

Revealing Character and Concealing Identity in the Romantic Familiar Essay

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that the elements of informality, self-revelation, and direct address in the Romantic familiar essay are evidence of concerted efforts for securing a relationship with readers and setting up standards of proper reading. In other words, what appears to be the strong presence of a writer's personality in the essays is really a means for constructing sympathetic readers in an age of increasingly hostile criticism. While other scholarship on Romantic essayists has focused on individual writers or, more narrowly, on particular essays, this is the first major study of the genre of the familiar essay in the early nineteenth century since 1934. This is a significant contribution to studies of Romanticism, which tend to ignore the genre and dismiss the essays as dated or quaint. By focusing on the generic components of the essays of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and

Charles Lamb in the political and social context in which they were written, I show that these writers used their essays to intervene in contemporary critical discussions about authenticity and the relationship of authenticity to writing.

The complexity of the familiar essay was intensified in the Romantic period by the emergence of several social formations, including a rapidly expanding reading public; the proliferation of mass-market periodicals and literary criticism aimed especially at the middle classes; anonymous publication practices; and emerging constructions of identity and authenticity. In other words, the self-fashioning and audience formation in the familiar essays in the Romantic period are determined neither by the generic conventions of the essay nor by the spirit of the age, but rather by an intersection of the two. Despite their diversity, the essays share a preoccupation with cultivating a relationship of familiarity with sympathetic readers in the midst of a volatile periodical scene. Although writers of the familiar essay frame their projects differently, each points to the importance of establishing an intimate relationship with his unknown readers. This emphasis on relationships over mere rhetoric is symptomatic of a desire for change in the dynamic between readers and writers in the early nineteenth century.

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Introduction

If I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself I portray. My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed.

Michel de Montaigne, "To the Reader"

That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause; simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favorite? If these speculations seem fantastical to thee, reader—(a busy man, perchance), if I tread out of the way of thy sympathy, and am singularly—conceited only, I retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia.

Elia (Charles Lamb), "New Year's Eve"

This dissertation is a study of the familiar essay, a genre which flourished during the Romantic period in England. Like the personal essay to which it is closely related, it is characterized by a focus on the life and experiences of its writer. There is, however, a significant difference between the two genres. Unlike the personal essay, whose primary goal is self-expression and which attempts to convey some sort of the idea of the character of its author, recording his or her thoughts, foibles, observations and life experiences, the familiar essay is much more focused on securing a casual intimacy with readers, either hinting at a pre-existent, co-operative alliance, or by simply instantiating one on the spot. The familiar essay cultivates an informal prose style. This informality is often characterized by random associations that appear to record unmediated, spontaneous thoughts, as well as digressions and non-sequiturs that would not be appropriate in more thesis-driven prose.

The premise of this dissertation is that writers of familiar essays, a genre that cultivates informality, self-revelation, and direct address to readers, are actually beset by acute anxieties of reception, which as Lucy Newlyn has recently shown in *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, should not be mistaken with Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence. Their concerns about being misinterpreted remain one of the prevailing features of their work, and defines their

drive to set up standards of proper reading. By situating the anxieties of reception at the center of the familiar essay, I follow the various strategies used by practitioners of this genre in securing a proper understanding of their goals.

The title of this study, *Revealing Character and Concealing Identity in the Romantic Familiar Essay*, points to the central paradox of writing about the self. Once “I, the undersigned,” in Philippe Lejeune’s formulation, is committed to writing, it is already different from the subject it represents.¹ As Newlyn points out, the anxiety of reception in British Romanticism similarly suggests an uncertainty about subjecthood, which is manifested in the equivocal relationship between a writer and his or her audience during the age of criticism; the ways in which writers construct an authentic identity for themselves from the materials of the past, when the past’s authority is under question; and the need to accommodate authorial rights alongside interpretative freedoms, at a time when the emerging power of the subject is politically and philosophically desirable, but contentious. (vii)

I cite Newlyn here to draw attention to the relationship between authenticity, authority, and authorship, which are all important terms for this discussion of the familiar essay.

Etymologically, all three words point to the value of the originating source, and the entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* point to the way our modern uses of each word is informed by the others. They are also all terms that have been problematized in the modern era. In this study I investigate how the genre of the essay contributed to the unsettling of the authority of classical writers by placing a greater value on personal authenticity. Montaigne, for example, claims that

¹ See *On Autobiography* 8–9. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth writes, “This implied author is always distinct from the ‘real man’—whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a ‘second self,’ as he creates his work.”

he portrays himself without artifice so as to be seen in his natural state. As we will see, this tension between authentic self–presentation and social acceptance is a driving force in the development of the practitioners of the Romantic familiar essay.

This study has two goals: to trace the development of the familiar essay from Montaigne through the writers of the Romantic period and give special attention to the formal design of this genre. Rather than simply focusing on the referential elements of the familiar essay, this dissertation is also concerned with the rhetorical strategies used by essayists to create relationships with their readers. To that end, the close readings presented in this study are less concerned with what the essays *say* than with showing what they *do* to contribute to the cultivation of those relationships.

The practitioners of the essay genre ask readers to ignore aesthetic design and focus instead on the truth of its content. In the first chapter, I locate this tension between truth and artifice in Plato, whose concern that poets would undermine the work of philosophy by spreading false knowledge through their art famously led him to banish them from his ideal republic. Even though since Plato critics have welcomed poets back into society, Plato’s fundamental distinction of the relationship between truth and artificiality (i.e., *tekhnê* or craft) continues to have strong critical influence. In the second half of the chapter, I show the effects that influence has had on readings of the Romantic familiar essay. I then explain the need for a better critical orientation that recognizes the characteristic elements of the genre—which, as I stated earlier, are informality, self–revelation, and direct address to readers—as strategies for creating a special connection with readers in an age of uncertain reception.

In the second chapter, I offer an abbreviated history of the development of the familiar essay in England. Some of the examples I choose, such as Montaigne and the *Spectator*, are

conventional for a study like this; others, like Thomas Browne and Henry Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones*, are decidedly less common. The chapter documents the increasing leverage that readers gained as consumers of texts in the eighteenth century and how writers responded to this development by assuming personae that would appear more attractive to readers. The third chapter focuses on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Leigh Hunt who cultivated a different strategy to court readers, rejecting essayistic personae and authentically presenting themselves to readers. In both Coleridge's *Friend* and Hunt's "Round Table," this promise of authentic self-presentation is predicated on the idea of treating readers as friends rather than as antagonists, which in theory gives the writer confidence that his work will be received sympathetically.

The fourth chapter focuses on the effects the negative critical reception of "The Round Table" had on William Hazlitt. The Romantic anxiety of reception was strongly felt by Hazlitt, who was savagely attacked in reviewing periodicals such as the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and his familiar essays are a direct intervention in contemporary critical discussions about authentic self-presentation and the desire to have one's work popularly accepted. The chapter profiles Hazlitt's anonymous "Table-Talk" essays in the *London Magazine* and his collected volume of *Table-Talk* (published under his own name) to show how anonymity and identity influence Hazlitt's essays. Finally, in the fifth chapter, I focus on Charles Lamb's Elia essays in the *London Magazine*—often read as the best examples of the familiar genre—which are deliberately disorienting, unsettling the genre's most important characteristics of self-presentation and familiarity. Elia preys on early-nineteenth-century fears about hoaxes and authenticity, identity and imposture, and invites his readers to join him in questioning the very ideas he presents in his essays. Contrary to Montaigne's project of

portraying himself without artifice, the “phantom cloud of Elia” undermines the possibility that one’s life can be recorded or reflected on in any satisfying way.

By selecting the familiar essays of Coleridge, Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb, I attempt to draw attention to some of the more representative elements of this genre, shared by writers who knew each other, influenced each other, and frequently collaborated with each other. This narrative could have emerged very differently, however. For example, in Chapter Four the writers of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* are cast as villains and foils to Hazlitt’s sincere and authentic familiarity. An alternative narrative might focus on the familiarizing discourse of *Blackwood’s* writers and personae such as James Hogg’s Ettrick Shepherd, or the dramatized late-night conversations of the “Noctes Ambrosianae” series that appeared in that magazine. Women writers are also noticeably absent from this study. This is not due to negligence, but rather reflects a real lack of female practitioners of the genre. In the conclusion, I will address some of the reasons for this situation.

This dissertation examines the paradox of the ideal of authentic self-presentation in the familiar essay, a genre that necessarily transforms the self into a character. While the genre is usually ignored by critics, and the essays dismissed as dated or quaint, in fact the self-fashioning in the familiar essay played a vital role in transforming reading audiences. Coleridge, Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb used their essays to intervene in contemporary critical discussions about authenticity and the relationship of authenticity to writing. The formal design of this genre and the rhetorical strategies used by essayists both developed as means to give writers leverage in their relationships with readers, thereby influencing how their essays would be interpreted.

Chapter 1: The Romantic Familiar Essay as Form

The question of how to read the Romantic familiar essay is primarily a critical one. The genre has long been at the margins of Romantic scholarship precisely because it does not fit well within the dominant discussions about the age, and its irregularities and perceived lack of formal characteristics challenge critical approaches. Few critics in the first half of the twentieth century paid much interest to the familiar essay at all; those who did expressed delight at its quaintness and charm at the expense of serious inquiry into what the essays were actually saying and what function they served. Marie Hamilton Law, in what remains the only book-length study of the genre, describes the familiar essayist's freedom "to wander whither his fancy led, to range over all time, and to employ any theme, to begin where he pleased and to stop when he wished," all in the service of aesthetic delight. "His style had a flavor, it bore the imprint of his mind and personality; it was in short the man. Such a style, self-revelatory, highly flexible, adapting itself to the theme without losing its individuality was essentially 'literary' as distinguished from journalistic" (10). The familiar essays, as Law describes them, are produced in a bubble, uninfluenced by political, social, or economic conditions, or the state of the periodical or literary markets of which they were a part. Most importantly, Law sees the essays as quintessentially Romantic, embodying the writers' interests in imagination and feeling, nature and aesthetics, truth and beauty, low and rustic life, all expressed through "the frank outpouring of personal experience and the self-revelation of the individual through the expression of his emotions and feelings" (184). Overall, this method of reading the familiar essay is highly problematic from a critical perspective: it bears the mark of an approach that is heavily invested in the tradition of Romanticism's self-representations and the place of the familiar essay in that tradition.

Most critical treatments of the Romantic familiar essay begin with William Hazlitt's essay "On Familiar Style," which is the only direct contemporary reflection on the genre.¹ The essay was written in response to accusations against the informality of his own style, and his defensiveness should unsettle any idea that Hazlitt or his readers understood his essays as "essentially 'literary,'" as Law describes them.² Rather, Hazlitt values an economical kind of writing because it suggests greater sincerity than the overwrought and showy prose that passed for good writing. According to Hazlitt, a familiar style "utterly rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, *slipshod* allusions. [...] To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes" (6: 217). This writing, with its emphasis on constructing casual, conversational intimacy between the writer and the reader, is positioned against the more serious and pedantic style of the essayists of the second half of the previous century, especially Samuel Johnson, whose style, according to Hazlitt, has "no discrimination, no selection, no variety in it. He uses none but 'tall, opaque words,' taken from the 'first row of the rubric:' — words with the greatest number of syllables, or Latin phrases with merely English terminations" (6: 217-8). The chief objection to such a style, for writers like Hazlitt, is that it depends more on "arbitrary pretension" of the sort wherein a writer's elegance can be judged "by the measurement of his words" rather than clarity of content and ease of understanding.

¹ Hazlitt begins his essay by asserting, "It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of" (6: 217).

² An article in the Philadelphia-based *Analectic Magazine* referred to him as a "slangwhanger" in 1818, and the *Quarterly Review* used the same term to describe him in 1822.

The strength of the familiar style, Hazlitt argues, is that it “steer[s] a middle course” between “the solemnity of the pulpit, or the tone of stage-declamation,” on one side, and the writer who would “gabble on at a venture, without emphasis or discretion, or [...] resort to vulgar dialect or clownish pronunciation” (6: 217). The Scylla and Charybdis between which the familiar style must navigate both imply the hazards of engaging in discourse that is too one-sided. One type of writing is a performance that requires the reader to remain silently passive, to simply take in the material as it is delivered from the authoritative source. The other type is the kind of rambling monologue that, despite not having real direction, does not make space for the reader to get a word in. In contrast to both kinds of discourse, the familiar style, because of its conversational approach, foregrounds the role of readers as active participants in the essay. The reader is invited into conversation with the writer, the subject is mutually considered, and the conclusion is reached together. Such a style cultivates the reader’s feeling of intimacy with the writer.

Although the familiar style closely suggests naturally occurring conversation, the absolute precision and purity of expression required to write in the style requires a great deal of work and skill from the writer, and this is why Hazlitt declares that the style is not an easy one to master. One of the misconceptions to which Hazlitt is responding is the idea that the style represents unstudied and careless writing. Although the apparent naturalness of the familiar style suggests a complete lack of affectation, Hazlitt argues that the process of composition is anything but random: “It is not to take the first word that offers,” he says, “but the best word in common use; it is not to throw words together in any combinations we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language” (6: 217). The writer of the familiar style must have a finely-tuned ear. Choosing the best word in common use also entails the ability to reject

all other words: “Out of eight or ten words equally common, equally intelligible, with nearly equal pretensions, it is a matter of some nicety and discrimination to pick out the very one, the preferableness of which is scarcely perceptible, but decisive” (6: 217). In other words, the appearance of naturalness—the essence of familiarity itself as it relates to writing, insofar as it constitutes the middle course—is really the result of an extremely careful and studied process of selection. Writing that seems the most intimate and least crafted—that is, the familiar essay that gives a sense of a close, conversational relationship between writers and readers—depends on the writer’s careful mediation of the composition process.

The danger, of course, is that as soon as a piece of writing reveals the process of its making, the potential for the reader to feel a sense of intimacy with the writer changes. It is difficult to force or fabricate a conversation with an unwilling party, and it is equally difficult to maintain a close textual relationship with a reader who feels manipulated or misdirected by a piece of writing. Thus the essay genre, from its very beginning in Montaigne’s *Essais*, has explicitly denied any pretense to artificiality. In his preface of the first edition of *Essais*, Montaigne addresses his reader directly, and he regularly returns to the importance of naturalness in many of the essays: “I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray” (2). The very idea of intimacy itself, for Montaigne, is inseparable from sincerity of expression: “This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one,” and this “domestic and private” goal is to produce a record of Montaigne’s thoughts and opinions that will outlive him: “I have dedicated [the book] to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have

had of me more complete and alive” (2). The disinterestedness that Montaigne assumes in his preface helps to situate his engagements with various subjects as attempts (essays) toward working through problems for his own benefit and for that of his friends, rather than authoritative or polemical instruction. The *Essais*, then, must show their writer as a trustworthy and reliable figure, one presented in his “natural form,” and this allows the essayist to function as a close companion rather than an impersonal guide.

As a response to criticism, Hazlitt’s “On Familiar Style” highlights certain tensions inherent in the use of the familiar style. Montaigne’s term—artifice—looms like a specter for subsequent essayists who want readers to pay attention to the content of their essays over form. As I will argue in my next chapter, as the reading public grew and became more diverse, essayists developed methods for mediating reader response in order to maintain the illusion of intimacy that Montaigne established. Artifice and its opposite term, authenticity, both lead to certain questions about the reliability of the writer’s process.³ The more the writing appears to resemble its author’s original thought process, unmediated, the more authentic it seems.⁴ Conversely, when the writing process is labored, when the text undergoes numerous revisions and emendations over time, the writer’s thoughts will appear to have been shaped for the page and the appearance of authenticity is diminished. Hazlitt favors a balance between careless writing and pretentious, overwrought writing. For Hazlitt, the best practitioners of the familiar

³ Again, Montaigne wants to be seen naturally, as if his essays had been written without straining: “If I had written to seek the world’s favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture” (2).

⁴ This type of writing almost suggests the same spontaneity that would resonate with readers familiar with Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Uttara Natarajan argues that Hazlitt’s essay “may be placed alongside Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as the manifesto for a new kind of writing” (29).

style are those who are most aware of their writing process, the requirements and proper use of their language, and the demands of their readers.

Treating the Essay as an Aesthetic Form

The essay occupies a liminal space between explicitly aesthetic modes of presentation—such as the novel, poetry, and drama—and non-aesthetic modes like the letter, the diary, and court records. That is, while essays often lend themselves to readings alongside what we would generally class as “literature,” most tend to be classed among texts that are read, crudely put, for information. Addison and Steele’s essays in the *Spectator*, for example, have very little in common with Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—the former draw from a belletristic tradition, influenced by space restrictions of the growing, highly competitive periodical market in the early eighteenth century; the latter, insofar as it can be considered an essay rather than a collection of essays, draws from a tradition of philosophical discourse. The genre pivots between the two modes by its relationship to its truth content, and this is a relationship in which writers and readers tend to be strongly, although not mutually, invested.

I argue in this section that when an essay is presented or considered in non-aesthetic terms, the underlying motive is to give priority to the truth content of the essay. When essayists deny artifice or claim to be presenting their material without manipulation, in other words, they are making a case that readers should be reading their essays for their content, not their aesthetics. Reading an essay primarily for what it says, then, means participating in the essayist’s own goals for his or her work rather than critically engaging with it. Or rather, it means engagement with the text on one level only. A more skeptical method of reading the essay, on the other hand, will ignore the essayist’s denial of artifice and will spend as much critical energy on the process of the essay’s making as on the actual content of the essay itself.

Contained within this debate over how to read a genre like the essay is a question about the difference between purely non-aestheticized texts and texts that deliberately resist aestheticization, such as the essay, a fact that can raise potentially significant problems for formal-aesthetic theory. While not all such texts reward formal analysis equally, there is a clear precedent for texts that have denied pretensions to artifice and yet, for one historical reason or another, they become subject to the kind of formal analysis that has traditionally been reserved for more deliberately aesthetic objects, such as poetry and the novel.

It is worthwhile to make a distinction here between texts that explicitly deny artifice and those that do so implicitly. Such a distinction is noteworthy, in part, because texts that are explicit in their denial tend to draw attention toward the very thing they try to cover up, while formal critiques tend to arrive at other non-aestheticized texts in a more roundabout way. Yet even in texts that do not address the issue of artificiality outright, there is an underlying concern that readers will appropriately understand that the text's genre is invested in truth over aesthetics. The unspoken anxiety here is that a focus on aesthetics tends to come at the expense of truth, thereby devaluing the latter in the process. As examples, I will briefly consider three genres in particular, each with a close relationship to the age of Romanticism, which seem to contain an implicit refusal of aesthetic reading: sacred texts, devotional writing, and philosophical writing.

In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* Robert Lowth demonstrates that the most important religious text of the Western world in the eighteenth century can be treated in aesthetic terms. Lowth taught his Oxford students that the Hebrew scriptures were “no less elegant and agreeable than useful and instructive, abounding in information no less curious for its extent and variety than for its great importance and venerable sanctity, deserving the attention of every liberal mind, essential to all who would be proficient in theology” (qtd. in Norton 220).

The Higher Criticism in general follows this judgment to the point of dividing up the sacred text according to the styles of its different writers. Before Lowth, Longinus's treatise *Peri Hypsous* suggested a similar aesthetic treatment of the Hebrew Scriptures: "[T]he lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man, since he recognized and expressed divine power according to its worth, expressed that power clearly when he wrote at the beginning of his Laws: 'And God said.' What? 'Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land'" (14). While Longinus would not have held the same view of the Hebrew Scriptures as sacred text, his grouping of the passage from Genesis with other classical works such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—in other words, texts that more readily lent themselves to aesthetic criticism—played an important role in opening the door for literary biblical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which included the Christian scriptures, especially Paul's epistles and John's gospel and epistles.

The seventeenth-century devotional writings of Jeremy Taylor, especially his *Rules and Exercises for Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, carried special authority for English writers a century-and-a-half later. Romantic admiration of Taylor had less to do with his theology than with his prose style. Writers such as Lamb, De Quincey, and Coleridge looked to Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne (whose *Hydriotaphia, or Urn-Burial* also does not fit an explicitly aesthetic mode) as models of poetic prose, and Hazlitt claimed that "some of the old English prose-writers (who were not poets) are the best, and, at the same time, the most *poetical* in the favorable sense. Among these we may reckon some of the old divines, and Jeremy Taylor at the head of them. [...] There is a softness in his style, proceeding from the tenderness of his heart: [...] His materials are as finely wrought up as they are original and attractive in themselves" (8: 13-4). Taylor does not invite this kind of praise. In the dedication to *Holy Living*, he writes, "[...] I study to do [man] good by conducting him in the narrow way to heaven, without intricating him

in the labyrinths and wild turnings of questions and uncertain talkings” (438). However, when his writing is removed from the devotional context in which it was written, it takes on a new function for another generation of writers and critics. A text like *Holy Living* becomes liable to formal-aesthetic criticism when its genre shifts and its truth function is called into question—or when, at least, it is no longer being evaluated solely in terms of its truth.⁵

Claudia Brodsky has recently shown how the most philosophical of texts—Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—depends upon, and itself demonstrates, an implicit theory of narrative form. Brodsky identifies in the study of narrative a tendency “to convert form into referential meaning, and meaning into logical form” (8). This tendency, which developed according to “the fact that the medium of narrative is discourse, i.e., signs whose meanings can be either referentially or figurally (formally) understood, appears eradicated at the moment their formal function is hypostatized” (6). For Brodsky, this conflation of form and content is already at work in the *Critiques*: “Kant’s theory of knowledge is specifically *critical* in that it replaces the possibility of pure, or unmediated, experience with experience necessarily mediated formally as representation.” His system of knowledge, therefore, “can be seen to describe a system of narrative—and to describe experience as *the* narrative—par excellence. For it ensures both the referential and formal functions of the mind by excluding the occurrence, for the mind, of that which is not already ‘known’: the formless, the ambiguous, the unrepresented, or unnamed” (10).

⁵ This is also why Hazlitt could claim that, despite his strong differences with Edmund Burke in terms of politics, he believed Burke to be the greatest prose writer in contemporary England.

If Kant can be shown to have an inherent connection to formal issues at the basic level of narrative, Plato can be classed among the poets.⁶ Coleridge, in his discussion of the relationship between poetry, meter, and prose, sums up the critical opinion of his time well:

The writings of PLATO, and Bishop TAYLOR [...], furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem. The first chapter of Isaiah (indeed a very large proportion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense; yet it would be not less irrational to assert that pleasure, and not truth, was the immediate object of the prophet. [...] Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved *in keeping* with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement, as will partake of *one*, though not a *peculiar*, property of poetry. (*Biographia Literaria* 2:14-15)

Coleridge's emphasis on the importance of "a studied selection and artificial arrangement" is echoed by Hazlitt in "On Familiar Style." What matters most for Coleridge in this regard is not the truth content of a work (though in other contexts, to be sure, this seems to be almost all that Coleridge is concerned about) but the attention the writer pays to a work's shaping elements.⁷ Rather than severing the form from the content—or what studies of narrative might term a work's logical dimensions from its referential dimensions—critical analyses of sacred writings, devotional writings, and philosophical texts find value in the potential to read content through

⁶ Though, to be sure, Plato himself, who argued that poets "imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of truth" (*Republic* 600e), would not have appreciated the classification.

⁷ It should be remembered that the context for this statement is Coleridge's disagreement with Wordsworth about what constitutes poetic language.

form. In that sense, formal-aesthetic analysis can be applied to any text that is made—which is essentially to say, any written text.

This position is complicated, however, by writers like Montaigne who explicitly refuse artifice in their work. In addition to the essay, such refusals often appear in the novel. Thus Defoe, as the “editor” of *Moll Flanders*, writes that “it will be hard for a private history”—written, according to the title page, “from her own Memorandums”—“to be taken for Genuine” in a world that is “so taken up of late with Novels and Romances” (37), but he nevertheless suggests that “The Author here is suppos’d to be writing her own History” (37). Likewise Samuel Richardson, as the “editor” of the letters in *Pamela*, claims that the letters have their foundation in *Truth and Nature*” (3), and a letter to the editor that prefaces the first edition recognizes that “all the Strokes of Oratory in the World” would spoil the simplicity of the work. Thus his admonition: “let us have *Pamela* as *Pamela* wrote it; in her own Words, without Amputation, or Addition. [...] The flowing Robes of Oratory may indeed amuse and amaze, but will never strike the Mind with solid Attention” (9). Similar claims appear again and again in novels throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and the promise of realism continues to drive the entertainment industry of the 21st century, from films that are marketed as “Based on a True Story” to so-called “mockumentaries” that pretend to portray events and characters through a supposedly unmediated camera lens, to more legitimate documentaries and reality television shows. Though many of these texts make an allowance for artful arrangement and editorial tweaking,⁸ the editorial role is supplementary as a means of assisting presentation. The overall focus of Defoe’s and Richardson’s novels, insofar as the editorial frameworks

⁸ E.g., “It is true, that the original of this Story is put into new Words, and the Stile of the famous Lady we here speak of is a little alter’d, particularly she is made to tell her own Tale in modester Words than she told it at first” (Defoe 37).

present them as true “histories,” insists on their being read as a means of virtuous instruction through example rather than as artificial constructs.⁹

Within the genre of the novel it is easy to observe instances in which narrators speak directly to the reader about the content of the novel—or even, sometimes, about completely unrelated content, too. These dramatized narrators, as Wayne Booth calls them, are in some ways different from the fictionalized “editors” of *Moll Flanders* and *Pamela*, and within the novel they “succeed by persuading the reader to accept them as living oracles. They are reliable guides not only to the world of the novels in which they appear but also to the moral truths of the world outside the book” (221).¹⁰ When they succeed, these intrusions by dramatized narrators simultaneously function as *apologia* for a text’s narrative method and reassert the narrator’s authority against potential readerly objections to narrative material. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Adam Bede*, in which the narrator responds to objections from a “pious reader” about the way the Rector of Broxton is characterized in the novel:

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasion. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my

⁹ Samuel Johnson emphasizes this moral dimension of novels when he writes that their purpose is “not only to show mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by treachery for innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity” (157).

¹⁰ Booth focuses especially on the dramatized narrators in Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Both of these texts will come up in my next chapter, which considers the debt the familiar essay owes to the eighteenth-century novel.

mind. [...] So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. (Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 164-6)

This passage could almost be taken directly from Montaigne's preface, for the concerns over the reliability and the propriety of the content of the *Essais* and *Adam Bede* are related.¹¹ Both texts suggest that a flawed presentation of character, even if it is subject to reproach in ways that a polished presentation would not be, is more valuable to readers because it is, in fact, more true than any idealized version. As Booth argues, the effect of this in *Adam Bede* "is to involve us on the side of the honest, perceptive, perhaps somewhat inept, but certainly uncompromising author in the almost overwhelming effort to avoid falsehood" (215). Booth's argument, which I suggest is as equally applicable to the essay as to the novel, is that authorial protestations assert authority as a means of mediating reader response and of producing an expected effect.

In "Thematics," Boris Tomashevsky breaks down the work of literature to its constituent parts, much in the same way Aristotle does in his *Poetics*, to show how the denial of artifice serves an author's principles of realistic and artistic motivation. In his section on motivation, Tomashevsky argues that "[t]he system of motifs comprising the theme of a given work must show some kind of artistic unity"¹² and that if "all the parts of the work are badly suited to one another, the work is *incoherent*. That is why the introduction of each separate motif or complex of motifs must be *motivated*" (78). In other words, Tomashevsky is interested in articulating the

¹¹ As Montaigne claims, "If I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. [...] My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed" (2)

¹² As much as the imperative mood seems to suggest otherwise, Tomashevsky is being descriptive here rather than prescriptive.

rationale for the inclusion of different kinds of elements in the work of art. Even though readers “demand an element of ‘illusion’ in any work,” their “perception of it must be accompanied by a feeling that what happens in it is ‘real’” (80), and this demand for verisimilitude is governed by “the laws of plot construction” (81). Moreover, he claims that reality itself, when converted into narrative, is subject to these same laws: “realistic material in itself does not have artistic structure [and] the formation of an artistic structure requires that reality be reconstructed according to aesthetic laws. Such laws are always, considered in relation to reality, conventional” (83).¹³ Tomashevsky’s comments echo Aristotle, who suggests in his *Poetics* that plot-structure—as “the mimesis of the action”—is the fundamental principle of tragedy. For Aristotle, plot-structure is important because tragedy is “both more philosophical and serious than history” because history looks at particulars while poetry presents universals (41; ch. 8). That is, the poet’s plot-structures show the *kinds* of things that *could* happen, rather than the specific things that have happened. The probability of the plot-structure, as true mimesis of action, holds greater weight for philosophy than a real (i.e., historical) event.

