

Reasons to be Cheerful: Leigh Hunt and his Versatile, Trenchant, Observant, Empathetic, Witty Journalism

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Introduction

The figure of James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) is, like many of his occasional essays, quaintly historical, manifestly that of a Dead White European Male, who plied his trade in London and is best known to scholars of the British Romantic movement. A curious object of enquiry, perhaps, to bring into focus at the start of a collection of essays seeking to extend coverage and understanding of literary journalism as a global phenomenon, and render the field less open to the charge of Occidentalism. Nevertheless, the sense of distance, of impertinence even, allows Hunt's long struggle for critical freedom to be read almost as an allegory of contemporary difficulties encountered by the journalistic imagination worldwide as it responds to external pressures and oppression, and as it attempts to give more than merely functional form and shape to events that demand to be recorded. If the past is another country, then reviewing the work of a writer like Hunt means crossing transnational as well as generic frontiers, and in so doing encouraging readings of literary journalism that are "culturally sensitive to the way the craft is practiced ... in different historical time frames" and which "recapture the meaning of journalism in its own time" (Sims 2009: 15).

In spite of the practical difficulties of recuperating it entire, Leigh Hunt's was one of the most substantial, significant, varied and visible journalistic careers of the nineteenth century. Commencing in 1804, while still a junior clerk in the War Office, moonlighting on the *Traveller* under the guise of "Mr Town, Jr., Critic and Censor-general," Hunt wrote, edited, and published continuously until his death in 1859. Perhaps because of this very scale and scope, Hunt's cultural influence – particularly in so far as it contributed to the momentum and character of early nineteenth-century Reform movements – has not yet been fully measured and is still insufficiently acknowledged (Woodring 1962: 71). While discrete and often partial assessments have been offered of his work as a poet, as an occasional essayist, as the friend and mentor of other poets and critics, or of his role as a *cause célèbre* imprisoned by a corrupt regime, these need to be subsumed into the larger project of understanding him above all as a literary journalist and one of the founding (if least patriarchal) fathers of the form.

Finally, Hunt's oppositional relationship with the British Establishment marks him out as one who, in Gramscian terms, fought a long "war of position" through the periodical press to establish a counter-hegemonic bloc in national culture.¹ He deserves recognition as a literary journalist of global importance, whose impact was based on his bringing an outsider's cosmopolitan perspective – Barbadian roots, charity school upbringing, nomadic experience of bohemian suburbia – to bear on national debates, and assuming, with a nonchalance infuriating to his critics, centrality for that perspective rather than marginality. Embarrassing genre boundaries no less than notions of "good" taste, pregnant with energy, wit and poetical conceits worthy of his hero Edmund Spenser, Leigh Hunt's journalistic writings deserve full-scale reassessment.

Although Hunt was born in Middlesex and schooled in London within earshot of Bow Bells, recent biographers have repeatedly stressed his overseas origins, his exuberant “tropical sensibility”, and the way he himself “traced his fathers and mothers to the oppressed races of Ireland and the Caribbean”: a West Indian in Cockney’s clothing, he grew up to be “an alien presence in respectable English society” (Roe 2005: 7, 10; Holden 2005: 3). His father, Isaac, came from a line of clergymen in Barbados, his mother from tender-conscienced Quaker stock in Philadelphia. They fled to England at the outset of the American Revolution when Isaac’s outspoken loyalty to the British Crown endangered his life, but as both families, partly Creolized though they were, derived their ancestry from seventeenth-century English emigrants, this was as much a home-coming as a diaspora. With so much transatlantic traffic, it would be too simple, in fact, to present Hunt as a foreign interloper, and too Anglocentric to speak of margins and centres as regards his eventual relationship with the London literary scene. What gives an axis to Hunt’s world, however, is his belief that his father’s privileging of principle over prudence set his children “an example of independent thinking.” While Isaac Hunt “was a true exotic, [who] ought not to have been transplanted” from his Barbados home, Hunt recalled in his *Autobiography*, nevertheless “the West Indian blood of which we [his children] all partake” allowed his sons

... to have been the means of circulating more knowledge and entertainment in society, than if [my father] had attained the bishopric he looked for, and left us ticketed and labelled among the acquiescent (1949 [1850]: 17; 10-11).

The desire for independence, the will to dissent, speaks loudly through Leigh Hunt’s writing, no less than through the career of his elder brother John (1775-1848), whom Isaac had apprenticed to the Piccadilly publisher Henry Reynell in 1791. As printer and editor/leader writer they made a formidable team. The idea of toeing a party line was anathema to both, to

the point where not joining the acquiescent became a motivating force, an axe that could be ground.

