

2020

## An 'Ungentle' Punk: Revisiting Charles Lamb's Bookishness

Michael Robinson

*University of Rhode Island*, [merobinson@uri.edu](mailto:merobinson@uri.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/writing\\_facpubs](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/writing_facpubs)

---

### Citation/Publisher Attribution

Robinson, M. (2020). An 'Ungentle' Punk: Revisiting Lamb's Bookishness. *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, Winter 2020, 172, 26-45.

Available at: <http://www.charleslambociety.com>

This Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing and Rhetoric Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons-group@uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons-group@uri.edu). For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

---

## An 'Ungentle' Punk: Revisiting Charles Lamb's Bookishness

The University of Rhode Island Faculty have made this article openly available.  
Please let us know how Open Access to this research benefits you.

This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

### Terms of Use

This article is made available under the terms and conditions applicable towards Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth in our [Terms of Use](#).

*An 'Ungentle' Punk: Revisiting Charles Lamb's Bookishness*

Accepted typescript

*Charles Lamb Bulletin*  
Winter 2020, New Series 172, pp. 26-45  
<http://www.charleslambociety.com/>

Michael Robinson

The materiality of the literary has become synonymous with Lamb. One of his Victorian editors, J. E. Babson, said he deliberately did not trace allusions in order to protect the ornamental beauty of Lamb's prose – or, as Babson memorably says in the preface to *Eliana* (1864), to preserve the 'blossoms of learning and observation' there.<sup>1</sup> In *Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!* (1976), Robert Frank similarly paints Lamb as an aesthete who intentionally eschewed depth: '[Lamb] wanted the essays to be treated as art objects'.<sup>2</sup>

Such views evacuate Lamb's works of deep meaning and implicitly tie this lack to labour and matter. Lamb emerges as an artisan who crafted mere 'trifles', a word Lamb himself embraced for his work.<sup>3</sup> Such views also invoke notions of Lamb's social inferiority, echoing a discriminatory refrain from his own time. Lamb's contemporary

---

<sup>1</sup> J. E. Babson, *Eliana: Being the Hitherto Uncollected Writings of Charles Lamb* (Boston, 1864), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Frank, *Don't Call Me Gentle Charles!: An Essay on Lamb's Essays of Elia* (Corvallis, 1976), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Preface', in *The Adventures of Ulysses* (London, 1819), iii-v (v).

Alaric C. Watts, for example, said that the allegedly workmanlike ethos of the Elia essays hinted at something feminine, if not queer, about their creator. Rather than transmit ethereal beauty, he took pains to deliver empty vessels: 'Charles Lamb delivers himself with infinite pain and labour of a silly piece of trifling every month in this magazine [*Blackwood's*] under the signature of Elia', Watts wrote to William Blackwood.<sup>4</sup> Thus positioned on axes of gender and class, Lamb, while skilful, is not quite Romantic, not quite literary, and not quite a man. Materiality emerges here as a stake in the construction of Lamb's gendered and classed difference: his stuff is *just* stuff.

Others have been attracted to Elia's alleged materialism and materiality. Walter Pater, for example, approved of Elia's attentive gaze on the world of things, saying in *Appreciations* that Lamb, like Keats, '[works] ever close to the concrete, to the details, great or small, of actual things, books, persons, and with no part of them blurred to his vision'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, for some of today's critics, the association of Lamb/Elia with the world of objects has served arguments suggesting that his essays do not lie at the margins of Romantic culture but rather contribute to its central themes. Felicity James,

---

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and his Sons, their Magazine and Friends* (New York, 1897), I, 501.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater in Eight Volumes* (London, 1901), V, 109, in *Google Books*.

attending to the role of physical environments in Lamb's works, has found Wordsworthian meditations in Lamb's urban reverie. Ina Ferris has argued that Lamb and other Romantic essayists contributed a new discourse to the culture – an embodied mode of book-love and a related reimagining of the public sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Deidre Shauna Lynch has positioned Lamb/Elia firmly in this new class of producer, grouping Lamb with William Hazlitt and Thomas De Quincey to claim that these writers' material dependence on literary culture led them to found the modern affective relationship with literature, making them 'in effect the first professional lovers of literature'. Theirs was a novel form of materialism that reflected the new form their cultural capital took, and their attitudes towards literature reflected this form. Lamb and his peers '[relocated] library culture [...] within the psychic territory of people's intimate lives'. This intimate relationship with the literary field was ultimately strategic, Lynch implies, because it allowed these consumers, rendered self-conscious about their practices by their liminal position, to distinguish their stock from the 'real capital' of aristocratic collectors.<sup>7</sup> Such collectors and their practices loomed large. As Philip

---

<sup>6</sup> Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke, 2008); Ina Ferris, 'Book-love and the Remaking of Literary Culture in the Romantic Periodical', in *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900*, ed. Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke, 2009), 111-25.

<sup>7</sup> Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2015), 8-10.

Connell has argued, they were widely viewed as deviant parasites whose materialism threatened the health of the still-embryonic public culture.<sup>8</sup>

In this recuperative view of Lamb's relationship to literary materiality, he joined a select group of middle-class consumers seeking a form of conspicuous consumption free of associations with aristocratic practices. A prominent thread running through the essays, consumption does seem to drive Lamb's discourse. The theme preoccupies Lamb/Elia whether the subject is antiquarianism ('The South-Sea House'), eating ('Dissertation on Roast Pig'), play-going ('My First Play'), or drinking ('Edax on Appetite'). The essays represent a mode of consumption different from aristocratic practices, but Lamb's complex relationship with the world of objects simultaneously deviated from mainstream tastes. The complexities of Lamb's taste are the focus of what follows. I argue that one can identify in Lamb's expressive consumerism a rebellion against conventionally middle-class tastes. Through symbolic detachment from a social position he held only precariously, Lamb/Elia's style anticipated that of later middle-class dissidents whose gendered and classed nonconformity also took consumerist form - namely, punks.

