

ON THE COCKNEY SCHOOL OF POETRY. NO. III

John Gibson Lockhart

Freeditorial 

OUR hatred and contempt of Leigh Hunt as a writer, is not so much owing to his shameless irreverence to his aged and afflicted king—to his profligate attacks on the character of the king's sons—to his low-born insolence to that aristocracy with whom he would in vain claim the alliance of one illustrious friendship—to his paid panderism to the vilest passions of that mob of which he is himself a firebrand—to the leprous crust of self-conceit with which his whole moral being is indurated—to that loathsome vulgarity which constantly clings round him like a vermined garment from St. Giles'—to that irritable temper which keeps the unhappy man, in spite even of his vanity, in a perpetual fret with himself and all the world beside, and that shews itself equally in his deadly enmities and capricious friendships,—our hatred and contempt of Leigh Hunt, we say, is not so much owing to these and other causes, as to the odious and unnatural harlotry of his polluted muse. We were the first to brand with a burning iron the false face of this kept-mistress of a demoralizing incendiary. We tore off her gaudy veil and transparent drapery, and exhibited the painted cheeks and writhing limbs of the prostitute. We denounced to the execration of the people of England, the man who had dared to write in the solitude of a cell, whose walls ought to have heard only the sighs of contrition and repentance, a lewd tale of incest, adultery, and murder, in which the violation of Nature herself was wept over, palliated, justified, and held up to imitation, and the violators themselves worshipped as holy martyrs.

The story of Rimini had begun to have its admirers; but their deluded minds were startled at our charges,—and on reflecting upon the character of the poem, which they had read with a dangerous sympathy, not on account of its poetical merit, which is small indeed, but on account of those voluptuous scenes, so dangerous even to a pure imagination, when insidiously painted with the seeming colours of virtue,—they were astounded at their own folly and their own danger, and consigned the wretched volume to that ignominious oblivion, which, in a land of religion and morality, must soon be the doom of all obscene and licentious productions.

The story of Rimini is heard of no more. But Leigh Hunt will not be quiet. His hebdomadal hand ☞ is held up, even on the Sabbath, against every man of virtue and genius in the land; but the great defamer claims to himself an immunity from that disgrace which he knows his own wickedness has incurred,—the Cockney calumniator would fain hold his own disgraced head sacred from the iron fingers of retribution. But that head shall be brought low—aye—low “as heaped up justice” ever sunk that of an offending scribbler against the laws of Nature and of God.

Leigh Hunt dared not, Hazlitt dared not, to defend the character of the “Story of Rimini.” A man may venture to say that in verse which it is perilous to utter in plain prose. Even they dared not to affirm to the people of England, that a wife who had committed incest with her husband’s brother, ought on her death to be buried in the same tomb with her fratricidal paramour, and that tomb to be annually worshipped by the youths and virgins of their country. And therefore Leigh Hunt flew into a savage passion against the critic who had chastised his crime, pretended that he himself was insidiously charged with the offences which he had applauded and celebrated in others and tried to awaken the indignation of the public against his castigator, as if he had been the secret assassin of private character, who was but the open foe of public enormity. The attempt was hopeless,—the public voice has lifted up against Hunt,—and sentence of excommunication from the poets of England has been pronounced, enrolled, and ratified.

There can be no radical distinction allowed between the private and public character of a poet. If a poet sympathizes with and justifies wickedness in his poetry, he is a wicked man. It matters not that his private life may be free from wicked actions. Corrupt his moral principles must be,—and if his conduct has not been flagrantly immoral, the cause must be looked for in constitution, &c. but not in conscience. It is therefore of little or no importance, whether Leigh Hunt be or be not a bad private character. He maintains, that he is a most excellent private character, and that he would blush to tell the world how

highly he is thought of by an host of respectable friends. Be it so,—and that his vanity does not delude him. But this is most sure, that, in such a case, the world will never be brought to believe even the truth. The world is not fond of ingenious distinctions between the theory and the practice of morals. The public are justified in refusing to hear a man plead in favour of his character, when they hold in their hands a work of his in which all respect to character is forgotten. We must reap the fruit of what we sow; and if evil and unjust reports have arisen against Leigh Hunt as a man, and unluckily for him it is so, he ought not to attribute the rise of such reports to the political animosities which his virulence has excited, but to the real and obvious cause—his voluptuous defence of crimes revolting to Nature.

