excision of material from within the main text as well as the paratext of footnote and postscript, these revisions typically remove material considered to be too trivial, too topical – or perhaps too metropolitan – for the relative feature of timelessness implied by the very fact of book publication.[23] The postscript to 'A Chapter on Ears', for example, playfully castigating Leigh Hunt for suggesting that Elia and Lamb were one and the same, is deemed superfluous and irrelevant, thus a sense of how Elia wryly enmeshes himself in the metropolitan text through such dialogue is either lost entirely, or at least, in annotated editions, greatly reduced. Hardly apparent in the collected essays, such inter-periodical banter enables Elia to become, as Treadwell observes, 'the focus of a small-scale cult of personality'.[24] Discussed in Chapter 3, 'Oxford in the Vacation' (October 1820) undergoes the heaviest, most significant pruning, the removal of both footnotes and main text changing the characterization of G. D. (George Dyer) from a problematic and controversial, to a relatively innocuous, sentimentalized figure in the collected version. All of which reinforces the impression of the Elian text as being a literary expression of metropolitan sociability, or the true conversational idiom, in its provocative opinions and sense of immediate, intimate and often argumentative dialogue. The notion of the uncut metropolitan text as being too topical for book publication readily merges with the even more conservative idea of it as tending to be too free with its opinions and allusions, too loose with its formal and narrative cohesion – and ultimately, perhaps, too emancipated altogether. This is emphasized by the minor controversy the Oxford essay stirred in its original form. Some of the above material was allegedly removed by Lamb as a result of complaints about Dyer's portrayal, both from a correspondent ('W. K.'), to whom Elia pacifically responds in the December number, and privately from Dyer himself.

With a generic discursiveness and desultoriness that correlates with the ever-shifting scenes observed by the restless flâneur, the essay is itself an essentially urban form. Such a fluent dynamic in turn bespeaks suggestiveness rather than statement, a feature that has unfortunately helped render the essay the poor relation of other, ostensibly more substantial literary forms, but which ironically also serves to empower the metropolitan author. Due in part to its association

with periodical writing, the traditional, derogatory notion of the essay is that of sub-literary endeavour, trivial or frivolous writing produced by those, presumably, either incapable or unwilling to set themselves to literature proper.[25] With the addition of an idiomatic tendency to self-belittlement, moreover, a sense of the triviality of the essay and the essayist might seem as if redoubled in the case of Elia. Yet this ostensible presentation of 'lameness' represents at another level a corporeal vehicle that transforms the dubious, anxiety-inducing conditions of periodical writing into the empowered metropolitan author. Elia's self-confessed incapacity for deep or prolonged thought encodes the ideal character to exploit the essay's generically tentative or experimental, indeed its suggestive quality. Similarly, the 'poverty' of his dreams that Elia laments in 'Night-Fears', against the fantastic visions of Lamb's peers, Coleridge, De Quincey and Proctor, suggests the reverse image, that of the essay's staple ingredient, domestic or familiar subject matter, and the appeal of shared, common experience, an appeal which Lamb's essay-writing contemporaries and predecessors all successfully exploit. Lamb's comparison of himself with his literary contemporaries is, in effect, between the essay and poetry, two forms of writing so different that his comparison is irrelevant. Comparison would only have been viable, in other words, if Lamb had treated like with like, and discussed his abilities in relation to fellow essayists, such as Hazlitt, Hunt or De Quincey. As it is Lamb's self-denigration achieves almost the opposite, by suggesting a sense of alternative to what itself becomes subtly mocked as a trend or fashion for poetic genius.

For *us* to compare like with like, however, is to see that Lamb's appropriative use of the essay marks a significant innovation. Reviewing the first volume of Hazlitt's *Table Talk* in an unpublished article of 1821, Lamb's survey of the essay tradition from which Hazlitt emerges highlights also Lamb's own interpretation of the genre. Having observed that the 'fathers of Essay writing in ancient and modern times', from Plutarch, to Montaigne, to Addison, to Johnson, had established the essay through the affect of the egoist, Lamb turns to 'Another class of essayists', who:

> equally impressed with the advantages of this sort of appeal to the reader, but more dextrous at shifting off the invidiousness of a perpetual self-reference, substituted for themselves an *ideal character*; which left them a still fuller licence in the delivery of their peculiar humours and opinions, under the masqued battery of a fictitious appellation.[26]

Elia's characteristic self-belittlement enacts the 'ideal character' for parody of the trenchant advocacy of the Johnsonian ego as Lamb describes it. A further, still more insightful parallel emerges for the unique extent of Lamb's exploitation of a 'fictitious appellation'. Appropriately from without as well as within the essays, Elia draws attention to his phantasmal existence and the freedom it allows, not

only to deliver 'peculiar humours and opinions', but more than this, to assume or inhabit different selves; indeed to interrogate the binary opposition of self and other. The extra-essayistic *ontology* of Elia through which the metropolitan text is appropriated, is therefore commensurate with the character's pluralistic *selfhood*.