In presenting this argument I will first briefly discuss some of the limitations of attempting to understand Lamb's relations with literature by relying on his history with

---

<sup>8</sup> Philip Connell, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations* 71 (2000), 24-47, in *JSTOR*.

the magazines. Next, the argument turns to Lamb's camp and ironic style of bookishness as this manifested itself in his book collecting, which informed and reflected his tastes as a reader. Then, the analysis turns to Elia's antiquarianism on the level of voice in order to demonstrate how the Elian persona both rebels against and conforms to middle-class forms of bookishness. Finally, the essay explores the manifestation of Lamb's prototypically punk sensibility in a well-known Elia essay, 'My First Play'.

The view of Lamb as being among the new literature lovers binds him to the middle class through his association with the periodical press. The magazines did offer a venue for Lamb to express his eccentric sensibility, and he found fame through them. As is well known, during Lamb's lifetime a legend made him the 'hero' of the *London*, one of the five periodicals where the Elia essays appeared.<sup>9</sup> The legend has had staying power: scholars have continued to identify him closely with the medium, with the rise in popularity of periodicals more generally, and with the professionalization of the literary field, with which the popularity of magazines was connected. Needless to say, Lamb's work for the periodicals of his day was but one facet of his identity and output. As sources of information about him, the essays and Lamb's general association with the periodical press have limited utility.

As glimpsed through biography, correspondence by and about Lamb, and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Edith Christina Johnson, *Lamb always Elia* (London, 1935), 141.

essays, Lamb's own sense of his place in the literary field seems more complicated than a straightforward identification with the magazines – despite the success of *Elia*. The expressions of reticence about writing for the magazines in his correspondence speak to this. In a letter to Edward Moxon he laments that the 'serious business of life' has drawn him away from poetry to work for the magazines.<sup>10</sup> Later, when the weight of financial pressures lessened with the success of *Elia*, he returned to drama rather than fully exploit *Elia*'s profitability. Despite the negative reception of *Mr H.*, he followed it with *The Pawnbroker's Daughter* and *The Wife's Trial*.<sup>11</sup>

A seemingly insignificant biographical detail about Lamb in Thomas Hood's *Works* hints at how closely Lamb probably held the notion that he was not of the magazines and that being such would have compromised his sense of self. Hood uses a highly evocative phrase to describe the modest footprint of Colebrooke Cottage, which Lamb rented: 'cottage of Ungentility'.<sup>12</sup> Although small, this nugget potentially sheds light on Lamb's personal style. Fittingly for a dissident 'ungentleman', his professional choices towards the end of his career present an image of hard-won commitment to the

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Letters of Charles Lamb: To which are added those of his Sister, Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols (London, 1935), III, 339.

<sup>11</sup> George L. Barnett, *Charles Lamb and the Evolution of Elia* (Bloomington, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hood, *The Works of Thomas Hood: Comic and Serious, in Prose and Verse, with all the Illustrations* (London, 1882-4), II, 369n, in *Google Books*.



particular form he wished for his art and, conjointly, a rebellion against the expectations for a periodical writer – suggesting an uncannily hard-core posture of middle-class artistic independence. Specifically, Lamb avoided professionalization when it was most profitable and preferred to depend on his East India House pay checks and, subsequently, pension, in the face of increasing demand and a lucrative rate for his pages.

As Lucas' *Life* reveals, these choices came at a cost. Lamb's retirement was comfortable but not luxurious: at two-thirds his salary, Lamb's pension from India House brought in £450, a portion of which, £9, went to supporting Mary. Lamb complained about the economizing the pension required, telling Bernard Barton in a letter that in 'cropping off wine, old books, &c. and in short all that can be called pocket money, I hope to be able to go on at the cottage'. He suggests in a letter to Hood that the Lambs' moves to Islington and then Enfield, progressively farther away from their beloved London, had similar motivations. Despite financial pressures, Lamb was increasingly selective about the periodical commissions he undertook. He had written 'Stage Illusion', his last contribution to the *London*, in 1825, the year he retired, and he attributed the break in a letter to Southey not to illness, significantly, but to the declining quality of the magazine.<sup>13</sup> The year 1826 saw only the 'Popular Fallacies'

---

<sup>13</sup> E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London, 1905), II, 167.

series in the *New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>14</sup> In 1827 he refused a commission from Barron Field to write a piece on the theatre.<sup>15</sup> Although illness and alcoholism probably contributed to the decrease in productivity at the end of his life, it also seems that a reluctance to capitalize on Elia led Lamb to turn down magazine work. He continued to write, but he focused on the less profitable arena of book publication.

This preference is noteworthy considering the high rate he could command. As Lucas notes, Bryan Waller Procter claimed that Lamb was the highest paid contributor to the *London*, at the rate of twenty guineas per sheet, or sixteen pages, by a factor of two or three. After leaving the *London*, while continuing to write for periodicals on a smaller scale, Lamb turned his energies in an impractical, bookish direction, completing *Album Verses, with a Few Others* (1830) and the unprofitable *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833). At nine shillings the latter was an expensive, collectible object. Given the disappointing sales of the first collection of Elia essays (*Elia* [1823, out of print by 1834]), few expected it to sell, yet Lamb went ahead. He continued to nurse dreams of success as a book author, remarking ironically to a friend that he dreamed of fame in the East as a book author and at another point expressing satisfaction about the success of a pirated Elia

---

<sup>14</sup> Claude A. Prance, *Companion to Charles Lamb: A Guide to the People and Places 1760-1847* (London, 1983), 370.