According to Tomashevsky, the demands of realistic motivation are so intimately tied to the demands of artistic motivation that “A system of realistic motivation often includes a denial of artistic motivation. The usual formula is, ‘If this had happened in a novel, my hero would have done such and such, but since it really happened, here are the facts....’ *But the denial of the literary form in itself asserts the laws of artistic composition*” (85 my emphasis). This is worth pausing over. Tomashevsky argues that when the artist perceives a potential objection to his aesthetic project, he attempts to hide the artistry of the project itself (he elsewhere describes this as “an attempt to conceal the device” [94]). But in this instance the refusal of artifice is itself a

¹³ This is an important point to keep in mind here. As aesthetic objects, essays depend on convention as much as any other genre.

form of artifice that tries to reinforce the verisimilitude of the work of art. Thus Defoe's and Richardson's editorial prefaces, as a part of the works they introduce, are themselves part of the art they would have their readers accept as history.¹⁴ The same is true for dramatized narrators, such as in *Adam Bede*. In other words, the refusal of form is an attempt to conceal the form itself, but such an attempt in no way means that form is not there.

However, as useful as it may be for thinking about the denial of artifice in some texts, this conceit does not completely satisfy when it comes to ostensibly less aesthetic genres, such as the essay, the diary, or the letter.¹⁵ As much as the frameworks of novels might make protestations to history over "Novels and Romances," those protestations can hardly be taken at face value. Authors of fiction, I would argue, know that as such they are plot-makers. The function of the essay, on the other hand, from Montaigne onward, is for the writer to express "himself," to articulate his "inner thoughts" in the truest way possible so that the reader can access his "true nature" in a sense that, at times, seems almost mystical. Or, in Montaigne's words: "it is myself that I portray. [...] I myself am the matter of my books" (2). The text in this sense almost becomes a synecdochical extension of its writer. The need to reinforce this realistic portrayal means that part of the rhetoric of the essay is to disguise its own form, to resist aestheticization by actively refusing artifice.

Adorno is wary of the essay form for just this reason, because it makes its subject into "an arena for intellectual experience" and the "takes this experience as its model without, as reflected form, simply imitating it. The experience is mediated through the essay's own

¹⁴ As, to be sure, savvy readers were only too aware. Henry Fielding, who wrote and published *Shamela* within six months of the appearance of *Pamela*, parodied the latter's commendatory letters by signing one, "I am, Sir, Sincerely your Well-wisher, Yourself" (309).

¹⁵ I include the diary and the letter alongside the essay here, briefly, because I think that those genres also tend to be read as implicitly non-artificial, i.e., as representative of the writer's true self.

conceptual organization; the essay proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically” (13).¹⁶ Anticipating Brodsky, Adorno sees the essay’s concealment of form as bound up within his dilemma of how to approach the genre from a critical perspective: “The persuasive element of communication is alienated from its original aim in the essay—just as the function of many musical features changes in autonomous music—and becomes a pure determinant of the presentation itself; it becomes the compelling element in its construction, whose aim is not to copy the object but to reconstitute it from its conceptual *membra disjecta*” (21). In other words, the essayist learns to organize—to shape and form—the essay in a way that obscures its own form so that the form itself can become absorbed into content.

Daniel Lehman argues that “any literary text, whether fiction or nonfiction, even one’s own memory of events, is arbitrated of ‘crafted’ in important ways, rendering impossible the simple equation of ‘actuality’ with nonfiction” (7). Even Montaigne recognized that there was an element of construction and form inherent in writing about himself. In his essay “Of Giving the Lie,” he writes,

In modeling this figure upon myself, I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me—a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life; not concerned with some third-hand, extraneous purpose, like all other books. (612)

¹⁶ For Adorno, this represents a weak imitation of the scientific method—he remembers that Bacon was an essayist—that is problematic insofar as it does not demand the same level of empirical verification.

Essay-writing for Montaigne is part of a dialectic of self-creation. His desire to articulate his own thoughts forces him to remove those thoughts from abstraction and give them shape in the essay, and he argues that the process in turn helps him to better understand himself. Thus, even within his refusal of artifice, Montaigne can be seen to make concessions for the forming and shaping processes at work. He forms his book even as it forms him.

When Montaigne denies artifice in his essays, he does so in defense of the truth. His reason for not being artificial is so that his “defects will [...] be read to the life” (2). Part of the underlying problem here, and one that has been lurking in the background in one way or another since Plato, is a tension between fiction and truth (*epistème*, for Plato, which Derrida glosses as science [92-3]). Plato criticizes poets in *Ion* because they speak of *tekhnai* about which they lack *epistème*, and in *Republic*, as has already been mentioned, he accuses them of the worst kind of *mimêsis*, for they copy that which is already a copy of the Forms. That is, if the things of the world are imperfect imitations of the perfect Forms, the mimetic arts imitate the things of the world and are thus another step removed from representing the Forms themselves. Plastic arts like painting and sculpture, by way of example, produce copies of physical objects. Poetry, on the other hand, is a partial and imperfect copy of *epistème* itself, which is properly the domain of the philosopher. Socrates argues that “the art of imitation is surely far removed from the truth, it seems, and that is why it produces everything, because it only touches some small elements of each thing, and that an image” (*Rep.* 596b). Whereas the philosopher—or at least Socrates and his disciple—uses the “art of dialectic” (*Phaedrus* 267e) to arrive at the highest form of knowledge (*Rep.* 532b-534e), the poet only pretends to know about the things his poems are about, for “if he had knowledge in the very truth [*epistème*] about those things he also imitates, he would devote himself much more earnestly to real things than to their imitations” (599b). As a

result, the poet's false *epistème* makes him a man of bad character who "has intercourse with an inferior part of the soul, not the best" and who "sets up an evil constitution in the soul of each individual and gratifies what is irrational in it" (605b, c). In other words, Plato's degradation of mimetic artists is twofold: they spread false *epistématai*, and this reveals their bad character.

The tension between the reliability of knowledge and the quality of individual character that is evident in Plato's attack on mimetic artists figures strongly into the aesthetic concerns about the essay, too. Plato's concerns with the reliability of poetic knowledge are echoed by Adorno, who seems uneasy with the essay form because it "maintains the attitude of someone who is beginning to study philosophy and somehow already has its idea in his mind. [...] If science and scholarship, falsifying as is their custom, reduce what is difficult and complex in a reality that is antagonistic and split into monads to simplified models and then differentiate the models in terms of their ostensible material, the essay, in contrast, shakes off the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world, an illusion well suited to the defense of the status quo" (14, 15). Like Plato, Adorno here distinguishes between one kind of knowledge—philosophy—and juxtaposes it with a less-reliable knowledge as represented through suspect means. As Claire de Obaldia argues, this tension stems from the fact that the essay can function as "literature" in ways that other, perhaps more rigorously philosophic genres, cannot:

Literature, like all art, knows itself to be illusory. Yet like scientific or philosophical discourse, the literary text can foreground its message, play down its dominant poetic or aesthetic function and provide as good an illustration as the philosophical text of the so-called 'order of mimesis'. [...] Essayism—whether philosophical or literary—therefore involves 'Literature' or the 'literary' with quotation-marks and/or capitals that indicate its

subversive function with regard to both philosophy and literature in the narrow sense.

(53)

According to de Obaldia, the generic difference between the essay and philosophical writing, including the particular conventions that the essay allows, makes it easy to overlook the fact that “The paratactic, digressive, poetic logic of [...] essays makes their truth content incommensurable with and thus not reducible to monologic scientific knowledge” (54). Those conventions, then, are crucial to understanding the genre as a means of navigating its claims to truth and its formal-aesthetic qualities.

I have already explained that Aristotle tries to resolve the tension between *epistème* and poetry by focusing on plot-structure as a *mimêsis* of action, rather than *epistème* or individual character.¹⁷ In his treatment of tragedy as a “representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude” and as something that elicits certain reactions from an audience, Aristotle argues that “events and plot-structure [*mythos*] are the goal [*telos*] of tragedy, and the goal is what matters most of all” (37; ch. 6). Moreover, “plot-structure is the first principle and, so to speak, the soul of tragedy, while characterisation is the element of second importance” (38). That is, character is secondary and exists only for the benefit of the formal coherence of the whole:

By “whole” I mean possessing a beginning, middle and end. By “beginning” I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but can itself give rise naturally to some further fact of occurrence. An “end”, by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule,

¹⁷ Significantly, Aristotle’s object of study in *Poetics* is *poiêtikê*, the art of poetry, rather than the *poiêsis* that Plato criticizes. Giving poetry the status of a *tekhnê* is fundamental to Aristotle’s ability to break his subject down to its constituent parts, something that Plato cannot do as easily.

but need not be followed by anything else. The “middle” involves causal connections with both what precedes and what ensues. Consequently, well designed plot-structures ought not to begin or finish at arbitrary points, but to follow the principles indicated. (39; ch. 7)¹⁸

When it comes to tragedy, at least, Aristotle is more concerned with formal coherence—that is, a naturally occurring beginning, middle, and end—than anything else. The benefit of this focus is that it shifts attention away from the truth content of the text or the quality of character it represents (both of which are so problematic for Plato) to the form, i.e. the probability of the plot structure.

To consider the essay in Aristotle’s terms is to recognize its *mimêsis* not as pertaining to any real thoughts, but to the process of thinking and the act of “essaying.” In other words, an essay is a strategic and deliberate presentation of the organization of thoughts, and of their development according to conventional principles of structure. Through Aristotle’s principles, the essay ultimately provides a *mimêsis* of the action—that is, of the process of arriving at the thought itself. As Brodsky points out, this *mimêsis* is the organized representation, through narrative methods, of that which is unrepresentable. A poetics of the essay as a form, then, will look at the organizing principles of the essay, through its syntactic and logical development, as a means for producing content. Moreover, it will consider this structure in terms of the ultimate goal of the essay, which itself depends on maintaining the right kind of relationship with the reader. In the next section I will demonstrate how this understanding can influence critical approaches to the Romantic familiar essay.

¹⁸ The idea of “causal connection” comes from Halliwell, Aristotle’s translator; it is not in Aristotle’s Greek. Cf. James Hutton’s translation: “A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it” (50).

The Romantic Familiar Essay, Autobiography, and the Question of Genre

The critical complications of the aesthetics of the familiar essay—having to do with its purchase on truth and the appearance of unmediated access to the writer’s thoughts—are especially evident in the Romantic version of the genre. Eugene Stelzig has aptly classed such texts as “self-writing,” an umbrella term for the kind of self-revealing, first-person non-fiction writing that includes autobiography, memoir, confession, apologia, diaries, journals, and letters. Many of these distinct genres, along with the familiar essay, are often lumped together under the broad rubric of “autobiography,” for they all purport to provide readers with the same kind of information: a writer’s recollection on some aspect of his or her own life. The similarities between the genres inevitably lead to confusion between them, and I argue that such confusion in turn opens the way for misreadings of texts.¹⁹ In this section, I will briefly demonstrate why classifying any early nineteenth-century works as autobiographical is problematic in order to explain the need to read the Romantic familiar essay as something other than autobiography.

“Autobiography” is a slippery term to assign to any Romantic text, even as it emerged during the Romantic period. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of the word in English in 1797 and, between 1783 and 1834, autobiographical writing developed into an immensely popular genre in England.²⁰ Because “autobiography” was in many ways a very new idea in the early nineteenth century, both readers and writers were still defining the conditions of what Phillipe Lejeune has since called the “autobiographical pact” that rests on the question of the authenticity of the text. The tremendous public taste for autobiographical texts—or at least texts that appeared to be autobiographical—bordered on a voyeuristic fascination with the

¹⁹ Indeed, some of the most famous Romantic “autobiographical” texts regularly test the boundary between true autobiography and writings that only seem autobiographical.

²⁰ The dates are James Treadwell’s, marking the first English translation of Rousseau’s *Confessions* on one end and, on the other, Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*.

possibility of unmediated access to the writer's inner self, and texts were criticized for accommodating that fascination. Meanwhile, other early critics of autobiographical writing tried to redeem the genre from charges that such texts pandered to the public. In the same way that early criticism of novels highlighted the potential for moral instruction, these critics suggested that the revelations of human character contained in autobiographical writing could provide useful examples for readers: good characters were models for readers to follow, while bad characters served as cautionary examples of the pitfalls for readers to avoid. These two critical narratives that developed alongside early autobiographical writing—on the one hand, criticism of overexposure and pandering to public voyeurism, on the other, praise for providing useful moral examples—had implications for both writers and readers. Writers were savvy about the possibilities inherent in what autobiographical writing suggested to contemporary readers. They have a heightened awareness of the intimacy such writing implies, and these writers appeared to reveal themselves in ways that satisfied the emerging market and, to a certain extent, critical taste for such writing.

Subsequent readers and critics of Romantic autobiographical texts have therefore inevitably had to come to terms with the difference between Romantic autobiography and a modern understanding of the genre. For example, when readers approach a text such as Wordsworth's *Prelude* with expectations of encountering authentic events that shaped Wordsworth's character and literary career, they will be disappointed by the small degree to which the poem satisfies those expectations. To be sure, verifiable autobiographical details do occur in the poem, but the role they play is minor compared to the subject of intellectual growth that the poem prioritizes. Moreover, *The Prelude*'s highly achronological organization complicates attempts to read the poem as a sustained narrative of the poet's life. Efforts to regard

the poem as strict “autobiography,” as the term is generally understood today, then, say more about readers’ needs to classify and compartmentalize than it does about the text itself.²¹

Sheila Kearns argues that “Traditional concepts of autobiography are not formulated to account adequately for the complex exchanges between writer and reader that figure in Romantic autobiography” (18), and she sees the *The Prelude* as an important example of the indeterminacy of the idea of autobiography in the early nineteenth century and of how writers sought, through autobiographical discourse, to establish a model for reading their own works. Kearns’ post-structuralist approach to Romantic autobiography relies on a Foucauldian understanding of the author-function in which writers, having been made newly aware of their place within the literary marketplace, “attempt to assert their own authority over the author-function [...] by developing strategies of writing that will figure in their texts the reading process itself” (27–8). Because the 1805 *Prelude* was initially a semi-private text—it is addressed to Coleridge, the poet’s “dear friend,” and the poem was only circulated among Wordsworth’s friends and family—it never envisions a “reading public” in the way that contemporary autobiographies do.²² At the same time, the poem is invested in what Kearns calls strategies of writing that “become explications of the process of reading” (62). That is, there is an undercurrent throughout

²¹ M. H. Abrams has even gone so far to argue that, because they know so much about the poem’s process of composition, readers are apt to consider *The Prelude* only in the shadow of *The Recluse* or in light of Wordsworth’s decision to add certain key episodes late in the process. In other words, the poem’s central autobiographical elements, taken as history, are judged to be inessential to the text because the text itself was not shaped originally around those ideas. In his view, the poem is rather a “crisis-autobiography”—that is, an account of a spiritual crisis manifested as a crisis of the poet’s imagination.

²² Although she admits that “The 1805 *Prelude* was never conceived as standing on its own as an autobiography” (37), Kearns focuses her reading on the 1805 version of the poem, rather than the version that was published in 1850. According to Kearns, the 1805 version “confronts the power which the reader exerts over the subject of autobiography, and it does so because Wordsworth’s most powerful (though not always accurate or accommodating) reader, Coleridge, is most materially present” (37).

The Prelude in which the poet explains how the poem should be read. The same could be said for any number of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts from the period.

An even more complicated example of how generic classification challenges reader expectation and opens the door for critical confusion is Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. As H.J. Jackson, James Treadwell, and others have shown, critical arguments about whether or not the *Biographia* is a unified text have inevitably had to take the idea of autobiography into account, a task made all-the-more difficult by its immethodically miscellaneous structure.²³ Jackson points out that one approach to the problem of the *Biographia*'s genre has been to disregard the text as autobiography in favor of seeing it as "a pioneering work of literary criticism. By turning a blind eye to seventy percent of the text, commentators are able to present Coleridge as an astute critic of the contemporary critical scene, as a theorist second only to Aristotle, and as a practical critic *avant la lettre*" (55). Not only does the critical approach described by Jackson ignore the majority of the text, it ignores Coleridge's own judgment in the title he gave the work.²⁴ At the same time, reading the *Biographia* as autobiography presents its own set of difficulties, as evidenced by Coleridge's claim in the opening paragraph that "It will be found, that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally" (1: 5).²⁵ In Treadwell's reading, the autobiographical elements of the *Biographia* have less to do with Coleridge's desire to present a full portrait of himself to readers than to lend coherence to an

²³ Questions of unification and coherence, which are so central to most critical discussions of the *Biographia*, are near-counterparts to the plot-structure that is important to Aristotle's criticism of tragedy and Tomashevsky's poetics of narrative.

²⁴ Jackson explains that Coleridge's choice to use "biographia" over the more appropriate "autobiographia" reflects an effort on Coleridge's behalf, conscious or unconscious, to "avoid the imputation of egotism" (59) and to suggest a greater distance between the author and his subject inherent in "the supposed proximity of the biographer to the historian" (57).

²⁵ Treadwell, following Kearns, argues that the "writing" this sentence mentions "refers not so much to the autobiographical text itself [i.e., *Biographia Literaria*] as to the whole corpus of Coleridgiana" (126).

otherwise fractured text. It appears therefore that “autobiography provides an organizing idea of the function of the book, but also exposes the impossibility of that intent: it simultaneously places and displaces other discourses” (130). Autobiography thus seems to serve a paradoxical function for this text, working as a structural device that combines parts of the text while at the same time showing that such a combination is ultimately impossible.

More recently, Raimonda Modiano has drawn attention to the closeness between autobiography—which the *Biographia* at least claims to be, in spite of the problems outlined above—and *apologia*, a generic classification that, like autobiography, allows room for the first-person narrative account of the writer’s life and opinions, but differs in that its teleological function is more clearly directed toward constructing a public defense of the subject. In this way *apologia* clearly fits Coleridge’s preoccupation with his critics and the need he had felt, at least since the mixed reception of *The Friend*, to vindicate himself and his work in the face of all sorts of accusations and attacks. According to Modiano,

To a large extent, *Biographia* features a defense of the man of letters in the public arena against hostile detractors, and aims to establish a new model of a literary review, entirely cleansed of personal biases, and based on the most scrupulous ‘application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism’ (*BL*, i.5). Coleridge’s discomfort with the possible designation of his work as ‘autobiography’ stems from his desire to avoid anything that could be inferred as bearing on personal motivations in his handling of the controversy with Wordsworth on poetic diction. (210)

The defensive nature of Coleridge’s autobiography also explains one of the strongest motivations for the *Biographia* being written when and how it was, namely the need Coleridge felt to respond to Wordsworth’s claims about poetry made in the Preface to *Poems* 1815. This reading of the

book as *apologia* amplifies the extent to which the text is less unified than joined under a common motif—one which Thomas Vogler claims is characterized by a “thoroughly conventional satiric plot” (36)—in which its disparate elements serve a common purpose of justifying Coleridge’s views and work. As a plotting device, the use of *apologia* in the *Biographia* structures the text as autobiographical and critical, allowing Coleridge to address his life, his work, the work of others, and his views on philosophy without losing the overall plot.

Thomas De Quincey’s work is perhaps the most complicated example of the problem of autobiographical classification in the early nineteenth century because nearly everything he wrote over almost forty years, beginning with his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, can be considered a form of autobiographical writing. The blurring of generic distinctions between his works has led to readings that overlook the extent to which De Quincey tended to favor different modes of presentation within different contexts. In my view, the *Confessions* and its sequels, for example, need to be read differently than the *Autobiographic Sketches* De Quincey wrote almost two decades later, and De Quincey’s short fiction needs to be separated from the realm of autobiography entirely.²⁶ Thomas McFarland is correct in arguing that De Quincey’s style in his works is quite varied.²⁷ However, the differences between De Quincey’s various works extend far beyond style; they pertain to audience, context, the type of information they aim to convey,

²⁶ De Quincey’s persistent first-person stance, coupled with the fact that the majority of his works of fiction are also written in the first person, make it tempting for critics to search for evidence of De Quincey’s personal problems recorded within his fiction, such as the death of his wife, his preoccupation with illness, or the vividness of his dreams. For example, Curtis Perry, in “Piranesi’s Prison: Thomas De Quincey and the Failure of Autobiography,” points to all of the above elements in De Quincey’s fictional *The Household Wreck* to argue that that text is primarily autobiographical.

²⁷ “[I]t is difficult to think of another figure with so varied a stylistic repertoire as De Quincey. The style he uses in his startling piece on ‘Murderer Considered as One of the Fine Arts’ is taut, reportorial, and suspenseful, a world removed from the caduceus style [of *Suspiria de Profundis*]. The style he uses in his *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* is conversational, anecdotal, frequently humorous” (McFarland 104-5).

and, perhaps most significantly, in the diverse personae of the writer. Although he is aware of the differences, McFarland indiscriminately lumps together the *Confessions* of 1822, the *Recollections of the Lake Poets* from the late-1830s, and the diary De Quincey kept in 1803, when he was 18, as records that convey a coherent picture of De Quincey's unflappable veneration of Coleridge and his desire to cast himself in a Coleridgean mold.

John Barrell, in his influential *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, also draws freely from across De Quincey's writings to convey a coherent picture of "the development of his psychic life." He argues that, when read together, De Quincey's various writings constitute "a synchronic myth whose different versions are not themselves easily susceptible of narrativisation, or not of that sort of narrativisation which can distinguish the stages of a case history or the phases of a neurosis" (22). In Barrell's reading, De Quincey's oeuvre reveals "a displacement of some primal and private terror" that manifests itself in his work as "fear of the oriental;" this fear, consequently, which is part of "the mythic melodrama he created from his childhood memories and his adult fantasies," "is elaborated in his autobiographical writings" and "re-emerges—by way of repeated patterns of imagery and structures of narrative—in his stories and essays" (20). The critic contends that the proliferation of this narrative of terror justifies his critical approach of treating all of De Quincey's texts in more or less the same way. He finds the same "compulsive returnings" to themes of terror across an assortment of genres—Barrell lists at least fourteen—that characterize De Quincey's fear of the Orient.

Significantly, when Barrell catalogues the variety of De Quincey's writings, he groups "autobiographical writings of various modes" together (23). The decision to combine the autobiographical writings in this way is critically convenient, but it overlooks some of the key differences among the kinds of texts Barrell chooses. As Frederick Burwick writes, "De Quincey

wrote three very different kinds of autobiography. One kind recollected his nursery and early school years (*Sketches from Childhood*, 1852-1853); another emphasized his dependency on opium (*Confessions*, 1821; *Suspiria de Profundis*, 1845); a third concerned his dependency on Wordsworth and Coleridge (the *Autobiographic Sketches* of 1834-1838 and 1851-1854)” (118). Not only is it important to recognize the three different kinds of autobiography De Quincey wrote as distinct—a difference of genre that even an anonymous reviewer for the *London Quarterly Review* recognized as early as 1857—²⁸but, as Burwick argues, one needs to view the *Autobiographic Sketches*, which combine De Quincey’s autobiography with biographies of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as providing a useful interpretative framework for his other autobiographical writings: “Although clearly identifying himself as the author of the controversial *Confessions*, De Quincey here reveals a different sort of dependency. Not his dependency on opium, which he had earlier declared was the true author of his autobiography (2:74), but rather his dependency on his literary acquaintances became the dominant concern of his narrative” (118-9). The different types of self-writing, despite clearly being the work of the same author, address different autobiographical concerns that, in effect, paint very different pictures of their author.

Such differences, as Susan Levin argues, need to be understood with reference to the representation of different characters in De Quincey’s writings.²⁹ Thus,

²⁸ In 1857, an anonymous reviewer of De Quincey’s *Selections Grave and Gay* splits De Quincey’s oeuvre into three categories, following the “rude general classification” De Quincey himself makes in the preface of the first volume: his *Autobiographic Sketches*, his essays, and the *Confessions* with its sequels (20:12). As a kind of career retrospective, the review also sums up De Quincey’s life and character.

²⁹ According to Levin, De Quincey casts himself as different characters depending on which genre he is writing. The confession, for example, is a more open-ended genre than autobiography, especially insofar as it is invested in the textual creation of the character of a “confessor,” in a pseudo-religious context, rather than attempting to present the infallibly “true”

[T]he presentation of the central character differs in the *Confessions* and the autobiography. In *Autobiographic Sketches*, the speaker appears as a wealthy Englishman, the child of a well-to-do family who enjoys the comforts and tortures of nursery life. [...] The central character of the *Confessions*, like the heroes of all romantic confessions, is a pariah, an outcast. At no point is he a socialite. Typically, the socializing underpinnings of the confessional form contrast with the content placed in that form: the story of one who is and remains isolated. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* thus emphasizes the romantic attempt at individuation through self-writing. (24)³⁰

The Opium-Eater may have plenty of things in common with the “historical” Thomas De Quincey, but he is a textual representation of just one aspect of De Quincey, and not of his whole character.³¹ While none of these texts is, ultimately, more representative of a “true” De Quincey than any other, the bold differences between them make it difficult to determine who exactly De Quincey was by relying on his own writing. They might even suggest that it is fruitless to rely too much on self-writing when trying to create a picture of the writer.

As the examples of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and De Quincey demonstrate, Romantic autobiographical writings are complex texts that demand a hermeneutic that goes beyond what

representation of the self. She argues that while “autobiography traditionally comprises an overall picture of a life, or a form such as the diary is an open-ended serial of a life, the controlling concern of its title usually shapes the narrative of romantic confessional” (6).

³⁰ Levin’s description of the Opium-Eater as a distinctly unsocial character would seem to carry strong implications for Barrell’s reading, which uses, for instance, the account of the Opium-Eater’s wanderings among the London poor—but, significantly, not mingling with them—as its opening example of De Quincey’s “fear of the working class” (1-3). As Levin points out, the character of De Quincey that Barrell finds in *Confessions* is not representative of other textual characterizations of De Quincey.

³¹ Notably, the version of De Quincey that appears in his diary from 1803—which, as a private text, stands apart from his other forms of self-writing in terms of its audience—has much more in common with the character of the *Autobiographic Sketches* than the *Confessions*, even though the diary dates from the year after many of the most representative events of the *Confessions*.

the writers say about themselves. In this regard, the fundamental critical concerns of autobiographical writing match those of the aesthetics of the essay: if autobiographical texts are supposed to reveal the character of the author, what are readers supposed to do when they reveal fundamentally different versions of the same person? Or, is character, as it appears in autobiographical writing, as in the essay, of secondary importance? These questions must be central to any critical consideration of the Romantic familiar essay.

Christine Chaney has recently argued that the familiar essay should be read as a form of self-writing due to the emphasis that both autobiography and the familiar essay place on “personal intimacy and familiar address to readers” (197). In support of this position, she defines the familiar essay as being “fundamentally based on patterns of speech and the informalities of personal interaction [...] that simultaneously make the reader an ‘intimate’ of these literate, insightful, and often witty observers of contemporary life. In addition, the essays themselves are directly ‘familiar’ in their address to readers by rejecting the formal generic norms and instead adopting the tone and style more akin to personal letters than learned disquisitions” (197). According to Chaney, familiar essays qualify as self-writing because what the authors reveal in the essays seems to be so intensely personal. In familiar essays, “We as readers come ‘to know’ these writers and their ‘character’ persuades us—at the deepest levels of ethical and value-laden judgment—that their way of seeing the world is the right one” (198). In other words, the definitive term of the genre is based on the idea of the writer as an “intimate familiar,” suggesting the kind of closeness that exists between friends or relatives.³²

Chaney identifies character as the driving function of the familiar essay, but she uses the term in its ethical sense (e.g., to be a person of good character) rather than its literary sense. In

³² Chaney’s description of the genre also recollects the analogy to conversation that Hazlitt highlights in his discussion of the familiar style.

her reading, the familiar essay works as a kind of self-writing: “because (as with real-life friendships) each person makes judgments about the character of the speaker as he or she listens to their self-reporting—choosing to make, deepen, or question the connection based on ethical judgments about the values of their possible friend—this is a rhetorical judgment, as well” (197). The familiar essay succeeds or fails, then, depending on the quality of character that the essayist reveals—a worthy character who earns rhetorical authority, or a duplicitous, untrustworthy character who draws anger and criticism. The familiar essayist must appear as someone whom the reader can trust.

Chaney’s decision to situate the Romantic familiar essay as small-scale autobiography highlights the similarities between Hunt’s “A Day by the Fire,” Hazlitt’s *Table-Talk*, and Lamb’s *Essays of Elia* and more conventional Romantic autobiographies, such as *The Prelude*, *Biographia Literaria*, and De Quincey’s *Confessions* and *Autobiographic Sketches*. Her claim is qualified a bit when, following Michel Beaujour’s terminology, she describes the essays as “literary self portraiture,” by which she means that “These narratives make no attempt to follow a teleological narrative and can be likened more to meditations than to traditional autobiography, particularly in their organization around thematic or dialectical discourse” (200). To be sure, the same claim could be made about longer Romantic autobiographies, which also make adequate room for digressive moments and authorial reflection, although those texts are often clearer than the familiar essays about placing their author at the center of their narratives. Although Chaney’s uncritical acceptance of the essayists’ claims of authenticity occasionally seems naïve, she

demonstrates nonetheless the usefulness of reading the oft-neglected familiar essay in the same tradition as romantic autobiography based on shared formal elements.³³

Because of their style, tone, and manner of self-presentation, Chaney argues that Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters in Sweden* serve as a convenient starting point for a study of the Romantic familiar essay, yet Wollstonecraft's text is distinctly unlike the works that I will consider in the subsequent chapters. Three of the most important differences, which I elucidate here in order to highlight the features that are central to my study, can be found on the title page of the first edition of *Letters in Sweden*. First, the work consists of "letters," a generic classification that, unlike the essay, points to a relationship of familiarity between writer and reader that has already been established. Letters also point to the presence of a specifically narrow audience that is already known to the writer. Second, Mary Wollstonecraft's name appears on the title page of the work from its first printing, thereby establishing the text as the product of a well-known writer. The paratextual implications of an established authorial name mean that readers approach the text with some kind of idea of the writer—and the writer's character—already in place. Third, the letters themselves were written for publication as a group.³⁴ Taken together in book form, they form a continuous narrative of their writer's journeys

³³ Chaney argues that Lamb's essays, through his use of fragmentary sentences, "more closely resemble 'true-memory thinking' because they reject an artificial generic linearity and teleology for the gaps, spaces, and images of time embodied in a text and a life lived and remembered within it" (202). While it is true that such a style is mimetic of the process of thought, I argue that this mimesis represents a formal strategy. It does not follow therefore that what is communicated through that style is in fact any more representative of unmediated thought, transformed into writing, than any other style.