The Novelty of Impartiality

When John Hunt founded the *News* as an eight-page Sunday weekly on 19 May 1805, Wordsworth was completing the thirteen-book version of *The Prelude*, Pitt the Younger and the Tories were in office, organizing the treaty of St Petersburg to unite Russia with Britain in a “Third Coalition” against the French (Austria would join in September); and Napoleon himself was seven days from being crowned King of Italy in Milan Cathedral. Leigh Hunt, not yet twenty one, was entrusted with the section of the new paper devoted to “Theatricals,” and from there commenced his counter-hegemonic campaign. While Britain prided itself on the theoretical and statutory liberties enjoyed by its newspapers, in practice, as Arthur Aspinall’s classic study (1973) demonstrates, the polarization of the press along party lines was increasing, with the field splintered between ministerial and opposition papers, instructed and subsidised by their respective masters. During the wars against Napoleon, newspapers which stepped out of line were ruthlessly and arbitrarily dealt with. A few months into the new administration, George III would congratulate George Rose, Pitt’s campaign organiser and self-styled right-hand man, that the Press was being “remarkably well managed” (ibid: 206 and n.).

Play reviewing was no less venal, controlled by “the bribery of theatre managers, actors and playwrights” (Kucich and Cox 2003a: 2). In response, the *News* promised “one novelty at least” in its columns: “an impartiality of Theatrical Criticism” (Vol. I, 19 May 1805: 6) and its critic soon developed a keen sense of “the cultural and political significance of the public

theatre” (ibid: 4). The role provided, it is now maintained, an early “opportunity for Hunt to declare his “independence” as a writer, a stance he struggled all his life to maintain” and his work for the paper reveals him as “the first major Romantic theater critic,” as he inaugurated a turn towards longer, more probing and critically-informed reviews, anticipating the better-known work of Charles Lamb, S. T. Coleridge and William Hazlitt in this area (Eberle Sinatra 2001: 100, 102).

Letting Loose the *Examiner*

In 1808, the novelty of impartiality was something Hunt self-consciously transferred, as overall Editor, to the columns of the new 16-page, stamped Sunday weekly which he and his brother John had just established. It was to be called the *Examiner*, in homage to the “wit and fine writing” of one of Jonathan Swift’s more mordant editorial personae of nearly a century before. The sense of an august stylistic tradition, reaching back through the “British Essayists” to Swift, Addison and Steele in the reign of Queen Anne, was to be an important feature of the new paper, serving what one recent account defines as its “quixotic aim of using a literary sensibility to reform both government and journalism” (Brake 2009: 211). A quotation from Swift – “Party is the madness of many for the gain of a few” – formed the epigraph for the leading “Political Examiner” articles, of which, together with other editorial contributions, Hunt was to write more than 1,400 during his years in the editorial chair (1808-1821).

To illustrate the continuity of Hunt’s critical technique as he moves from treating theater as politics to discussing politics-as-theater, an early leader can be marked for attention. After all of two months in his new role, Hunt devoted his tenth “Political Examiner” to a setting forth of the “Rules for The Conduct of Newspaper Editors with Respect to Politics and News.”

This curiously seldom-cited satire ironically treats the corruption of the many as a master-class for the few:

1. OF POLITICAL ATTACHMENTS.

You must absolutely be a party-man, or you are neither a true editor, nor a true patriot. Patriotism ... is certainly not a love of [one's country] considered in its earthly qualities, not a love of muddy Brentford nor or calcareous Margate, but an attachment to the best men in the country. Now the best citizen is he who would do most good to his fellow-citizens, and as every man must judge for himself, the best statesman is he who offers you the best place. It becomes you, therefore, to support him on every occasion, and particularly when he is wrong; for who would expose the errors of a friend? ("THE POLITICAL EXAMINER," *Examiner*, 6 March 1808: 1-2).

Laced with historical allusions to Homer, Plato, Stracocles, Justinian, Petrarch, Machiavelli, Luther, Calvin and other "philosophers," the piece nevertheless works up to delivering a highly topical subtext in its penultimate section, "Of Invention in News" – a critique of party bias in the reporting of the Napoleonic wars:

The art of newspaper politics certainly cannot rank among the polite arts, but nevertheless it requires almost as much fancy as poetry or painting. This is particularly apparent in periodical accounts of battles. ... If your favourite statesman is in office, it is your business to announce nothing but victories; if he is out, conquest must vanish with him. While you are in opposition, you must lament the total want of foresight in ministers, their useless expeditions and senseless expenditures, and you must praise the French Emperor: while you are ministerial, you must insist and swear ... that the expeditions will settle the balance of the world, and that NAPOLEON is a Corsican tyrant and usurper (ibid: 2).