<sup>15</sup> Lucas, *Life*.

collection published in the US (*Elia. Second Series* [1828]).<sup>16</sup>

In light of such choices towards the end of his life, Lamb seems to have harboured a conflicted desire for a more traditional form of literary fame along with a resistance to the commercial motives and professional identity associated with the magazines. Tellingly, in writing about Lamb, Hazlitt saw Lamb's distaste for the profession as a symptom of a lack of qualification – a deficient professional identity. In a *Table Talk* piece from 1825 ('Elia – Geoffrey Crayon'), Hazlitt describes Lamb as an amateur who has merely lucked into popularity.<sup>17</sup> Hazlitt's attack suggests that a peer recognized that Lamb, while finding success in the periodicals, was in them but not of them. Hazlitt was likely projecting a fault where aspiration was dubious. Clear enough is the significance of Elia's description of himself in 'Oxford in the Vacation' as having perversely inverted a writer's relations with print. Rather than an autonomous creator, he is a dependent consumer whose posture towards his medium resembles an addict's. Like an alcoholic, he 'sucks his sustenance, as certain sick people are said to do, through a quill'. Writing for hire by 'certain [...] people' appears here as a nasty habit.<sup>18</sup>

Elia's disgust at his compromised identity registers the extent to which the aspiring book author saw himself as standing apart from the periodicals and viewed

---

<sup>16</sup> Lucas, *Life*.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph E. Riehl, *That Dangerous Figure: Charles Lamb and the Critics* (Rochester, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 8 vols (London, 1912), II, 8.

professionalization in terms of a choice between autonomy and compromise. Together with the terms of this choice, the darkness and perversion in this negative self-image anticipate the rhetoric, posturing, and general ethos of punk, a subculture organized around a posture of opposition to the commercial sphere, or, in the words of one critic, around an 'anti-corporate stance'.<sup>19</sup> This analogy makes particular sense in light of the Romantic origins of this emphasis on artistic autonomy, which Bethany Klein has traced in *Selling Out: Culture, Commerce, and Popular Music*: 'The notion of autonomy as critical to genuine artistic expression has its roots in the Romantic movement, and was imported alongside related ideas of authorship and authenticity into popular music culture and other areas of mass cultural production'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Romantic conceptions of genius served a cleaving of the authentic punk artist from commercial entities and interests. Like Lamb/Elia, punk has a vexed and contradictory relationship with commerce that exists in tension with its anti-commercial ethos, however. For example, as Klein says, foundational figures in the movement such as the Sex Pistols did not spurn large record labels but rather courted them, despite the centrality of opposition to selling out to the movement this group ostensibly led. Helping to explain this contradiction, hostility to the hippies and the 1960s counter-culture in general

---

<sup>19</sup> Bethany Klein, *Selling Out: Culture, Commerce, and Popular Music* (New York, 2020), 15, in *Google Books*.

<sup>20</sup> Klein, *Selling Out*, 62.

animated the punks' hostility to commercialism: the counter-culture was anti-corporate, and punks saw the counter-culture as fundamentally hypocritical. In fact, some punks deliberately embraced corporatism as a matter of principle because doing so flew in the face of counter-cultural values. For other punks, corporate affiliation or opposition was a matter of practicality, not principle, and, even though relations with corporate labels could be tense, commercial ties and investments materially supported the subculture's expressions of hostility to selling out and its posture of autonomy.<sup>21</sup> A similarly complex and contradictory relation to cultural production lay behind Elia's dark image of writing in 'Oxford'. Lamb's sacrificial dedication to the book format – a purer form of literary art 'within bourgeois limits' – struck a prototypically punk note of resistance considering the contradictions evident in Lamb's posture towards his art, attended as it was by a commitment with moral weight and real stakes to some commercial forms (the book and drama) rather than another (the periodical), which he resented, and a contradictory structuring of this hard-core commitment in terms of material autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

As I will attempt to show in what follows, the pregnant image of fetishistic sucking in 'Oxford', which shades Lamb's vexed relationship to print with the suggestion of sexual dissidence, belongs to a pattern across the Elia essays. In using an

---

<sup>21</sup> Klein, *Selling Out*.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution, 1931-39* (New York, 1973), 312, in *Google Books*.

image of consumption to index the dramatic extent to which Elia has compromised himself, the image of him and the quill relates consumption to identity, anticipating punk style in another way. An influential work on the history of modern style has identified in punk and other subcultures a gendered and classed mode of non-conformity in not production but consumption practices. In the classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige reads the counter-cultural styles of the teds, punks, and mods of 1960s and 1970s Britain as social salvos aimed at the symbolic order of the majority that, however subversive, were nonetheless restricted to 'the profoundly superficial level of appearances'. The contradiction between dominant culture and marginal culture displayed by these groups found expression through the consumption of certain commodities in deliberate, novel ways. Consequently, Hebdige sees the subversive practices of such factions as a doubly reified form of 'spectacular' *bricolage*, the fashioning of a new, oppositional system of signs out of readily available consumer goods. Among punks, the buying and repurposing of safety pins served rebellious self-expressions, including using the pins to adorn flesh, but the expressions' restriction to the sphere of signs and consumerism blunted this rebelliousness. Nonetheless, punks' repurposing of consumer goods represented one way that they posed challenges to the seeming naturalness of the dominant faction's aesthetic norms. Such unexpected adaptations posed challenges because, as Hebdige says, 'Any elision, truncation, or convergence of prevailing linguistic and ideological categories can have profoundly disorienting effects. These deviations briefly expose the arbitrary nature of the codes

