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ROMANTIC CONVERSATIONS: THE COCKNEY SCHOOL OF POETRY LEIGH HUNT

'One day, — 'twas on an early autumn noon,
When airs and gurgling brooks are best in tune
And grasshoppers are loud, and day-work done
And shades have heavy outlines in the sun,—
The princess came to her accustomed bower
To get her, if she could, a soothing hour,
Trying, as she was used, to leave her cares
Without, and slumberously enjoy the airs,
And the low-talking leaves, and that cool light
The vines let in, and all that hushing sight
Of closing wood seen through the opening door,
And distant plash of waters tumbling o'er,
And smell of citron blooms, and fifty luxuries more.
[...]

Ready she sat with one hand to turn o'er
The leaf, to which her thoughts ran on before,
The other propping her white brow, and throwing
Its ringlets out, under the skylight glowing.
So sat she fixed; and so observed was she
Of one, who at the door stood tenderly,—
Paulo, — who from a window seeing her
Go straight across the lawn, and guessing where,
Had thought she was in tears, and found, that day,
His usual efforts vain to keep away.
"May I come in?" said he: — it made her start,—
That smiling voice; — she coloured, pressed her heart
A moment, as for breath, and then with free

And usual tone said, "O yes, — certainly."

There's wont to be, at conscious times like these,
An affectation of a bright-eyed ease,
An air of something quite serene and sure,
As if to seem so, were to be, secure:
With this the lovers met, with this they spoke,
With this they sat down to the self-same book,
And Paulo, by degrees, gently embraced
With one permitted arm her lovely waist;
And both their cheeks, like peaches on a tree,
Came with a touch together, thrillingly;
And o'er the book they hung, and nothing said,
And every lingering page grew longer as they read.

As thus they sat, and felt, with leaps of heart,
Their colour change, they came upon the part
Where fond Geneura, with her flame long nurst,
Smiled upon Launcelot when he kiss'd her first:—
That touch, at last, through every fibre slid;
And Paulo turned, scarce knowing what he did,
Only he felt he could no more dissemble,
And kissed her, mouth to mouth, all in a tremble.
Sad were those hearts, and sweet was that long kiss:
Sacred be love from sight, whate'er it is.
The world was all forgot, the struggle o'er,
Desperate the joy — That day they read no more.

Leigh Hunt was a central figure of the Romantic movement in England, a 'forgotten giant of English Romanticism.' During the first 60 years of the 19th century he produced a large body of poetry in a variety of forms: narrative poems, satires, poetic dramas, odes, epistles, sonnets, short lyrics, and translations from Greek, Roman, Italian, and French poems. His vivid descriptions and lyrical quality are noteworthy, as was his keen delight in nature; he is a master of mood and atmosphere. Most of his poems have commonplace themes such as friendship, patriotism, and appreciation of nature. He was a man of varied talents; as a poet, he played a major role in freeing the couplet from the rigidity of neoclassical practice. He had remarkable insights as a literary critic and discovered and introduced to the public many poets, among them Keats, Shelley, Browning and Tennyson. He encouraged many other writers, such as Lamb, Hazlitt and Dickens. He was a journalist of note, being editor of *The Examiner* from its inception in 1808 to his departure for Italy in 1821. He was editor of several journal and wrote for many more. As a prose writer he was best as an essayist and has probably had more influence on the development of the personal essay than any other writer. He also wrote a novel and several plays. As the outspoken liberal editor of *The Examiner* he had many admirers but also many political enemies. Consequently his literary works tended to be praised or damned according to the politics of the reviewer. His poem *Feast of the Poets* was condemned as 'despicable...flimsy, feeble, unsustained and impertinent' (*Satirist*, 1814) and also 'lively' and 'sublime' (*Eclectic Review & Champion*, 1814). In 1812, he attacked the Prince Regent as a fat 'Adonis' of fifty which resulted in two years imprisonment for 'diabolical libel.' This imprisonment defined his career; he became a hero to his generation (even if Byron murmured that he had 'conceited himself into a martyr'). He refused to be silenced and continued editing *The Examiner* with little change in the tone of his editorials. He was allowed a room in the infirmary with a small plot of ground just outside in which to walk and he planted an apple tree and a garden of lilacs, daisies, heartsease, broom, and sweetbriar. He had his ceiling painted with sky and clouds and the walls papered with a trellis of roses. He also had the luxury of a pianoforte which he delighted in playing. His family was permitted to live with him and his friends, including Byron and Hazlitt, visited and dined with him. He devoted his life to literature, writing several volumes of poetry, many essays, a handful of plays and a novel, as well as making other literary contributions as a critic, editor, and encourager of younger writers.

For a thorough introduction to Romanticism, the following two volumes are useful:

R 33 / 18 REF McCalman, Iain (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776 - 1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

R 14 / 17 Wu, Duncan (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

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R 34 Hu/7 Roe, Nicholas, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Pimlico, 2005).

This is an in depth biography written by an expert in Romanticism. Using brilliant imaginative insight and a wealth of unpublished manuscript sources, this volume overturns existing accounts and presents a sparkling new portrait of Leigh Hunt and the English Romantics.

R 34 Hu/15 Holden, Anthony, *The Wit in the Dungeon : A Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Little, Brown, 2005).

This is a biography from a different point of view; it views Hunt as the editor and writer rather than the Romantic. He evaluates Hunt's literary career in terms of the pressure which produced it rather than debating the quality of it. He views Hunt as a journalist and explores *The Examiner's* attention-grabbing front-page editorials, and suggests that the critic who sneered at Hunt's 'Cockney' school of poets had been briefed by his editor to 'sharpen his pen' and cause a media stir.

R 34 Hu/4 Hunt, Leigh, *The Feast of the Poets with Notes, and Other Pieces in Verse by the Editor of the Examiner* (London: James Cawthorn, 1814).

This poem was originally published in 1811 in the *Reflection*. It was published in an expanded form in 1814, and revised and expanded throughout his life. The work describes Hunt's contemporary poets, and either praises or mocks them by allowing only the best to dine with Apollo. It also provides commentary on William Wordsworth and Romantic poetry. Critics praised or attacked the work on the basis of their sympathies towards Hunt's political views.

R 34 K/68 Mizukoshi, Ayumi, *Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure - Romanticism in Perspective: Texts, Cultures, Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

This book demonstrates the profound effect Hunt had on Keats and his work. It tackles the age-old interpretative problem of 'pleasure' in Keats's poetry by placing him in the context of the liberal, leisured and luxurious culture of Hunt's circle. Challenging the standard narrative which attribute Keats's astonishing poetic development to his separation from Hunt, the author cogently argues that Keats, profoundly imbued with Hunt's bourgeois ethic and aesthetic, remained a poet of sensuous pleasure through to the end of his short career.

WEG/R 34 BYR/HUN Hunt, Leigh, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries with Recollections of the Author's Life and of His Visit to Italy* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828).

We are lucky enough to have a second edition of this book in William Gladstone's original donation to the library. It demonstrates how Leigh Hunt was invariably couched within the society of the Romantics and very much had a voice in their Romantic Conversations. It is also an entertaining and informative read written by the man who influenced much of their work.

R 34 Hu/2 Hunt, Leigh, *Leigh Hunt as Poet and Essayist, Being the Choicest Passages From His Work* (London: Frederick Warne, 1898).

A collection of Hunt's work which demonstrates how versatile he was as a poet, essayist, editor and writer of politics and romance.

OUR COLLECTION OF VOLUMES ON LEIGH HUNT CAN BE FOUND IN THE CLASSMARK R 34 HU/ __.