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SELF IN THE LAST ESSAYS OF ELIA

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Abstract

Self in the last essay of Elia Lamb's last essays tells a lot about small details, the great agonies his first impression the play of a mind and the play on words. The main point of this paper to study the difference between the letter writing who signed himself C.L. and the essayist known as Elia. So Lamb was having a charming and captivating personality. He used to say about himself that he love reading, walking and writing. Lamb lived as a social Hero who was never defeated by the challenges of life.

Key words: Self, Charles Lamb, Infancy, Love of past, Fact and fiction and Agonies.

The **Last Essays of Elia** was introduced by a Preface, suggested to be written “by a friend of the late Elia,” but of course from Charles’s own hand. In this preface he assumes Elia to have actually died, and after some preliminary remarks on his writings thus proceeds to describe his character and manners:

My late friend was in many respects a singular character. Those who did not like him, hated him; and some, who once liked him, afterwards became his bitterest haters. The truth is, he gave himself too little concern what he uttered, and in whose presence. He observed neither time nor place, and would even out with what came uppermost. With the severe religionist he would pass for a free-thinker; while the other faction set him down for a bigot, or persuaded themselves that he belied his sentiments. Few understood him; and I am no certain that at all times he quite understood himself.¹

When a man’s account of himself – his eccentricities and peculiarities – is confirmed in minutest detail by those who knew and loved him best, it is reasonable to concluded that we are not far wrong in accepting it. This self – portrait of Lamb gives an unexpected rationable to the judgments. The peculiarities which Lamb here enumerates are just those which are little likely ever to receive gentle consideration from the world.

¹ Alfred Ainger, **Charles Lamb**, St. Martin’s Street, London, 1932, p. 101.

Lamb's mention of the "senseless pun" which often "stamped his character for the evening, "suggests the subject of his reputation as a humorist and wit. This habit of playing upon words was a part of him through life.

Those persons, who indulge in it, became an outlet for whatever mood was for the moment dominant in Charles Lamb's mind. When he was annoyed, he made annoying puns, - when he was frivolous, he made frivolous puns. But when he was in the cue, and his surroundings were such as to call forth his better powers, he put into this form of wit, humour and imagination of a high order.

In his preface, Lamb made it clear that he never wanted to be treated as a grave or esteemed person. He always wished to be associated with people younger than himself. He never believed in the march of time and as he himself confesses:

He was too much of the boy-man. The toga virile never sate gracefully on his shoulders. The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood. These were weaknesses; but such as they were, they are key to explicate some of his writings.²

Lamb never liked to have "the impertinence of manhood" over his infancy and boyhood days. The reason seems to be his early entering into the fray of the affairs of the world. And he was deprived of that fun and enjoyment that boyhood could have rendered hi. So he was always haunted by the memories of his infancy and boyhood. It seems to be the case with his first essay of the last series – "Blakesmoor in H – shire. "The essay shows Lamb's local attachment which is significant to energize genius into expression. The essay is an account by Lamb after visiting the place of his infancy with his sister Mary. He was so attached with the place and buildings where he used to live in infancy that when he found them destructed on his grown up visit he says:

Had I seen these brick-and-mortar knaves at their process of destruction, at the plucking of every panel I should have felt the varlets to spare a plank at least out of the cheerful store-room, in whose hot window-seat I used to sit and read Cowley, with the grass-plat before, and the hum and flapping's of that one solitary wasp that ever haunted it about me-it is in mine ears now, as oft as summer returns; or a panel of the yellow room.³

² Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, C. U. P. London, 1969, pp. 3-4.

³ Ibid. pp. 6-7.

Lamb was well aware of the surroundings. As a lovely child he roamed about in every apartment of the house and knew every nook and corner. He had the devoted love for the place which he had felt in his childhood. He had a silent affection and admiration for its surroundings.