which underlie and shape all forms of discourse'. These codes included gender styles, which the youth subcultures initially questioned with the help of David Bowie's sexual ambiguity and, subsequently, the punk styles that derived from this while taking cues from the stylistic vocabulary of bondage and S&M.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars have found a more direct connection between punk style and queerness. Kevin Dunn, for example, has observed that punk scenes have historically made space for queer folks.<sup>24</sup> Tavia Nyong'o has identified in the different histories of African American and white versions of punk evidence of a dynamic in which homophobia and hyper-sexualization haunt occluded representations of queer and Black sexuality.<sup>25</sup> This work suggests that queerness has long been elemental to the representation and self-identification of the subculture's members.

'What a careless, even deportment hath your borrower!': Elia's signature voice offers textual evidence of Lamb's own dissident and consumerist play with signifiers.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Elia's vintage diction calls into question the unquity and originality of

---

<sup>23</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979), 17, 102-04, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (New York, 2015), in *Google Books*.

<sup>25</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, 'Punk'd Theory', *Social Text*, 23 (2005), 19-34, in *Lyrasis HELIN Library Consortium*.

<sup>26</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 26.

authorial voice itself – a writer’s allegedly personal property – and, in this way, poses a challenge to the very notion of private intellectual property, the basis of Lamb’s unprecedented profitability as an artist. The source of this challenge lies in the voice’s bookish and antiquarian dimension, which is the material evidence and product of Lamb’s compulsive consumption. In their form, the essays amount to the vocal equivalent of a bibliophile’s blackletter collection, taking this shape because antiques, in the form of antiqued diction, are Lamb/Elia’s stylistic calling card: ‘What rosy gills! What a beautiful reliance on Providence doth he manifest!’<sup>27</sup> The similar opening apostrophe in ‘Valentine’s Day’ insists on being read as if in quotation marks:

Hail to thy returning festival, old Bishop Valentine! Great is thy name in the rubric, thou venerable Arch-flamen of Hymen! Immortal Go-between! Who and what manner of person art thou? Art thou but a name, typifying the restless principle which impels poor humans to seek perfection in union? Or wert thou indeed a mortal prelate, with thy tippet and thy rochet, thy apron on, and decent lawn sleeves?<sup>28</sup>

Such passages are sets of antiquarian objects packaged as such for the reader – old stuff

---

<sup>27</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 63.



that Elia has repurposed.

Hazlitt bristled at the artifice. In *Table Talk*, he writes, 'The style of the *Essays of Elia* is liable to the charge of a certain mannerism. His sentences are cast in the mould of old authors'.<sup>29</sup> Hazlitt's 'charge' reads more like a description than the passive-aggressive critique he probably intended. Lamb's style draws attention to its antiquarian elements, likely irritating Hazlitt and some others because its archaism – inconsistent and overt – coexists with the contemporary vernacular, rendering the archaism as heightened 'form'. By contrast, Pater expressed great affection for this 'aroma of old English' in the Elia essays, along with the 'noticeable echoes, in chance turn and phrase, of the great masters of style, the old masters'.<sup>30</sup> By these echoes, Elia's antiquarian style is old-fashioned rather than simply old, the essays hyper-materializing the fruits of Lamb/Elia's prior consumption of 'old authors'. Hazlitt's critique registers this hyper-materiality with the metaphor of casting ('cast in the mould'). In paradoxically making the secondhandedness that Hazlitt disparaged a stylistic signature, the style exposes the discursiveness of private intellectual property, just as punks' reuse of safety pins revealed the workings of beauty and gender norms.

A passage in 'That We should Lie Down with the Lamb' is self-conscious about its

---

<sup>29</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits*, 2nd ed. (London, 1825), 403, in *Google Books*.

<sup>30</sup> Pater, *Works*, V, 113.

secondhand lyricism: 'Marry, daylight', Elia says, '[D]aylight might furnish the images, the crude material; but for the fine shapings, the true turning and filing (as mine author hath it), they must be content to hold their inspiration of the candle'.<sup>31</sup> Here, not only does the style objectify itself through self-consciously deployed, old-fashioned diction, but, as if to emphasize this gesture, diction in the passage makes the use and transformation of materials ('crude material', 'turning', 'filing') the theme of a hierarchy of beauty subordinating nature ('daylight') to culture ('the candle'). Ultimately, Elia's voice, like that of a self-conscious and bookish collector, makes an ironic and playful showcase of consumption, rather than, like a self-conscious labourer, draw attention to labour. This is so because the originality of this work consists partly in its knowing play with its lack of originality, and this material secondhandedness is consistent with the essays' pervasive retrospection, uniting style and substance with a collector's preoccupations. This antiquarianism in the Elian persona exposes a punk flair creditable to its challenge to the intellectual supports of originality as such, a challenge implicit in the secondhandedness of Elia's signature. The basis of an authorial persona in consumerism should be seen as a challenge to the ideology of singular authorship and the 'author-reader dyad', one key aspect of which was the invisibility of the medium.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 308.

<sup>32</sup> Ina Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke, 2015), 47.

The irony of the challenge is comparable to the one implicit in modern subcultural styles, however: far from assaulting the structure of consumer capitalism, the challenge exemplifies its logic and fully belongs to it. In this case, a non-conforming style served as the basis of an eccentric and powerful, not to say 'original', authorial voice.