The ambiguities displayed in the opening sentence here are multiple, as "fancy" was a Huntian keynote long before Charles Dickens seized on it, and treating political writing as an art form was his manifest aim long before George Orwell endorsed such an aspiration. Only gradually is the rug pulled out from under the reader's feet.

Hunt's resourcefulness at putting words into the mouths of his imagined critics rather than grandstanding his own, is notable for the way it uses a variety of fictive and burlesque techniques to create a space almost by default for the kind of philosophical and aesthetical positions the "Examiner" wished to occupy. The anonymity and ponderousness of the editorial "we" is outwitted by the mercurial "I" of Hunt's essay-writing persona, which always seems to be slipping away from the reader, one – if not several – steps ahead. As if in recognition of this, from the outset Hunt took to "signing" his pieces with the equivalent of a

textual signpost, a trademark hand ☞ pointing offstage, as much as to say: ... “he went that way!”

Hunt’s substitution for “Party Spirit” of the disembodied spirit of critical enquiry and non-partisan politics was of course, a stance in itself, though never merely a pose; Hunt himself recognized in his *Autobiography* (1850) that the newspaper did in time acquire a recognizable platform, even if one with few elected representatives:

The main objects of the *Examiner* newspaper were to assist in producing Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general ... and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever. It began with being of no party; but Reform soon gave it one (ibid: 175).

However, “in time” and “soon” are reminders that the process by which “Reform” became a definable movement extrapolated from a series of complaints and practical suggestions for progressive legislative steps, was an uncertain one. Tracking the word and its corollaries through Hunt’s leaders, it features first as a simple countable noun (“a military reform”), then becomes identifiable as a call-to-arms (“a Reform in the Representation”) but not until 1816 is a politician described in terms of Reform as an affiliation: “Lord GRENVILLE, who is ... neither Whig, Tory, or Reformer, according to anything we could ever make out.”² Before then, all the many causes that the *Examiner* backs, attacks and probes – the reluctance of West India planters to abolish the slave trade; the barbarism of army flogging (“Military Torture”); the folly of attempting to fight imperial wars with France in India or China; the justice of Catholic Emancipation; the gloomy intolerance and superstition of Methodism; Britain’s inability to come to terms with Napoleon’s greatness; the relationship between power and the arts;³ and dozens of others – are individually scrutinized on their own merits, and not because they are part of a pre-established policy programme. If Hunt ground his axe on non-acquiescence, he stuck his neck out whenever he did so.

Imprisoning the *Examiner*

The dramatic events of 1812 had a long overture. After enduring with impatience a year of restricted powers under the terms of the “Regency Act,” the Prince Regent assumed his full *vires* in January, and took full advantage of the distraction provided by British successes in the Peninsular War and Napoleon’s setbacks on the road from Moscow to face down the growing horror of his loyal Foxite followers, who had expected him to honor more than a decade of pledges and form a Whig administration to carry through long-awaited liberal reforms. Dumbfounding his own supporters, the Prince chose first to maintain Spencer Perceval’s widely disliked and embattled Tory administration, then to endorse Lord Liverpool as Perceval’s successor, following the latter’s assassination in 1812. Unlike William Cobbett’s *Political Register*, which had continued to flatter the Prince in the hope of his keeping his word, the *Examiner* could claim to have been prescient about the betrayal. Since his “Letter of Strong Advice to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales on His Character and Connections” (21 August 1808), Hunt had addressed the heir to the throne in a tone of high moral reproof, and with remarkable candor. If no other Editor would do so (so ran Hunt’s editorial line) the “*Examiner*” would prove a true Englishman, and tell the Prince the truth about himself and public opinion. In not courting George, however, the Hunt brothers – both now married; Leigh with a young son – were courting disaster.

Unsuccessful prosecutions for libel against the Hunts had been brought by the Crown on three previous occasions (Woodring op cit: 10-17), but on 22 March 2012, Hunt’s celebrated leader, “The Prince on St. Patrick’s Day,” provided government lawyers with the material they needed to secure a conviction. Among many hopes dashed by the Prince’s tergiversation in 1812 were those for Catholic Emancipation and improvement of the condition of Irish citizens, yet on 17 March George had blithely attended a public dinner in honor of St Patrick’s Day, where he had been duly hissed as the villain of the piece by some of those

present. In reporting the event, the ministerial papers had suppressed this in favor of their usual forms of flattery, but the immediate provocation of the *Examiner's* ensuing outburst was a set of panegyrical verses published in the *Morning Post* which Hunt seems to have objected to on the grounds that they constituted an abuse of poetry as much as of honest journalism:

What person ... would imagine, in reading these astounding eulogies, that this *Glory of the People* was the subject of millions of shrugs and reproaches! ... That this *Maecenas of the Age* patronized not a single deserving writer! ... That this *Conqueror of Hearts* was the disappointer of hopes! That this *Exciter of Desire* (bravo, Messieurs of the *Post*!) this *Adonis in Loveliness*, was a corpulent gentleman of fifty! In short that this *delightful, blissful, wise, pleasurable, honorable, virtuous, true, and immortal PRINCE*, was a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who has just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity! (Kucich and Cox 2003a: 221).