³⁴ The *Letters* were addressed to Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft's former lover. Wollstonecraft's plan, according to her Advertisement to the first edition, was "simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through, as far as I could obtain information during so short a residence; avoiding those details which [...] appear very insipid to those who only accompany you in their chair" (6: 241).

through Scandinavia and, in effect, create a full portrait of her character that develops and is revealed within a contained context.

The familiar essays that are the focus of this study, on the other hand, point to very different circumstances of publication. With few exceptions, the essays initially appeared in periodicals, including newspapers, journals, and magazines; they appeared individually (that is, not in a shared context along other works by the same writer), and they were almost always published anonymously or pseudonymously.³⁵ Moreover, a pervasive emphasis on “miscellaneous” content detracts from any unifying theme that carries over from one essay to another. Instead, all of these essays featured strong essayistic personalities or characters that had much in common with the writers who wrote them but that were nevertheless distinct from their writers in important ways.

I argue that these circumstances of publication ultimately complicate efforts to read Romantic familiar essays as true autobiography. Yet despite the fact that the periodical context deliberately effaces almost every trace of the writer’s identity, subsequent readers still tend to emphasize the autobiographical elements of the essays. The same kinds of claims that are made

³⁵ Most of the familiar essays written by Lamb, Hunt, and Hazlitt, emerged out of the material those writers produced for Hunt’s periodicals, *The Reflector* (1810–1812) and *The Examiner* (1808–1821 under Hunt’s editorship). The weekly *Examiner* and the quarterly *Reflector* were both purported to be primarily political periodicals, also containing theatrical and artistic criticism, but the Prospectus to *The Reflector* also promises that the bulk of the magazine will be devoted to “*Miscellaneous Literature*, consisting of Essays on Men and Manners, Enquiries into past and present Literature, and all subjects relate to Wit, Morals, and a true Refinement” (Hunt 1: 139), and Hunt and Lamb developed their familiar essays in that department. In 1815, shortly after *The Reflector*’s collapse, Hunt introduced a similar series of essays in *The Examiner* under the heading of “The Round Table,” again carving out a space, in the midst of political writing, for essays on miscellaneous topics of manners, morals, and taste. This time Hunt’s most consistent collaborator was Hazlitt, who ended up contributing the bulk of the material of the series. Finally, Hunt’s *Indicator* (1819–1821) marked itself as a site that would be exclusively devoted to miscellaneous essays. *The Indicator*’s run corresponded with Lamb’s publication of the first Elia essays and Hazlitt’s early “Table Talk” essays in the *London Magazine*.

about Montaigne's essays (e.g., "the author, writing of himself or of something that is near to his heart, discloses his personality to the reader in an intimate and familiar way" [Shelly 230]) are traditionally made about the Romantic familiar essays, too. But although the familiar essays style themselves as autobiographical (in a way that fits conveniently with contemporary popularity of the genre), they, like Montaigne's essays, are frequently predicated on destabilizing and reestablishing the relationship between the writer and the diegetic persona of the text. This intentional deployment of the strategies of autobiography in texts that are not themselves autobiographical suggests, I argue, the need for a more careful critical method of reading the Romantic familiar essay than what is usually practiced. In the next section, I will suggest what such a method might look like.

Reading the Familiar Essay for Form

The emergence of New Historicism over the past few decades has provided a much-needed correction to biographical and personality-centered criticism of Romantic poetry and novels, but it has been less effective with the familiar essay. In the beginning of this chapter I criticized the New Critical reading Marie Hamilton Law gave to the essays in 1934 as insufficient for understanding the social and literary work the Romantic familiar essay does. In 1987, Thomas McFarland essentially ends up in the same place as Law by reading Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey's essays as representative of the "spirit of the age" and as "Romantic figures": "Each took his cross and bore it towards his individual destiny. Their own elevations, as serene as others occupying our view of the great range, were like all the others actually cast up by gigantic pressures that tormented the clay and shingle of ordinary human experience" (24).³⁶

³⁶ The "great range" metaphor McFarland uses here is part of a larger metaphor that sees Romanticism as "a mountain range, its various characteristics, and, alternatively, its various

Although his conclusion is in many ways similar to Law's, McFarland's approach differs from hers in that he draws from across each writer's body of prose work, rather than just the familiar essay. In other words, the familiar essay ceases to have any defining formal characteristics that would set it apart from a critical essay, a letter, or diary entry. Although this method takes differences of style into account, all non-fiction prose is treated as primarily documentary and is taken as a more-or-less unproblematic record of writers' thoughts and feelings about various subjects.

What Law and McFarland's approach have in common—and, I argue, where they both fail—is that their readings of the Romantic familiar essay, in one way or another, hinge on the question of the writer's autobiography. They focus on the person represented over the structure of that representation and on the informational content of an essay over that content's formal and rhetorical function. As a result critics are forced to read the familiar essay in a piecemeal fashion. They snatch phrases and sentences out of context in order to recover informational data or some kind of personal, autobiographical perspective on an important issue or writer of the time. As a result the familiar essay has been mostly ignored for the past century and has become little more than a documentary tool for expressing how Lamb, Hazlitt, and Hunt, among other writers, feel about an aspect of the age in which they lived. Only rarely are fuller readings of essays given at all.³⁷ But the persona of the familiar essayist is a narrative I, a "character," and not an

individuals, as the different peaks in that range" (15). McFarland uses the metaphor to argue that Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey are true "mountains" of Romanticism, rather than "foothills" (i.e., lesser, marginal writers), that are "aligned so that their perspective takes in the snow-capped peak of Coleridge" (24).

³⁷ For example, McFarland looks at two brief passages from the Elia essay "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago": one that names Coleridge, and one in which McFarland supposes Lamb projects Coleridge's childhood loneliness as his own (48). The passages are used to show how Lamb (not Elia) demonstrates his need for "a heroic *alter ego*" who is, of course, Coleridge.

autobiographical subject. Readers need to be aware of the difference of genre that sets the familiar essay apart from other forms of self-writing that are more clearly autobiographical. Although Romantic familiar essays may invite autobiographical readings, I argue such readings are apt to run into problems when specific essays are considered in their original context and when the function of the genre, as a whole, is drawn into question.

In response to the limitations of reading the familiar essay autobiographically, this dissertation builds on recent criticism by giving attention to the Romantic familiar essay's form and function in context. Mark Parker and Simon Hull have each argued for the importance of reading Lamb's Elia essays in the larger context in which they were published in the *London Magazine*, for example, by demonstrating how in that initial context the essays are more highly politicized than they appear to be when read individually. Frederick Garber also looks at the Elia essays to show how Lamb develops "ironies in his practice of this genre that always vaunts upfront selfhood" (269), and he argues that the familiar essay is a development out of traditions that provided instruction for polite conversation and letter writing. And Uttara Natarajan reads Hunt, Lamb, and Hazlitt's familiar essays as examples of a specifically British way of investigating and questioning idealistic aesthetics through familiar discourse. While each of these critics takes a different approach to the essays and has different goals for their criticism, they are alike in that they focus on the essays' rhetorical aims and social function rather than what they say about the authors. These approaches prioritize the formal elements of the genre to identify how the essays work, individually and in shared contexts, to establish "familiar" relationships with their readers. In so doing, they point toward a more thoughtful method of reading familiar essays than what has hitherto been practiced.

Given the importance of form to the central project of the familiar essay, I see a need for a critical method that takes the formal–aesthetic elements of the genre as seriously as the ideological aspects of the text that are significant for cultural studies. Caroline Levine, who has argued that “literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them” (626), has recently proposed what she terms “strategic formalism” to fill such a critical need. According to Levine, strategic formalism “is a method that seeks to be both historically specific and transhistorically expansive. It is less about what authors intend or what readers receive than about what forms *do*. And it links literary forms to social forms as if they inhabited the same plane, as if poetic techniques and social formations were comparably iterable patterns, each struggling to impose order” (647). In other words, strategic formalism, rather than emphasizing or trying to establish causality, acknowledges outright that literary forms and social forces co–exist, and relishes that co–existence. It refuses the kind of generalization that represents form as merely reflecting (or anticipating) material and social “reality” even as it eschews ahistorical or apolitical critical formalism, because neither kind of form—literary or social—“precedes or dominates the other, and they are less likely to reinforce each other than to clash, interrupt, or derail one another” (626). The strength of strategic formalism is that it draws unabashedly from aesthetic–formalist methods, such as those used by New Criticism or structuralists, while remaining heavily invested in exploring the patterns by which cultures make sense of phenomena. Strategic formalism, then, is formalism that is willing to connect its concept of the objects that are suited to its mode of analysis to “social forms and literary forms [that] are always potentially embedded within one another” (651). This seems like an ideal space for criticism of

the familiar essay, which depends on the literary and textually formal elements and patterns in order to establish a social relationship with readers.

Levine's strategic formalism as a starting point for thinking critically about the familiar essay in the early nineteenth century. A strategic formalist approach identifies the salient features of the Romantic familiar essay as the means for undermining and engaging with a politically and socially volatile periodical scene. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, there are a number of reasons that Romantic familiar essays have generally not been read in the way I am proposing, from the apparent lack of aesthetic design in the essays to a tendency to read them as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts. My argument is that what appears to be the strong presence of individual personality in the essays really represents a means for constructing sympathetic readers in an age of increasingly hostile criticism. In the following chapters I will trace the historical development of the most important characteristics of the Romantic familiar essay—an appearance of authenticity, the impulse to address readers directly, and the use of stylistic and structural informality—as textual forms and generic conventions that represent these strategies for responding to and managing a growing reading public.

Chapter 2: A Tradition of Familiarity

The Romantic familiar essay is part of a rich and complex history of the essay in England. In order to understand the development of the genre in the seventeenth– and eighteenth centuries it is necessary to consider how Montaigne’s stylistic, formal, and thematic choices were adapted by subsequent essayists in order to address a very different writing situation than that of the retired French statesman. The 223 years between Montaigne’s death and the first of Hazlitt and Hunt’s “Round Table” essays saw monumental changes in education, literacy, and publishing in England, and the development of the essay genre through these years reflects corresponding changes in readership. That is, contemporary readers of the Romantic familiar essay are fundamentally of a different kind than the readers that Montaigne imagined for his work. For that matter, they are different from Francis Bacon’s readers, as well as Joseph Addison’s and Samuel Johnson’s. Writers in each generation have keenly felt the vulnerability that comes with exposing oneself to readers, as Montaigne did. Their attempts to mitigate that vulnerability by recasting themselves as writers and explaining to readers how they should understand the essay constitute the legacy of the essay in England.

In this chapter, I trace the development of the genre of the essay beginning with Montaigne and ending with the novelistic essays in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones: A Foundling* and Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive history of the essay in England, I will show and analyze how different writers—operating in different mediums and imagining different audiences—adapted Montaigne’s essayistic project. The first section will demonstrate that Montaigne’s practice of writing essays developed out of his interest in knowing the authors of the books he read and his efforts to cultivate the right kind of readers for his essays. Montaigne typically treats

unknown readers as friends and thus facilitates a project of sympathetic reading that encourages readers to cooperate with the *Essais*' goal of self-examination. The next section will show the strategies used by Montaigne and two of his English successors—Francis Bacon and Thomas Browne—to safeguard their essays from reader hostility, as well as how those strategies are embedded in their prose styles. The third section will demonstrate that the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* opened up new ways for periodical writers to manage the relationship with its readers by simulating Montaigne's friendliness. Finally, the fourth section shows how *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy* use essayistic elements to frame their narratives and teach readers how to read their texts. In the novel, the essay creates space for authors to write directly to readers in the matter-of-fact tone of familiarity; at the same time, and anticipating the Romantic familiar essay, dramatized narrators of novels intensify the periodical-essay persona, like those in the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*, to build relationships between readers and a fictional character.

Montaigne's Friendly Readers

For Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb, as for most modern essayists, the genre begins with Montaigne, who first used the word *essai* (from *essayer*) to describe his short prose writings. Montaigne wrote about himself so distinctly that readers do get to know the person behind the essays, and his self-disclosure to readers ultimately means more to them than whatever ideas the essays may contain. His apparent immanence in the text makes it common for later readers to equate the book with the man, or even to speak of him as almost literally embodied in his text.¹ But, of course, Montaigne is not really present in his text at all. He merely assumes a textual persona through stylistic, formal, and thematic choices aimed at imitating natural speech and

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "The sincerity and marrow of the man reaches to his sentences. [...] Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive" (95).

unmediated thought. What the Romantic essayists value in Montaigne's essay is the product of these choices, and they inherit and take up that legacy in their own essay writing, filtered by more than two centuries of English adaptation and modification of the genre.

Montaigne describes his essays as experiments or attempts toward developing a better understanding of his subjects and, more importantly, of himself. Although there are no clear precedents for Montaigne's essays, his writing developed out of the classical tradition of *sententiae*, or "sentences," a practice of collecting aphorisms and maxims. Generally, these sentences came from classical writers whose wisdom on various subjects had been established; some of Montaigne's favorites were Lucretius, Horace, Seneca, and Lucan. After choosing a subject—such as death, sadness, idleness, constancy, etc.—a writer would gather these aphoristic sayings and historical anecdotes and then tie them together with brief commentary of his own.² Many of Montaigne's early essays share these characteristics of sentences, but as his practice developed, his own commentaries on the historical events and quotations gradually expanded to include personal anecdotes and reflections. Before long Montaigne had refined his approach to the point of almost completely forsaking the classical wisdom altogether in order to make room for his own reflections.

The composition of *sententiae* highlights a close connection between the act of reading and writing: one writes to reflect on what one reads, and one's reading is used to generate writing. Montaigne adds to this practice a strong investment in the writers of the classical texts, who are

² In his earliest version of the essay "Of Sadness," for example, Montaigne summarizes an account of the defeat of an ancient Egyptian king and quotes Petrarch and Catullus on the inexpressibility of deep grief. What makes the first version of "Of Sadness" so remarkable among Montaigne's early essays is that Montaigne himself is almost completely absent from it. The first person "I" appears only once, as part of the qualification "I think" when Montaigne is trying to connect the story to his point. More of Montaigne's opinions were added to later revisions of the essay.

given priority over the actual content of books. That is, he is not so much interested in what the classical writers have to say as he is interested in discovering who they were and what they were like as people. In “Of Books,” he confesses that he has “a singular curiosity [...] to know the soul and natural judgments of my authors. We must indeed judge their capacity, but not their character nor themselves, by that display of their writings that they expose on the stage of the world” (366).³ His clearest explanation of how he determines what texts reveal about their writers appears at the end of “Of Books,” when he gives an account of the efforts he made to keep a record of what books he had read and what his impressions of those books were. After finishing a book he would write, in the back of the book, a short note regarding the time he had finished reading it and his general judgment of it, which would serve as a record of his thoughts about the author.⁴ Montaigne’s notes are not summaries of the books, nor do they focus much on the content at all, whether to agree with or dismiss it. Rather, the impressions he records reinforce his claims of interest in knowing the “souls” of the authors—the text is the means by which he evaluates the quality of the writer’s character.⁵ The acts of reading and writing work

³ Montaigne also borrows from authors that he feels to be most in harmony with his own soul; he claims that it gives him great pleasure when readers attack him for what he has copied from Seneca and Plutarch. Overall, he strives to absorb the writers of his books into his own character to the point that he and his sources are indistinguishable.

⁴ Montaigne provides three examples of these notes. In his reflections on Philippe de Commines’ *Mémoires*, for example, he writes, “Here you will find [...] the author’s good faith showing through it clearly, free from vanity in speaking of himself, and or partiality or envy in speaking of others; his ideas and exhortations accompanied more by good zeal and truth than by any exquisite capacity; and, throughout, authority and gravity, representing the man of good background and brought up in great affairs” (371).

⁵ Because these notes preceded the writing of *Essais*, Good suggests that they “could be seen as not only the germ of the literary essay, but of the essay as such. In them Montaigne attempts quick character sketches of various historians, trying to intuit their moral natures from their writings. In some ways he treats their books as ‘consubstantial’ with their selves, as he claims for his own book. He appropriates them, as it were, through their books [...] Montaigne’s writing is thus generated out of his reading as a kind of friendly dialogue in textual form” (35).

together to create a sustained and self-perpetuating relationship between reader and writer, but only when the two acts occur together.

Montaigne also anticipates how his text will be read by others. Despite frequent claims that he does not care about how his readers react because the essays are meant chiefly for his own memory and for the “private conveniences” of his friends and relatives, the regularity with which he defends himself against readerly objections, whether real or imagined, reveals an underlying concern that readers might not encounter and ultimately receive the “right” Montaigne—that is, Montaigne as he intends to be understood. His admonition to readers of other books, that they judge authors by their “capacity” and not by “their character nor themselves,” is of course also a suggestion to readers of his book. Just as Montaigne’s comments on books he has read imply, in Good’s phrase, “a kind of friendly dialogue” with others, the highly self-referential nature of his *Essais* implicitly encourages readers to approach his book in the same way—as friends. Thus his disclaimer, in the preface, that the *Essais* are intended only for his friends, can really be seen as an invitation for the reader to become Montaigne’s friend through the text, to accept the book generously as a friend would, and, through emulation rather than example, to engage in the same friendly process of seeking the author’s soul in the text in order to better know the kind of person he is.

The revelation of one’s soul involves—at least for Montaigne—much more than a simple act of self-exposure. He addresses this in “Of Friendship,” an essay about his late friend Etienne de La Boétie, whose death in 1563 left a void in Montaigne’s life. After La Boétie’s death Montaigne edited and republished his work in order to preserve the memory of his friend for the world, and the *Essais* can be seen, in part, as Montaigne’s effort to recreate with readers the kind

of intimate conversation he shared with La Boétie.⁶ As Montaigne writes, the basis of friendship is true self-revelation: “What we ordinarily call friends and friendships are nothing but acquaintanceships and familiarities formed by some chance or convenience, by means of which our souls are bound to each other. In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again” (169). When Montaigne situates the work of maintaining a friendship in the context of essay-writing, he draws attention to the connection between the two acts. Writing mingles with reading just as the souls of friends mingle and blend with each other. The act of *reading* an essay, then, satisfies the condition of reciprocity demanded by friendship only when the reader’s investment in the relationship matches the writer’s. “Of Friendship” itself models and enacts the kind of friendship that it describes by baring the soul of the writer. Readers encounter Montaigne’s thoughts on friendship and his sorrow at having lost his friend, and they absorb or reject them depending on the degree to which those views are compatible with his own thoughts. In the process he demonstrates the development of his own thinking on the subject, through essay-writing, and as part of that process he turns readers into friends.

Because of the way Montaigne foregrounds a relationship with his readers, his hyper-awareness of how readers might respond to the text is the crucial element in the legacy he leaves for later familiar essayists. As early as his first edition of *Essais* in 1580, he warns readers that those who might take issue with the material of his essays (or, more importantly, with his manner of placing himself at the center of them) have misunderstood the project’s purpose. According to

⁶ Jean Starobinski has argued that Montaigne’s views on friendship—which bear on the *Essais*’ interest in “the needs of the other, the memory or desire of intimate commerce with an alien consciousness” (52)—show La Boétie’s influence. For Boétie, “Friendship, a reciprocal, honest, and disinterested exchange of selves, is diametrically opposed to the self-seeking obsequiousness of the person willing to cast himself into voluntary servitude” (54).

Montaigne, the essays are neither meant to earn public glory for their author nor to provide public instruction. In fact, he dedicates the essays to his family and close friends, “so that when they have lost me [...] they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive” (2). Although he is clearly aware of the public implications in having such private reflections published,⁷ casting his ideal readers as friends and family enables Montaigne to assume an intimate tone that highlights the sense that he is writing, or almost speaking, directly to them.

In this light Montaigne often addresses his readers—usually in response to anticipated objections about his choice of writing about himself at such great length.⁸ Montaigne wants to reveal himself as to a friend, but he understands that most readers will not accept the text in the same way that he would. Indeed, he is aware that the extent to which he writes about himself will be seen by many as vanity, heightened by the fact that he writes not just of past experiences of special significance or instructiveness for a general readership, but of intensely personal experiences that are supposed to lead to fuller self-knowledge.⁹ He explains that recording his thoughts is both more difficult and more valuable than simply giving a bare account of events: “What I chiefly portray is my cogitations, a shapeless subject that does not lend itself to expression in actions. It is all I can do to couch my thoughts in this airy medium of words” (332). But while these claims seem to undermine any interest in the benefit of the essays for others, the

⁷ At one point he claims, “The farther from my lair the knowledge of me spreads, the more I am valued” (744).

⁸ “Custom,” he writes in “Of Practice,” has made speaking of oneself a vice, and obstinately forbids it out of hatred for the boasting that seems always to accompany it” (331).

⁹ For example, when Montaigne gives a lengthy account of a serious accident in which he was injured and nearly died, he concludes that the account itself, while being trivial, draws its value from the act of being recounted: “What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others” (331). The anecdote is not meant to benefit his readers as much as it is a record of his own reflections on something that had happened to him.

intimacy suggested by the familiar tone of his writing undermines his regular insistence on the division between himself and his readers.

Montaigne's frequent reassurances to his readers about the appropriateness of the project undertaken in his *Essais* show the extent to which he anticipated the likelihood that the book would not be understood in the way he intended it to be. More often than dismissing the utility of the book for others, he assumes an apologetic tone when he writes about what the *Essais* are and what he hopes to do with them. What made Montaigne's essays seem so new—and what made them especially liable to objections—was the audacity of placing his experiential knowledge alongside and on an equal footing with classical wisdom. In “Of Books,” he admits that he tends to tackle subjects “that are better treated by the masters of the craft, and more truthfully” (359), but he claims that the real difference between his book and those written by “the masters of the craft” is in the kind of wisdom it contains, which is not akin to conventional wisdom overall, as the thoughts recorded in his essays are constantly changing. He might disagree today with something that he wrote yesterday, but although this would seem to undermine his ability to write with any authority, Montaigne is unbothered by the apparent contradictions in his book. He writes, “These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge not of things [that is, the subjects of his essaying], but of myself. The things will perhaps be known to me some day, or have been once, according as fortune may have brought me to the places where they were made clear. But I no longer remember them. [...] I guarantee no certainty, unless it be to make known to what point, at this moment, extends the knowledge that I have of myself” (359). The ultimate subject that develops over the course of *Essais* is Montaigne himself, through self-knowledge and self-understanding. First and foremost, Montaigne claims that his essays are a record of his own changing thoughts over time, made all the more necessary by his having an otherwise poor

memory.¹⁰ Contradictions are therefore valued instead of avoided, for only contradictions show a mind in development rather than one that has already arrived at conclusions, and the mind in development bears a closer resemblance to Montaigne's mind as he saw it. Montaigne works to capture—in the text—this essence of his mind as accurately as possible, for this alone will enable readers to see him as he wishes to be seen: portrayed in a “simple, natural, and ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray” (2). Only the authentic, true-to-life Montaigne is worthy of the kind of friendship he asks from readers as they encounter the text.

Style and Self

As compelling as it may be to think of Montaigne's *Essais* in the way that he hoped readers would—as revealing the author's soul or containing a true portrait of him—Montaigne is not, of course, really present in his text in any substantial way. The presence and intimacy that readers feel is produced by a style and method that is just as crucial an element of Montaigne's project as the more frequently discussed elements—his pervasive skepticism or his eternally inward focus. Many of the essays—especially the later ones—are written in a running style, built around loose sentences that seem less artfully constructed than the carefully balanced periodic sentences that dominated European prose for most of the sixteenth century, and that style contributes to the feeling of conversational intimacy in the text. As Donald Frame, Montaigne's twentieth-century translator, describes it, Montaigne's style is “part of the self-portrait. Free, oral, informal, personal, concrete, luxuriant in images, organic and spontaneous in order, [...] it

¹⁰ The contradictions among and within essays are highlighted by the fact that, in the three editions of *Essais* that Montaigne worked on in his lifetime, he regularly added material to almost all of the essays and rarely deleted what was already there. This layered textual history of *Essais* conveys a portrait of an individual that is constantly changing even as he records his thoughts at any given moment. As Graham Good argues, this is what Montaigne means when he says that he is “consubstantial” with his book—it grows along with him in a reciprocal relationship.

communicates the flavor of the man” (vi). This does not mean that Montaigne’s essays were written spontaneously or that they represent unrevised or unmediated thought, but they are made to seem that way to readers. The style contributes to the rhetorical *ethos* of the writer whereby readers can construct a sense not only of the identity of the person writing but of what kind of person he is and, in Montaigne’s case, it reinforces formally his claim to write “without straining or artifice.” In the following section I will analyze Montaigne’s style and compare it to the styles of Francis Bacon and Thomas Browne to show how the persona created through style influenced the essayistic stance adopted by the Romantic familiar essayists.

English-speaking readers first encountered Montaigne’s style through John Florio’s 1603 translation of *Essais*,¹¹ which—despite some occasional clunkiness—captures much of the characteristic intimacy of the original French. For example, here is Florio’s translation of the first two sentences of “Of Practice”:

It is a hard matter (although our conceit doe willingly apply, it selfe unto it) that Discourse and Instruction should sufficiently be powerful to direct us to action, and addresse us to performance, if, over and besides that, we doe not by experience exercise and frame our minde to the traine whereunto we will range it: otherwise, when we shall be on the point of the effects, it will doubtlesse finde it selfe much engaged and impeached. And that is the reason why amongst Philosophers, those that have willed to attaine to some greater excellence, have not beene content, at home and at rest, to expect the rigors of fortune, for feare she should surprise them unexperienced and finde them novices, if she should chance to enter fight with them but have rather gone to meet and

¹¹ As a testament to Montaigne’s popularity in England, Florio’s translation appeared just even years after Montaigne’s death and eight after the publication of the final edition of *Essais*.

front her before, and witting–earnestly cast themselves to the triall of the hardest difficulties. (3: 66)

Like Montaigne, Florio strings clause after clause as each sentence progresses toward the period. The opening of the first sentence (“It is a hard matter”) is modified first by a parenthesis and then by a *that*-clause which completes the thought. The sentence would be much simpler if it were to read, “It is a hard matter that Discourse and Instruction should sufficiently be powerful to direct us to action.” Instead, the sentence continues into another dependent clause (which itself includes another modification) before the colon, which is the first chance the reader is given to pause and reflect on what he has just read. The colon then sets up a contrast (“otherwise”) to the preceding clause in order to explain the consequences of instruction that is not reinforced by action. The second sentence likewise relies on dependent clauses and adverbial phrases, to the effect that the writer seems to hesitate and qualify as he states the problem of the first sentence and the explanation of the second. Overall, the style of the passage suggests a sense of uncertainty but shows the writer working through that uncertainty, thus completing the idea.¹² Moreover, this kind of sentence structure creates forward momentum, for a full understanding of Montaigne’s ideas is only possible at the end of his sentences, once everything has been qualified and modified; readers are thus almost pushed to the end of each sentence.

Montaigne’s style instills his writing with self-characterization in a way that separates his *Essais* from those of his closest English counterpart, Francis Bacon. Despite Bacon’s choice to

¹² In his preface “To the curteous Reader,” Florio notes that Montaigne’s style will seem harsh to English readers: “that, in the course of his discourses, or webbe of his Essayes, or entitling of his chapters, he holdeth a disjoynted, broken and gadding stile; and that many times they answer not his titles, and have no coherence together” (1: 10).

borrow the word “essay” to describe his own short prose pieces¹³, and to borrow Montaigne’s skeptical stance against common social opinions, Bacon’s *Essayes* are stylistically different from Montaigne’s. In contrast to Montaigne’s open-ended, associative style, Bacon relies on a much more formal—and, in some ways, more rhetorically effective—pointed style.¹⁴ Over the course of an essay, Montaigne’s loose sentences allow him to wander from subject to subject, through reflection and digression, and he often ends up on a different topic from which he started; Bacon’s essays, on the other hand, generally begin with an idea and then proceed methodically to explore and explain that idea through a series of illustrative statements and related examples. As Alexander Smith wrote in 1863, “Bacon is the greatest of the serious and stately essayists—Montaigne the greatest of the garrulous and communicative. The one gives you his thoughts on Death, Travel, Government, and the like, and lets you make the best of them; the other gives you his on the same subjects, but he wraps them up in personal gossip and reminiscence” (79). As fathers of the essay in England, Montaigne and Bacon are the Dionysus and Apollo of the genre—one embracing the experimental, intoxicating prose of spontaneity; the other the sober logic of balanced reflection.