Lamb felt loneliness of the temple which ever haunted him thus:

I was here as in a lonely temple. Sung firesides-the low-built roof-parlors ten feet by ten frugal boards, and all the homeliness of home-these were the condition of my birth-the wholesome soil which I was planted in. yet, without impeachment to their tender lessons, I am not sorry to have had glance of something beyond; and to have taken, if but a peep, in childhood, at the contrasting accidents of a great fortune.⁴

The destructed place could not be built again in original manner. No bricklayers can ever restore the impressiveness of that haunted room, where Lamb used to reside, even if they rebuild it.

Lamb opined that one should have the consciousness of being a gentleman, without having been born a gentleman. The pride of ancestry would be cheaper in terms. On the contrary one should be obliged to think about the race of ancestors. One pride of ancestry will render them a vanity as those who do inherit it. Lamb very rightly expresses:

What to us the uninterrupted current of their bloods, if our own did not answer within us to a cognate and corresponded elevation?⁵

There would be no interest in ancestry and its pride until and unless there is not a kindred pried in contemplating it. For gentility, what is needed cultivation and not mere ancestry. To be gentle does not depend solely to be born gentle.

Lamb could not control himself after seeing the destruction of the place of his infancy. Everything was demolished and crushed into the mere dust and rubbish – which he found on his visit when Lamb was grown up. Just like an idol, he worshipped the place:

Was it for this, that I kissed my childish hands too fervently in your idol worship, walks and windings of BLAKESMOOR, for this, or what sin of mine, has the plough passed over your

⁴ Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, C. U. P. London, 1969, pp. 8.

⁵ Ibid. p. 15.

pleasant places? I sometimes think that as men, when they die, do not die all, so of their extinguished habitations there may be a hope-a germ to be revived.⁶

Lamb wonders, was it for the sin of idolatry, that he has been punished by the destruction of Blakesmoor. Lamb suggests that as the Christians believe in the immortality of the soul, so they may perhaps dream of a re-creation in a future life of their beloved earthly haunts.

In his essay, 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading,' Lamb expresses his views pertaining to books and their reading Lamb had the passion for reading:

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.⁷

Lamb had no literary prejudices. He can lay his hand on any book which could sincerely be called a book for reading. For this selection of a book he had some reservations. The books which could not be admitted to be really books, according to him, are Court Calendars, Directories, Pocket Books, Draught Boards, bound and lettered on the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacks Statutes at large, the works of Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Beattie, Soame Jenyns, the Histories of Flavious Josephus and Paley's Moral Philosophy. For these reservations only, he could read almost anything. He had the rare taste of catholicity.

Lamb expresses his opinion regarding the books which are in hard covers. He regarded that the clothed books are just like false saints, usurping the place of true shrines, and compelling the genuine ones to leave their legitimate places. He exemplifies his statement that when a reader takes out a well bound volume, hoping it to be by Steele or Farquhar but to their disappointment it turns to be Adam Smith's Population Essay. He further goes on to say:

To view a well-arranged assortment of blockheaded Encyclopedias (Anglicans or Metropolitans) set out in an array of Russia, or Morocco, when a tithe of that good leather would comfortably reclose my shivering folios; would renovate Paracelsus himself, and enable old Raymund Lully to look himself again in the world. I never see these impostors, but I long to strip them, to warm my ragged veterans in their spoils.⁸

⁶ M. L. Hallward, S. C. Hill, **Essays of Elia**, The Macmillan Company of India Ltd., Delhi, 1976, p. 19.

⁷ Charles Lamb, **Essays of Elia and Last Essays**, p. 10.

⁸ Ibid. p. 11.

So Lamb wanted to clothe his poor tattered old writers in the leather stripped from these modern encyclopedias. In his opinion, to place Shakespeare or Milton's works into gay bindings would be only foolish ostentation. Because possession of their works is no distinction in itself. And above all, it does not give a feeling of possession of their works in the owner. But for others, he had different views:

Thomson's Seasons, again, looks best (I maintain it) a little torn, and dog's eared. How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn-out appearance, nay, the very odour (beyond Russia), if we would not forget kind feelings in fastidiousness, of an old 'Circulating Library.' Tom Jones, or Vicar or Wakefield. How they speak of the thousand thumbs, that have turned over their pages with delight.⁹

Lamb opines that sometimes there may be better books like those of Fielding, Smollett and Sterne but these books demand little binding because the copies are easily available and it is an everlasting process. But rare books, for example, the Life of the Duke of Newcastle, by his Duchess, no binding or casket is safe enough to keep such a precious jewel.