Given that a lawyer defending a libel case in the second half of George III's reign "was not permitted to introduce evidence that the statements alleged to be libellous were true in fact," and that it was the judge who "determined for the jury whether the statements in question, no matter how true, did or did not constitute a libel," (Woodring op cit: 13-14) the Hunt brothers could scarcely hope to be acquitted a fourth time, particularly as before the hearing the *Examiner* addressed the trial judge, the notoriously peppery Lord Ellenborough, at length, audaciously "object[ing] to [his] fitness for the discharge of the judicial office" (6 December 1812; see Houtchens and Houtchens 1962: 147-53).

After long delays, the trial went forward on 6 December, and on 3 February 1813 the two brothers were sentenced to two years' imprisonment in separate gaols, and ordered to pay a substantial fine of £500 apiece – some £31,920 in today's terms.⁴ The selfsame day John Hunt was despatched by hackney carriage to the House of Correction at Coldbath Fields, Clerkenwell, "reputedly the severest prison in Britain" (Roe 2005: 182), while Leigh was taken south of the Thames to Surrey Jail, in Horsemonger Lane, Southwark, to begin the twenty-four months of incarceration that would both make and mar his writing career.

As far as the authorities were concerned, the troublesome cipher known as “the Examiner” was now locked up, but in two equally important ways, he contrived to escape. Friends rallied round the Hunt brothers to assist them in continuing to publish the newspaper from behind bars. Its sales and fashionable status “especially among the high political men” soared.⁵ Secondly, with his health collapsing under stress, Leigh Hunt was able to secure two rooms for himself and members of his family in the prison Infirmary, which, within six weeks, he proceeded to transform astonishingly not simply into the stage set for a poet’s bower, but into what has been identified as an alternative site of power, where he held a kind of “counter-court of sociality and wit (not deference and obsequiousness) presided over by a ‘Cockney King’ ... who substituted classical music, art and poetry for the Prince Regent’s vulgar, noisy extravaganzas of fireworks, waterworks and banquets” (Kucich 2003: 125). The recollections of a stream of visitors, crowding to attend Hunt’s ultra-fashionable literary “lock-ins,” have corroborated the fantastical account of his rooms preserved in his *Autobiography*:

I papered the walls with a trellis of roses; I had the ceiling coloured with clouds and sky; the barred windows I screened with venetian blinds; and when my bookcases were set up with their busts, and flowers and a pianoforte made their appearance, perhaps there was not a handsomer room on that side of the water. ... I possessed another surprise, which was a garden. ... Here I wrote and read in fine weather, sometimes under an awning. ... but my triumph was issuing forth of a morning. ... I made a point of dressing myself as if for a long walk; and then putting on my gloves, and taking my book under my arm, stepped forth, requesting my wife not to wait dinner if I was too late (op cit: 243-244).

Much prison journalism recounts the hard facts of deprivation, and is distilled from suffering. Leigh Hunt’s flights of journalistic imagination take off from this fairytale makeover of his prison rooms and garden: “I used to shut my eyes in my arm-chair, and affect to think myself hundreds of miles off” (ibid: 244).

Of course, it would have been more prudent, financially, to have lived frugally and put the *Examiner*’s profits towards paying the fine. Better still, by that token, for the Hunts to have

accepted the “attempt to bribe us” made “through the medium of a third person” by whom the brothers were informed they might avoid first prison and then the fine, if they would “abstain in future from commenting upon the actions of the royal personage;” but, Hunt recalled: “I need not add that we declined” (ibid: 233). The opportunity to become embedded reporters on the inside of Britain’s prison system and carry on their campaign was too good to miss. Hence, as one perceptive commentator has put it, while “Hunt’s aesthetic frolics within the government’s site of discipline might seem like a primary embodiment of Romantic escapism” there was, in fact, “much more substance and political self-consciousness to Hunt’s prison experience ... than the decorative excess and revelry might imply” (Kucich 1999). This has been recently explored in terms of the emerging cultural “Cockneyism” of Hunt’s position in relation to Nature on the one hand, and existing periodicals and political groupings on the other (Dart 2012: 30-60), but the impact of imprisonment on Hunt’s representation of the world as reporter and Editor also deserves attention.