The publication of the voluptuous story of Rimini was followed, it would appear, by mysterious charges against Leigh Hunt in his domestic relations. The world could not understand the nature of his poetical love of incest; and instead of at once forgetting both the poem and the poet, many people set themselves to speculate, and talk, and ask questions, and pry into secrets with which they had nothing to do, till at last there was something like an identification of Leigh Hunt himself with Paolo, the incestuous hero of Leigh Hunt's chief Cockney poem. This was wrong, and, we believe, wholly unjust; but it was by no means unnatural; and precisely what Leigh Hunt is himself in the weekly practice of doing to other people without the same excuse. Leigh Hunt has now spoken out so freely to the public on the subject, that there can be no indelicacy in talking of it, in as far as it respects him, at least; and since he has most unjustly accused us, and our brethren the Quarterly Reviewers, of seeking to destroy his reputation, it is worth while to hear him speak for himself. The exhibition he makes in a late Number of the Examiner is singular, and, on many accounts, painful.

“As a specimen of the calumnies directed against those who enrage the world by differing with them, and who will practise neither their want of charity towards others, nor their gross and exclusive indulgence towards themselves, we lay before our readers the following extraordinary accusations. We do not know whether our contempt of their falsity would have allowed us to do this had they been mentioned to us in a different style; but we think we can perceive, that the writer of the letter on the subject is really a well-wisher, and we will give an answer to a single honest and kind person, which we might deny to thousands of malignant accusers and unconscious flatterers, like the Quarterly Reviewers,—miserable gabblers behind walls,—who take care at once to accuse and to exempt,—to endeavour to injure, and to save themselves from the consequences of their falsehood. Our Correspondent, after saying that the Editor of this paper must be astonished— but he had better publish the whole letter at once.

“*June 11, 1818.*

“SIR,—If your character really is such as the readers of the Examiner imagine it to be, (and that is the only source from whence I can form a judgment) you must certainly require a key to understand the illiberal attack that is made upon you in the last Number of the Quarterly Review; and to enable you to do so, I inform you, that report speaks of you as a perfect tyrant in your family, and your wife as the most abject of your slaves, (of course not a willing one), that you are so entirely devoted to the gratification of your passions, and so completely given up to sensuality, that no female of your acquaintance is secure from your addresses, for not any ties are considered by you as sacred, if they come in contact with your inclination; and that a sister of Mrs Hunt’s resides with you, who is the mother of at least one child, of which you are the father. When I heard this account, my first thought was to send it to you instantly, in order that I might judge, by the notice you took of it whether it was true; my second dismissed it altogether as a vile fabrication, nor has it ever occurred to my memory since, till I read the article in the Quarterly, where the writer so evidently accuses you of these things, which, if you are innocent of, you certainly cannot comprehend his meaning, that in justice I have been induced to send you every information in my power, to enable you to repel and prove his accusation false. In the hope that you can, and will do so, I remain your sincere ‘WELLWISHER.’

“An assailant of all the women that came in his way! A tyrant to his wife! And the father of children by her sister!—Really, the Editor of this paper never knew his prodigious effect on the bigotted and the worldly-minded till now! He was prepared for and has borne a good deal of calumny both real and imaginary, in differing with them; and he has always let it run silently from off him, like rain from a bird’s wings. He must give the present shower a shake, if it is only to oblige his well-wisher. He says, then, that the whole of these charges are most malignantly and ridiculously false, so as to make those who are in habits of intercourse with him alternately give way to indignation and laughter. He knows several ladies, whom he respects and admires, and even (with permission of poor Giffard) likes to see happy; but he believes they are no more afraid of him than of the light at their windows: and as to being a tyrant to his wife, and the father of nieces and nephews, whatever may be the charity of his opinions, the charge is really a little too ludicrously uncharitable towards them, under all circumstances. He looks at his wife and his family, and shakes his shoulders and their own with laughing—which, the way, is rather an iniquitous custom of his. It might as well be said of him that he had Mr Giffard’s temper, or used his grandmother’s shin-bone for a switch.”