Noting stylistic parallels between Elia and aristocratic bookmen of the Roxburghe Club ilk, Ina Ferris has glimpsed Elia's hyper-material style through the illuminating notion of 'book fancy' – a self-conscious reflection of bookishness on the level of figuration that registered Lamb's liminal status in the literary sphere. With bibliomaniacs, Lamb shared an 'outlier', as opposed to outsider, status and, reflecting this, a materialist view on the literary contrasting with the dominant idealism that defined the literary for mainstream producers. This materialist outlook took the form of play with the materiality of the medium – a softer version of Thomas Frognall Dibdin's ecstatic typographical rapture in highly ornamented works such as the *Bibliographical Decameron* (London, 1817). For Ferris, Elia's play with form reflected not a dissident collector's posture toward the literary but an anti-collector's: 'Lamb contested the bibliomania's model of exclusive collection and literary possession, translating the bibliomaniac's fine library of expensive rarities into a bohemian domestic space – the site of a *reader* – where book collection marked personal attachments rather than material value'.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ferris, *Book-Men*, 7, 5, 38 (emphasis in original).

When one considers Elia's style as an extension of Lamb's own collecting practice, the subject of the next section of this article, a different perspective on the clear links, as well as tensions, between Elia and more conventional antiquarians becomes visible. In Lamb's collecting, I will claim, books remained fetish objects despite being read and lacking material value. Likewise, in Elia's voice, words remain things and Elia a consumer, despite his differences from a Dibdinesque materialist. As Lynch says of Romantic periodical writers' 'edgy' relationship to bibliomania in *Loving Literature*, 'Their mimicry is [...] double-edged – adopted to call into question the gentleman's social entitlements, and adopted to mark off the distinctiveness of their own styles of bookish consumption and literary love'.<sup>34</sup> Like a modern-day middle-class dissident, Elia uses things to express dissidence. Elia's voice can be seen provocatively to make camp artifice the foundation of his personality – appropriating the practice of conspicuous antiquarian materialism and rendering this as an excess of old-fashioned signifiers. The style's parody of antiquarianism and book collecting is notable in itself for a provocative aspect when one considers the notoriety of auction culture and wealthy collectors during the period (despite the broadening popularity of the habit and antiquarianism in general).<sup>35</sup> In the style's conversion of possession into a mode of

---

<sup>34</sup> Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Pascoe, in *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors* (Ithaca, 2006), discusses the popularization of antiquarianism during the

expression one sees an example of oppositional consumerism not fundamentally different from the heightened stylistic language of punk or its glam and glitter antecedents. As in those subcultures, queerness also surfaces in Elia that is hard to pin down, evoking something of the courtly pose with arm akimbo – a style that reads as queer due simply to its ornamentation and excess.<sup>36</sup>

#### Lamb's Library

The dissidently antiquarian quality of Elia's voice parallels what is known of Lamb's eccentric style of collecting. Lamb's consumption of books was arguably just as cultivated, oppositional, and self-conscious as Elia's voice. Given that the voice is a repurposed collection, the fact that, in life, Lamb preferred the secondary market for book-objects is fitting. In the abstract, his collecting resembled the general style of Thomas De Quincey, who, as Nigel Leask has said of the opium-fuelled, nocturnal wandering described in *Confessions of an English Opium-eater*, enjoyed 'slumming it' in the marketplaces of working-class London.<sup>37</sup> Lamb tended to 'slum it' in London's used book shops. The books he sought there were not simply bargains, significantly, but the

---

period. Lynch, in *Loving Literature*, addresses the notoriety of traditional and aristocratic collectors.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas A. King, *The Gendering of Men, 1600-1750*, 2 vols (Madison, 2004), II.

<sup>37</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 2004), 205.

ragged detritus of the retail market. In acting on this preference he, like traditional bibliophiles drawn strictly to certain features of incunabula (such as vellum pages and blackletter script) and conditions, allowed certain standards to rule him. These made his collection unusual compared to the library of a bibliomaniac or a different kind of innovator such as De Quincey, who took pains to catalogue his purchases of new fiction, but nonetheless still that of a collector, even if he read his books.<sup>38</sup> Lamb's rules were shabbiness, affordability, and irregularity. Elia winks at this in 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading' when he self-consciously describes a collecting practice with reference to his 'ragged veterans'' being in such poor condition that they 'shiver' on his shelves.<sup>39</sup> Lamb's contemporaries' descriptions of his library seem to register the existence of a degree of uniform stylistic choice behind the collection. Crabb Robinson called Lamb's books the 'finest collection of shabby books' he had ever seen.<sup>40</sup> Leigh Hunt noted the collection's ironically 'handsome contempt for appearance'.<sup>41</sup> Thomas Westwood, repeating an allusion of Lamb's to *Henry IV, Part I* in 'Character of

---

<sup>38</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *A Diary of Thomas De Quincey 1803*, ed. Horace Eaton (New York, 1927).

<sup>39</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler (London, 1872), I, 403.

<sup>41</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Essays and Miscellanies* (Philadelphia, 1856), 139, in *Google Books*.

the Late Elia', describes Lamb's library as a 'ragged *regiment* of book-tattered demalions' that were 'curious' (a term, synonymous with 'desirable', favoured by collectors) and 'cheap'. Quoting Lamb himself on his library, Westwood says, 'He had, he said, a curious library of old poetry, etc., which he had bought at book stalls, cheap'.<sup>42</sup> Cheapness likely served as a criterion of material (non-)value shaping his bookish consumerism, this being reflected in the spectacular form taken by this value in the display of the collection. A certain Mrs FitzGerald recalled that his books ostentatiously retained their price tags.<sup>43</sup> In building this eccentric library, Lamb literalized Susan Sontag's notion of the aristocracy of taste, which she uses in 'Notes on Camp' to describe the consumerist dissidence of queer subcultures: Lamb made collecting into a self-conscious expression of difference – a medium for a consumerist expression of self that relied on the appropriation and modification of existing, aristocratic consumption practices.<sup>44</sup> In the process, in an uncanny anticipation of punk's camp aspects, such as carefully torn clothing, Lamb also appropriated the market's 'ragged', trash-like detritus as an ironic badge of self and status.