Prison Literary Journalism

The pretence of narrative omnipresence that a newspaper *de facto* affects is eloquently exposed by Hunt’s prison journalism, as he candidly and habitually presents his commentary on world affairs as the speculations of an individual whose body is immured, but whose mind is free (in Horace Walpole’s phrase) to “expatiate through the boundless realms of invention.” This is done fairly directly in the four leaders that immediately followed the incarceration, but in some ways the places where this occurs tangentially are even more interesting. In January 1814, the news agenda was dominated by reports of European generals and their armies moving in on the weakened Napoleon, and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in Spain. Hunt’s “Political Examiner” of the 23rd constitutes a meditation on the relationship between military and monarchical success, as opposed to intellectual or artistic achievement:

Lying awake the other night, and looking through our prison bars at the constellation Orion, we fell into a chain of reflections on the habitual homage which is paid to the disturbers of mankind, and which has so perniciously tended to keep up the breed. By these persons we mean conquerors commonly so called, and ordinary mischievous kings. ... The reader may not see very clearly the connexion between this subject and Orion: but the fact is, that when BONAPARTE was visiting one of the celebrated German universities, the name of Napoleon was given in full senate to a part of that constellation, – we believe the sword and belt. How the doctors and professors have since looked on a fine, starlight night, we cannot say; but the sword may by this time be unchristened, and the name of ALEXANDER [of Russia] or FRANCIS [of Austria] bestowed upon it (see Kucich and Cox 2003a: 314-15).

It is not just Hunt's upending of traditional social distinctions – mighty generals and kings are common and ordinary; poets, explorers and scientists are the great and the good – that is striking here, it is the sense (hard won, no doubt) of editorial detachment and serenity.

A recent appraisal of Hunt's "jailhouse journalism" develops the idea that prison catalyzed a form of stylistic release and rejuvenation, noting how he himself rejoiced that the newspaper's enemies would soon find that "whatever may be the case with our bodies, we are still ranging abroad in full freedom of spirit; only a little invigorated perhaps by our leisure for study".⁶ Like the final lines of Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" (of 1916), the admixture of determination and wit here in the choice of "invigorated" and "leisure" should not be underestimated.⁷ Hunt's irony is often sharpened by an element of suspected truth and the possibility of self-deception beneath its theatricality. He evidently needed to believe in the comforts of prison, and in particular, that its bars, no less than the columns of the *Examiner*, could be made like home. In later years, when the themes of invigoration, leisure, escape and transformation – or even, simply, the desire for friendship and the warmth and security of extended family – recur, as they frequently do in Hunt's essays and occasional journalism, it is insufficiently understood how this stands, metonymically, in relation to the ordeal of Horsemonger Lane. Creative advice he would give, years later, to working-class readers of *Leigh Hunt's London Journal* on homely matters

ranging from the delight of cultivating geraniums to how to make the best of a room without a view is illuminated poetically by the subtext of hard experience.⁸

His Companionable Style of Writing

The persona projected by the “Examiner” always reserved the right to act as fearless scrutineer and “censor general,” and this in no way diminished after the Hunts’ release from captivity, even if the critical approach was more sophisticated.⁹ But even before 1815, Hunt was seeking ways of extending his range of editorial approaches as well as subject matter. Orion-like, a constellation of other publications collected around the sword-arm of the *Examiner*, particularly after Hunt had relinquished the editorship in 1821, ostensibly to avoid further libel indictments. The first of these was a short-lived quarterly magazine, the *Reflector* (1811-12), intended to be reflective (in both senses) of developments in philosophy, politics, and the liberal arts, carried forward at a slower pace than the parent paper. It featured well-paid contributions from other writers, notably essayist Charles Lamb and future *Times* editor Thomas Barnes, with both of whom Hunt had been at school, and while it folded shortly before the Hunts’ fourth libel trial, the *Examiner* was able, for reasons already discussed, to accommodate its more leisurely approach. Post-1815, Hunt continued the practice of publishing creative work by friends and kindred spirits, notably the young poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose famous sonnets “On First Looking in Chapman’s Homer” and “Ozymandias” made their first appearance in *Examiner* columns (1 December 1816: 762; 11 January 1818: 24).