Lamb's review also suggests the importance to a collection of miscellaneous essays of a unifying element or 'pervading character',[27] otherwise the sheer heterogeneity will override the pleasure of individual essays and spoil the reader's enjoyment. More clearly than in Hazlitt's appraisal of Lamb, therefore, in Lamb's review of Hazlitt's essay-writing the very attempt at confining his discussion of the essay to the textual register of the book alludes to the cause of authorial anxiety in the periodical writer. The pervading character of the miscellaneous magazine that flourished in Britain after the Revolution, as dictated by the socio-political beliefs and commercial objectives of the editor or owner, who expediently arranges the articles, would presumably present an even greater threat than a collected volume to the autonomy of individual essays. As a self-pluralizing figure, however, Elia himself enacts a sort of 'pervading' or unifying character within the *London Magazine*. Lamb fully exploits the discursive flexibility of the essay form to unite seamlessly within a rounded, instantly recognizable character, abstract Romantic theory and the familiar, material world, in particular the consumerist or 'low' aspect of metropolitan culture. Using examples by Hazlitt and Lamb, Uttara Natarajan has challenged the traditional view of the familiar essay as having a 'fundamental lack of seriousness or purpose' by arguing that it often contains allusive or indirect expressions of aesthetic and philosophical principles more commonly associated with the high Romanticism of Wordsworth and Keats.[28] Natarajan also sees the Lamb essays she selects as singular expressions of Romantic theory in which the domestic or familiar convey these principles. My reading of Lamb similarly takes Elia and the familiar essay seriously as Romantic literature, although the concept of metropolitanism here involves an important degree of alternativeness. Elia takes Lamb some way towards alignment with definitive Romantic preoccupations such as the exalted, negatively capable imagination and the notion of the child as father of the man, yet counterbalances this with the common or human touch, in a mock-heroic propensity for sensory gratification and appetite for consumer goods.

Having thus argued the case for Lamb as author of the metropolitan text by defining what Elia is and what are his effects, how and why Elia came into being is equally relevant. Just as Lamb builds into Elia's character a tendency towards identity play – the autobiographical trickster who borrows from Coleridge's childhood, or the sincere confessor, the drunkard, undercut by the wry parodist – so the very name 'Elia', the anagram of which is 'a lie', comes about through an act of appropriation. As he explained in a July 1821 letter to the

London's co-publisher and editor at the time, John Taylor, Lamb took the name from an Italian clerk with whom he had worked in his brief spell at the South-Sea House, in 1791–2. Uncannily, this F. Augustus Elia died in August 1820, the same month that his usurping fictional counterpart came to life in the *London*, in, appropriately, 'Recollections of the South-Sea House'. Elia's contextual and conceptual origins, as I propose them, are just as revealing. Elia emerges in Chapter 1 as a response to an immediate metropolitan milieu, that of the new, ultra-competitive magazine in the years 1817–20. Chapter 2, however, delves further back, to the early 1800s, to trace the germ of Elia in Lamb's revolt in his correspondence and early essay writing against the sentimental, ruralist image of him projected by Coleridge in 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison', an image informed by the 'strange calamity' of Mary Lamb's killing of their mother.[29] Elia here is the climactic embodiment of Lamb's turning away from the country to the city, from poetry to prose, and, as implied in Chapter 5, from the melancholic figure of sensibility who narrates *Rosamund Gray*, to the less sympathetic but more resilient figure of the fool, articulated elsewhere by Lamb's fleeting essayistic personae, Edax, and Suspenserus. The above episodes are both, equally, formative of Elia, and are indicative of the central role of the metropolis in that process.

The impression of Elia as something nourished or nurtured by the *London* is created by the fact that between 1820 and 1825 forty-four of the fifty-three essays, and almost all of those regarded as the definitive and strongest ones, written, or in some cases rewritten, under Elia's name appeared in that magazine. Realizing by 1825 that the overall quality of the *London* was in sharp decline, with almost all the regular contributors who had set the high standards of the first four years now departed, Lamb provided a small number of Elia essays for other magazines. The relatively uninspiring quality of these sporadically produced essays indicate that Elia's name and character were very much established and maintained by the *London*, and to certain a degree that the reverse was also true.

Manifestly 'at home', then, in the heterogeneous and fragmentary environment of the *London*, Elia's metropolitanism emerges, in the first instance, from an undercutting or overwriting of the spatially and temporally proximate, comparatively monologic texts that also contribute to that magazine. In Chapter 1, Elia's auto-critical and neutral style debunks the aggressive-defensive posturing of the Cockney dispute, a pervasive anxiety over metropolitan culture ironically (and fatally) infecting even the founding editor of the *London*, John Scott. In Chapter 3, as previously mentioned, chief among the peer texts against which Elia's suggestively 'prosaic' expression of a domesticated metropolis defines itself are the simultaneous instalments of De Quincey's 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater', in which occurs a conversely pathological encounter with an enigmatic, ineffable environment. In the same chapter, the anxious conservatism of a report