The contrast between Bacon’s style and Montaigne’s is immediately apparent. At the beginning of his essay “Of Expence,” Bacon writes,

Riches are for Spending; And Spending for Honour and good Actions. Therefore

Extraordinary Expence must be limited by the Worth of the Occasion: For *Voluntary*

¹³ Bacon writes in one of his dedicatory epistles that “The word is late, but the thing is auncient. For *Senecaes* Epistles to *Lucilius*, yf youe marke them well, are but *Essaies*,—That is dispersed Meditations, thoughe conveyed in the forme of Epistles” (317).

¹⁴ The sentences that characterize this style are also referred to as “exploded periods” because the period (i.e., the main theme of the sentence) appears first and is followed by elaboration and amplification (i.e., the “explosion”). Both Montaigne’s associative style and Bacon’s pointed style reflect what Richard A. Lanham refers to as “return-to-nature” styles in reaction to the artful (and therefore less natural feeling) periodic style.

Undoing, may aswell for a Mans *Country*, as for the *Kingdome of Heaven*. But *Ordinary Expence* ought to be limitted by a Mans Estate; And governed with such regard, as it be within his Compasse; And not subject to Deceit and Abuse of Servants; And ordered to the best Shew, that the Bills may be lesse, then the Estimation abroad. Certainly, if a Man will keep but of Even hand, his *Ordinary Expences* ought to be, but to the Halfe of his Receipts; And if he thinke to waxe Rich, but to the Third Part. (87–8)

Bacon's paragraph begins with a compound sentence and a universal observation—that money is meant to be spent, but should be spent in the right way—before making the statement about understanding the limits for ordinary expenses. The series of subordinate clauses that follows amplifies the point through elaboration, but stylistically it is patterned more like oracular wisdom than informal exploration. This is clearest in the third sentence, where each semicolon introduces a new condition (“And governed ... And not subject ... And ordered”) that is subordinate to the main verb and its preposition (“ought to be”), thereby creating an almost list-like effect. The text feels methodical because its method is embodied in the pointed style; by contrast, Montaigne's digressions feel unmoored and disorderly, and much more like the process of thinking. Moreover, because Bacon's essays present the points first, only to amplify them, rather than working toward them, they seem less like Montaigne's “attempts” and more like the classical wisdom from which Montaigne's essays deviated—the primary difference being that Bacon's wisdom is his own.

The confident tone of Bacon's prose reflects a different kind of relationship between the writer and his readers, evidenced in the changing subjects of the dedicatory epistles to each

edition.¹⁵ The first edition of 1597 is dedicated to Bacon's brother and another edition from 1612 is dedicated to his brother-in-law, but Bacon also dedicated editions to those outside of his family. An edition dated between 1610 and 1612 is dedicated to the young Prince Henry (who was heir apparent before his death), and the final edition is addressed to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham and close companion to the newly crowned Charles I. As suggested by the full title of Bacon's final edition—*Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*—the goal of the book is to give readers a better understanding of how society and nature work; the essays are directed toward the behavior of some of the highest people in society. This is all presented to readers as a means toward what Graham Good describes as “self-improvement and the reforming and reorganizing of human affairs in general” (46). Bacon does not express much of an interest in building a relationship with his readers; he does not care to “know the souls” of the authors he reads, nor is he particularly concerned with his readers getting to know his soul. In his dedicatory epistle to the 1625 edition, he explains that, out of all his works, the essays “have beene most Currant: For that, as it seems, they come home, to Mens Businesse, and Bosomes” (5). While Montaigne's goal was to leave a record for posterity of the writer's thoughts and a legacy for his friends and family, Bacon saw his essays as contributing to the greater good of society.

As the first major English essayist, Bacon's influence on his country's tradition of prose writing is undeniable, but that influence is not felt in the familiar essays of the nineteenth century. Bacon is not the focus of his essays in the same way that Montaigne is. In one essay he

¹⁵ Bacon's *Essayes*, like Montaigne's, grew through several editions during its author's lifetime. There were three main editions: the first edition of 1597, which contained ten essays; an expanded edition of 1612, which supplies some minor revisions to the original ten essays and adds another twenty-four; and the final edition of 1625, which adds another nineteen essays (bringing the total to fifty-eight) and makes substantial revisions to the existing thirty-four. It is worth noting here that many essays in the early editions were initially less formally structured before being revised by Bacon for the final edition.

writes, “Of this I may give onely this Advice, according to my small Modell” (13), and his self-presentation—to the limited extent that he writes about his own interests and experiences—is supplementary to his instruction for his readers. He gives brief personal observations and guidance on the subjects such as death, friendship, suspicion, envy, and polite discourse because he recognizes that his “small model” also has broad appeal. The result is that Bacon’s essays, full of wisdom and learning, lack substantial characterization. Compared to Montaigne’s, they reveal comparatively little about Bacon himself.

Hazlitt describes Bacon’s style as “equally sharp and sweet, flowing and pithy, condensed and expansive, expressing volumes in a sentence, or amplifying a single thought into pages of rich, glowing, and delightful evidence” (5: 307). Yet despite his powerful insight, Bacon’s strength was, for Hazlitt, “in reflection, not in production: he was the surveyor, not the builder of the fabric of science. He had not the constructive faculty” (5: 307). While Montaigne had used his essays to observe his own thoughts and to establish friendship with his readers, Bacon, in contrast, suggests that “Men that are great *Lovers of Themselves*, waste the Publique” (73); he uses the experimental, testing elements of the genre to suggest principles for public (or at least class) unity rather than self-understanding. To the extent Bacon includes readers in his essayistic explorations at all, it is in the search for right conduct within civil society—that is, relationships between men—rather than to develop a mutually sustained relationship between readers and the author.

Although Hazlitt and many of his contemporaries respected Bacon’s place in the history of English prose, they favored the eminent seventeenth-century prose writers, such as Richard Burton, Jeremy Taylor, and Thomas Browne, who matched Bacon “for pomp and copiousness of style” but differed from him in everything else. Hazlitt especially celebrates Browne for the way

he treats whatever subject he writes about, an approach that is the stark opposite of Bacon's.¹⁶ For Hazlitt, Browne's prose, like Montaigne's, represents a mind in the process of thinking, moving in one direction and then another without design or plan. His prose style is not the point-and-amplification used by Bacon so much as it is amplification, on any number of subjects, without the point; it thrives on indeterminacy. Or, as is the case in Montaigne's *Essais*, when Browne is trying to make a point, it is only to depart from a prevailing opinion rather than to reinforce it as Bacon did. Browne reveals his character in a way that is similar to Montaigne in the intimacy with readers it implies.

Browne's most notable works, such as the *Religio Medici* and *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, are not really essays in either a Montaignian or Baconian sense as much as they are long prose works, but Browne's persistently skeptical stance and focus on his own perspective place him clearly in the tradition of Montaigne.¹⁷ Yet whereas Montaigne's winding, digressive style is the means by which he discovers and works through the thinking process, Browne gets lost in his style. He writes, "I love to lose my selfe in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an *o altitudo*. 'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved aenigma's and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation, and Resurrection. [...] I desire to exercise my faith in the difficultest points, for to credit ordinary and visible objects is not faith, but perswasion" (15). Amidst his claims of a deep investment in understanding the mysteries of faith, even to the point of self-

¹⁶ Hazlitt writes, "As Bacon seemed to bend all his thoughts to the practice of life, and to bring home the light of science to 'the bosoms and businesses of men,' Sir Thomas Brown [sic] seemed to be of opinion that the only business of life, was to think, and that the proper object of speculation was, by darkening knowledge, to be more speculation, and 'find no end in wandering mazes lost'" (5: 312).

¹⁷ In a copy of Browne's *Works*, Coleridge writes, "He sometimes reminds the reader of Montaigne but from no other than the general circumstance of an Egotism common to both, which in Montaigne is too often a mere amusing Gossip, a chit chat story of Whims & Particularities that lead to nothing, but which in Sir Thomas Brown is always the result of a feeling Heart conjoined with a mind of active curiosity" (*Marginalia* 1: 763).

negation, Browne repeatedly highlights (and celebrates) aspects of his own character that enable him to get lost in this way. In other words, he loses himself in that mystery only to find himself again in the text.¹⁸ Browne's character develops as several aspects of himself are absorbed into one skeptical persona who is carefully observing the world. For readers, the character that Browne reveals in his writing is striking because of the way it assimilates so many otherwise disparate aspects of his thoughts and opinions into a unified textual whole.¹⁹

In the beginning of the second part of the *Religio Medici*, Browne writes,

Now for that other Vertue of Charity, without which Faith is a meer notion, and of no existence, I have ever endeavoured to nourish the mercifull disposition and humane inclination I borrowed from my Parents, and regulate it to the written and prescribed Lawes of Charity; and if I hold the true Anatomy of my selfe, I am delineated and naturally framed to such a piece of vertue: for I am of a constitution so generall, that it consorts and sympathizeth with all things; I have no antipathy, or rather Idio-syncrasie, in dyet, humour, ayre, any thing; I wonder not at the *French*, for their dishes of frogges, snailes, and toadstooles, nor at the Jewes for Locusts and Grasse-hoppers, but being amongst them, make them my common viands; and I finde they agree with my stomach as well as theirs; I could digest a Sallad gathered in a Church-yard, as well as in a Garden. (68)

¹⁸ Hazlitt claims that Browne's "gossiping egotism and personal character have been preferred unjustly to Montaigne's. He had no personal character at all but the peculiarity of resolving all the other elements of his being into thought, and of trying experiments on his own nature in an exhausted receiver of idle and unsatisfactory speculations" (5: 312–3).

¹⁹ J.R. Mulryne points out that the intimate, confessional tone in the *Religio Medici* and "the implied contract with the reader [...] of admitting everything" makes it difficult "to separate Browne from 'Browne,' author from persona" (64).

Browne's style in this one sentence depends on an elaborate amplification that is much like Bacon's, beginning with a general point about his natural tendency toward open-mindedness which is then extended to all facets of his interactions with those individuals of other nationalities. The amplification comes in the form of a loose sentence like Montaigne's, however, rather than like Bacon's balanced pointed sentence; the sentence could have ended with "...borrowed from my parents," but Browne carries it on for another 123 words, stringing clause after clause. Moreover, by the time readers reach the end, the opening subject of the laws of charity has turned into a reflection on different kinds of eating habits. In this sentence as throughout *Religio Medici*, Browne pulls his readers from subject to subject in a way that makes it difficult for one point to be grasped before he has moved on to the next.

Stanley Fish argues that passages such as the one above—especially in the parts of *Religio Medici* where the topic is closer to questions of religious orthodoxy—draw readers away from the content of the text to impress them with the style and, more importantly, with what that style says about its writer. According to Fish, Browne's prose "repeatedly calls attention to what it *is* doing, and what it is doing is displaying Browne to advantage, even when the content is, on its face, prejudicial to him" (367). In his text, the author of *Religio Medici* "releases his reader from any real obligation to the issues his prose pretends to raise" (368). The showiness of Browne's complex style, in this reading, disguises his unwillingness (or inability) to deal with the implications raised by his unorthodox approach to religion. Fish argues that when style overwhelms content like this, it opens the way for potentially harmful content to be ushered in under the guise of impressive style, and therefore this kind of writing makes Browne a "bad physician" who pretends to lead readers into understanding while really leaving them in a state of mystery. What it also makes him is a writer who, like Montaigne, is cautious about the way he

will be perceived by his readers once his thoughts are committed to print, much more than Bacon was or ever needed to be. Browne shares with Montaigne a lack of certainty about his project, which is more clearly connected to uncertainty about the implications of being published and his concerns about finding the right readers who will accept and understand his text in the right way. This uncertainty is embedded in the hesitations and syntactic complexity of his writing. Because Browne's focus is distinctly more personal (and more personally revealing) than Bacon's, his writing is marked by a hesitancy that suggests an investment in mediating readers' reactions to it, something Browne already had a real taste of before he had printed the first edition.

Browne's anxieties about seeing the *Religio Medici* in print and his concerns that readers might not understand it appropriately are emphasized by the work's textual history. Its first class of readers was one that Browne had not counted on. According to Browne's own account, the text was first written "with no intention for the Presse ... contrived in my private Study, and as an exercise unto my self" (542). Browne shared it with a friend who, in turn, passed it on, and it continued to circulate in this fashion, with one hand-written copy following another. Before long, transcription errors led to versions that strayed further and further from the original until, in 1642, a pirated transcription was published without Browne's approval or knowledge. After he learned of the printing of the corrupted text, Browne was distressed and, in 1643, brought a corrected, authorized text to the same printer who had published the pirated text, thereby producing "a full and intended copy of that Peece which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously published before" (5). The first authorized version, then, already anticipates and addresses readers' responses, just as Montaigne incorporated responses to his readers in the second and third editions of *Essais*.

Browne suggests that his choice to revise the text and publish an authorized version of it, beyond simply restoring the work to its original form, has much to do with his attempt to correct the haphazard self-exposure of the earlier version. In his preface “To the Reader,” Browne explains that the “particularities and personall [sic] expressions” of the pirated text should make it clear to any reader that the book was never meant for the public. Because the authorized version was printed seven years after the first version was written, Browne claims that “all that is contained therein is in submission unto maturer discernments, and as I have declared shall no further father them then the best and learned judgements shall authorize them; under favour of which considerations I have made its secrecie publike and committed the truth thereof to every ingenuous Reader” (6). He distinguishes his present self from the youthful writer of the text and, through his preface, establishes a framework for reading that initially places readers at a distance, too—they were not originally intended as readers for these private thoughts—only to highlight the fact that they are now drawn close, as confidants. The “ingenuous Reader” is made privy to Browne’s private thoughts—revised and amended so as to be publicly presentable—and is thus brought into that class of friends for whom he claims the text was first intended. Like Montaigne, Browne uses his preface to cultivate an *ethos* that asks readers to read generously, as familiar companions who are willing to participate in the exploration pursued by the text, and then reinforces that *ethos* through a style that dramatizes the self suggested by the preface.

I have tried to show how the personalities of three of the strongest influences on the Romantic familiar essay—Montaigne, Bacon, and Browne—are embodied in their respective prose styles. Montaigne and Browne are textual characters who appear so immanent in their writing that later writers like Hazlitt and Lamb refer to them almost as intimate acquaintances, while Bacon’s controlled and balanced style seems impersonal. But as much as style seems to be

the result of self-expression, it is also an indicator of the writer's confidence in his relationship with his readers. Montaigne and Browne, who anticipated hostility or objections from readers, adopt an associative style that confers to their writings a tone of hesitation and uncertainty; when they work to turn readers into friendly readers, they are also shielding them from criticism. Bacon, on the other hand, whose style is more direct, cultivates the stance of a more self-assured individual; he is able to approach readers from a position of confident authority and has no need to develop a relationship of equality with his readers. And Browne, while matching the looseness of Montaigne's style, distances himself from his text in a way that suggests more of a constructed persona than a real person. As the next two sections will show, the essay of the eighteenth century develops as a synthesis of these different approaches, first in the periodical essays and then in the novel.

“To Print My Self Out”: The Rise of the Periodical Essay

Despite Montaigne's influence on writers like Bacon and Browne, the Romantic familiar essayists considered the periodical essayists of the early eighteenth century to be the clearest heirs to Montaigne among British writers.²⁰ In the same way, Coleridge, Hunt, Lamb, and Hazlitt tend to describe their own essays as taking up the tradition of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. Lamb writes that the early periodical essayists, “equally impressed with the advantages of this sort of appeal to the reader, but more dexterous at shifting off the invidiousness of a perpetual self-reference, substituted for themselves an *ideal character*; which left them a still fuller licence in the delivery of their peculiar humours and opinions, under the masqued battery of a fictitious appellation” (95). It is worth noting that Lamb acknowledges the potentially invidious nature of

²⁰ In their respective histories of self-characterization in the essay, both Lamb and Hazlitt move from Montaigne to Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, skipping the seventeenth century entirely.

making oneself the persistent subject of one's own writing, as Montaigne and Browne did. But what is even more significant is his recognition of the construction of an "ideal character"—a persona who is distinct from the writer—as a solution to that kind of readerly resentment.

Whereas Montaigne and Browne betray anxiety, through their style and through frequent appeals to readers, about how they will be seen in their writing, the ideal characters of the periodical essays limit the risk of the same kind of personal exposure. This makes it possible for these writers to offer social and moral instruction, like Bacon's, to a broad and popular audience. Because the *Tatler's* Sir Isaac Bickerstaff and the *Spectator's* Mr. Spectator are fabricated characters—fictional personae masquerading in the papers as real individuals—they are therefore free to present themselves to readers in whatever way their writers choose. Through this flexibility, they play an important role in determining the character of the British essayists that follow them.

Although it was neither the first periodical in England nor the first to contain essays, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* that followed it revolutionized the possibilities for both the genre and the medium of publication in ways that had repercussions throughout the following century. Scott Black has argued that the *Spectator* project—consisting of both periodicals—owes its initial success and its lasting power as a literary text to coincidences of time, place, and medium, and the periodical essay was the perfect genre to inhabit that context: "A new literary form was developed at the intersection of the city and the press; a new urbane ethos emerged from this meeting of literary form and technology; and finally that structure of politeness offered an indigenous form with which to explain the modern city to itself" (87). Much more than the essays of the previous century, the *Spectator* project is distinctly public in the audience it imagines and in the way it is situated in relation to that audience. It is directed toward a broad

metropolitan audience rather than familiar acquaintances. Although the *Spectator* is often read today as an instrument for enforcing ideological subjection or promoting moral change, it was much more than that. In its early issues, the *Tatler* was an instrument of satire, but the satirical tone of the early *Tatler* papers eventually softened, setting the stage for the *Spectator* to exhibit what Black describes as “a kinder, gentler style, grounding a literary form geared not to the threat of pain, but to the promise of friendship, mutuality, and pleasure” (91). Following the *Tatler*, the *Spectator* worked to establish a strong bond of familiarity with readers before presuming to instruct them.

The instructive component of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* matches Bacon’s emphasis on social morals (and an eye towards reformation) with Montaigne’s tone of familiarity, candor, and self-revelation. Contrary to the suggestion of Montaigne’s famous question, “What do I know?” both periodicals are direct in their admission of their aims to provide English readers with material “whereby such worthy and well-affected Members of the Commonwealth may be instructed, after their reading, *what to think*” (*Tatler* 1: 15).²¹ To this end, both papers’ focus on a wide readership—in contrast to Montaigne’s familial and friendly readers—is facilitated by the recurring conceits of clubs and coffeehouses. *Tatler* essays are addressed from different places around the town, while the *Spectator* essays are purportedly written by the members of the Spectator Club, who are presented as co-conspirators in discussing the subjects of the paper.²² Mr. Spectator claims that his ambition is to increase public learning by bringing “Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and Coffee-houses” (1: 44). As both setting and framework for the essays, the Spectator Club

²¹ In Addison’s well-known phrase from an early number of the *Spectator*, the goal of the paper is “to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality” as a means of making his readers’ “Instruction agreeable, and their Diversion useful” (1: 44).

²² The club itself is said to meet in various public locations around town.

does the work of Montaigne's appeals to the reader by creating a public and social environment in which readers are made to feel included—or, if they are not included, to desire to be so.

The prominent role of the coffee-house in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* has provided fertile critical ground for understanding the development of the public sphere in post-Restoration England. Notably, Jürgen Habermas has argued that the papers were a kind of mimetic enterprise through which “the public held up a mirror to itself” (43). The coffee-house scenes of the papers and the conversations they dramatized were re-enacted as real conversations in real coffee-houses, and in the papers Addison “worked toward the spread of tolerance, the emancipation of civic morality from moral theology and of practical wisdom from the philosophy of the scholars. The public that read and debated this sort of thing read and debated about itself” (43). For Habermas, the papers are most notable as textual models of the kinds of exchange that were taking place between individuals—in the persons of writers and readers—and of the kind of conversation that really occurred in the public sphere; the papers preserve a record of that sphere during an important time of change.

Brian Cowan has since complicated Habermas's claims by arguing that the papers were not, in fact, intended to encourage public discourse as much as they sought “to close off and restrain [...] venues for public debate and especially public debate on matters of political concern. Far from championing an easily accessible coffeehouse society, unrestrained newspaper reading, and political debate in the public sphere, the *Spectator* project aimed to reign in and discipline these practices” (346). That is, rather than serving as a mimetic tool, the papers represent coffee-houses as idealized spaces that foster a specific kind of conversation and that, by extension, limit the potential for the wrong kind of conversation. The coffee-houses for Cowan are “the seat of a whole host of anxieties about the proper behavior in that public space”

(347). What critics like Habermas do not take enough account of is the fact that the coffee-houses of the *Spectator* are texts and they only exist on the page; they are not really coffee-houses at all. The literary coffee-house is powerful because it seems like a coffee-house, a site of public discourse; but it belongs to the writer, not to the public, and the discourse of the essays only simulates public exchange.

The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* use the coffee-house conceit to establish a close correspondence between character and setting. The *Tatler* papers were mostly written under the name of Sir Isaac Bickerstaff, but from different places around the town.²³ Papers on miscellaneous subjects that did not fit easily into the established categories would come from Bickerstaff's own apartment—that is, they are addressed from a private rather than public site. The *Spectator* revises the *Tatler*'s univocal nature by placing itself in a single location—the Spectator Club—and multiplying the characters who would be its writers.²⁴ In the midst of this expanded cast of characters, the key figure is Mr. Spectator, who draws the rest together into the club and edits their essays into the paper that bears his name. Mr. Spectator describes himself as not “an idle but a very busy Spectator” (1: 22), and he unifies the *Spectator* papers through a common character or persona. Both Mr. Spectator and his club are encountered by readers as elements of a text, and this suggests that the “host of anxieties” about public exchange that Cowan identifies in the papers are anxieties about the ways readers will receive and engage with

²³ In the first number, Bickerstaff explains, “All Accounts of *Gallantry, Pleasure, and Entertainment* shall be under the article of *White's Chocolate-house*; *Poetry*, under that of *Will's Coffee-house*,” and so on, with each subject given a different locus as characteristic of its nature (1: 16).

²⁴ Sir Roger de Coverly replaces Bickerstaff's apartment as the contributor whose “being unconfined to Modes and Forms, makes him but the readier and more capable to please and oblige all who know him” (1: 7)—in other words, he is the character most readily able to answer for miscellaneous subjects. Sir Andrew Freeport is the resident expert on economics and business, Captain Sentry knows about military and civic subjects, and Will Honeycomb “is very ready at that Sort of Discourse with which Men usually entertain Women” (1: 12).

the text itself. As in Montaigne's *Essais* and Browne's *Religio Medici*, there is a recurring subtext to the *Spectator* essays that is concerned with producing the right kinds of readers—readers who will be appropriately receptive to Mr. Spectator's ideas—and that subtext is intensified by the periodical nature of the essays. More than teaching people what to think, the *Spectator*'s mimetic environment creates a situation in which readers are prepared to learn. It goes about this instruction by creating characters for the various “contributors” to the club and developing a sense of friendship between the characters and their readers.

The first number of the *Spectator* acknowledges the bearing that a relationship of familiarity between readers and writers has on how his text will be read: “I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure, ’till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man, of a mild or choleric Disposition, Married or a Batchelor, with other Particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right Understanding of an Author” (1: 1).²⁵ The relationship between the pleasure of reading and a “right Understanding” of an author's character occasions the need, in the rest of this first essay, for Mr. Spectator to give an account of his own “History and Character,” an explanation of his unique qualifications for the *Spectator* project, and, in the second essay, briefer descriptions of the characters of the rest of the Spectator Club.²⁶ Unlike Montaigne, who claims his essays are the means by which he might be preserved after his death, the *Spectator* does far more than simply preserve Mr. Spectator's character; it is the occasion for it. Mr. Spectator continues, “[S]ince I have neither Time nor Inclination to communicate the Fulness of my Heart in Speech, I am resolved to do it in Writing; and to Print

²⁵ Clifford Siskin identifies in this opening statement the beginning of a tradition of placing an author before his work in a way that “reconfigures the very nature of the work itself” (162).

²⁶ The most essential characteristic, of course, is that of a spectator of society and culture: “I have acted in all the Parts of my Life as Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper” (1: 5).

my self out, if possible, before I Die” (1: 5). Writing—specifically the essays of the *Spectator* papers—is, of course, the only possible medium in which Mr. Spectator can communicate the fullness of his heart because he only exists in print. The papers enable him to both print himself out—that is, to exhaust his communicative capacity in print—and to print out his self by embodying his character between the margins of the *Spectator*.

Mr. Spectator generally seems to have a good deal of fun with the way that he develops his character in the paper, especially in the early numbers when he has much more of a blank page, so to speak, on which he can print himself out. The construction of an “ideal character,” as Lamb refers to it, creates freedom and opportunities not available to writers like Montaigne who also want to lay out accurate pictures of their true selves. It is important to remember, however, that the way Mr. Spectator’s character develops has a direct relationship with perceived readerly expectations that are almost taken for granted in the first issue—the idea that readers only read with pleasure when they are familiar with the character of the author. The *Spectator* could conceivably have been just a series of anonymous miscellaneous essays, directed toward a general readership, but the success of the *Tatler* taught Addison and Steele that the likability of the writer has a direct relationship to readers’ willingness to entertain the ideas raised by the essays.

Not content to just define the character of the writer, Mr. Spectator casts his readers as particular kinds of readers, too. In the same way that Montaigne, Bacon, and Browne used their prefaces to explain whom their essays were for, the *Spectator* clarifies its expected audience in *Spectator* 10. Faced with an expansive readership that necessarily limits the degree of closeness between writer and readers, the authors of the *Spectator* create an intimate and familiar relationship with its readers on their own terms. As Ketcham argues, “The *Spectator* papers are

distributed to a large, public audience, yet they also sustain the illusion of an intimate circle of readers, and Addison plays on this doubleness in *Spectator* 10 with the same mixture of seriousness and self-mockery that he had used in *Spectator* 1” (17).²⁷ The special exclusivity with which Mr. Spectator defines his readers—essential for reinforcing the club atmosphere of the paper—is predicated on an articulation of each specific group toward whom the *Spectator* is directed, which in turn is accompanied by an explanation of how each group should read the paper and what they should hope to gain from it. Mr. Spectator publicly hopes that his readers “will take care to distinguish themselves from the thoughtless Herd of their ignorant and unattentive Brethren” (1: 44), and, through flattery, he closes the circle of intimacy a little. In the act of reading the *Spectator*, individuals demonstrate that they are thoughtful, attentive readers, distinct from the rest of the “ignorant” public.²⁸ Readers are thus encouraged to behave a certain way in response to the paper, and by simply following Mr. Spectator’s recommendations and reading the paper they become part of the intimate group he writes for and about.

Mr. Spectator further divides readers into four distinct classes, the first of which is the family. He recommends that the paper be read by “all well regulated Families, that set apart an Hour in every Morning for Tea and Bread and Butter” and he advises them “for their Good to order this Paper to be punctually served up, and to be looked upon as a Part of the Tea Equipage” (1: 44–5).²⁹ His second recommendation is to the other spectators of the world, like himself—“in short, every one that considers the World as a Theatre, and desires to form a right Judgment of

²⁷ Mr. Spectator estimates “as a modest Computation” that he has “about Threescore thousand Disciples in London and Westminster” (1: 44).

²⁸ Additionally, he claims that those who do read the *Spectator* but get tired of it prematurely reveal themselves to be “small Wits” (1: 47).

²⁹ There is a similarity to Montaigne in the way Mr. Spectator articulates this bond of familiarity through the text but, whereas Montaigne directs his essays to his own family and makes friends out of readers, Mr. Spectator invites himself in among others’ families and makes himself—or at least the text that embodies him—part of their daily familial routine.

those who are the Actors on it” (1:45–6). Third, he recommends the paper to “the Blanks of Society,” or those who have no original thoughts of their own until they have received the gist of the day’s news and conversation, “by that Means gathering together the Materials for thinking” (1: 46). Mr. Spectator generously encourages the Blanks to stay inside, away from the rest public, each day until they have had the opportunity to read that day’s *Spectator*, which, once read, “shall have a good Effect on their Conversation for the ensuing twelve Hours” (1: 46). As the classes of readers are defined, Mr. Spectator pokes fun at these different character types, each a gradually more exaggerated caricature, and the element of humor softens the negative characteristics of the types being described.³⁰ Mr. Spectator’s use of humor toward these hypothetical others also lowers the reader’s defenses, thus paving the way for a stronger bond of familiarity between them and him.

The fourth group of readers to whom Mr. Spectator recommends his paper are women.³¹ This inclusion of women in the reconstructed coffee-house atmosphere is especially notable given the status of females in the real coffee-houses in post-Restoration London.³² Women are included in the club discourse of the *Spectator* to the end of “improving” or “divert[ing] the

³⁰ According to Ketcham, “A reader can recognize himself or herself in these portraits, and recognize how closely his public self, comes to being ridiculous. He is admitted into the circle of readership because he participates in the joke” (20).