The sight of lyric poetry hemmed round by hard news looks, at first sight, incongruous, but Hunt knew such transitions needed to be accomplished if his counter-cultural campaigns were

to gain ground: an example to be followed by countless other radical publications that featured poetry prominently in their pages, first as part of the so-called “War of the Unstamped Press,” and later by the Chartist press.¹⁰ That Hunt was acutely conscious of the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas involved is obvious from the second number of the *Reflector*, which contains his witty dialectical verses “Politics and Poetics.” Subtitled “The desperate Situation of a Journalist unhappily smitten with the Love of Rhyme,” the poem is narrated by a frustrated lyricist, with the printer’s devil at the door, who reluctantly yields to “harsh politics” and bids farewell to the indulgence of his Muse on the basis that “He conquers ease who would be crowned with leisure.”¹¹ The poem finishes with the insertion on the next line of Hunt’s *Examiner* icon, pointing indicatively onwards into the fray. The joke, of course, is that this surrender to journalistic necessity is accomplished in poetic form, though as usual the personal cost of the irony can be sensed.

In this respect, the *Indicator* (1819-1821), a 2d. mid-week journal edited and principally authored by Hunt, was a development from the Sunday *Examiner* intended to redress the balance in favor of the poetic. Unstamped, its status as literary balm for political gall was underscored by its curious introductory essay:

THERE is a bird in the interior of Africa, whose habits would rather seem to belong to the interior of Fairy-land: but they have been well authenticated. It indicates to honey-hunters where the nests of wild bees are to be found. It calls to them with cheerful cry, which they answer, and on finding itself recognized, flies and hovers over the hollow tree containing the honey. (No. 1, 13 October 1819: 1)

The role of the miscellany editor, pointing his sweet-toothed readers to the good things they seek, has seldom been figured in such ingenious terms. The 76 numbers also contain a wealth of familiar essays by Hunt on a kaleidoscopic range of subjects, which he himself considered

“were the best writing he had ever done” (Holden op cit: 142). Recognizing his approach as one that blended the tones and rhetoric of friendship with the wisdom of a scholar and the street knowledge of a *cicerone*, Hunt formally embodied them as the 1820s drew to a close in the *Companion* (1828), voiced by an editorial persona “who shall walk and talk with [the reader] like any other friend, discussing the topics of the day, politics least of any.”¹² A similar approach was intended to underwrite the unstamped *Chat of the Week* (1830) until Hunt’s gleeful animadversions on George IV’s death and the July Revolution in France caused the government to “put a stop to this speculation by insisting it should have a stamp,” whereupon it morphed into the wide-ranging *Tatler* (1830-1832), “the most substantial and impressive journal of his later career,” which failed when Hunt could no longer afford to advertise it.¹³

On the whole, however, it was the “companionable style of writing” (Hessell 2005: 86) which predominated in Hunt’s journalism during the decade and, while doing little to improve the precariousness of his finances, it was to form an enduringly popular legacy. At the time, however, it was overshadowed by controversy over Hunt’s role in the *Liberal* (1822-1823), a quarterly miscellany set up at Byron’s instigation, with Shelley – before his drowning six days after welcoming Hunt to Italy – as the other main protagonist, and principally written by Hunt. “We will divide the world between us, like the Triumvirate,” (cited in Holden op cit: 162) Hunt had joyfully predicted, forgetting what had happened to Antony and Octavius after the exile of Lepidus. The Tory press – particularly Hunt’s old enemy and rival, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* – was delighted with any excuse to attack Hunt’s supposed Cockney pretensions, revelling in the ensuing rift between Hunt and Byron in Italy, and exploiting it in class terms as cruelly as they could. Yet, in spite of their political antagonism, the Tory *Blackwood’s* (1817) and Hunt’s *Examiner*, *Reflector* and *Indicator* can all be seen as crucial

experiments with forms of literary journalism. Indeed, as David Stewart stresses: “Without the developments Hunts introduced in the periodical format, the revolution *Blackwood’s* effected would not have been possible” (Stewart 2009: 155).

Leigh Hunt in 1832

The passage of the Act to amend the Representation of the People in England and Wales (famously known as the “Great Reform Act”) in 1832 may be taken as a watershed for Hunt’s journalistic career, as much as for the political outlook of the countries concerned. Together with a range of other Reform measures enacted both by the outgoing Tory and incoming Whig administrations between 1829 and 1834, it represented a vindication of much the *Examiner* and Hunt as a journalistic voice had stood for, yet at the same time it served to make that voice appear increasingly redundant, as Hunt approached his fourth decade as a public writer. Having skilfully loaded his cultural journalism so as to carry a political charge, in the days when direct assault was potentially both dangerous and self-defeating, Hunt now found that both he and the times had mellowed: his message of cheerfulness in adversity was in danger of becoming bland.