There is no need for us to sink down this unhappy man into deeper humiliation. Never before did the abuse and prostitution of talents bring with

them such prompt and memorable punishment. The pestilential air which Leigh Hunt breathed forth into the world to poison and corrupt, has been driven stiflingly back upon himself; and he who strove to spread the infection of a loathsome licentiousness among the tender moral constitutions of the young, has been at length rewarded, as it was fitting he should be, by the accusation of being himself guilty of those crimes which it was the object of "The Story of Rimini" to encourage and justify in others. The world knew nothing of him but from his works; and were they blameable (even though they erred) in believing him capable of any enormities in his own person, whose imagination feasted and gloated on the disgusting details of adultery and incest? They were repelled and sickened by such odious and unnatural wickedness—he was attracted and delighted. What to them was the foulness of pollution, seemed to him the beauty of innocence. What to them was the blast from hell, to him was the air from heaven. They read and they condemned. They asked each other "What manner of man is this?" The charitable were silent. It would perhaps be hard to call them uncharitable who spoke aloud. Thoughts were associated with his name which shall be nameless by us; and at last the wretched scribbler himself has had the gross and unfeeling folly to publish them all to the world, and that too in a tone of levity that could have been becoming only on our former comparatively trivial charges against him of wearing yellow breeches, and dispensing with the luxury of a neckcloth. He shakes his shoulders, according to his rather iniquitous custom, at being told that he is suspected of adultery and incest! A pleasant subject of merriment, no doubt, it is—though somewhat embittered by the intrusive remembrance of that unsparing castigator of vice, Mr Gifford, and clouded over by the melancholy breathed from the shin-bone of his own poor old deceased grandmother. What a mixture of the horrible and absurd! And the man who thus writes is—not a Christian, for that he denies—but, forsooth, a poet! one of the

"Great spirits who on earth are sojourning!"

But Leigh Hunt is not guilty, in the above paragraph, of shocking levity alone,—he is guilty of falsehood. It is not true, that he learnt for the first time, from that anonymous letter (so vulgar, that we could almost suspect him of having written it himself) what charges were in circulation against him. He knew it all before. Has he forgotten to whom he applied for explanation when Z.'s sharp essay on the Cockney Poetry cut him to the heart? He knows what he said upon those occasions, and let him ponder upon it. But what could induce him to suspect the amiable Bill Hazlitt, "him, the immaculate," of being Z.? It was this,—he imagined that none but that foundered artist could know the fact of his feverish importunities to be reviewed by him in the Edinburgh Review. And therefore, having almost "as fine an intellectual touch" as "Bill the

painter” himself, he thought he saw Z. lurking beneath the elegant exterior of that highly accomplished man.

Dear Hazlitt, whose tact intellectual is such

That it seems to feel truth as one’s fingers do touch.

But, for the present, we have nothing more to add. Leigh Hunt is delivered into our hands to do with him as we will. Our eye shall be upon him, and unless he amend his ways, to wither and to blast him. The pages of the Edinburgh Review, we are confident, are henceforth shut against him. One wicked Cockney will not again be permitted to praise another in that journal, which, up to the moment when incest and adultery were defended in its pages, had, however openly at war with religion, kept at least upon decent terms with the cause of morality. It was indeed a fatal day for Mr Jeffrey, when he degraded both himself and his original coadjutors, by taking into pay such an unprincipled blunderer as Hazlitt. He is not a coadjutor, he is an accomplice. The day is perhaps not far distant, when the Charlatan shall be stripped to the naked skin, and made to swallow his own vile prescriptions. He and Leigh Hunt are

“Arcades ambo

Et cantare pares”—

Shall we add,

“et respondere parati?”

Z.

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