Lamb favors to keep old editions of writers such as Sir Philip Sydney, Bishop Taylor, Milton in his prose works, Fuller safe and intact. He says, on the contrary, he never bothered for a First folio of Shakespeare.

Lamb had a unique fascination for the works of Kit, Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Shakespeare became stale and hackneyed. It seemed to him that they are harping upon the same subject in various ways.

What is more important when and where one reads a book. The Fairy Queen could not be read in the five or six minutes before the dinner is quite ready. For Milton, he says, that his verse produces harmony and bring music. Milton's music of verse produces slavish thoughts and purified ears. For Shakespeare's The Tempest and The Winter's Tale, Winter Evenings are superb when the world's all activities are silent.

Lamb had his own opinion on an important item such as Newspaper:

A newspaper, read out, is intolerable. In some of the Bank offices it is the custom (to save so much individual time) for one of the clerks who is the best scholar-to commence upon the Times, or the Chronicle, and recite its entire contents aloud *probono publico*. With every advantage of lungs and elocution, the effects is singularly vapid...Another follows with his selection. So the

⁹ Ibid. p. 12.

entire journal transpires at length by piece-meal. Seldom – readers are slow readers, and, without this expedient no one in the company would probably ever travel through the contents of a whole paper.¹⁰

So the newspaper is read in piece meal and all by himself. Then only its reading is enjoyed. Newspaper reading is selective as well as light reading. Like a book it has not to be read completely. It is a very good pastime for a person who had ordered for a supper in a hotel and waiting for it. There these like banded magazines are best accompaniments rather than any other better book.

Lamb was not given to out-of-doors reading. He could not adjust to that kind of reading. Lamb also could not be a street reader. He recounts about them with affection and the whole process of their reading at the open stalls.

He mentions Martin Charles Burney – one of his lifelong friends – who read two volume of *Clarissa* (Richardson's novel) at stalls in fragments:

Venturing tenderly, page after page, expecting every moment when he shall interpose his interdict, and yet unable to deny themselves the gratification, they 'snatch a fearful joy'. Martin B-, in this way, by daily fragments, got through two volumes of *Clarissa*, when the stall-keeper damped his laudable ambition, by asking him (it in his younger days) whether he meant to purchase the work. M. declares, that under no circumstances in his life did he ever peruse a book with half the satisfaction which he took in those uneasy snatches.¹¹

Lamb's "Thought on Books and Reading" produces an interesting assessment of his personal views on books and his way of reading. We could know in which books he was especially interested. He himself was a voracious reader. But out of door reading was not a passion for him. On the other hand, he describes about out of door reading with affection. His own friend Martin was given to such kind of reading. That kind of reading gave his friend satisfaction in full. It seems that Lamb was quite fascinated by this kind of reading – being a devoted reader himself. It is because of this reason that he describes about this kind of reading with affection.

"The Old Margate Hoy" is Lamb's experience of sea side. Margate is the small coasting vessel which ran between London and Margate. At the outset Lamb admitted his preference of passing his vacation at the universities and next to it is some woody spot but on his cousin Bridget's (his sister Mary Lamb as referred to in all the essays) insistence he agreed:

¹⁰ Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, p. 12.

¹¹ Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, p. 13.

I am fond of passing my vacations (I believe I have said so before) at one or other of the Universities. Next to these my choice would fix me at some woody spot such as the neighborhood of Henley affords in abundance, on the banks of my beloved Thames. But somehow or other my cousin contrives to wheedle me once in three or four seasons to a watering-place....and all because we were happy many years ago for a brief week at-Margate. That was our first seaside experiment, and many circumstances combined to make it the most agreeable holiday of my life.¹²

Both Lamb and his sister have not seen the sea earlier. So, they passed their time in company happily out of doors for such a long time.