³¹ Both the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* conceive of women as an important part of their readerships. In the *Tatler* Bickerstaff claims to have resolved “to have something which may be of Entertainment to the Fair Sex, in Honour of whom I have invented the Title of this Paper” (1: 15), and Mr. Spectator admits that “there are none to whom this Paper will be more useful, than to the Female World” (1: 33).

³² Under the pretense of the coffee-house as a place where people of all classes could participate in the conversations, women were, in theory, also able to attend, but social expectations of behavior fitting class and status still tended to discourage this. As Cowan suggests, “The coffeehouses of London were simply no place for a lady who wished to preserve her respectability” (246). By setting women aside as one of his classes of readers, then, Mr. Spectator allows female readers to participate privately in the public discourse without risking the social consequences of real participation.

Minds of [the] Female Readers from greater Trifles” so that they may “inspire a kind of Awe and Respect, as well as Love, into their Male Beholders” (1: 33). The papers are especially committed to gently—if unsubtly—providing a corrective to such “characteristically” female vices as gossip, idleness, and coquetry, even as they provide a diversion from “Sowing and Embroidery, and their greatest Drudgery the Preparation of Jellies and Sweet-meats” (1: 33). The ideal female readers of the *Spectator*, as defined by the paper, are those who are less inclined to participate in such unproductive diversions. In the same way that he separates the thoughtful male readers from the thoughtless, he directs the paper toward female readers “of a more elevated Life and Conversation”: these readers “move in an exalted Sphere of Knowledge and Virtue, that join all the Beauties of the Mind to the Ornaments of Dress, and inspire a kind of Awe and respect, as well as Love, into their Male-Beholders” (1: 46–7). Mr. Spectator’s definition of the characters of his female readers is as tongue-in-cheek as his other definitions of readers, but it also suggests the creation of a social readership between male writer as instructor and female readers as students.

The level of directness in asserting such moralizing goals for male and female readers alike necessitates a certain degree of complicity on the reader’s part beyond simply being in on the joke. The risk of reader rejection is mitigated by a modeling of suitable reader responses and methods of discourse within the papers themselves. In addition to the coffee-house frame the metaphor of a conversation to describe the particular discourse of the *Spectator*, another device for making the reader feel like a participant in the project of the paper, thereby making him or her complicit with the didacticism at work, is the use of epistolary exchange—particularly

through letters from female readers.³³ Whether or not these letters are written by real readers of the paper or by the authors—some were from legitimate, but many others were written by Steele, Addison, and their friends—the function they serve is the same: they model ideal readers who demonstrate the proper level of respect for their instructor’s advice and thus enable him to carry on with his directions.

The *Spectator* represents an important shift in the history of the essay, a turning point between Montaigne’s essays and the development of the Romantic familiar essay. Mr. Spectator can treat his readers as friends, not by revealing his soul to them, as Montaigne strived to do, but by *telling* them that they are his friends and by *showing* them how to read his text. As Black argues, the special significance of the *Spectator* is that the form of the essays “is mimetic of an abstract form of relations in order to create the conditions for social negotiation between real people. [...] Addison used the essay to develop a modern form based on the *structure* of friendship, but not necessarily the *fact* of it. The essay provided the mechanism by which a private ethos of friendship could become a public discourse of sociability” (98). The kind of discourse that the *Spectator* imitates—through its style, through its processes of characterizing writers and readers, through its imitations of conversation and letter-writing, and through efforts to influence the process of reading itself—is at the same time an investment in the essay genre, as modeled by Montaigne, and an important English (and more specifically metropolitan) revision of it. As Black suggests, “The essay assumes a relationship between reader and writer structured by an *ethos* of friendship, but this does not necessarily require the *event* of friendship”

³³ One such reader is Clarinda, “a maiden lady of a good Fortune,” who at Mr. Spectator’s suggestion has kept a journal of her daily activities and now sends it to him with the profound confession, “I scarce find a single Action in these five Days that I can thoroughly approve of” (3: 181–5). One of the more notable entries from the journal suggests the seriousness of Clarinda’s moral failings: Saturday, “From Eight to Nine. Shifted a Patch [of hair] for Half an Hour before I could determine it. Fixed it above my left Eye-brow” (3: 184).

(98). By separating *ethos* from *event*, Addison and Steele's *Spectator* project functions as the dynamic equivalent to familiarity-as-friendliness while placing a stronger focus (and burden) on the writer as the director of familiar exchange and the responsible agent for maintaining that exchange. But as the English reading public grew in size over the following decades, and as writers subsequently faced more competition for the attention of readers, these methods for cultivating sympathetic and friendly readers would have to be adapted even further.

Changing Expectations and the Novel

For all of its successes in helping readers to feel like friends of the writers, the conversational elements of the *Spectator* also creates a textual atmosphere in which readers were free to reject the essayist and his writing absolutely. The popular response to the periodical essay gradually shifted in the decades that followed the *Spectator*, and many of the essay projects developed during these years bear witness to a change in the relationship between writers and readers. In a 1750 issue of Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*—a paper initially modeled after the *Spectator*—Mr. Rambler presents a letter from a “fashionable woman” who articulates both her criticism and her gradual acceptance of the *Rambler*: “I am no great admirer of grave writings, and therefore very frequently lay your papers aside before I have read them through; yet I cannot but confess that, by slow degrees, you have raised my opinion of your understanding” (3: 227). Oliver Goldsmith similarly complains about the poor reception of his periodical *The Bee* (1759) by an undiscerning public. He confesses to having considered “throw[ing] off all connexions with taste” and providing the public with a more fashionable style before “my pride at least overcame my prudence, and determined me to endeavor to please by the goodness of my entertainment, rather than by the magnificence of my sign” (27–8). These comments point to a developing tension between essayistic authenticity, in which an essayist writes on his own terms,

and writing that has no goal other than to please a broad readership. There was a deluge of imitators that tried to recreate the essence of the original *Spectator*, but readers' interests changed while the imitative periodical essays did little to improve on their model. As the periodical market was flooded, readers gained leverage as consumers in their relationships with the writers of essays, and the essayists began to express feelings of displacement from the positions of authority that Steele and Addison had assumed and worked to maintain in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. The pretense of familiarity between the writer and his audience was threatened, and as a result later writers had to find new ways to mediate the tastes of the reading public.

While essayists like Johnson and Goldsmith were protesting about the difficulty of satisfying fickle readers, a different approach to exploring the relationships between readers and writers was developing in the emerging genre of the novel. The eighteenth-century novel has a close relationship to the English essay: Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift wrote periodical essays (Swift contributed to the *Spectator*), many of the letters written in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels were essayistic, and Henry Fielding wrote essays for his own periodical, the *Covent-Garden Journal*. In novels like Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the narrators use the same kind of self-characterization that was used to advantage by Sir Isaac Bickerstaff and Mr. Spectator. In this sense, both of those texts fit as comfortably into the history of the familiar essay as they fit into the history of the novel. *Tristram Shandy* and *Tom Jones* are alike in that they are highly self-referential texts; they convey awareness of themselves *as* texts and are therefore as much concerned with the acts of reading and writing—more specifically, being read and being written—as they are concerned with delivering a consistent and linear narrative. As in the *Spectator*, they demonstrate those concerns by defining

relationships with readers that are dependent on establishing a cooperative understanding of what the traditions of reading and writing look like and of how those traditions might be changed. They are also predicated on the function of a mutually beneficial exchange between the reader and the writer in carrying the task of the text to some kind of completion. Familiarity becomes a tool to encourage readers to surrender authority of the narrative to the writer. Unlike the *Spectator*, however, these novels develop an exaggerated sense of playfulness—in the essayistic elements—that disarms the reader, even as it may potentially offend him or her, and ultimately places fuller control of the narrative in the hands of the writer.

The narrative stance that Fielding takes in *Tom Jones* shifts constantly. At times, he is apologetic to his readers about the “coarse” materials of the work, while at other times he is a firm apologist for the book, standing against critics and unlearned readers alike who bear ill will for the text. Sometimes the narrator takes on the role of a literary critic, situating the book in the context of whatever genre is relevant to the moment and explaining to the reader how his appropriation of the genre necessarily veers from established rules. In all, Fielding himself, as the narrator, is constantly before readers, presenting something like a running commentary on the characters, the narrative, the acts of reading and writing, and pretty much everything else that suggests itself as a topic.³⁴ Throughout, Fielding’s commentary and reflection, like Montaigne’s essays, always have the readers in sight, developing and dramatizing a relationship with them that is regularly undermined and reinforced.

³⁴ Thomas Lockwood has suggested that Fielding’s presence in *Tom Jones* is something like a screen or lens through which we see the story: “Sometimes this screen is opaque, as in most of the prefatory chapters, or when, as Fielding says, ‘the author himself makes his appearance on the stage’. Sometimes it approaches—only approaches—transparency, as in the concluding book, where there is simply ‘no room,’ according to Fielding, for anything beyond ‘plain narrative only’—a departure from form so significant as to obligate him to explain” (230).

Among the most frequently acknowledged essayistic elements of *Tom Jones* are the prefatory chapters to each book. The essayistic nature of these chapters gradually increases as the novel progresses, so much so that the chapter headings begin to refer to them as “essays” rather than chapters at all. Fielding discusses the function of these essays or chapters directly in Book V. After much protesting that an explanation for his “digressive essays,” which he refers to as “the SERIOUS in writing,” is not necessary, he provides an explanation anyway: the essays are the “soporific parts” of the text, meant to bore readers and thereby provide a contrast to the more exciting elements of the story proper. Fielding writes, “In this light, then, or rather in this darkness, I would have the reader to consider these initial essays. And after this warning, if he shall be of opinion that he can find enough of serious in other parts of this history, he may pass over these, in which we profess to be labouriously dull, and begin the following books at the second chapter” (184–5). Fielding’s explanation is simultaneously dismissive (he could care less if the reader takes time to read the prefatory chapters), comical (he writes to put readers to sleep, thereby arresting the very act of reading), and strangely hostile in his professed indifference to the reader’s interest in the book or tolerance for its experiential (and sometimes alarming) nature.

The hostile tone that the narrator of *Tom Jones* sometimes takes toward the readers can be explained in part by the fact that the text envisions readers that change over the course of the book. Or rather, contrary to other texts in which the intended reader is clearly defined, Fielding expresses uncertainty in *Tom Jones* about who the reader is at any given moment or, as a related concern, what his reaction to the text will be, and he treats that uncertainty as a problem that needs to be addressed on a regular basis. Toward the end of the first book the narrator admits that “we cannot possibly divine what complexion our reader may be of” (52), and, to satisfy the variety of possible “complexions,” the narrator regularly explains things that he says do not need

to be explained and defends characters who he says do not really need defending. He makes sure his bases are covered for whoever his reader may be. Fielding's narrator is constantly thinking about and speaking to his readers; he is cautiously aware of what concerns they will have—in fact, he articulates those concerns for them—and he addresses those concerns preemptively in the text itself before readers have a chance to voice any objections.

Whereas Montaigne and Browne could direct their essays toward friends and family, and Addison and Steele were able to describe the different sorts of readers for whom their papers were intended, Fielding depends on changing metaphors to define and redefine the kinds of readers he envisions throughout the novel. In the first chapter, Fielding compares his book to a fine dining experience to envision his readers as customers who are, naturally, curious about the “bill of fare to the feast” of the novel, and many of the early references to the reader are indulgent in a way that seems designed to keep the customer—for example, the reader is frequently a “courteous reader,” or “my good reader.” The narrator's initial attitude toward readers sees them as consumers and he caters toward them as such. By the middle of *Tom Jones*, though, he realizes that the reader is just as likely to be a critic, which is a very different role from a customer—he may even be a reader who is, in fact, hostile to Fielding's offering.

Fielding again echoes his early uncertainty about what type of person his reader might be in Book X of the novel: “for, perhaps, thou may'st be as learned in human nature as Shakespeare himself was, and, perhaps, thou may'st be no wiser than some of his editors” (453). It is well-known, Fielding suggests, that editors have “misunderstood and misrepresented” Shakespeare, so it is equally possible that a similar class of readers will have the same reaction to *Tom Jones*: “for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final catastrophe, is a most

presumptuous absurdity” (453). While the narrator indulges the “good reader” with assurances about the wholesomeness of the text (assurances that are comically undermined even as they are made), the critical reader is transformed by the text into “my good reptile” and is at risk of being dismissed outright for trying to speak of things about which he knows nothing. As soon as the risk of dismissal is made, however, the narrator is quick to invite the reptilian critic back into the narrative fold. He becomes “my worthy friend (for, perhaps, thy heart may be better than thy head)” and is admonished “not to condemn a character as a bad one, because it is not perfectly a good one” (454). That is, Fielding encourages the critical reader to accept imperfect characters in the same way that he, the narrator, is graciously willing to accept the imperfect reader. The pattern of hostility and rejection followed by the reforming of the friendship between writer and reader—once again referred to as “my friend” by the end of this particular chapter—occurs over and over again throughout the prefatory chapters in the novel, and it enables Fielding to perpetually assert the writer’s control over the processes of how his text is read and reacted to.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator reassesses his relationship with the reader, as it has developed over the course of the book, for the last time, and he attempts to make peace with him. He writes,

We are now, reader, arrived at the last stage of our long journey. As we have, therefore, travelled together through so many pages, let us behave to one another like fellow-travellers in a stage coach, who have passed several days in the company of each other; and who, notwithstanding any bickerings or little animosities which may have occurred on the road, generally make all up at last, and mount, for the last time, into their vehicle with cheerfulness and good humour; since after this one stage, it may possibly happen to us, as it commonly happens to them, never to meet more. (808)

Tom Jones is presented here as a conversation had between the writer and readers, but the novel depends on an important revision of the coffee-house and social club metaphors that were so important to the periodical essays. Instead of the coffee-house, the stage coach is a more suitable site for the relationship built between the writer and readers of *Tom Jones*. The coffee-house—like the periodical—creates the potential for a theoretically unending conversational exchange. Any discord generated between the writer and reader, it follows, can be addressed and resolved at any point. The novel, however, cannot run on interminably, and Fielding therefore acknowledges outright that, although there may have been some tension along the way, the best approach is for writer and reader to make amends and let bygones be bygones. He even goes so far as to extend an olive branch to readers, writing, “If in anything I have offended, it was really without any intention. Some things, perhaps, here said may have hit thee or thy friends; but I do most solemnly declare they were not pointed at thee or them” (809). After this last introductory chapter, the essayistic voice of the narrator disappears almost completely from the final volume, allowing the reader to finish the journey, as it were, in peace.

I argue that the frequent reorientation of the relationship between Fielding and his readers depends on the familiarity of the essay tradition. Lockwood argues that Fielding “retains the essayist’s privilege of talking freely in his own person” (227), but the essays in *Tom Jones* do a lot more than simply allow Fielding to talk. They self-consciously place the book into a tradition of reading and writing by teaching readers how to read within that tradition. As Scott Black argues, the book “is better understood as a study of how forms survive, as well as a brief for their survival—though not just for their cultural capital [...]. Rather, learning to engage those forms teaches a skill of reading that is no less part of a modern public sphere than the models of identity learned from diaries or the referential transparency adopted from newspapers” (122). In

short, the essays within the novel highlight a skill of literacy that should be practiced on the book itself, and they do so in a direct way that the narrative parts of the book cannot. In this sense the essays in *Tom Jones* bear a strong resemblance to the periodical essays of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, but the complexly heterogeneric nature of Fielding's novel means that the models of reading afforded by the text are as regularly torn down and undermined as they are constructed and built up. It would be a mistake, then, to limit the essays of *Tom Jones* to mere critical commentary on the narrative, or even to attempt to separate the essays' concerns about reading and readers from the non-essayistic (or, at least, less essayistic) elements of the text, as if the essays could be excised from the text to leave us with a book of pure narrative and a separate book of Fielding's essays and commentary.

The special power of *Tom Jones*, and of the way that the book addresses its readers, owes much to the fact that narrative and the essays are inseparable—in a sense, as Black suggests, “animating its culture's bookstall and allowing those myriad volumes sitting side by side to speak to each other” (119). The book as a whole sets its sights on the act of reading in toto, not just the reading of fiction. By putting the essays at the center of the book—through the heavy-handed authorial voice in content and commentary alike—Fielding dramatizes the inseparability of reading and reflection. For readers, the ability to understand that inseparability, and to thrive on the right kind of reflection it suggests, is the essential difference between being a “good reader” and “friend,” patient in the act of reading and agreeable in everything, or the reptilian critic who would too hastily “condemn any of the incidents in this our history as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner such incident may conduce to that design” (451). The narrator's job is to condition just these kinds of readers. According to Lockwood, “The author enjoys a degree of freedom not granted to the

material, as in his speaking directly to the reader, so that in Fielding's case we must and do instinctively trust the teller rather than the tale" (228). The freedom that the essay form gives the writer of *Tom Jones* allows him to move in and out of the world of the narrative to establish, maintain, and complicate a relationship with the reader in a way that facilitates the reception of his textual project. In this sense Fielding's familiar essays in *Tom Jones* become a narrative device, essential both to the overall project of the novel and for suggesting the method of its interpretation.

The kind of essayistic narrative voice that Fielding relies on so much in *Tom Jones* is exaggerated to a remarkable degree by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. Almost from the beginning of the book, Tristram divides readers into separate classes: "I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,—who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you" (3). Like the divisions of readers in the *Spectator* and in *Tom Jones*, the division made here draws attention to readers' awareness of their own reading habits as well as on those of their neighbors. The act of reading—on which the book itself depends—is split between good and bad readers, who are really not readers at all but nevertheless demand that the writer give an account of himself for their benefit.³⁵ Tristram continues,

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself—and, in the end, prove the very thing which

³⁵ The admission, in fact, replicates the opening lines of *Spectator* 1 almost note for note.

Montaigne dreaded in his essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour–window;—I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little further in the same way: For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*. (3–4)

Tristram’s plan implicitly acknowledges, from the outset, the absurdity of trying to address the needs of each individual reader. Yet in order to avoid offending any reader or failing to provide any detail that may prove important to what readers need to know (to “let them in on the whole secret”) Tristram promises to give his readers his entire history, beginning with the moment of his conception, *ab ovo*, and ostensibly concluding with the present—in other words, the moment of writing. This comic plan goes far beyond any of Montaigne’s efforts at full self–revelation, but once again the reason that is given for the writing is to facilitate readers’ understanding according to the way the writer wants the text to be understood.

Of course, one of the great jokes of *Tristram Shandy* is that such a project can never be completed. The text makes promise after promise to readers in this regard but fails to follow through. Tristram himself isn’t even born until the third volume and, although the novel is at no shortage in providing Tristram’s opinions, the story of his “life” is largely restricted to just a few incidents of his childhood and a trip to the continent; besides being the narrator, he could hardly even be described as a main character in a conventional sense. Moreover, the narrative—if it can be so defined—runs circles around itself trying to say all that it wants to say in time.³⁶ As he writes, the “thoughts rise heavily and pass gummous through [his] pen” (434), and nothing gets

³⁶ Tristram writes, “Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the days and hours of it [...] are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more—every thing presses on” (430).

done. Even the digressions, the clearest textual manifestations of the inability to complete one thought in writing before it is replaced by another, are left incomplete.³⁷ Rather than provide readers with the information they need in order to read correctly, the text as a whole mimics the kind of interruption that characterized the moment of Tristram's conception, and even attentive readers are distracted from the story.

The narrative pyrotechnics (or miscues, depending on one's critical position) in *Tristram Shandy* are well documented, but this push and pull between readers and Tristram is essential to the overall effectiveness of the text. What makes the book so important to the genealogy of the familiar essay is that, for all the dizziness of the text, Sterne's style is also intensely intimate. In fact, Hazlitt discusses Sterne's style with the same language that he uses to define the familiar style elsewhere: he describes the style as "at times the most rapid, the most happy, the most idiomatic of any that is to be found. It is the pure essence of English conversational style" (5: 110). It may seem surprising to describe the style of *Tristram Shandy* as conversational when, more than just about any other contemporary work, the text is presented through so many mechanisms that seem designed to disorient the reader. But for every disorienting move the text makes—the stuttering, false-starts, and reversals of the Shandean dash; the deletions and blushing asterisks; the blank pages and black pages—committed readers are offered the chance to participate in the process of narrative-making and to fill in the spaces that are left open with

³⁷ Near the end of the novel in Volume IX, for example, Tristram spends three chapters promising a digression in Chapter XV and building up to that digression. When it finally arrives, he writes, "The fifteenth chapter is come at last; and brings nothing with it but a sad signature of 'How our pleasure slips from under us in this world;' For in talking of my digression—I declare before heaven I have made it!" (436). Another example is Tristram's promised chapter on button-holes, first proposed in Volume IV and returned to every so often—generally with a promise that it will appear at any moment. In the end, however, the chapter is never written.

their own contributions to the text. *Tristram Shandy* is conversational first and foremost because readers cannot experience the text passively. They are drawn in.

This conversational intimacy of Sterne's novel is a product of its style as much as its narrative structure. *Tristram Shandy* is characterized by a running prose style, much like Montaigne's. Because of the free-flowing nature of Sterne's style, the writing comes across as seeming spontaneous and improvisational and, by extension, as mimetic of the actual process of thought rather than a carefully constructed arrangement. In Montaigne, as we have seen, hesitation, qualification, and doubling back are important elements for portraying the writer in his natural state. When this style is amplified in *Tristram Shandy* so as to illuminate the incompleteness and immediacy of Tristram's thoughts as they occur to him and as he gets them on to the page, readers encounter an even more naturalized individual. The uncertainties present throughout each level of the text—sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books—suggest a writer who is so invested in accurate self-representation that he is willing to sacrifice order and clarity in the process of capturing his thoughts.

If the text is at all successful in creating the impression that it is a record of Tristram's thoughts, that success is made all the more powerful by the realization that Tristram is only a character. He does not really have any thoughts. In other words, the mimetic realism of what simulates his thoughts as embodied by writing "*pretends* to improvisation and thoughtless haste that did not preside over its actual creation" (Lanham 62), but what we are really reading is Sterne's approximation of the process of thought. It is, as Hazlitt suggests, affected: "There is more of *mannerism* and affectation in [Sterne], and a more immediate reference to preceding

authors” than in the writing of his near contemporaries, such as Fielding (5: 110).³⁸ If anything, this exaggerated style can be seen as overcompensation for the fact that the narrator, who is always striving to make himself fully known through his life and opinions, is ultimately not a “self” at all. Like the personae of the periodical essayist—whether Steele’s Bickerstaff and Addison’s Mr. Spectator—Tristram is a character made to seem more real because of the way his writing seems to reveal personal, intimate thoughts as they occur to him. For the Romantic familiar essayists—Hunt and Lamb especially—*Tristram Shandy* suggests a method by which a writer can present a version of himself to readers as a vital fiction, a character that seems real and yet is not in many important ways.

The end goal of all of this—as I have argued is the tendency, implicitly or explicitly, in essays or essayistic texts—is to create and maintain a sense of relationship with the reader which enables the writer to educate the reader about the act of reading itself. Together, the playfulness and disorientation of *Tristram Shandy*, as Howard Anderson suggests, both intrigue and irritate readers (966). Sterne is aware of this, and Tristram regularly addresses it, almost from the very beginning. In fact, he explains that the reader’s compliance in following his directions for reading will recast the reader’s own role in the context of the book. In Chapter VI of the first volume, he writes,

Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.—
You must have a little patience. [...] As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship. [...] Therefore, my dear friend

³⁸ Walter Scott, too, admits that “the greatest admirers of Sterne must own, that his style is affected, eminently [...]” (490).

and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out,—bear with me,—and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:— or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don’t fly off,— —but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;—and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do anything,—only keep your temper. (6–7)

Over the course of this brief paragraph-length chapter, the reader is transformed from a “perfect stranger” to a “dear friend and companion” and is given a clear list of imperatives of how he should respond when some aspect of the text irritates him; he is even given a catalog, in advance, of some of the ways that the text *will* irritate him.³⁹ By showing that he is as aware of readers’ own reading habits as they are, and by pairing his acknowledgement that his writing habit will disturb them with his willingness to go through with it anyway, Tristram sets himself up as an authority on reading as much as on his own life and opinions. Because he causes readers to doubt their own habits and instinctive responses in this way, he regularly reminds them that they are dependent on him—as their friend—to make their way through the text.

As a text, *Tristram Shandy* regularly draws readers’ attention to the fact that they are reading; it just as regularly calls their attention to the utter failure of any text to adequately represent what it describes.⁴⁰ The book embraces the failures and distortions wholeheartedly and

³⁹ As Anderson argues, we, as readers, “are at once put on guard and disarmed by Tristram’s unexpected consciousness of our dawning criticism of his blatantly arbitrary narrative method (or, alternatively, by this sign that he is himself more aware than we had been of that very arbitrariness); we are both put off and attracted by the prospect of intimacy with a person of such perception” (966).

⁴⁰ Richard Lanham argues, “Sterne wants to make us self-conscious about print, as well as about words. Necessary intermediaries to representing reality, they distort it too” (91).

it encourages readers to do the same. Rather than attempt to assert narrative dominance as Fielding does in *Tom Jones* or even as, in a sense, Mr. Spectator does in the *Spectator*, Tristram invites readers, as much as a narrator can, to participate in the construction of the novel and, as a counterpart to the sense of doubt that he causes readers to feel about their own reading habits, he provokes them to contribute to the text in their own ways.⁴¹ In other words, Tristram builds up enough of a relationship with the reader as to trust him to contribute something that Tristram himself does not (or cannot). He realizes, more fully than most essayists, that texts form a two way street and that the most effective way to implicate readers—especially for texts that could otherwise pose obstacles for readers—is to not teach them how to think, or what to think, but to bring them alongside the text in conversation that allows, in one sense or another, readers to feel like they have a voice.

Fielding and Sterne both use essays within their texts to determine the relationship between writer and readers, and this requires them to divide their readers into separate classes—familiar and not-yet-familiar readers, sympathetic and hostile readers—in order to address the unique needs of each class. In this sense, the concerns embedded within their novelistic essays match those in the essays of Montaigne, Bacon, Browne, Steele and Addison. In the novel, however, the essays frame and are framed by the surrounding material. They work as critically interpretative devices that shed light on the fictional lives and situations of the text and, just as importantly, they are themselves written by dramatized narrators. The novel thus creates a unique environment for an essay that is not concerned with the accurate and authentic representation of the writer (as in Montaigne and Browne) nor with the utility of moral or social education (as in Bacon or the *Spectator* project), both of which relate to the essay's impact in the

⁴¹ The two blank chapters in the middle of Volume IX can even be seen as an opportunity for readers to fill up that part of the story—to momentarily become writers themselves.

real world for which it was written. Instead, the novelistic essay's primary allegiance is to the world created through its narrative.

The preceding history of the essay in England, as it existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, draws attention to some of the concerns inherent to the genre that remained constant, even while the manner of addressing those concerns changed. Montaigne's desire that his book would be read in the same manner he read other books—as a means of getting to know the soul of the writer—led him to write in a way that highlighted a natural method. This striving toward authentic self-presentation, contradictions and all, depends on a style that imitates the process of thinking itself, thereby adding to the apparent immediacy of the writer's presence in his text. And, as Montaigne directed his book toward his friends and family rather than a general readership, he defined a class of readers who would know how to read it in the right way that he wanted them to. In the case of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, however, the authenticity of the essayists' self-presentation had become secondary to his appeal to a more general readership. The efficacy of the text itself depended on the congeniality of a large class of readers, and dramatized narrators—or fictional essayists—could simply create the *appearance* of an authentic self by appropriating Montaigne's style. As I will argue in the next chapter, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Leigh Hunt reject these essayistic persona and attempt to return sincerity and authenticity to the essay in an effort to restore the relationship between writers and readers to one of intimacy and cooperation.

Chapter 3: Friends and Companions: Coleridge's and Hunt's Periodical Projects

In the previous chapter, I discussed the gradual development of strategies in the genre of the essay that responded to the growing readership of the eighteenth century. The need to assert control over readers in order to assure that a text was read on its author's terms became increasingly prevalent as writers' confidence in their relationship with readers faltered.

Coleridge's constant concern about the reception of his work is symptomatic of a crisis in the relationship between writers and readers that was emerging in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge writes,

Poets and Philosophers, rendered diffident by their very number, addressed themselves to "learned readers;" then, aimed to conciliate the graces of "the candid reader;" till, the critic still rising as the author sunk, the amateurs of literature collectively were erected into a municipality of judges, and addressed as THE TOWN! And now finally, all men being supposed able to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism. (1: 59)

The golden age Coleridge describes, in which "poets and philosophers" were revered, may be a fiction, but for Coleridge it represented an ideal past in which the works of genius were treated as seriously and as generously as they deserved. Despite the alarmist tone, the passage provides a fair summary of how English literature and the English reading public had adapted from the time of Bacon through the beginning of the nineteenth century. As the number of readers grew, they represented more diverse and therefore more critically astute audiences; as a result, essayists had to conceive of new ways to influence the reception of their work. The efforts of writers like Fielding and Sterne to address critical readers opened up new possibilities for the novel, but

essayists—especially writers of “serious” essays—took longer to address the changing dynamic between writers and readers. According to Jon Klancher, “No single, unified ‘reading public’ could be addressed in such times, as Coleridge and his contemporaries well knew. This inchoate cultural moment compelled a great many writers to shape the interpretive and ideological frameworks of audiences they would speak to. They carved new readerships and transformed old ones” (3).