on Queen Caroline's disrupted funeral centres on the metropolis an acute sense of an overwhelmingly intractable present, to which Elia's timely use of historical perspective in his commemoration of the centenary of the South Sea Bubble (in 'The South-Sea House') calmingly responds. In Chapter 3, the tone of moral indignation set by editor John Scott's protest against a creeping metropolitanization of children's literature (through the inclusion of inappropriately adult satire of the vanities and fashions of the town), is immediately undercut by Elia's testimonial to London's allegedly corrupt educational institution, Christ's Hospital. In Chapter 4, an innocent piece of whimsy by Thomas Hood on the pleasures of the panorama at the top of St Paul's unwittingly prefigures the dangerously disaffected implied reader in the Elia essay, 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers', which, again, immediately follows. Finally, in Chapter 5, the cult of theatricality articulated by J. H. Reynolds's rather distracted drama review is transformed, initially in 'My First Play' and later in the 'old actors' series, into a manifesto for theatre's capacity to liberate the city-dweller from such mass social conditioning. The concept of metropolitanism from which the notion of an Elian alternative emerges is defined by five themes, as allotted in turn to each of the five chapters. Decided both by the social and cultural preoccupations of the time, and subsequent theoretical debate, these themes are as follows: periodical writing in Chapter 1; the flâneur in Chapter 2; the Great Wen in Chapter 3; the process of social reform in Chapter 4; theatricality in Chapter 5.

Elia's mediation of the immediate text around him is assisted also by the impression the essays create of being validated by a preternaturally literary consciousness, or embeddedness in the collective, accumulated wisdom of literature. The very lunacy of 'All Fool's Day', for instance, is constructed out of an impressive knowledge of examples ranging from Shakespeare's Aguecheek to Landor's Gebir. Yet beyond the bookish intertextuality of Elia's well-read character, this literariness is a richly allusive quality in which subtle inflections of tone and mood are often conveyed by the echoes of contemporary and antecedent voices. These include the prose of Addison, Swift, Goldsmith, Hazlitt, Hunt, Egan and De Quincey, the poetry of Blake and Coleridge, and humanitarian and popular literature. Thus Elia's ironic, provocative dehumanization of the subject as consumer item in 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers' recalls the humanitarian objective behind the still more shocking precursor of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which outlines how poverty can be alleviated by parents cooking and eating their own children. Equally important, however, is Lamb's more protracted and complex engagement with the Lake-ish principles of Wordsworth's poetry, notably the depiction of St Bartholemew's Fair in Book VII of *The Prelude*, and the contentious figure here and in several other poems of the beggar.

Where Elia's bookish, explicit intertextuality is concerned, it clearly presents a voracious, even obsessive reader of a broad range of literature, from Sir Thomas

Browne, to Milton, to the Restoration dramatists, to Fielding. But Elia's own character as reader plays a relatively small part in the overall importance *to* Elia of the figure of the reader. As the essays 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading' and 'The Two Races of Men' suggest, the reader and the act of reading feature prominently, in a preoccupation with reading and readers that is quite literally instrumental in Elia's metropolitanism. Influenced in part by the continuing growth of newspapers and periodicals from the early part of the century, according to William St Clair, a dramatic late eighteenth-century rise in 'the number of men, women, and children who read printed texts' was accompanied by a change in reading habits: this involved the abandonment of 'the ancient practice of "intensive reading" in favour of "extensive reading"', in which books were read, comparatively speaking, in rapid succession at a superficial level, and for 'pleasure rather than instruction'.[30] In *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, Leah Price similarly refers to the rapid increase in readers, and the 'intensive/extensive' reading dichotomy, in arguing that the simultaneously burgeoning genre of anthology in the late eighteenth century 'oscillat[ed] constantly' between the two models, in training readers to 'pace themselves through an unmanageable bulk of print by sensing when to skip and where to linger'.[31] Also in concordance, Richard Cronin sees the magazine in this period as a formal response to an increasingly atomized, urbanized readership who demanded a commensurately miscellaneous kind of text. Having little or no concept of memory, Cronin proposes, magazines 'were designed to be read in a new way, not from beginning to end but dipped into, and not slowly digested but skimmed'.[32] Clearly, the essay and the act of *essaying*, to proffer ideas and argumentative approaches in the singular or weighed against each other in a spirit of experimentation, ideally fits the extensive reading model.

Overall, contemporary comment reveals an awareness of this trend and is clear about its cultural origins. The prominence of the periodical press and the issue of its socio-cultural influence was by Elia's time a cause of some concern among politicians and the intelligentsia in general. Because the periodical press and periodical writing are, and were, associated with metropolitan culture, the new model of reader becomes a product or symptom of that culture. As periodical text, thus predisposed towards a more intimate and immediate relationship with the reader than is the case with the book, Elia's implied reader is very much in the 'extensive' mode. Simultaneously imagined as the polite 'dear reader', the reader here is a manifestly average figure: a reasonably well-read, but rather unimaginative middle-class, middle-aged suburbanite with moderate political opinions and who enjoys, in moderation, the pleasures of the metropolis, a clerk, probably, with the usual aspirations but also the guilt of his class. Similar enough, in other words, for the humble Elia to identify with, yet sufficiently different in the key area of the imagination to perform an educative function. My