Lamb had a graphic view of the vessel in his eyes. The vessel was weather-beaten and sun-burnt captain was there. He further goes minutely into the operation of the vessel and depicts that the vessel rests its burden of passengers to wind and wave-the *Hoy* being a sailing vessel – and did not require the aid of steam to propel it. Lamb fancifully likened the steam to the smoke of witches' fires, with their incantations and cauldrons of boiling herbs and other ingredients like those in *Macbeth*. The cauldrons are the prosaic boilers of the steam-engine.

Lamb writes about the crew members and the obvious curiosity of the travelers regarding the different mechanisms involved in the movement of the ship. He also talks about the Cook and regards him as the “happy medium!”:

Can I forget thy honest, yet slender crew, with their coy reluctant responses (yet to the suppression of anything like contempt) to the raw questions, which we of the great city would be ever and anon putting to them, as to the uses of this or that strange naval implement? Specially can I forget thee, thou happy medium, thou shade of refuge between us and them, conciliating interpreter of their skill to our simplicity comfortable ambassador between sea and land like another *Ariel*, flaming at once about all parts of the deck, yet with kindlier ministrations – not to assist the tempest, but, as it touched with a kindred sense of our infirmities, to soothe the qualms which that untried motion might haply raise in our crude land-fancies.¹³

Lamb addresses the cook as a capital intermediary or ambassador, as it were, between the passengers and the crew. So “happy medium” is being the equivalent of “the golden mean,” the moderation which lied between two extremes. This *Ariel* was not to assist storm but to render soothness

¹² Ibid. p. 14.

¹³ Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, p. 18.

to the travelers who were having the nausea or sea-sickness which the unaccustomed roll of the vessel might excite in their inexperienced landsmen's imaginations. The cook, regarded by Lamb as Ariel, served those exhilarating brinks and still more exhilarating conversation.

Lamb further gives details about the travel he writes that in addition to crew members and cook there was a dark, Spanish-complexioned young man, remarkably handsome with office like appearance. That man had assertion in his way of talking. About him, Lamb expresses:

He was, in fact, the greatest liar I had met with them, or since. He was none of your hesitating, half story-tellers (a most painful description of mortals) who go on sounding your belief, and only giving you as much as they can see you can swallow at a time – the nibbling pick-pockets of your patience.¹⁴

So Lamb was in the company of a “thorough-paced liar” and by and by the consumed the patience of the listener. Lamb noticed that he (Spanish looking young man) made sure of his company before he used to tell the fabricated tales. The company should be such people consisting of not too much wealthy person, not many wise or learned persons. But Lamb here remarks to a very natural behavior of the listeners – to go on listening to his gossips as they were in a new world-world of sea and time and place was such that everything was taken with reception whatsoever was disposed before the.

While having personal experience of sea-travelling, Lamb had another co-traveler who sat upon the edge of the deck and was quite a different character. He was a boy, apparently very poor, weak and patient. He was engrossed in himself and not aware of his surroundings. He was also not eating or drinking, by personal queries, it could be revealed to the author that he was going to Margate, with the hope of being admitted into the infirmary there for sea-bathing. His disease was a scrofula, which had left nothing in him. He had no friends.

As there are two aspects of Life – happy and sad. So in the same manner Lamb also experienced two different persons showing two aspects of life happy – in the form of a Spanish complexion young man and another a boy who was patient. Lamb writes to say that these memories lingered on with him:

These pleasant, and some mournful passages, with the first sight of the sea, co-operating with youth, and a sense of holydays, and out-of-door adventure, to me that had been pent up in populous cities for many months before, - have left upon my mind the fragrance as of summer

¹⁴ Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, p. 18.

days gone by, bequeathing nothing but their remembrance for cold and wintry hours to chew upon.¹⁵

Conclusion:

The word Elia may be closely related to Charles lamb but not in any sense identical. When it comes to authorship there were two Charles Lamb. If not that, there was a Lamb who wrote into styles different Lamb had a distinct public and private manner of writing .He did not write to his friends as he wrote for the magazines. Although in either case existed in natural -born essayist or a matchless critic of books and man his styles which was always intimate, altered according to weather his pen or a printer was to the transmitter of his words.

¹⁵ David Cecil, A Portrait of Charles Lamb, p. 26-27.