In this chapter I will focus on Coleridge’s *The Friend* of 1809–10 and Hunt’s miscellaneous essays in the *Reflector* and the “Round Table” to show how the Romantic familiar essay participates in this process of creating and transforming audiences. In an effort to appear more sincere than other periodical essayists, both Coleridge and Hunt rejected the use of the periodical persona that played such an important role in the *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays. Through them, sincerity becomes a device for cultivating a friendly relationship with readers. As I will demonstrate, Coleridge and Hunt also both actively tried to influence how their texts would be read by giving examples of model readers and by implicating readers in the process of creating meaning. Such essays test the limits of a writer’s influence over how his readers respond to his writing, and they function as a reminder that the relationship between the parties should be cooperative.

In the first section I will explain how Coleridge’s frustrations about his inability to enlist readers as “co-labourers” in that periodical stem from his uncertainty about who his readers are. In the second section I focus on Coleridge’s attempts to establish a friendly character and argue that his efforts are undermined by his prose style, which had the opposite effect on readers than Coleridge had hoped for. In the third section I examine Hunt’s approach to the essay writing to argue that he was more successful than Coleridge in constructing a relationship with readers

because his style is more conversational and therefore involves readers more successfully. Finally, in the fourth section I read the “Round Table” series in the *Examiner* as Hunt’s most concentrated early effort to write in a way that would encourage readers to become his companions.

“Assuming the Privileges of a Friend”: Coleridge’s Periodical Effort

Focusing on the journal’s title and its dedication to Coleridge’s friends Mr. and Mrs. Gillman, E. S. Schaffer has argued that *The Friend* “vividly marks the transition from the eighteenth-century periodical paper [...] to a Romantic and hermeneutic model” that links a writer with his readers (213). On a similar note, Jerome Christensen points to *The Friend*’s pretense of being “intimate rather than sociable, humble but essential, amicable yet advisory” as central to the development of Coleridge’s theories about the extent to which language can represent anything other than itself. According to Christensen, “[A]mong Coleridge’s published work only *The Friend* surpasses the *Biographia* in its intellectual range” (186–7). Both of these readings rely on the 1818 text as the coherent and fully-developed sequel that Coleridge promised would follow *Biographia Literaria*, and both also mostly ignore the much more chaotic 1809–10 version of *The Friend*, an irregular periodical that reveals Coleridge struggling to define his readers and battling with those readers as he tries to keep them invested in the goals of the journal. In this section I will show that Coleridge’s plan for *The Friend*—and ultimately the reason it initially failed as a periodical—stems from his attempts to address his apprehension about readers.

Coleridge’s worries about the reception of his work and his efforts to influence that reception can be well documented. From the marginal gloss he added to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in 1817 and framing preface to “Kubla Khan,” to the foregrounding of the act

of sympathetic listening in the “conversation poems,” much of Coleridge’s poetry deals with problems of transmission and interpretation. In his prose and lectures, Coleridge targets even more pointedly what he believes to be a careless readership that is easily seduced by the allure of what is sensational and popular. In *The Statesman’s Manual*, he complains about a Reading Public, “the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity,” made up of a majority “whose heads and hearts are dieted at the two public *ordinaries* of Literature, the circulating libraries and the periodical press” (37–8). Lucy Newlyn has shown that Coleridge felt tremendous anxiety “about the devaluation of literature, and the demise of the author as vehicle of truth” (52), and the frequency with which he both railed against undiscerning readers and tried to provide models of better readers in his writing reflects his deliberate efforts to return the relationship between readers and writers to the prelapsarian state he imagined.

Although *The Friend* was not Coleridge’s only attempt to alter the relationship between readers and writers, it nevertheless represents one of his most concentrated efforts.¹ The periodical was the closest Coleridge ever came to writing the kind of familiar essays that Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb excelled at, even if it differs from the later essays in style and seriousness of subject matter. The decision to call the paper *The Friend* suggests that Coleridge wanted to establish a relationship of familiarity with his readers. Compared to its periodical predecessors—a *Tatler*, a *Spectator*, an *Idler*, a *Rambler*—the persona of the friend that Coleridge assumes takes on a softened character, one whose goal is to come gently alongside readers as he instructs them. More importantly, it represents Coleridge’s efforts to form a sympathetic readership of friends who, in distinguishing themselves from the unthinking multitude, would themselves influence other readers, too.

¹ Jon Klancher, expanding on the impact of *The Friend*’s method, has called the project “a first real intervention in England’s existing cultural and social relations” (200n17).

Part of the design of *The Friend*, as Coleridge explains in the eleventh number, was to ask “serious Readers” to pursue “a change of the usual *order*” of amusement, followed by instruction, which had been the standard for periodical literature since the *Spectator*.² Coleridge requests that his readers be willing to participate in these goals, to pursue understanding alongside him rather than read passively and then affirm or deny his claims. He writes, “All the principles of my future Work, all the fundamental doctrines, in the establishment of which I must of necessity require the attention of my Reader to become my fellow–labourer” (2: 151). By focusing on readers’ involvement as his co–workers, Coleridge forges a new dynamic between writer and readers. He goes on to explain that *The Friend* can only be successful insofar as he can “prevail on [others] to retire *into themselves* and make their own minds the objects of their steadfast attention” (2: 151), and he promises, for his part, to “make all allowable sacrifices” in order to ensure that the work is as interesting to readers as it is to him. The foundation of this collaborative process not only calls for a shared investment in *The Friend*’s goals; from Coleridge’s perspective, it promises to restore the relationship between writers and readers.

Coleridge’s decision to publish *The Friend* as a periodical rather than as a book was informed by his hope to gradually cultivate a new class of friendly and sympathetic readers. He speaks of the periodical context as offering “the most likely Means of winning, instead of forcing my Way” (2: 17), suggesting that publishing periodically was essential to upholding “those Truths and those Merits, which are founded in the nobler and permanent Parts of our Natures,

² Although most criticism of *The Friend* tends to take the significantly revised 1818 version as the primary text, I am focusing exclusively on the original periodical version, which is ultimately much more revealing for the anxieties it exposes Coleridge to have had about his audience. Barbara Rooke’s edition of *The Friend*, prepared as part of Coleridge’s *Collected Works*, takes the 1818 version as its primary text and includes the periodical version as an appendix in a second volume. The only major study devoted to the 1809–10 version is Deirdre Coleman’s *Coleridge and The Friend (1809–1810)*.

against the Caprices of Fashion, and such Pleasures, as either depend on transitory and accidental Causes, or are pursued from less worthy Impulses” (2: 18). Coleridge’s emphasis on permanence at the expense of what is transitory highlights the irony of publishing *The Friend* as a periodical, which is naturally a more disposable medium than a book.³ But the periodical context allowed him to approach his subject through a gradual, dialogic method that addresses responses from readers in the process. Publishing essays on a weekly basis would also ideally give readers time to think about each stage of the argument before moving on to the next, and Coleridge hoped that readers who initially had a negative reaction to a particular idea in an essay would have a chance to come around—through proper thought and reflection—by the time the next essay appeared. In this sense, the periodical context afforded great freedom for Coleridge to develop and share his interests as a kind of running dialogue.⁴

For all his talk of including readers in the long-term goals of *The Friend*, however, Coleridge is clearly concerned that his paper will not be read according to the terms of mutual cooperation that he tries to establish. The worries articulated in his later work (such as *Biographia Literaria* and *The Statesman’s Manual*) about the intellectual laziness of the reading public, who wants nothing more than light entertainment, are embedded throughout *The Friend*. Coleridge therefore positions himself, his paper, and his readers against what he believes to be

³ Coleridge’s friends recognized this and warned him ahead of time that the work he was proposing would be much better suited for a book.

⁴ As Jerome Christensen has argued, Coleridge was preoccupied with striking a sense of balance in *The Friend* between what he believed to be the limitations and strengths of the periodical context. Because periodicals require an ongoing investment on the behalf of readers, Coleridge had to keep readers interested and avoid offending them or turning them off. He therefore had to present what he thought was essential information without appearing arrogant and he had to be friendly without appearing frivolous. According to Christensen, “In the instance of *The Friend* the difficulty of bringing truth into the everyday is compounded by the prosaic problem of writing about complex philosophical matters in the format of a periodical, a literary form that is ordinarily devoted to information and amusement, not intellectual exertion” (193–4).

the dominant habits of reading—specifically, the reading of other periodicals—that *The Friend* is meant to correct.⁵ He explains that the experimental method and focus of *The Friend* should make it undesirable for “three–fourths of the ordinary readers of periodical publications, whether Reviews, Magazines, or Newspapers” (2: 273). Coleridge is deliberately selective in the audience he chooses as his friends. Although he is aware that it means he will not reach the largest class of readers possible, he designs his project in a way that will appeal to committed readers—a small group that he imagines will consist of no more than five– or six hundred individuals—and, in order to avoid any misconceptions, he repeatedly clarifies the method and objective of the periodical.⁶

Coleridge’s frequent reminders about the expectations his readers should have for *The Friend* suggest that he was never really confident that his paper was being read correctly, a suspicion that is manifest in his addresses to correspondents scattered throughout the paper. In one letter to a reader he admits to being depressed by the frequency with which his periodical is “complained of for its’ [sic] abstruseness and obscurity” (2: 150), and two months later he writes to convey to an admirer “the anxious thoughts and gloomy anticipations, with which I write any single paragraph, that demands the least effort of attention, or requires the Reader to enter into himself and question his own mind as to the truth of that which I am pressing to his notice” (2: 247). Over the course of *The Friend*’s publication, Coleridge grew increasingly frustrated by the failure of readers to apply the “effort of attention” that he believed his essays merited, and he

⁵ At one point he complains that these periodicals only succeed by flattering readers: “The way to be admired is to tell the Reader what he knew before, but clothed in a statelier phraseology, and embodied in apt and lively illustrations” (2: 282).

⁶ Coleridge is equally clear that his paper is no intended for the general public, which “is at present accustomed to find itself appealed to as the infallible Judge, and each Reader complimented with excellencies, which if he really possessed, to what purpose is he a Reader, unless, perhaps, to remind himself of his own superiority? [...] I bid defiance to all the Flatterers of the Folly and foolish Self–opinion of the half–instructed Many” (2: 86–7).

accordingly takes his readers to task for their inability or unwillingness to respond in the way Coleridge feels his work deserves.

The difficulties Coleridge had with his readers seem to stem from the fact that, while he recognized the role that readers had to play for his paper to be successful, he initially trusted that the act of subscribing was in itself sufficient evidence of a willingness to participate in the *Friend* project.⁷ The subscription model was a means for assuring a deeper investment because it brought subscribers who were either Coleridge's friends or friends of his friends, and thus were carefully hand-picked in that regard, at least.⁸ Yet because readers were also the patrons of the paper, Coleridge's failure to get them sufficiently interested in the intellectual objectives of the paper also meant that he lost their financial interest. Coleridge hoped the subscription model would ensure that his readers were friends; instead, he found himself in debt to readers who wondered what they were investing in.

The Friend had more than six hundred subscribers, matching the size of Coleridge's target audience, but over three-fourths of these were unknown to Coleridge personally and he was therefore reluctant to request payments from them. When he finally did begin to ask subscribers to pay—not until the sixteenth number—the payments were irregularly collected.

⁷ As Coleridge later explains, "I thought it not improbably, that [...] a sufficient number of persons able and willing to patronize it might be collected—sufficient, I mean, first to render it *possible* for the Author so to employ his time and powers, and secondly, to repay the expences of the publication" (2: 273).

⁸ Deirdre Coleman has argued that one of Coleridge's most serious problems with subscribers stems from the fact that many were Quakers. More specifically, Thomas Clarkson recruited many Quakers who belonged to a sect called the Society of Friends, which also had its own journal by that title. John Beer has suggested that several subscribers signed up because they mistakenly assumed that *The Friend* was another publication from the Society (119).

Some subscribers discontinued their subscription without remitting any payment at all,⁹ but because of the time interval between writing, printing, and distributing the periodical and the overlap of correspondence, they continued to receive issues after canceling.¹⁰ Although *The Friend* was never intended to make much of a profit, the loss of more than £200 was not something that Coleridge had counted on. The challenges with subscribers and payment only intensified Coleridge's more serious frustrations with readers who, at best, were put off by some of the difficulty of Coleridge's ideas and, at worst, demonstrated outright hostility toward him. Readers failed to match the level of commitment Coleridge expected from co-laborers and, disheartened, he concluded *The Friend* abruptly with an unfinished essay in the twenty-seventh issue.¹¹

Even if he had been able to satisfy his readers and keep them invested, *The Friend* was ultimately doomed as a periodical. The substantial difficulties of Coleridge's writing were

⁹ In *Biographia Literaria* he gives an anecdote of one subscriber who, after receiving all of the issues through the sixteenth, which included the advertisement to pay, wrote to Coleridge to tell him that he had never even subscribed in the first place.

¹⁰ The financial mess that ensued led Coleridge to plead patience (and payment) from his subscribers in the supernumerary essay: "If therefore THE FRIEND is permitted to proceed, it must be understood that for the next twenty numbers a notice of six weeks will be expected from those who wish to discontinue the publication. At the same time I must intreat those who may have sent orders for its discontinuance, with their payment of the Subscription for the numbers preceding, not to be surprized or offended by the receipt of the present number: for neither I nor the Printer have, or possibly can have received their order" (2: 274).

¹¹ The abrupt conclusion of *The Friend* coincided with other distress in Coleridge's personal life. As the twenty-seventh issue approached, Sara Hutchinson, who had served as Coleridge's amanuensis since the fourth number, decided she needed to get away. She went to stay with cousins in Wales and Coleridge became depressed. Dorothy Wordsworth wrote about the effect of Sara's departure on *The Friend*: "True it is she was the cause of the continuance of The Friend so long; but I am far from believing that it would have gone on if she had stayed. He was tired, and she had at last no power to drive him on; and now I really believe that *he* also is glad that she is not here, because he has nobody to teize [sic] him" (*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* 1: 365).

exacerbated, especially at the beginning, by some practical matters.¹² The third number cut off mid-sentence, and readers had to wait almost a month (from August 10 to September 7) to finish the sentence in the next issue; a long footnote at the end of Number 4 was not completed until the next issue, a week later; Numbers 5 and 6 also split a sentence between them; and the essay in Number 7 runs over a page and a half into Number 8. All this made readers' attempts to understand Coleridge's ideas, even at the most basic level, challenging, and accusations of obscurity in Coleridge's writing were fueled by the difficulty these irregularities posed for even dedicated readers. One of Coleridge's friends, Daniel Stuart wrote to him after the fifth number, highlighting the degree to which Coleridge's expectations and execution were too difficult for readers:

Your work, even less than I expected requires immediate circulation. Can you suppose that all your Readers read it instantly on receiving it as they do a Newspaper? Most assuredly they do not. You send a piece of an Essay beginning & ending in the middle of a sentence, & yet you imagine the Public will be as eager to read the Scrap as if it contained the account of a riot in the Theatre or a Duel with Mr Canning? Rapidity of circulation cannot constitute any part of the value of your work. The matter it contains constitutes its value, & that is not of a transient nature. By publishing once a month you will save a great expence to your Readers & will present them with the work in a better form [...] (*The Friend* 2: 491–2)

¹² In an effort to cut costs, for example, Coleridge procured paper and stamps on his own, but miscommunication with his supplier led to a shortage of paper and caused the third issue to appear more than a month late. The ninth issue was late because rats at the printing office had eaten part of Coleridge's manuscript.

Coleridge heeded Stuart's advice and made more of an effort to regularize subsequent issues, but that did not solve the difficulties of some readers who already felt alienated and were becoming increasingly hostile toward Coleridge and *The Friend*.¹³

I have argued that the frustrations felt by Coleridge in *The Friend* of 1809–10 resulted from a failure to connect with his readers in ways that were essential to the success of the project. Two of the most serious factors in that failure were difficulties he had with subscribers and irregularity of publication, and both stemmed from the challenges of producing a periodical. Coleridge's desire to develop a friendship with his readers was undermined by the same periodical context that he believed to be essential to producing and maintaining such relationships. When he republished the series in the dramatically revised version of 1818, he ultimately abandoned the periodical idea in favor of producing a coherent volume of essays; despite keeping the name of *The Friend* intact, Coleridge's more focused and cohesive text of 1818 constructs a more ordered relationship with readers than the periodical.¹⁴ In the next section, I will show the challenges of *The Friend* 1809–10 that compromise Coleridge's attempts to make himself into his readers' friend.

¹³ Even some of Coleridge's closest friends expressed disappointment with *The Friend*. In October 1809, he asked Robert Southey to write a lively and humorous letter criticizing the paper so he could then respond to it. In his letter, Southey writes, "I know not whether your subscribers have expected too much from you, but it appears to me that you expect too much from your subscribers" (2: 498). When he sent the letter to Coleridge, Southey attached a note explaining the sentiments expressed in the letter were not feigned: "From jest I got into earnest, and, trying to pass from earnest to jest failed. It was against the grain, and would not do. I had to re-read the eight last numbers, and the truth is, they left me no heart for jesting or for irony." To fix the problem, Southey encouraged Coleridge to pursue lighter fare and to include more poems.

¹⁴ As I have already suggested, most modern criticism follows Coleridge's lead by treating the 1818 version as the more significant text. Michael John Kooy suggests that, through republication, "the 1818 *Friend* was seen to transform the 1809–10 edition into a lay sermon" (147).

“Without Reminding the Reader Obtrusively of Myself”: The Problem of Reputation

In the previous section, we saw that Coleridge’s goals for *The Friend* depended on the participation of his readers as co-laborers who would be willing to put in the required work to ensure the success of the journal. We also saw that Coleridge was frustrated by his readers’ unwillingness to cooperate with the project in the way he suggested they should. In this section, I will consider a different factor that undermined Coleridge’s efforts in *The Friend*: his inability to create a textual character that lived up to the friendly promise of the journal’s title. While Coleridge’s worries about unsympathetic readers led him to try to develop a character that would appeal to readers, his convoluted prose actually alienated them from the sincere character he tried to cultivate.

Coleridge opens the first issue of *The Friend* by declaring his decision to avoid the use of pseudonyms or fictitious characters. This rejection of the persona is a significant innovation for the periodical essay;¹⁵ it signals an attempt to return to the kind of authenticity and sincerity that was foregrounded by Montaigne. Coleridge explains that if he were to take on a persona, doing so “would have put [him] at once in possession of the stage; and [his] first act [would] have opened with a procession of masks” (2: 5). In contrast to the eighteenth-century periodicals, *The Friend* places great value in authorial sincerity that stems from a true character, and Coleridge acknowledges that if he were to take on the kind of persona used by Addison and Steele, the truth content of the work on which he is embarking would become suspect. Coleridge therefore claims to be committed to presenting his real self to his readers, even though he knows some will be predisposed to reject the work based on what they know or (more likely) what they have heard about him.

¹⁵ In 1809, the standard periodical convention was to publish either anonymously or pseudonymously.

By thus rejecting the periodical persona in favor of Montaignian sincerity, Coleridge places his *Friend* project within a tradition of semi-autobiographical self-examination as the means for asking readers to reflect on how the world works. He claims to be “the Biographer of [his] own sentiments” rather than “a Legislator of the opinions of other men” (2: 9), and he clarifies that his arguments should be understood as the product original thought and not a synthesis of what others have written. As we saw in the last chapter, Montaigne’s similar claim in this regard—“What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others” (331)—was strengthened by his dedication of the *Essais* to friends and relatives, a select group of sympathetic readers, and by his implicit invitation to readers outside of the fold to respond to his book as friends.

By comparison, Coleridge’s uncertainty about his readers, as outlined in the previous section, keeps him from being able to adopt the same attitude toward his readers that Montaigne had. He imagines his readers asking “by what right [he affects] to stand aloof from the crowd” (2: 10), and he is concerned that they will see his assumption of intellectual authority as a sign of arrogance rather than as the authentic and sincere interrogation of values he means it to be. Because he wants to project himself as a Friend, however, Coleridge cannot simply dismiss readers who might not be sympathetic to his project. His confidence in his own authority—insofar as it is manifest in his writing—is therefore much more tenuous than Montaigne’s.¹⁶ Writing in the early nineteenth century, he cannot assume that readers will accept either his

¹⁶ As Coleridge writes, “[T]he frequency, with which I have spoken in my own person, recalls my apprehensions to the second danger, which it was my hope to guard against; the probable charge of Arrogance, both for daring to dissent from the opinions of great Authorities and, in my following numbers perhaps, from the general opinion concerning the true value of certain Authorities deemed great” (2: 32).

sincere self-portrayal or the authority that depends on it, and this leads him, alternately, to apologize for his method and to insist on its appropriateness for the goals of *The Friend*.¹⁷

The problem with writing without a pseudonym or a mask is that the author is then knowable to readers by reputation, and Coleridge was worried that his reputation would be an obstacle for readers to accept his authenticity. In his second number, Coleridge attempts to address his reputation and build a more intimate rapport with his readers by tackling “a subject of utmost delicacy”: his own character. In fact, Coleridge actively attempts to win his skeptical readers over by reconstructing his character as one who is truly sincere and trustworthy. He opens with an address “To My Readers,” in which he explains, “I direct myself more particularly to those among my readers, who from various printed and unprinted calumnies have judged most unfavourably of my political tenets; and to those, whose favour I have chanced to win in consequence of a similar, though not equal, mistake” (2: 22–4).¹⁸ Although Coleridge promised that *The Friend* would not be political (the title-page promised that the journal would exclude

¹⁷ In the first couple issues, especially, this double approach leads to a highly disorganized and anxious explanation of the project’s aims. Coleridge regularly pauses to beg forgiveness from his readers (e.g., “Excuse me therefore, gentle reader!” [2: 6]; “IT will be long, ere I shall dare flatter myself, that I have won the confidence of my Reader sufficiently to require of him that effort of attention” [2: 8]; “I must rely on my Readers’ Indulgence for the pardon of this long and, I more than fear, prolix introductory explanation” [2: 10]; “I have transgressed from a Rule [...] of never troubling my Readers with my own Verses” [2: 15]). This kind of talk with the reader becomes a framing device that establishes the interests of readers as a primary concern in *The Friend*. However, in reality this concern, however sincere it might have been, does not really affect the plan of the paper or lead him to be mindful of transgressive moments that might alienate his readers.

¹⁸ Coleridge reacts to accusations, made more than ten years earlier in a pamphlet titled *The Beauties of an Anti-Jacobin*, of preaching Deism and of abandoning his wife and children (and his “native Country,” with the implication of sedition) when he traveled to Germany at the end of 1798. In defense of his orthodoxy and patriotism, he cites some sixty lines from *Fears in Solitude*. According to Coleman, the need to address his past in this way had more to do with Coleridge’s anxieties than with any real objections from readers: “The unearthing of these old and for the most part, forgotten calumnies appalled and mystified the Wordsworths; and the spectacle of Coleridge, now separated from his wife, boasting of the homesickness he had felt as a husband and father ten years ago in Germany, seemed foolish beyond belief” (4).

“personal and party politics, and the events of the day”) he was concerned that readers who were familiar with accusations about his past political views would be predisposed to see him differently from how he wanted to be seen and, as a result, dismiss *The Friend*.

In other words, Coleridge sees his reputation as potentially undermining the investigation *The Friend* is supposed to represent. Therefore he sets about reforming his character before his readers, presenting a version of himself that is closer to how he wants to be seen. Coleridge’s attempt to embrace authenticity in *The Friend* is actually driven by his mistrust of a broad reading public, and even of the more carefully selected group of subscribers to *The Friend*. This leads him to refashion himself as he wishes to be seen by readers. In short, Coleridge recreates himself as a textual persona. Despite his suggestion that he is being more genuine than Addison and Steele because he does not assume a fictitious character, he is nonetheless preoccupied with framing his essays through his version of his personality, not someone else’s.

This character that Coleridge cultivates both dismisses the objections he anticipates readers may have and attempts to conciliate those same objections by promising to tread gently in places where readers might be wary. In other words, he assumes a position of authority but also claims to prioritize his friendship with readers. The character of *The Friend* therefore emerges in the tension between authority and humility, a tension that Coleridge regrets yet feels constrained to acknowledge.¹⁹ Moreover, Coleridge is worried that the way he talks about himself will make

¹⁹ In one of the last issues of *The Friend*, Coleridge abandons all pretense of this humility when he describes his frustration with having been placed in this position: “a moment’s reflection will enable my reader to acquit me of this charge [of assuming superiority], as far as it is, or ought to be a charge. He will recollect, that I have been giving the History of my own mind, and that if it had been my duty to believe, that the main obstacle to the success of my undertaking existed not in the minds of others, but in my own insufficiency and inferiority, I ought not to have undertaken it at all. To a sincere and sensible mind, it cannot but be disgusting to find an Author writing on Subjects, to the investigation of which he professes to have devoted the greater portion of his Life, and yet appealing to all his Readers promiscuously, as his full and

him seem arrogant and will therefore be even more damaging to readers' view of his textual character.²⁰ Coleridge therefore devotes much of the process of character building in the second essay to absolving himself from possible charges of arrogance. The energy he puts defending himself from these charges sets the stage for him to explain how he, in *The Friend*, will not do anything to merit such an accusation. He writes,

As long therefore as I obtrude no unsupported assertions on my Readers; and as long as I state my opinions and the evidence which induced or compelled me to adopt them, with calmness and that diffidence in myself, which is by no means incompatible with a firm belief in the justness of the opinions themselves; while I attack no man's private life from any cause, and detract from no man's Honors in his public character, from the truth of his doctrines, or the merits of his compositions, without detailing all my reasons and resting the result solely on the arguments adduced; while I moreover explain fully the motives of duty, which influenced me in resolving to institute such investigation; while I confine all asperity of censure, and all expressions of contempt, to gross violations of Truth, Honor, and Decency, to the base Corrupter and the detected Slanderer; while I write on no subject, which I have not studied with my best attention, on no subject which my education and acquirements have incapacitated me from properly understanding; and above all while I approve myself, alike in praise and in blame, in close reasoning and in

competent judges, and thus soliciting their favour by a mock modesty, which either convicts him of gross hypocrisy or the most absurd presumption. For what can be conceived at once more absurd and presumptuous, than for a man to write and publish Books for the instruction of those who are wiser than himself, more learned, and more judicious! Humility like all other virtues, must exist in Harmony with Truth" (2: 277–8).

²⁰ He expresses awareness of this tension in his wish to get past the prefatory essays of *The Friend*: "I can with strictest truth assure my Readers that with a pleasure combined with a sense of weariness I see the nigh approach of that point of my labours, in which I can convey my opinions and the workings of my heart without reminding the Reader obtrusively of myself" (2: 32).

impassioned declamation, a steady FRIEND to the two best and surest Friends of all men, TRUTH and HONESTY; I will not fear an accusation of *Arrogance* from the Good and the Wise, I shall pity it from the Weak, and despise it from the Wicked. (2: 35–6)

This extremely Montaignian assertion of sincerity and disinterestedness should extricate Coleridge from charges of presumptuousness. But while his anxieties about his work being misinterpreted mirror those expressed by Montaigne, Coleridge envisions an audience that requires him to prove the quality of his character in ways that Montaigne, whose *Essais* did not depend on a favorable reception, never had to. Coleridge therefore promises, with apparent confidence, motives that are so pure and an execution that is so thorough that it will be impossible for the best kind of readers to charge him with being arrogant. As a friend to “TRUTH and HONESTY,” he makes himself a friend to his readers, so long as they are good and wise.²¹ The way he engages his readers also enables him to reassure them of his sincerity, and in the process he attempts to determine the standard by which readers will be able to judge him.

Despite Coleridge’s efforts to cultivate a character that is worthy of his readers’ friendship, however, his prose style works against the authentic and natural portrayal of his thoughts. Instead of the free style used by Montaigne, Coleridge’s style requires from readers a great amount of focused attention to make sense of his writing as a whole. In the last chapter, I argued that Francis Bacon’s periodic style, though rhetorically effective, suggests an authoritative stance, projecting a self-assured individual who has no need to develop a relationship of equality with his readers. In the same way, Coleridge’s carefully structured periodic style is at odds with portraying him as a writer who is really invested in connecting with

²¹ He also implies that readers who do not act like friends—those who level the charge of arrogance against him—are neither good nor wise, but weak and wicked. Although in theory this should safeguard Coleridge from his readers’

his readers. Christensen explains that this “tortuously obscure style” with “its turns and counterturns, its haltings and dizzying inwardnesses,” was essential to Coleridge’s goals for *The Friend* but was also a source of concern for his readers: “Indeed, because the Friend’s periodic style so plausibly evokes the place and feel of truth, indulgence in the exquisitely meditated cadences [...] may on balance be a more serious hazard to the pilgrim soul than the naked impieties of Jacobin rhetoric” (“The Method of the Friend” 11–12).²² Coleridge, it will be recalled, explained to readers that their “effort of attention” was instrumental to the success of the periodical. However, in reality his work put readers off and alienated them precisely because of his deliberately complex style.²³ According to Hazlitt, Coleridge is so preoccupied with the way he appears before his readers and with making sure that they read the text in the right way that he allows his style to obscure his ideas. In other words, Coleridge’s problem is not that readers do not labor enough, but that he labors too much. Although he asks readers to trust his character and see him as a friend, his style alienates them and keeps them at a distance.²⁴

²² Christensen also situates Coleridge’s complex style against the “sophistical” style of periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review*, which mimics wisdom but is ultimately devoid of truth (15).