More specifically, the price tags left on Lamb's books crystallize the expressive and

---

<sup>42</sup> Lucas, *Life*, II, 191, 271 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup> Lucas, *Letters*, III.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1969), 105-20.

ironic dynamics of his collecting style. In this library, signifiers of the marketplace and, by extension, the social joined 'ragged' signs of wear. Consequently, one could call Lamb's take on the collectible book the inverse of the authentic art object, the authenticity of which, as described by Walter Benjamin, derives historically from objects used in religious ritual.<sup>45</sup> The criteria of value operative in privileged collecting circles, in the Romantic period and currently, show the circulation of what Benjamin calls 'cult value'. This value has stemmed from art's occult lineage – the mystified 'ritualistic basis' of art and foundation of the antique art object's aura of authenticity, a unique existence in space and time reflecting the art object's origins in religious practice. This lineage explains the high value to bibliomaniacs of not only the unique edition but also the perfect one. As Benjamin's theory suggests, the value of the auratic book, like the cult object from which it derives, reflects its distance from human hands and collectives such as mass movements and systems of exchange. Benjamin cites prehistoric cave paintings, whose intended audiences were 'spirits' rather than humans, and modern religious practices involving images of the Madonna: 'Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden'.<sup>46</sup> Benjamin's theory of the aura helps

---

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 217-52.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, 'Work of Art', 224-25.



explain the high auction prices won by books unmarked by human hands – ‘pristine’ uncut copies free of ‘rubbing’ and ‘bumped corners’, all of which indicate human handling, exchange and use. In this light, a punk irony in Lamb’s collecting style becomes visible: he adopted a traditionally exclusive, aristocratic habit and replaced the signifiers of its rarefied, cultic origins with price tags, marginalia, tears, and soil. Within Benjamin’s historical narrative, the wide circulation of art made possible by its reproduction undermined the exclusivity surrounding the art object’s originally sacred function.<sup>47</sup> This trajectory reveals another irony: Lamb’s transformation of price tags into ironic signifiers does not puncture but rather parodies the traditional aura. The tag conveys a different kind of distinction in parodying exclusivity by fetishizing imaginary masses. Hence, it marks the populist collection’s own distance from the social.

Elia describes such a populist aura in ‘Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading’ when he conjures a ‘lone sempstress’ whose evidently well-read books represent the beauty of ragged volumes. Elia relates how appealing he finds the fact that this worker’s spending of rare leisure time with a volume of Fielding or Goldsmith leaves behind traces ‘beautiful to a genuine lover of reading’. These beloved marks include ‘sullied leaves’, a ‘worn-out appearance’, and even a unique ‘odour’. This record of circulation left by ‘the thousand thumbs’ of mass readership ‘confers [...] distinction’, ‘sweet emotions’, and a ‘tickling sense of property’ beyond any pleasure afforded by

---

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’.

'magnificent' bindings. Such 'gay apparel' on books Elia, sounding here like the inverse of a stereotypical book collector, allows only in the rarest cases. A lavishly bound copy of Milton or Shakespeare 'confers no distinction' on the owner (first editions of these aside), Elia says, but a 'dog's-eared' copy of James Thomson's *The Seasons* has an aura. It 'looks best (I maintain it) a little torn' – but not too torn. Elia, describing a library like Lamb's own, is describing a fetishistic ('tickling sense') as well as punk and camp co-optation of luxury consumerism in which a highly cultivated and assertively alternative kind of status is the goal. Elia seeks a badge of status (tellingly, a 'distinction') conferred by an embrace of the kind of object conventionally devalued and abject in collecting circles – a widely available, well-worn copy of a book most readers love. Significantly, this cultivated consumption practice serves a hard-core ethos of authenticity ('genuine lover of reading') opposed by implication to a false and compromised sort of bookishness. Like a punk's safety pin, Lamb/Elia's 'dog's-eared' volume serves expressive and dissident aims.

Different from a collection of the new, readily available 'cheap books', as the publisher Charles Knight described them, Lamb's library ultimately resulted from a practice on the margins of privilege that was nonetheless cultivated and rarefied and that invoked and distinguished itself from exclusive practices and normative aesthetic standards.<sup>48</sup> Lamb appropriated and parodied traditional practices in other ways as a

---

<sup>48</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London, 1854), 246.

book collector, and biography adds helpful context to the perspective offered by the essays. Elia invokes the figure of the discriminating collector in 'Oxford in the Vacation', where the 'wary connoisseur' of prints appears as one whose eye cares for nothing except provenance (because it 'never fails to consult the *quis sculpsit* in the corner' of a print) and, hence, whose reading should not properly be called this (his eye 'seems as though it reads not'). In the same essay, Elia describes his own bookishness similarly. In reflecting on a tour of Oxford's libraries, Elia, embodying a stereotype of the book collector, celebrates (rather than confess to) his disregard for the contents of books:

What a place to be in is an old library! It seems as though all the souls of all the writers, that have bequeathed their labours to these Bodleians, were reposing here, as in some dormitory, or middle state. I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding-sheets. I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage; and the odour of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard.<sup>49</sup>

This description of a collector's fetishism of materiality is strikingly author- and

---

<sup>49</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 11.