Even signing up as theatrical critic for the recently-established *True Sun*, the most Radical evening newspaper in London, did not restore his bite nor – what was possibly worse – his credit. This year saw the first of a number of humiliating applications for support to the Royal Literary Fund, only months after the death of the monarch who had helped to ruin him financially.¹⁴ Increasingly, Hunt was seen by a younger generation of writers and critics as a faded Romantic spendthrift, fitfully brilliant and curiously lightweight.

Postscript: Dickens, Skimpole, Hunt

1832 also saw the first of many curious crossovers between the life of Hunt, then 48, and that of the then-unknown Charles Dickens, just 20, who was employed for six months on the staff of the *True Sun* as a freelance parliamentary reporter (Drew 2003: 15-20). Hunt's literary influence on Dickens has never merited a full-length appraisal, perhaps because the forms of literary journalism in which each excelled have resisted critical enquiry, as well as falling from view in archives and newspaper libraries. The digital revolution is bringing both back into focus, and future comparison – I venture to predict – will in no way work to Hunt's disfavor. Almost all of the things for which Dickens the journalist is justly celebrated – his adoption of the role of *flâneur* in his urban reportage; his fearlessness in attacking humbug and jobbery in national life; his overflowing sympathy with the down-at-heel and dispossessed; his endless facility of comic invention; his “philosophy” of charity and good humour – have antecedents in Hunt's larger and more varied output. Nothing in Dickens's work is comparable to Hunt's range as a political commentator or his abilities as a literary critic.

It is in Dickens's mastery, of course, of that most hybrid of forms, the serial novel – part-newspaper, part artwork – that his primacy has been achieved, and not least because in one of his most important, *Bleak House* (1853), he incorporated a widely-recognized caricature of Hunt, not just as faded Romantic spendthrift, but – in terms of his plot-function – as a spongeing, bribe-taking hypocrite, spuriously flaunting his financial incompetence and aesthetic predilections. Hunt was still alive as successive instalments of *Bleak House* were issued, and stung to the quick by his appearance in the novel as the villainous “Harold Skimpole.” The quarrel, at a local, biographical level, has been well documented but Dickens's savagery towards an elderly champion of the free press and a pioneer of his own brand of ecumenical Liberal reform has left critics with a “curious dilemma.” A recent and

careful reading of some of Skimpole's airiest persiflage in the novel against passages of Hunt's writings that might have inspired them is said to reveal, on closer inspection, "not a mimetically reproduced Hunt, but an ironic anti-Hunt; a character defined by inverting the original." But this seems a charitable interpretation to put on evidence that points equally towards Dickens having wilfully or ignorantly misrepresented Hunt's thinking (Roberts 1996: 184).

His later claim in print, shortly after Hunt's death, to have innocently blended the manner and graces of the "admired original" with the "imaginary vices of the fictitious creature" rings hollow, not just because the distinction between "real" and "imaginary" is fallacious in any discussion of textual character but because the disclaimer makes no attempt to confront the underlying reasons for the assault. The more public of these was the stand Dickens and his circle were taking on the "Dignity of Literature," which sought to relieve professional writers from the taint of patronage. Dickens's views on this were strong enough for him to quarrel with novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), accusing him even in an obituary for the *Cornhill Magazine* of "too much feign[ing] a want of earnestness" and making "a pretence of undervaluing his art, which was not good for the art he held in trust" (Slater and Drew 2000: 326, 328). Hunt and his family's latter-day dependence on a form of charity hard to distinguish from begging-letter writing – to the Royal Literary Fund and elsewhere – must have struck Dickens as similarly detrimental to the cause. In castigating Hunt for representing the insincere, debt-ridden, dandified artist, Dickens forgets Hunt's greater performance, in castigating an insincere, debt-ridden, dandified monarch.

A more private reason, we may speculate, can be adduced along the lines of Harold Bloom's famous detection of Freudian defence mechanisms amongst Romantic poets of Hunt's generation, whose work demonstrated the "anxiety of influence" with respect to predecessors such as John Milton (Bloom (1997 [1973])). The idea of Dickens clearing "imaginative space" (ibid: 5) through creative misprision of Hunt is a hypothesis worth pursuing. Anyone wishing to test it may sample Dickens's London sketches as "Boz" (1834-1836) alongside Hunt's earlier incarnation as "The Townsman" (*Weekly True Sun*, 1833) or Dickens's celebrated Arabian Nights parodies in his journal *Household Words*, titled "The Thousand and One Humbugs," alongside Hunt's original examples of this technique in the *Examiner*, where, under sentence, he had related "a fragment of an Eastern story:"