²³ Klancher argues that “The complex ‘connected’ style of the *Friend* becomes an audience-forming strategy to counter all other strategies being deployed in the early nineteenth century” (153). The overall disorganization of the periodical version of *The Friend*, on the other hand, shows the extent to which Coleridge’s style inhibited the formation of the audience he envisioned.

²⁴ As Hazlitt explains in his essay “On the Prose Style of Poets,” “[I]n treating a common subject, the link is truth, force of illustration, weight of argument, not a graceful harmony in the immediate ideas; and hence the obvious and habitual clue which before guided him is gone, and [the poet] hangs on his patch-work, tinsel finery at random, in despair, without propriety, and without effect. [...] He aims at effect, at captivating the reader, and yet is contented with common-place ornaments, rather than none” (8: 7). When the goal of a prose composition appears to be impressing the reader rather than communicating clearly and naturally, readers feel alienated. This is why, in Hazlitt’s estimation, readers have such a hard time with Coleridge’s prose, for his style aims at effect rather than clearly communicating truth. This makes Coleridge seem “swelling and turgid—everlastingly aiming to be greater than his subject; filling his fancy

While the first two issues of the periodical are devoted to establishing Coleridge's tone and character, he fails to maintain that character throughout the rest of the periodical. Rather, the character that develops in the early issues slips away as Coleridge's frustrations with the project and his readers grow. As he attempts to explain himself better, his style becomes even more convoluted.²⁵ Rather than maintaining the balance between friendship and humility, he frequently assumes an authoritative tone and, more often than not, appears to be talking down to his readers.²⁶ Given Coleridge's uncertainty about his readers, his persistent efforts to influence how he would be viewed by them are not surprising. However, the distinction between his desire to appear as a sincere friend and his inability to sustain that character in the text requires him to regularly address his readers in a way that highlights that uncertainty. His anxieties undermine his ability to present himself in a truly friendly way.²⁷

Although the periodical version of *The Friend* ultimately failed, Coleridge's simultaneous efforts to reform readers' ideas of his character and to engage them as participants in the project are influential for the development of the Romantic familiar essay. *The Friend* was

with fumes and vapours in the pangs and throes of miraculous parturition, and bringing forth only *still births*" (8:12).

²⁵ Hazlitt later described *The Friend* as an "enormous title-page, the longest and most tiresome Prospectus that ever was written; an endless preface to an imaginary work" (4: 108). Coleridge's preoccupation with making sure readers know what to expect ultimately prevents him from satisfying his own expectations for the work.

²⁶ According to Deirdre Coleman, "As readers of *The Friend* we are sometimes cajoled but more often bullied by Coleridge's projections of an entire range of reader-performance. At one end of the spectrum stands the ideal reader, the reader most like Coleridge himself, upon whom instruction falls in delightful excess. [...] Conversely, to stand in a critical relation to the author and his text is to be ranked amongst the lowest and most needy, a parched shrub in the sandy desert" (50).

²⁷ Coleman points out that Coleridge was also "highly susceptible to the pressure of audience, the desire to please and to avoid controversy often leading him to tell his listeners what he imagined they wanted to hear. Yet he also held a strictly authoritarian view of the intellectual superiority of the writer over his readers, and as *The Friend* began to fail, bitterly inveighed against the intellectual laziness of his subscribers" (10).

conceived as an attempt to redefine the range of possibilities for what a periodical journal could do, both in terms of its level of discourse and the complexity of its subject matter. Because of this, Coleridge endeavors to cast readers as active participants in the project of the journal, making their chief goal neither the pursuit of entertainment nor submission to instruction but instead turning them into laborers whose mutual investment in the work requires thoughtful reading and careful reflection. At the same time, Coleridge defines the parameters of his own role as author and presents his character as trustworthy, unpretentious, wise, one who comes to his readers without selfish motives or vanity and who, in all earnestness, seeks to introduce readers to a new way of thinking about social, ethical, political, and aesthetic matters. In refusing to adopt a periodical persona, he presents his true self to readers; at the same time, he asks readers to reject whatever they might know of him by reputation and recreates his character in a way that encourages readers to see him as a close friend, and he promises to treat them as friends, too. Yet, as I have argued in this section, these conceptual goals of *The Friend* are undermined by Coleridge's anxiety about his authority and his difficulty of seeming friendly due to his complex prose. As I show in the next section Hunt's essays, like Coleridge's, develop out of a need to situate essayistic personae against an otherwise damaging reputation. But while Coleridge's prose style undermined his efforts to seem like a friend, Hunt was more successful in assuming a friendly character and creating a sense of relationship with readers because his style is more conversational.

Hunt's Prose and Politics

Hunt's career of editing and writing for periodicals began shortly before Coleridge started to work on *The Friend* and, like Coleridge, he saw the potential to reform the medium. Hunt got his start in 1805 by contributing theatrical criticism to the *News*, a weekly paper started by his

brother John. At a time when many theatrical critics received special favors from theaters in exchange for kind reviews, Hunt took pride in the fact that his financial independence enabled him to keep his critical reviews impartial and therefore more critically fair. When the Hunt brothers launched the *Examiner* in 1808, their goal was to bring the same standards of impartiality to the newspaper by remaining free from the influence of political parties.²⁸ Their motto, adapted from Pope, was “Party is the madness of many for the gain of a few.” John Hunt again served as publisher for the new paper, while Leigh contributed most of the articles (signed with what would eventually become recognized as his famous indicator symbol, ☞) and edited it. Despite the Hunts’ claims of approaching all of their subjects from a position of critical neutrality, however, it did not take long for the paper to become associated in the public eye with the liberal Whigs and reform politics.

The regular writing of essays for the *Examiner* gave Hunt the opportunity to develop his prose style, and one of his key goals was to give a unified voice to the different kinds of articles he wrote for the paper. In an essay “On Periodical Essays” in the second issue, Hunt recognizes the periodical essayist’s hazardous position in relation to his readers when he observes that the periodical essayist is “a writer who claims a peculiar intimacy with the public. [...] his acquaintance is likely to be more lasting, because it is more gradual and because you see him in a greater variety of subject and opinion. If you do not like him at first you may give up his conversation; but the author of a book is fixed upon you for ever, and if he cannot entertain you beyond the moment, you must even give him sleeping room in your library. But how many

²⁸ The Hunts were so concerned that the *Examiner* be free of outside influence that they promised, in their Prospectus, not to print advertisements either.

pleasant modes are there of getting rid of a periodical essay?" (1: 35).²⁹ Hunt's description of the relationship between periodical essayists and their readers demonstrates an important difference between Hunt and Coleridge: whereas Coleridge, discouraged by the intellectual laziness of the reading public, sought to transform his readers on his terms, Hunt openly acknowledges the power readers have and expresses willingness to work within the constraints of their expectations. Although the demands placed on a writer due the periodical's ephemerality could potentially drive a writer to try to please his reader at all costs, Hunt does not succumb to those demands by pleading with readers, as Coleridge does in *The Friend*. Rather, throughout his work he embraces the opportunity to put on different hats and treat different subjects while cultivating a unified persona that will be too attractive for readers to discard.

"On Periodical Essays" was the inaugural essay for a short-lived *Examiner* series called "The Literary and Philosophical Examiner," in which Hunt tried to set aside space, in the midst of the politically charged paper, to experiment with writing about subjects that were markedly apolitical. He tried to follow the tradition of Addison, Oliver Goldsmith, and Samuel Johnson and match their tone of congeniality in the way he approached his subjects. As Hunt grew more confident as a writer, he began to abandon the imitation of his predecessors in favor of his own developing style, but the weekly schedule of the *Examiner* and its limited size still restricted the degree to which he could experiment with the essay form, and Hunt's miscellaneous and apolitical essays were of secondary importance next to the other series in the *Examiner*.³⁰

²⁹ Hunt suggests a number of ways to get rid of essays that highlight the disposability of the periodical, including using it to light a pipe and to protect one's hand when picking up a hot kettle.

³⁰ Other regular series included the "Political Examiner," "Theatrical Examiner," "Foreign Intelligence," "Provincial Intelligence," and a column on the "Fine Arts."

Following the early success of the *Examiner*, the Hunts launched the *Reflector* as a quarterly magazine in the beginning of 1811.³¹ The *Reflector* not only represented an opportunity for increased revenue for the brothers, but also a new and expanded forum in which Leigh could experiment with the style and form of his essays and enlist some of his friends and acquaintances—including Barron Field, Thomas Barnes, George Dyer, and Charles Lamb—to contribute articles as well. Hunt originally planned for a significant part the *Reflector* to be devoted to politics and current events because “they have an importance and interest almost unexampled in history, and because *they are now, in their turn, exhibiting their re-action upon literature, as literature in the preceding age exhibited its action upon them*” (1: 137 Hunt’s italics). This priority given to political subjects was unusual for a magazine that, due to quarterly publication, would not be able to respond to current events in as timely a fashion as a weekly paper, but Hunt believed that his impartiality made him uniquely qualified to discuss politics and to consider the influence of politics on the arts.

Significantly, the Prospectus for the *Reflector* also promised that the magazine would set aside space for “*Miscellaneous Literature, consisting of Essays on Men and Manners, Enquiries into past and present Literature, and all subjects relative to Wit, Morals, and Refinement*” (1: 138). Like the short-lived “Literary and Philosophical Examiner” in the *Examiner*, the miscellaneous essays were intended to serve as a reprieve from the more politically charged subjects that appeared elsewhere in the magazine. The essays that appeared in this part of the *Reflector*, as a contrast to the political material, are some of the earliest versions of the Romantic familiar essay. Marie H. Law has called the *Reflector* “the cradle of the familiar essay in the

³¹ Although the *Reflector* was advertised as a quarterly, its publication was irregular. The first number was issued around January 1, 1811; the second around July 27, 1811; the third, October 25, 1811; and the fourth and last was issued on March 23, 1812.

nineteenth century” (38), for the *Reflector* was the first place where Hunt and Lamb were able to develop their writing on miscellaneous subjects while their respective styles matured.³²

Hunt’s political essays in the *Reflector* are characterized by a frank tone. The matter-of-factness of Hunt’s writing voice in these essays reflects both the seriousness of his approach and the attitude of impartiality he values in his critical thought. In an essay “On the Present and Future Character of the Prince Regent,” for example, Hunt dismisses claims that were being made continually by defenders of the prince, whose behavior Hunt believed disgraceful. He writes,

To write like Englishmen, and to endeavour that others may speak and act like Englishmen is our sole political object; and as no affected dislike of hearing England praised and it’s enemy rebuked, can hide from us it’s real design, which is only to put a more imposing silence upon truth in general, so having nothing to conceal on our own part, we have no language to use but what is both frank and fearless; and are as little inclined to degrade the truth by an apology, as others are to acknowledge it with or without one. (1: 184)

Contrary to Coleridge’s exhausting style in *The Friend*, Hunt’s periodic style in this passage gives the writing a sense of controlled progress, first through through linked infinitive phrases that build toward an explanation of the “political object” of the essay, and then in an series of dependent clauses that point toward his claim about the necessity of “frank and fearless” language. Through the passage, Hunt draws attention to the particularly English method of his

³² Some of Lamb’s most important pre-Elia essays were written for the *Reflector*, including “On the Genius and Character of Hogarth,” “On the Plays of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation,” “On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged,” and “A Bachelor’s Complaint on the Behaviour of Married People,” the last of which was eventually republished as an Elia essay in the *London Magazine* in 1822.

approach as necessary to his subject. His individual personality is absorbed into the editorial *we* as he casts himself as an English everyman, compelled to write in the service of truth.

The style of the passage cited above contrasts starkly with “A Day by the Fire, – Poetically and Practically Considered,” which appeared in the final issue of the *Reflector* and is one of Hunt’s most famous essays from the magazine.³³ An early example of the Romantic familiar essay, it is a highly associative, twenty–page–long reflection on sitting by a fire over the course of a day, with observations ranging from the abstract—such as which seasons are more desirable for sitting by a fire, the suitability of the English climate for such an activity, and what great poets from Homer, to Chaucer, to Milton, to Cowper have written about fires—to the practical, including how to sit by a fire, with or without company, at different times of the day and how to best tend to a fire. At twenty pages, the essay also is strongly mimetic of the slow passing of time as one stares into a dwindling fire.³⁴ Part of the appeal of the essay for readers is that it seems to be about nothing essentially, with no perceptible goal other than to talk at length about an ordinary subject. Against the backdrop of Hunt’s political essays, such aimless discourse marks

³³ Ann Blainey suggests that the essay was the first to represent a change in Hunt’s perspective on life: that “it was his—and everyone’s—duty to cultivate enjoyment and cheerfulness in themselves and in others. He began to surround himself with cheerful objects, flowers, pictures, books, busts. He began to pursue cheerful pastimes. Above all he began to tell his readers that they, too must be seekers after cheerfulness” (49). Hunt’s interest in cultivating cheerfulness in others leads him to experiment with adopting a cheerful—and therefore friendly—attitude in his writing, too.

³⁴ As Kenneth Kendall notes, “The slow, almost imperceptible movement of the essay conveys the slow movement of time as the day creeps from morning to night, just as an inactive, reflective day spent indoors can be, with the passing of time marked only by the meals and the ticking of a clock. [...] The outer world penetrates but dimly as the *Reflector* relaxes with the reader beside him and lets his mind move from one thought to another in its strange associative process” (57).

an abandonment of divisive political interests and moral persuasion in favor of familiar and friendly small-talk.³⁵

Because the intimate style of “A Day by the Fire” depends so much on the illusion of free-flowing conversation, the reader is given an essential role to play in the text. In the second paragraph, the essayist implicates the reader as he reflects on the act of stirring the fire:

If there is any one thing that can reconcile me to the loss of my kettle, more than another, it is that my fire is left quite to itself; it has full room to breathe and to blaze, and I can poke it as I please. What recollections does that idea excite!—Poke it as I please!—Think, benevolent Reader,—think of the pride and pleasure of putting it into the proper bar,—gently levering up the coals,—and seeing the instant and bustling flame above! To what can I compare that moment? That sudden, empty enthusiasm? That fiery expression of vivification? That ardent acknowledgment, as it were, of the care and kindness of the operator?—Let me consider a moment:—it is very odd;—I was always reckoned a lively hand at a simile;—but language and combination absolutely fail me here. If it is like any thing, it must be something beyond every thing in beauty and life. Oh—I have it now:—think, Reader,—if you are one of those who can muster up sufficient sprightliness to engage in a game of forfeits,—on Twelfth night, for instance,—think of a blooming girl, who is condemned to ‘open her mouth and shut her eyes, and see what heaven,’ in the shape of a mischievous young fellow, ‘will send her.’ Her mouth is opened accordingly, the fire of her eyes is dead, her face assumes a doleful air;—up

³⁵ As James Thompson points out, “The essential characteristic of Hunt’s prose style is its strong colloquial quality; everywhere his better work creates the impression of a man with the leisure to talk. [...] He knew that the personal voice was his forte; that, although more esthetically conservative readers were offended by his intimacy, the bulk of his audience enjoyed the rejection of authorial distance” (93).

walks the aforesaid heaven or mischievous young fellow, (young Ouranos,—Hesiod would have called him) and instead of a piece of paper, a thimble, or a cinder, claps into her mouth a peg of orange or a long slice of citron;—then her eyes above instantly light up again,—the smiles wreath about,—the sparklings burst forth,—and all is warmth, brilliancy, and delight.—I am aware that this simile is not perfect; but if it would do for an epic poem, as I think it might after Virgil’s whipping-tops and Homer’s jackasses and black-puddings, the reader perhaps will not quarrel with it. (1: 222–3).

As the essayist grasps about for the best language to invoke the proper images and the most suitable metaphors to describe his feelings, he appeals to the “benevolent” reader for help. Yet Hunt’s invitation for readerly participation is noticeably different from what we saw from Coleridge. This is not simply a writer going on and on about himself, but one that encourages readers to become part of the act and be good-natured throughout it all. The passage is characterized by what appears to be spontaneous expression, most notably as the essayist muses, almost as if to himself, on his inability to come up with the right simile to describe the feeling of pleasure that comes from stoking the embers. This dramatization of his own thought makes him appear genuine and his presentation impromptu, while his apostrophizing implicates readers in the essays’ search for the right description.

The disorderliness of the long, fractured paragraph highlights the need for a more structured method in the essay. In a significant moment for establishing the familiarity between the writer and his readers, Hunt writes, “But to describe my feelings in an orderly manner, I must request the reader to go with me through a day’s enjoyments by the fireside” (1: 223). In other words, he places the responsibility for acquiring that method not on himself but on the reader’s good graces. The “reader” almost becomes a muse, but not as an abstract or imagined source of

inspiration. Rather, this is always a real person, projected by Hunt but realized by whoever is holding the essay and reading it. While the tone of the rest of the essay is conversational, it is really a one-sided conversation in which the reader can only listen as the writer goes on. The way Hunt includes his readers in the opening passages establishes a bond of familiarity, and once that bond is forged Hunt's need to involve readers is satisfied, while the feelings of readerly benevolence that Hunt assumes give him license to pursue his subject in the manner he pleases. After these introductory paragraphs all reference to the reader disappears.³⁶ The reader is only acknowledged at the beginning and at the end of the essay; Hunt will not address him again until last paragraph, some nineteen pages later, when he writes, "and so, gentle Reader, good night:—may the weariness I have caused you make sleep the pleasanter" (1: 239). Or rather, instead of the reader being absent, he is absorbed into the essayist's own character through Hunt's use of the first-person plural; that is, the editorial *we* of "On the Present and Future Character of the Prince Regent" becomes, in this essay, an inclusive *we*.

In "A Day by the Fire," Hunt cultivates a character of someone who enjoys leisure, who can talk as an authority on any number of subjects and writers, and who has a lifestyle that has an appeal to readers. In this sense, the intimacy of Hunt's tone—inviting readers into his study, by the fire, and treating them as friends—includes readers within the idealized atmosphere he creates in the text. Whereas the anxiety in Coleridge's style, as we have seen, alienates readers, the seemingly effortless disinterestedness of Hunt's ultimately makes him seem more accessible to readers. And, because the topic of the essay is, in contrast to Hunt's other work, unrelated to

³⁶ Hunt's "manner," however, does not really become more orderly as the essay progresses. He continues to rely heavily on the associative style to maintain the feeling of natural expression throughout the essay.

politics or contemporary figures, he can involve his readers without risking stirring up debate or presenting contentious opinions.

Despite the opportunity the *Reflector* gave Hunt to practice other kinds of writing outside of the politically charged context of the *Examiner*, and although the *Reflector*'s circulation grew steadily over the course of its short run, financial difficulties led the Hunt brothers to discontinue it after the fourth issue was published on March 23, 1812. Even if they had not planned to stop working on the more labor-intensive *Reflector*, however, they almost certainly would have been forced to stop anyway, for the brothers' energy became fully involved in a debate that was playing out in the pages of the *Examiner*. The day before the final issue of the *Reflector* appeared, Hunt ran an *Examiner* article titled "The Prince on St. Patrick's Day," written in response to a piece of effusive praise of the Prince Regent that had been published in the *Morning Post*. In it Hunt charged the prince with being "a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of 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" (1: 221). These attacks on the regent continued over subsequent weeks and, on April 26, Hunt opened the paper with the unsurprising announcement that he and his brother had been charged with libel. The Hunts' trial was delayed over the summer and autumn, during which time Hunt continued to add to his arsenal of criticisms of the regent. When the trial finally took place on December 9, the brothers were found guilty of libel; on February 3, 1813, they were fined £500 each and sentenced to two years' imprisonment in separate jails. The sentence was longer than the brothers had anticipated, but the forced separation was even more

devastating.³⁷ Despite this blow, however, they continued work on the *Examiner* with the help of friends on the outside, including Thomas Barnes, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, who was a new contributor to the paper in 1814 and supplied critical articles on Hogarth, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. Although Hunt's time in prison did little to alter his political views, it influenced his efforts to produce familiar essays that were free of politics.

I have argued in this section that, because of his role as an editor for a number of different periodicals, Hunt's early essay writing tackles a broad variety of subjects, from political and theatrical criticism to what it is like to spend the day sitting by a fire. The attitude of neutrality and sincerity Hunt attempted to bring to his criticism also influenced the miscellaneous essays he wrote about more "trivial" topics, and he cultivates a conversational prose style that deliberately involves readers in a space that is set apart from the political divisiveness of Hunt's other periodical work. Hunt's prison sentence showed the real consequences of that divisiveness. As I will argue in the next section, "The Round Table" series in the *Examiner* represents an even more concentrated effort by Hunt to develop a friendly relationship with readers by creating space for the miscellaneous and casual essays that were distinguished from his otherwise political and critical writings. As in "A Day by the Fire," Hunt treats his readers as companions in "The Round Table" essays and, through his familiar discourse, he involves them in the act of reading and responding to the essays.

Taking a Seat at Hunt's Round Table

While in prison, Hunt developed the series that would be the successor to the miscellaneous essays in the *Reflector*. The Christmas Day issue of the *Examiner* in 1814

³⁷ As Michael Eberle-Sinatra notes, the brothers were offered a modified sentence on the condition that they refrain from publishing any more political attacks in the *Examiner*, but they refused to accept this compromise (29).

included a “New Prospectus of the Examiner” in which Hunt announced a slight change of direction for the paper that would correspond with the release of its founders from prison. Among the other kinds of articles that were promised to appear in the eighth volume, beginning its run the following week on January 1, 1815, would be “a series of Articles, comprising subjects of Miscellaneous Interest, Literature, Manners, &c. headed the GENERAL EXAMINER” (365: 819). The goal of the new series would be to provide direction on subjects of style and taste and of balancing out the many articles about the current state and criticisms of parliament.³⁸ The model for this series of articles, renamed “The Round Table” when the first piece appeared the next Sunday, was to be the “good old periodical” works from the previous century, especially the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*.

The original “Round Table” series appeared weekly in the *Examiner* over the course of these fourteen numbers, from January 1, 1815, to April 16, with two weeks missed.³⁹ The

³⁸ Hazlitt recalls in Advertisement to the 1817 collection of the series, “These papers were to be contributed by various persons on a variety of subjects; and Mr Hunt, as the Editor, was to take the characteristic or dramatic part of the work upon himself. I undertook to furnish occasional Essays and Criticisms; one or two other friends promised their assistance: but the essence of the work was to be miscellaneous” (2: 3).

³⁹ The legacy of the “Round Table” essays runs through the collected edition of 1817, and for that reason the project has been associated chiefly with Hazlitt. Hazlitt’s is the only name that appeared on the title page of *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners*, and although he explains in the advertisement that the some of the essays in the collection were written by Hunt, Hunt was only responsible for twelve of the fifty-two essays. Many of Hazlitt’s essays in the collection did not actually appear as part of the *Examiner*’s “Round Table” series, and some that were part of the series had been published earlier in other forums, primarily the *Morning Chronicle*. Hunt’s contributions were more specifically taken from the original *Examiner* series (although he also drew from other sources—reprinting, for example, “A Day by the Fire”), and their subject matter was of a much more miscellaneous nature (with titles such as “On Death and Burial,” “On the Night–Mare,” and “On Washerwomen”) as consistent with the goals originally stated for the series. Even though the “Round Table” project started off with Hunt at the helm, every edition of the essays since the 1871 edition of *The Round Table*, edited by Hazlitt’s grandson, W. C. Hazlitt, omits Hunt’s essays entirely. Any of Hunt’s “Round Table” essays that are still read today have mostly survived in miscellaneous essay collections or editions of Hunt’s selected writings—in other

fifteenth number did not appear until August 6, ending a silence of “The Round Table” that had lasted four months (but without acknowledging the series’ absence over the span), and the narrative framework of those first issues was largely dropped in favor of more consistent essays—mainly critical essays written by Hazlitt—that would eventually characterize the series. As a result, however, the original narrative and context of “The Round Table” as it was developed in the earliest numbers has been mostly forgotten. In fact, there are three primary narratives that develop over the course of the first fourteen numbers—of which only five were written by Hazlitt—as a means of establishing the framework for the series: 1) explaining the “Round Table” project; 2) establishing the “Round Table” relationship between readers and the writers through the use of published correspondence; and 3) defining roles for members of the Round Table, as well as for their male and female readers, through the discussion of chivalric ideals. The initial fourteen-issue run of “The Round Table” demonstrates Hunt’s investment in cultivating friendly and mutually beneficial relationships with his readers, apart from the more politically charged and therefore contentious material elsewhere in the *Examiner*.

“The Round Table” plays a similar role in the *Examiner* to that filled by the miscellaneous papers in the *Reflector*—that is, it provides a reprieve from the political essays that surround it—and the series is another important piece in the development of the Romantic familiar essay. Like the *Reflector* essays, “The Round Table” establishes three characteristic traits for the way the genre would continue to develop over the next decade. First, Hunt attempted to ensure, in the prefatory numbers of the series, that “The Round Table” would be understood apart from his other work as a distinctly apolitical type of writing. Second, the prose style used by the series is characterized by a frankness of tone that approximates the kind of directness and conversational

words, they are only read outside of the context of the “Round Table” project, which in its origins is different from the series’ surviving legacy in ways that I will outline below.

exchange between friends and close acquaintances. And third, to compliment the frank tone and apolitical focus, the series is addressed specifically toward readers who, it is assumed, will share the interests of the writers and be predisposed toward reading the essays sympathetically rather than with hostility. These three characteristics can by no means be taken for granted, especially given Hunt's reputation in 1815 and the nature of his earlier periodical writing, but together they highlight the ideals of authenticity and sincerity as central to the "Round Table" project, and they constitute a clear effort to create a bond of familiarity between writers and readers.

This is not to say that Hunt and Hazlitt themselves were apolitical, or even that their "Round Table" essays are uninfluenced by their politics, but it is significant that within their essays on "Manners, Morals, and Taste" the writers are deliberate about creating an atmosphere in which their social and literary views can be expressed and developed apart from civil and social debates. That these essays appeared in the *Examiner* heightens the contrast between, for example, essays on common subjects (such as the characteristics of washerwomen) and long-dead authors in "The Round Table" and the weekly content of "The Political Examiner," with its open criticism of the regent and British politics. The conversational tone of the "Round Table" papers plays a significant role in keeping the subjects in line with that apolitical goal because Hunt replaces the voice of disbelief or outrage, found elsewhere in the *Examiner*, with a lighter, even humorous, touch. The metaphor of conversation is at the center of "The Round Table," encouraging readers to see the essays as the written record of a real conversation among friends who are sharing a meal. This curtails pedantic flourishes and personal attacks in favor of mutual understanding and support. Significantly, the series models conversation by posting replies and counterarguments to previous articles and by including correspondence that keeps the series from becoming stagnant.

Writing as “The President of the Round Table,” Hunt opens the first number by observing that “there has now been a sufficient distance of time since the publication of our good old periodical works, and a sufficient change in matters worthy of social observation, to warrant the appearance of a similar set of papers” (366: 11). Despite initially patterning the series after the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, however, Hunt claims that his essays will be different from his predecessors’ because they will not be written through fictional personae. He promises the reader “that wishing to be regarded as his companions also, we act as becomes all honest persons under such circumstances, and profess to be no other than we are:—in other words, we assume no fictitious characters” (366: 11). The fellowship of likeminded companions that make up the Round Table desire to include their readers as part of their company, as well. Echoing Coleridge’s claim that a fictional persona would impede his ability to act as his readers’ Friend, Hunt emphasizes the importance of familiarity in “The Round Table”—of a kind that is not hidden behind a veil—for making readers into participatory companions.

As I have argued, this strategy of denying artificial presentation, reminiscent of Montaigne, prioritizes personal and textual authenticity as a means of enhancing the relationship between writers and readers. In a telling gloss on the role of pseudonyms in early–nineteenth–century periodicals, Hunt refers to “fictitious characters” not as pen names but as the “*names of war*” behind which writers hide as they attack each other in print.⁴⁰ By contrast, Hunt explains that his decision to appear before readers entails honesty and is a prerequisite for friendship between writers and readers. At the same time, he clarifies that appearing as “no other than what [they] are” does not mean that the writers do not have anything to hide, but he declares that it

⁴⁰ Hunt’s literal translation of *noms de guerre*, the French term for pseudonym, draws attention to the hostility that emerged with the use of pseudonyms in the early–nineteenth–century periodical industry.

would be simply too difficult for them to try to keep up with fictional characters on top of their real ones.