'content'-centred. Elia has preferred not to read out of respect for authors' 'shades', whose books are akin to graves. Therefore, in deference to immaterial authorial property, Elia would rather behave like a bibliomaniac. The irony of this embourgeoisement of traditional book fetishism parallels another aspect of Lamb's own collecting. In life, Lamb embraced a stereotype about collectors, making a common slight against them into an ironic boast. As J. Fuller Russell recalled in the 1870s, Lamb's collection's lack of utility was a source of pride. About his collection, Lamb reportedly told Russell, 'I have *nothing useful*'.<sup>50</sup> While recalling, perhaps deliberately and ironically, the traditional collector's fetishistic style of consumption, this statement implies an attitude towards collecting that subordinates value (in use and exchange) to the aim of self-expression. In this style, book-objects, not texts, are media. At the risk of over-burdening an isolated comment, the statement sounds like one from someone for whom bookishness was less a value proposition, as for collectors, or a professional necessity, as for scholars, than the reflection of an ironic appropriation of a stigmatized identity serving a dissident self-image – an outward embrace of fetishism in the spirit of a provocative rejection of expectations associated with literary professions.

In 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading', Elia meditates on a similarly unprofessional, unproductive style of bookishness: 'At the hazard of losing some credit [...], I must confess that I dedicate no inconsiderable portion of my time to other

---

<sup>50</sup> Lucas, *Life*, II, 271 (emphasis in original).

people's thoughts. I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me'. In the same essay, Elia admits that the price of this substitution of means for ends is 'originality'.<sup>51</sup> This confession renders Elia's fetishism as a potential professional liability and vulnerability. He acknowledges that his fetishism, if known, would weaken his professional standing (cost him 'some credit'). This winking confession to use of a secondhand style suggests an awareness of the paradoxical basis of Elia's distinctiveness. As visible in Elia's old-fashioned style, Elia's originality paradoxically tweaks the ideology of literary property as such.

Self-conscious irony about his bookishness extended to Lamb's representation of his general literary taste. About this, Lamb writes in the same essay, 'I have no repugnances. Shaftesbury is not too genteel for me, nor Jonathan Wild too low. I can read anything which I call a *book*. [...] I bless my stars for a taste so catholic, so unexcluding'.<sup>52</sup> Affirming this catholic taste, Hunt recalls seeing on Lamb's shelves Chaucer, Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, Spinoza, Sidney, Southey, Jeremy Collier, Dryden, Martin Luther, Sewell, and Charles Grandison.<sup>53</sup> W. Carew Hazlitt lists, in addition to some of these, anthologies of Restoration drama along with

---

<sup>51</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 195.

<sup>53</sup> W. D. Howe, *Charles Lamb and his Friends* (Indianapolis, 1944), 114.

Burton ('a very poor, cropped copy'), Milton, Spenser, Talfourd, William Warner (*Syrinx*, 1597), Euripides, Pope, Bacon, and Ben Johnson. Hazlitt's descriptions of the books mention marginalia by both Coleridge and Lamb. Hazlitt notes about a copy of Thomas Holcroft's *Travels from Hamburg, through Westphalia and the Netherlands, to Paris* that 'Lamb has made these volumes, flyleaves, margins and every other imaginable space, a receptacle for a variety of observations – has, in fact, turned them into a commonplace book'. He also notes some folios: Samuel Daniel (with 'important notes' by Coleridge), Taylor, and Spenser.<sup>54</sup>

In this light, Lamb's self-conscious cultivation of an eccentric reading as well as collecting style mirrored Elia's description of himself in 'Mackery End, Hertfordshire': 'Out-of-the-way humours and opinions – heads with some diverting twist in them – the oddities of authorship please me most'.<sup>55</sup> A kind of rarity reigned here, as it long had for traditional book collectors, but in this collection rarity reflected a mode of self-expression and a self-reflexive process for the evaluation of authors and meaning. Books were not simply mute objects meaningful insofar as their value reflected a collector's wealth. Instead, books lacked meaning apart from their ownership by an eccentric personality who made them expressive – and, in this way, akin to media. In

---

<sup>54</sup> W. Carew Hazlitt, *The Lambs: Their Lives, their Friends, and their Correspondence* (London, 1897), 62-65, in *Google Books*.

<sup>55</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 86.

other words, Lamb's collection appears to have been a form of playful, ironic, and self-conscious consumerism that channelled bibliomaniacal desire through a middle-class lens – that of private property.

### 'My First Play'

The essay 'My First Play' illustrates how Lamb/Elia's oppositional and self-conscious style manifested itself in Lamb's writing for the magazines about subjects indirectly related to books. Elia implicitly offers a punk critical theory in this essay according to which a consumer's relationship to culture appears inevitably defined by questions of materiality and ownership, but what gives a culture consumer the right of possession – meaning in this case an appropriate, qualifying sensibility – is a matter of distinction from the qualities that make one a fit owner of real property, or land. In a way consistent with the tensions informing Lamb's collecting practices, the essay presents cultural consumption in terms of relations with objects while deprecating Elia's capacities as an owner of objects in the typical sense.