In the land of the Genii, ... there was a territory governed by a sultan of the name of JEE-AWJ, who had under him a counsellor that was also a cadi, called EL-EN-BURRAH. The reader has perhaps heard of cadies in the land of Genii, but that is not my fault; that people were a desperate sort of fellows ... Sultan JEE-AWJ was what in the dialect of Ginnistan was called a *Raic*, which in our language perhaps we should interpret by the phrase *Jolly Fellow*: – he could sit up, for instance, night after night, drinking the forbidden liquor and eating bang. He was also fond of dress, delighting in sumptuous vests and drawers covered with gold; his mustachios were each of them six inches long; but for all that, he did not know how to govern.¹⁵

That nineteenth-century London could boast of in Leigh Hunt, in addition to William Hazlitt in the years before Victoria and Dickens during the early and middle years of her reign, a journalist as versatile, trenchant, observant, empathetic, witty and relevant as both and more exuberant and culturally imaginative than either, whose work remains largely to be rediscovered and enjoyed, should give any lover of prose, anywhere in the world, reasons to be cheerful.

Notes

¹ Scholars of Gramsci's thought stress that for him, the strategic "war of position" aimed at breaking down cultural hegemony in no way lessened his belief in the need for socialist revolution (Greaves 2011: 42); nevertheless, Gramsci's imprisonment in Rome, his *Prison Notebooks* (from which the concept of the wars of

position and manoeuvre derive), his relationship during confinement with his sister-in-law, offer such tempting affinities with key aspects of Hunt's life that the two writers' strategies for subversive reform seem comparable.

² All from "THE POLITICAL EXAMINER," *Examiner* [London, England] 10 April 1808:1; 7 October 1810: 1; 28 January 1816: 2. Hunt experimented with the term "Reformist" before 1816, but the terminology, and therefore the concept, was clearly still in flux.

³ See "Political Examiner" articles in the *Examiner*, 3 January 1808; 31 March 1811 (see Kucich and Cox 2003a: 170-175); 27 March 1808 (ibid: 46-48); 5 June 1808 (ibid: 61-63); 24 January 1808 (ibid: 42-45); 8 May 1808 (ibid: 49-55); 23 January 1814 (ibid: 314-317).

⁴ Equivalent to the brothers' joint profits from eight months' publication of the *Examiner*, at 1d. margin and weekly sales averaging 7,500; "Hunt's income for a whole year," Roe claims (op cit: 181).

⁵ Circulation put at 7,000 to 8,000 according to Jeremy Bentham, cited in Bain, A. *James Mill* (1883) p. 123.

⁶ "Sentence against the *Examiner*, and Summary of Objections to the Whole of the Proceedings Connected with it," the *Examiner*, Sunday, 28 February 1813; No. 270, p. 129; cited in Hessell op cit: 84.

⁷ After depicting the terror and peril of surviving a trench shelling, Rosenberg's speaker concludes: "Poppies whose roots are in men's veins / Drop and are ever dropping; / But mine in my ear is safe, / Just a little white with the dust" (1916).

⁸ "A Flower for your Window," *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*, 17 September 1834, leader; "Windows, Considered from the Inside," ibid. 27 August 1834, leader; reproduced without source in Priestley 1929: 8-12, 240-247. The journal cost 1½ d.

⁹ See Kucich and Cox (eds.) (2003a) pp. xlix–liii and Morrison (ed.) (2003c) pp. xxi–xxiii for nuanced discussion and evidence of how, post-1815, Hunt maintained Radical positions through evolving lines of critical approach that alloyed political argument with other forms of cultural analysis.

¹⁰ See Schwab (1987) for an account of the tidal wave of newspaper verses exploring the Chartist cause.

¹¹ The *Reflector* No. II, Article IX, p. 361 (London: John Hunt, 1811).

¹² "Prospectus of the *Companion*," the *Companion*, p. 2. (London: Hunt and Clark, 1828).

¹³ See Hunt 1949 [1850]: 421; Morrison 2003: 117.

¹⁴ George IV had died in 1830. Beleaguered by its own financial difficulties, the *True Sun* folded in 1836. For Hunt's applications to the fund in 1832 and 1839, see Davies 1983: 15 and n., and Holden op cit: p. 263.

¹⁵ "Sentence against the *Examiner*," Part ii, *Examiner*, 14 February 1813, pp. 97-99, see Kucich and Cox 2003a: 283-288; 287. See also "Account of the Remarkable Rise and Downfall of the Late Great Khan of Tartary" (in which JEE-AUGE, VEL-HING-TON and the troops of Hing-Land drive NAH-PO-LEE-HON to Samarcand), *Examiner* 14 January 1816, pp. 17-20, see Kucich and Cox 2003b: 40-49.

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