Elia relates how he temporarily came into possession of a small estate in Hertfordshire, which his godfather, 'F.', who, as Elia notes, was an implausibly cultured 'oilman' who had known Sheridan, had willed to him. This anecdote's larger context relates another 'testamentary beneficence' of the godfather: Elia's love of the theatre. F. had sent him to the first play of the title, *Artaxerxes* (probably Thomas Arne's adaptation of Metastasio's *Artaserse*). The maturation of Elia's appreciation for the theatre serves as the essay's focus. This aesthetic development the essay presents in

terms of maturation occurring along multiple axes, one being geographical. Elia's initial, youthful exposure to the theatre he renders in Orientalist terms (a choice in keeping with the Persian setting of the play). Initially, as a youthful theatre-goer, his perception was compromised by decadent materialism: a 'devotee' worshipping at a 'temple', young Elia had the tastes of a blinkered sensualist. He imagined that the theatre's shiny columns were made of 'candy', and this delusion spoke to a broader naivety reflected in his appreciation of the plays he attended. In his immaturity, Elia says, he did not mistake signs for signifieds so much as mistakenly imagine things to be signs – to fabricate an 'emblem' or 'reference' where there was none. (This delusion was later exposed in maturity by the realization that '[t]he green curtain was no longer a veil, drawn between two worlds, the unfolding of which was to bring back past ages'). Mature Elia, by contrast, is a 'rationalist' who understands that actors are signifiers – 'men and women painted' – and that the turning on of the orchestra lights is not magic but 'a clumsy machinery' operated by people. In this way, the essay maps maturation, along with the mind-body dichotomy, along an East-West axis, with superstition, naivety, sensuality, and immaturity clustered in the 'East' of Elia's past.<sup>56</sup> Gerald Monsman, drawing parallels between 'My First Play' and an earlier *Reflector* essay, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare', has claimed that the former essay's nostalgia idealizes the childhood experience in a more straightforward way: '[H]is main thrust centres on

---

<sup>56</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 111-14.



the loss of the child's innocent credulity and the ensuing impoverishment of the original dream'.<sup>57</sup> While the essay does not simply favour the 'rationalist' perspective, neither does it seem to idealize young Elia's representational naivety.

The essay's concluding sentences reveal that the taste of ostensibly mature, 'rationalist' Elia represents only a temporary stop on the way to a fully mature taste. In closing, Elia describes a moment in his theatre-going in which cynical disillusionment yielded to a more sophisticated posture: the suspension of disbelief. Elia says,

Perhaps it was fortunate for me that the play of the evening was but an indifferent comedy, as it gave me time to crop some unreasonable expectations, which might have interfered with the genuine emotions with which I was soon after enabled to enter upon [...] Comparison and retrospection soon yielded to the present attraction of the scene; and the theatre became to me, upon a new stock, the most delightful of recreations.<sup>58</sup>

Considered in light of this passage, the relevance of the seemingly digressive anecdote about having received property from F. becomes clear. Upon receiving the bequest, Elia

---

<sup>57</sup> Gerald Monsman, *Confessions of a Prosaic Dreamer: Charles Lamb's Art of Autobiography* (Durham, 1984), 122.

<sup>58</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 114.

took himself for 'an English freeholder' when, in fact, he had merely been playing the part:

When I journeyed down to take possession, and planted foot on my own ground, the stately habits of the donor descended upon me, and I strode (shall I confess the vanity?) with larger paces over my allotment [...] with the feeling of an English freeholder [...] The estate has passed into more prudent hands, and nothing but an agrarian can restore it.<sup>59</sup>

Elia's own example suggests that social status dictates whether or not one is entitled to the bounty of England's material patrimony – only an 'agrarian' could play the part Elia was mistakenly given, that of the 'freeholder'. Considered alongside the descriptions of Elia's theatre-going (a parallel invited by the diction 'crop'), this notion of ownership applies to both culture and land. (Lamb played with this notion of cultural inheritance as property elsewhere, inscribing a copy of *The Last Essays of Elia* to his friend John Forster with the phrase 'a legacy from Elia').<sup>60</sup> Mature Elia has realized when to 'crop' his expectations regarding theatrical signifiers – that some fields are appropriate for

---

<sup>59</sup> Lucas, *Works*, II, 112.

<sup>60</sup> South Kensington Museum, *Forster Collection: A Catalogue of the Printed Books Bequeathed by John Forster, Esq., LL.D.* (London, 1888), 277.

'recreation' and some not. In other words, the wasteful consumption practices of a youthful sensualist have matured into a worldly, hard-boiled mode.

Elia's self-identification as a lord of the theatre who has failed as a landlord suggests his notions of theatre-going derive their sense from economics and, specifically, a punk take on the logic of capitalist accumulation: cultural consumption is profitable, meaning appropriately pleasurable and efficient, when the consumer can manage her desire and the distribution, as it were, of her disbelief. Developing an awareness of the gap between sign and signified is a crucible of maturity, but this gap is uncannily like the one between the products of factory production and their producers – anonymous bodies reduced (or, here, elevated) to the form of commodities ('men and women painted'). Hence, mature taste appears as a more enlightened fetishism – the profit from 'a new stock' of emotion yielded by the gap between labourer and product. In this view, one form of fetishism (cultic worship) has given way to another (commodification), and different forms of pleasure and alienation share a horizon defined by objects, property, and ownership. Elia ultimately suggests that a mature consumer is akin to a cultural capitalist whose style reflects a loss of innocence – a harder and truer but also disillusioned worldliness – that is actually a gain on an economic ledger. This view of consumption seems cynical but, partly for this reason, uncannily punk: Elia's achievement of independent, mature selfhood is bound up with his consumption practices, and materialism is both the hazard of growth and horizon of possibility. At the same time, the freer person and his enlightened tastes belong to a

world apart, and the question of this style's superiority compared to a more conventional, or at least more conventionally privileged, way of life is a preoccupying theme.