“The Round Table” depends on the appearance of authorial sincerity but, as its title suggests, it also draws from the *Spectator*’s influence in setting up the conceit of a public conversation as the source of the material, with the important distinction that in “The Round Table” the conversation is ostensibly private rather than public. By moving the conversation from a public meeting place like a coffeehouse to a private dining table, the setting heightens the illusion of the intimacy of the discourse. Of course, because the essays appear in print, they are really no more private or intimate than those produced by the Spectator Club, nor is the round table around which they gather any more real in a material sense than Steele and Addison’s fictional club. Nevertheless, “The Round Table” presupposes the condition of friendship between authors and readers, fostering the conversation at table—and, afterwards, by the fire—which occurs naturally over “a philosophic bottle of wine”: “[W]e are, literally speaking, a small party of friends, who meet once a week at a Round Table to discuss the merits of a leg of mutton and of the subjects upon which we are to write. This we do without any sort of formality, letting the stream of conversation wander through any grounds it pleases, and sometimes retiring into our own respective cogitations” (366: 12). The promise of mundane subjects and casual conversation is, again, especially striking given the surrounding political context in the *Examiner*. In other words, “The Round Table” is space set aside in the *Examiner* for the familiar essay and for friendly conversation between writers and readers. Unlike the rest of the paper, the private conversation of the series is concerned with congenial exchange, not politics.

More than just a private conversation, “The Round Table” constructs a dramatic narrative framework that draws on the Arthurian Round Table tradition, recalling both the golden age of

Britain during Arthur's kingship and the chivalric virtues of Arthur's court.⁴¹ In the first number the President of the Round Table promises readers that he and his companions will constantly have those traditions in mind as they write their articles. The companions are given the title of Knights and the President imagines himself, "under an unexpected but more useful character" as the fulfillment of Arthur's prophesied return. The President commits to maintaining the chivalric ideal throughout the "Round Table" essays, since "the most chivalrous persons" had been moral reformers from the earliest ages who fought "error and corruption with various weapons, [...] who carried light into darkness, and liberty among the imprisoned, and dissipated, with some charm or other about them, the illusions of pleasure" (366: 13). Since contemporary efforts at moral reform were ineffective, the Knights of the Round Table promise to revive the age of chivalry in nineteenth century England and thereby usher in a new golden age. By highlighting the connections between Arthur's Round Table and *The Examiner's*, Hunt humorously ushers in the return of Britain's golden age (and the social unity it suggests) and asks readers to come to the series with the feelings of nostalgia and eagerness fitting such a momentous occasion.

The "edifying goals" of "The Round Table," as Hunt refers to them, depend on readers' willingness to participate actively in the process of familiar exchange, despite the fact that readers are never really invited into the fellowship of the table. Even as readers are, in a sense, made into companions, inclusion in the primary level of conversation that appears in print is restricted to writers of "Round Table" essays. Readers are instead invited to participate in the

⁴¹ According to Nicholas Roe, "The Arthurian association was important to Hunt, who fancied that his efforts as a poet and moral reformer revived 'the spirit of that great British Monarch'. Hunt knew that King Arthur had never existed outside 'the brain of a poet', but that was exactly the point: like other quasi-mythical figures such as Charlemagne and Robin Hood, the idea of Arthur had the gift to attract and impel 'persons of greater prowess than himself'—as Hunt was now doing in the *Examiner*" (221). While Roe is one of the few critics to acknowledge the connection between Arthur's Round Table and Hunt's, he overlooks the humor in Hunt's use of the framework, which I will elaborate on below.

fellowship through correspondence. The initial fourteen numbers of the series especially contain a significant amount of correspondence from readers responding to specific articles and, more often, to the Round Table framework in general. Correspondents (classed by Hunt as “all persons not actually admitted to the said Table” [366: 12]) are given strict instructions that all communication with members of the Table had to occur in the form of a letter, addressed according to the formula, “Mr. President,---Gentlemen of the Round Table” or “To the Member of the Round Table, T. or W.” This pattern of address prescribes a formal difference between readers and the kind informal relationship that they are told the members of the Round Table have with each other, but it also gives the readers a chance to feel included in the project. Through correspondence, readers can actively take part in the larger “Round Table” project, and in the process the community that the series suggests realized.

The actual role that the correspondence plays in the series varies from one letter to the next. According to the original plan, “The Round Table” was supposed to consist of contributions by a handful of writers on miscellaneous subjects. The series was conceived as a collaborative effort between five writers,⁴² but the other writers, however, failed to materialize, with the exception of Hazlitt, who recycled a couple of articles he had written for the *Morning Chronicle* before making his first original contributions in Nos. 9 and 10. Lacking the help he had counted on from his fellow writers, Hunt was constrained to produce most of the material on his own, and he saw the lack of variety in contributions as a threat to the verisimilitude of the Round Table framework.⁴³ If the illusion of a Round Table conversation is to be maintained by

⁴² One of the writers was Charles Lamb.

⁴³ Hunt writes in the fifth number, “I have been telling my companions of the Round Table, that if scarcely one other signature besides my own continues to appear in our lucubrations, people will begin to doubt the reality of our Institution, or that I shall at least cut as poor a figure as King Lisuarte, when all his knights abandoned him” (370: 75). His explanation

miscellaneous contributions from diverse members, the absence of those contributions makes the President's claims seem like flights of the imagination.

The first piece of correspondence is introduced to “vary this monotony [of the President's essays] for a week or so,” and as more correspondents are added their letters form a kind of dialogue with each other. Hunt also engages with the letters by commenting on them in introductory and concluding notes, praising the correspondents with whom he agrees and gently correcting others. Some of the letters printed in “The Round Table” were written by readers but, as with the correspondence in the *Spectator*, a significant portion was actually written by Hunt and his friends in disguise. Regardless of who really wrote the letters, however, the crucial function they serve for the series remains the same. Hunt uses correspondence to create the appearance of variety in “The Round Table,” to add depth to the series and to increase the number of participants in the conversation that was supposed to be modeled. Through the letters the conversation of “The Round Table” comes to life. Moreover, because the writers of the letters are also readers of the series, they act as surrogates for other, non–corresponding readers. These letters serve as interpretive models for reading the series and appropriately responding to it. They show readers how the familiar conversation works, how to participate in that conversation, and how to react to it.

For example, the fifth number features a letter from a correspondent who calls himself “Serviceable Servant.” The letter is filled with extravagant praise for the companions of “The

for the lack of other contributions is that his companions have been too busy pursuing “knightly” activities: “A chivalrous life is not an idle one; and they have lately been busy in other quarters. One [Lamb] has had as much Indian business on his hands, as would have tried Alexander himself; a second, like Sir Launcelot, has been pushing his exploits to the north of this realm; and a third, after the manner of other knights, who made nothing of having crowns offered them, and became kings and emperors in a matter of course, is considering whether or not he shall consent to have a superintendence over the affairs of the whole civilized globe” (370: 75).

Round Table” and the correspondent expresses his desire to be included in the fellowship as a lesser member, an esquire to their knights: “let me have a little stool and table placed behind your chair, with a common–place folio, in which I may keep the scantings and crumbings of conversation that may be thrown from the Round Table, as unworthy of insertion in the journal” (370: 75). Serviceable Servant is a reader who values “The Round Table” so much that he is willing to serve the writers in whatever way necessary just so that he will be included. Hunt’s response to this request signals that it represents the attitude of an ideal reader. He writes, “[W]e applaud the spirit of it, and do regard him as manifesting excellent qualifications for the office which he requests. He appears to be at once modest, active, and intelligent.” Because it is only filled with praise for the premises of the series, the content of the letter does not have much to offer readers of “The Round Table,” but Hunt’s enthusiastic affirmation of the letter ensures that readers will understand it for what it really is: a model response to the series.

The essential role of the Serviceable Servant letter in modeling reader response becomes much clearer when it is placed alongside the letter that appears in the next number of “The Round Table,” a letter as different from the first in style and content as imaginable. The writer of this new letter, “A Mechanic,” asks the members of the Round Table to help settle a disagreement he has had with a friend about taxation, war spending, and food production. The response this second correspondent receives is starkly different from the first: he receives a cool rebuff followed by the reminder that “it is not the intention of the Round Table to admit discussions in general that have any thing to do with politics or particular living persons, and that if the same subject is pursued by the present or any other Correspondent, he will be good enough

to treat it in as general a light as possible” (371: 90).⁴⁴ In other words, this second letter also models a response, but in this case the example shows the kind of thing that the series will not treat and of the kinds of letters that should not be written. Significantly, the President prints the letter even though he criticizes its appropriateness for “The Round Table” and refuses to discuss its content. The opposite responses elicited by these first two letters emphasize the goals of “The Round Table” and show how it will be different from what readers might expect given the *Examiner*’s overall interest in questioning political activity. Taken together, the two letters show the degree to which “The Round Table” is distinguished from the rest of the *Examiner*.

The President of the Round Table is serious about the goals that he explains for the project, and he regularly reminds his readers and correspondents what to expect and how to participate appropriately. At the same time, the tone of Hunt’s writing is frequently lighthearted and humorous, adding a whimsical undertone to the way the series is positioned against prevailing political and social opinions. This aspect of “The Round Table” is not often observed, yet it is crucial to the overall tone of the series. Hunt’s praise of Serviceable Servant’s letter and his disappointment with the letter from “A Mechanic” both depend on humor to maintain the congenial familiarity that he expresses the wish to cultivate with his readers. The humorous tone is especially apparent when Hunt describes his companions at the Arthurian Round Table as “fellow knights,” emphasizing the chivalric ideals they claim to follow.⁴⁵ For example, when

⁴⁴ The President of the Round Table is also careful to remind readers that he had just finished serving a two-year prison sentence.

⁴⁵ Some of the funniest letters are addressed from female readers who ridicule the Round Table framework. One reads, “MR. PRESIDENT,—It is in vain for you to pretend that you are a friend to the women; I dont [sic] believe one word of it.---Were not you the Inventor of that Round Table, as you call it?---You are as bad as Don Quixote, for aught I know, and as mad too.---Pray, Sir, who made you a Knight, and all your fine companions? I suppose some great Governor of a castle or other of your own finding, if the truth was known.---You a friend to the women! Yes, indeed; but God preserve me from such friends!---You have done me more injury

Hazlitt writes, in one of his first contributions to the series, that “he never met with any woman who could reason and with but one reasonable woman” (372: 108), the president responds in the following number with disbelief and mock outrage. He writes,

If the reader remembers the great dusty canopy that came down over the feasters in Horace, or presents to his mind the sudden appearance of ORLANDO sword in hand before the Duke and his dinner party in *As You Like It*, or has read of the ghastly dishes that RICHARD the First is said to have provided for the Saracens whom he entertained in the Holy Land, or has heard of the terrible little fellow that issued out of a pie at a royal wedding, or finally has been at a dejeuner, or with a set of pasty-eaters under a tree, when a bull has taken it into his head to make one of them, he may have some faint idea, some dim, far-distant and indifferent notion, of the sensation that struck our Round Table last week at the ungallant ebullition of one of the Knights. A Knight, and attack the ladies! One of *us*, and not be perfectly amiable and high-minded! Where could it end, and how could it be? To begin too, as he did, in that noble manner,—with that provokingly fine proof of a generous knowledge, that lofty survey as it were, of space and time,—and then to pounce down with his Hippogriff upon the whole dismayed body of females, and begin laying about him, like the Iron Man in SPENSER, as if he were among a parcel of rabble;—what could it mean? We looked at his eyes, but they were whole:—we looked at his hair, but it was in good and plentiful condition; we looked at him as far as the Table would let us, but there he was, sitting in as complacent a style and looking as fine and conclusive, as if he had been rescuing forty damsels from insult. We only observed that

than enough. Here’s my husband, who must copy you, forsooth, in every thing, has just been having my best mahogany table, with two beautiful large flaps, cut, because to be sure nothing will suit him not but a round one. Oh, that he ever took in your paper!” (378: 207).

he drank his wine a little more eagerly than usual; and that one of us next him happening to take out a pocket–handkerchief, he started in a half–suppressed manner, as if he had seen a ghost in a white petticoat. (373: 121–2).

This opening paragraph is a parody of the outrage and moral superiority found in conservative periodicals. Its hyperbole—from the exaggerated comparisons that describe the Round Table’s surprise to the image of Hazlitt leaping off a hippogriff to attack the whole of womankind—both heightens the sense of outrage expressed by the hypothetical community to which Hazlitt belongs and undermines that outrage completely. Hunt’s exclamations and questions in the middle of the passage express shock and confusion that a fellow knight would act in such a way, as if the preceding essay had really been spoken in a private gathering—rather than printed in a newspaper, of which Hunt is the editor—and in so doing had caught the other members of the Round Table entirely off guard. Finally, the closing description of the offending knight, looking somewhat uneasy as he anticipates the response to what he has said, adds comic realism to the scenario, demonstrating that the way one behaves at the table, even among friends and companions, may have real consequences. In response, the President assumes the role of champion to offended women and the humorous tone is maintained in his defense, thereby allowing Hunt to treat the subject seriously while staying true to the informal and pleasurable atmosphere of the series as a whole.

Although they bear little resemblance to the essays in the series that followed, the first fourteen numbers of “The Round Table” establish a tone and framework that the writers used to influence reader expectation about the series. Through the dialogue between members of the Round Table and correspondents, as well as through the way members respond to each other from one essay to the next, the first fourteen issues create an atmosphere of congenial and

lighthearted discourse, emphasizing the importance of familiarity and mutual cooperation in both writing and reading. However, after the first fourteen numbers of “The Round Table,” and following Hunt’s diminished involvement, the series takes on a significantly different character.⁴⁶ Most of the remaining essays were written by Hazlitt on subjects such as poetry or political and social philosophies. While Hunt contributed some of his best-known familiar essays (such as “On Washerwomen”) later in the series, the framework of knights and chivalry on which “The Round Table” was initially structured was abandoned.

Hazlitt esteemed Hunt as one of the best prose-writers of his generation: “[T]he genuine master-spirit of the prose-writer is there; the tone of lively, sensible conversation; [...] Mr. Hunt wants something of the heat and earnestness of the political partisan; but his familiar and miscellaneous papers have all the ease, grace, and point of the best style of Essay-writing” (8: 13). Contrary to Hunt’s other periodical writing, “The Round Table” essays feature a voice that is playful and free, immensely likeable in the way he presents himself to his readers and in the way that he invites readers into fellowship with him. Hunt tended toward intimacy in his style regardless of context, but he could also be malicious, as well. Hunt’s familiar essays, on the other hand, developed in the *Reflector* and “The Round Table,” prioritize casual friendliness that is conducive to building mutually cooperative relationships with readers.

In 1819, while he was still working as editor for the *Examiner*, Leigh Hunt launched yet another periodical, the *Indicator*. While the familiar essays in the *Reflector* and “The Round Table” shared space with other political and critical essays, Hunt declares in his Prospectus that the *Indicator* will be devoted specifically to “literary” subjects that have nothing to do with

⁴⁶ Edmund Blunden argues that, by 1816, the series “was becoming rather dull; it was often empty, and when it was not, it was almost always occupied by Hazlitt in solitary and minatory state” (65).

contemporary events or issues. He elaborates in the next issue that “the Examiner is to be regarded as the reflection of [the Editor’s] public literature, and the Indicator of his private. In the one, he has a sort of public meeting with his friends: in the other, a more retired one. The Examiner is his tavern–room for politics, for political pleasantries, for criticism upon the theatres and living writers. The Indicator is his private room, his study, his retreat from public care and criticism, with the reader who chuses to accompany him” (*Indicator* 1: 10). From a modern critical perspective, it is ironic that Hunt saw the private and withdrawn aspect of the *Indicator*, and its avoidance of politics, as ensuring a more lasting legacy than the political and social issues covered in the *Examiner*. For Hunt, however, these personal essays provided a valuable retreat from an otherwise hostile periodical and political environment, and they point to his continual effort to create an intimate relationship with readers that exists outside of divisive political debates.

I have argued in this chapter that Coleridge and Hunt demonstrate a desire to restore a relationship with readers that many writers felt had been fractured. Rejecting the essayistic personae of the periodical essay, both writers tried to appear friendly in a way that would make them seem trustworthy to readers. It was not enough, however, to simply assure readers of the strength of one’s character and then assume that this was sufficient in gaining readers’ friendship. This was what Coleridge tried to do in *The Friend*, and he was unsuccessful at it. Rather, writers had to adopt a style and tone that suggested a friendly character and encouraged conversational exchange between writers and readers, as Hunt did in essays like “A Day by the Fire” and in the early numbers of “The Round Table.” As I will argue in my next chapter, Hazlitt took a similar approach to Hunt’s in the “Table–Talk” essays he wrote for the *London Magazine*, under the cover of anonymity, and in his later collection of *Table–Talk* essays published under

his own name. More specifically, Hazlitt developed his familiar style in an effort to connect with readers in the aftermath of the severe critical attacks that had been leveled at him in the conservative periodicals. Hazlitt's essays are one of the strongest reflections of the tension between authentic self-presentation and the desire to have one's work accepted by a public in an age of personal criticism.

Chapter 4: Hazlitt's Search for Familiarity in an Age of Personality

In the October 19, 1809, issue of *The Friend*, Coleridge complains about the precariousness of writing in an “AGE OF PERSONALITY, this age of literary and political *Gossiping*, when the meanest Insects are worshipped with a sort of Egyptian Superstition, if only the brainless head be atoned for by the sting of *personal* malignity in the tail” (2: 138). Earlier that year, George Canning and William Gifford founded the *Quarterly Review* as a London-based and conservative response to the *Edinburgh Review*, which itself had started in 1802 with the promise of political neutrality but quickly became identified as a mouthpiece of the Whig party. Coleridge does not name the “meanest Insects” who are worshipped for their cruel attacks on others, but the title could have applied equally as well to Gifford or Francis Jeffrey, his counterpart at the *Edinburgh Review*: both editors used their journals to attack writers—on the basis of their personal lives as much as on the merits of their work—with whom they were politically and ideologically opposed. Coleridge and Hunt's respective attempts to overcome the limitations of this “AGE OF PERSONALITY” and become friends and companions of their readers, as I argued in the previous chapter, point to the beginning of efforts to construct new *textual* personalities and utilize sincerity and familiarity not as ends in themselves but as the means for recreating relationships with the readers from whom they felt alienated.

In this sense, Coleridge's *Friend* and Hunt's “Round Table” can be seen as representing the tragedy and comedy of the Romantic reaction to what I described in the last chapter as the crisis of relationship between readers and writers. Or, to put it more accurately, they regard it as melodrama and farce: Coleridge saw a world made up mostly of hostile readers and tried to convince them to believe his sincerity and accept him as a friend; Hunt's more ironic solution, on the other hand, was to set up his Round Table as the supposed paradigm of moral reform in

England and then treat the whole thing as an Arthurian joke. These extremes meet in Hazlitt, an occasional friend and enemy to both writers, who championed familiar conversation as the most effective strategy for connecting with readers. In this chapter, I argue that Hazlitt developed his “Table–Talk” persona as a strategy for crafting an authentic presence in the midst of a vicious periodical market. The conversational, familiar style of the “Table–Talk” essays reflects Hazlitt’s efforts to appear more sincere to his readers and thereby enables him to undermine the authority of the reviewing periodicals in the “AGE OF PERSONALITY.” In the process, he creates a new class of readers who rely on their own critical intuition rather than the biased, gossipy judgments of reviewers.

In the first section I demonstrate that Hazlitt’s legacy as a critic and essayist is the product of an uncritical absorption of his own comments about writing, which are subsequently applied to his work. More specifically, Hazlitt is valued as “authentic” according to a Romantic standard of textual authenticity that he helped to create. Contrary to most modern views of Hazlitt, the second section shows the extent to which the authenticity and reliability of his criticism was called into question by some of his contemporaries. He was subject to “literary and political *Gossiping*” that undermined his critical authority and required him to develop strategies for presenting himself sincerely to skeptical readers. The most important of these strategies was the plain–speaking, familiar style Hazlitt cultivates in his “Table–Talk” essays, which I examine in the third and fourth sections. As the third section demonstrates, Hazlitt makes the anonymous “Table–Talk” essays in the *London Magazine* seem like the work of a friendly, disinterested writer whose primary goal is to teach his readers to read critically and intuitively. In contrast to this disinterested persona, the fourth section shows how Hazlitt, as the named author of the collected *Table–Talk*, cultivates a bitter and discontented character whose authentic criticism

undermines the power of the periodical criticism he opposes. These contrasting personae point to Hazlitt's authenticity not as an end in itself, but as a rhetorical device for influencing the development of objective, disinterested criticism.

Hazlitt and the Romantic Ideology of Authenticity

Much more than his contemporary essayists, Hazlitt has been acknowledged by critics as writing in his own voice. The pronouncement is usually made to show the contrast between Hazlitt and his friend and contemporary Charles Lamb. For many of his critics, the strong presence of Hazlitt's voice is indicative of his sincerity and depth of feeling as an essayist.¹ The frankness with which readers are addressed in a typical Hazlitt essay also creates a strong impression of a writer who has observed the world around him and reflected on some of the customs and paradoxes therein, and who now feels compelled to share those reflections with others. For these reasons, Hazlitt is more often compared with Montaigne and Rousseau—paradigms of authentic self-investigation—than with Hunt and Lamb, whose overt playfulness makes them seem more equivocal. For example, Graham Good describes Hazlitt's essays as autobiographical sketches, the Romantic “prose genre equivalent to ‘Tintern Abbey’ or to episodes of the *Prelude*, except of course that they remain isolated episodes” (78). Seen through the lens of autobiography, Hazlitt's essays can be stitched together into a tapestry displaying of the power of the Romantic critical genius as well as the frustrations that accompany that power.

¹ Laurence Stapleton begins his chapter on Hazlitt by contrasting him with Bacon, Addison and Steele, and Lamb: “Hazlitt speaks in his own person. His is not the grave impersonal voice of ‘counsels, civil and moral,’ nor the brisk sociable presence of a Bickerstaff or Spectator, or the smiling mask of Elia. He comes forward and utters an incisive sentence reflecting a straight personal conviction” (93).

More often than not, these evaluations of Hazlitt's work are based on his own comments about essay-writing and prose style. To be sure, his method seems to invite such an application.² The titles of his two collections of miscellaneous essays—*Table-Talk* and *The Plain Speaker*—suggest a writer who is invested in communicating truth with as much earnestness as possible, and this attitude again reflects back on the sincere personality of the writer. Because Hazlitt clearly saw himself as the inheritor to the tradition of Montaigne, his description of Montaigne's *Essais* is useful for showing what he valued in his own writing. In his 1819 lecture "On the Periodical Essayists," he writes,

The great merit of Montaigne then was, that he may be said to have been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man. And as courage is generally the effect of conscious strength, he was probably led to do so by the richness, truth, and force of his own observations on books and men. He was, in the truest sense, a man of original mind, that is, he had the power of looking at things for himself, or as they really were, instead of blindly trusting to, and fondly repeating what others told him that they were. [...] He does not converse with us like a pedagogue with his pupil, whom he wishes to make as great a blockhead as himself, but like a philosopher and friend who has passed through life with thought and observation, and is willing to enable others to pass through it with pleasure and profit. (5: 85–6)

For Hazlitt, Montaigne's interest in adhering only to truth that he arrives at through the process of self-discovery makes him a model of true and courageous authenticity. Everything Hazlitt

² When he explains in his essay "On Familiar Style," for example, that "To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes" (6: 217), Hazlitt appears to be describing his own prose style, an impression that is further strengthened by the *apologia* for his work that appears later in the essay.

says about Montaigne, modern critics have said about Hazlitt. His essays are often treated with reverence because his criticism seems to emerge through authentic self-reflection rather than—as in Coleridge’s case for example—religious or philosophical idealism.³ Compared to Hunt and Lamb, Hazlitt is considered the more philosophical and critical essayist, the heir of Johnson and precursor to Emerson and Ruskin who, according to Harold Bloom, “teaches us several unfashionable truths as to the nature of authentically *literary* criticism” (8).⁴

As useful as it is for creating a compelling portrait of Hazlitt’s essayistic practice and his intellectual contributions to late Romanticism, this critical narrative needs to be revised. Jerome McGann has rightly cautioned against the “uncritical absorption of Romanticism’s own self-representations” (1), but critics have been slow to recognize that the representation of authenticity in the Romantic essay is of the same kind that McGann resists. Indeed, the expressivist readings of Montaigne that still survive in the twenty-first century are a Romantic invention, the heritage of essayists like Hazlitt and Lamb.⁵ I argue that critical readings of Hazlitt’s work that replicate the same language Hazlitt used to describe Montaigne’s essays

³ As Uttara Natarajan, Tom Paulin, and Duncan Wu claim in their bicentenary collection of essays, “Central to the current reappraisal of Hazlitt is the acknowledgement of his stature as a philosopher and not simply a ‘familiar’ essayist” (*Metaphysical Hazlitt* i). This “heroification” of Hazlitt as a philosophical Romantic critic began most notably with David Bromwich’s *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (1983), and it usually comes at the expense of Coleridge, whose turgid prose and conservative politics of his later life contrast with Hazlitt’s plain-speaking and unswerving radicalism.

⁴ According to Bloom, Hazlitt shows that such criticism “must be experiential; it must be at least somewhat empirical or pragmatic; it must be informed by love for its subject; above all it must follow no method except the personality of the critic himself” (8).

⁵ Neither of Montaigne’s major translators—John Florio and Charles Cotton—describe Montaigne’s essays as containing the kind of authentic self that Hazlitt finds there, nor do eighteenth-century essayists like Joseph Addison or Samuel Johnson. The first major edition to add Montaigne’s travel journal and letters to Cotton’s translation of the essays—thereby amplifying an expressivist reading of the essays themselves—appeared in 1842 and was translated by Hazlitt’s son William Hazlitt. This edition was later corrected and revised by William Carew Hazlitt in 1877.

participate in the problematic perpetuation of a particularly Romantic ideology of authenticity and the self, such as that described by Charles Taylor and Charles Guignon, in which greater worth is placed on writing that supposedly represents the writer's "true" inner person.⁶

That Hazlitt's writing voice seems so authentic to his modern readers is evidence that this Romantic view of authenticity and sincerity has transcended its historical moment. What is less immediately apparent is how this idea of authenticity has emerged from a body of texts as diverse and multivocal as Hazlitt's. Readers who come to Hazlitt's work expecting to find a unified textual self will in fact discover several contrasting versions of the writer, each representing different attitudes and interests that belong to distinct narrative personae embodied in a variety of prose styles. The most obvious of these differences is apparent when Hazlitt's conversational familiar essays (which are a development from the *Round Table* on which he collaborated with Hunt) are compared with his published lecture series. In the former, Hazlitt assumes the persona of a writer conversing informally with his readers, while in the latter he is a lecturer whose controlled oratory shows his authority on his subjects. Despite occasional similarities, each context suggests a very different writer with goals that are unique to the situation.

The division of Hazlitt's voices is not restricted to his familiar essays and lectures. In *Liber Amoris*, for example, which is written as a dialogue between lovers and supplemented by

⁶ Guignon's description of artistic authenticity in Romanticism contains echoes of Hazlitt's comments on Montaigne and Bloom's depiction of Hazlitt: "To be an artist, one must become authentic. The artist learns to let the unconscious creative process work itself out in its own way within him, without imposing the assumptions derived from social expectations and reinforced by the intellect. But the converse is also true: to be authentic is to become an artist. For only the creative person can achieve the sort of access to the inner life that captures its depth and potentiality" (73).

their letters, Hazlitt is a suffering lover as the barely-disguised “H.”⁷ Whereas in his political and critical essays Hazlitt’s tone is controlled and demonstrates the writer’s critical distance from his subject matter, the writer of *Liber Amoris* is consumed by his passion, so much so that he employs seventeenth-century diction when he is most upset.⁸ On the other hand, the speaker in Hazlitt’s famous narrative essay “The Fight” (who signs his name “Phantastes”) comes across as good-natured and enthusiastic about attending his first boxing match, an attitude characterized by slang and boxing jargon that suggest the influence an essay’s subject can have on the writer’s voice.⁹ Finally, in his *Letter to William Gifford, Esq.*, Hazlitt launches into a tirade of insults directed at the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, conveying anger that would be out of place in one of his lectures or familiar essays but that adds power to his accusations about Gifford’s periodical practices.¹⁰

The differences between these examples, and between the authorial persona suggested by each, unsettles any notion of Hazlitt’s style as a transparent representation of his authentic voice

⁷ This book was published anonymously and with a headnote explaining that the protagonist is dead. It is closely based on Hazlitt’s ill-fated affair with Sarah Walker, the daughter of his landlord, and draws freely from letters between Hazlitt and Sarah.

⁸ In a letter titled “The Quarrel,” for example, H. writes, “You are the only woman that ever made me think she loved me, and that feeling was so new to me, and so delicious, that it ‘will never from my heart.’ Thou wert to me a little tender flower, blooming in the wilderness of my life; and though thou should’st turn out a weed, I’ll not fling thee from me, while I can help it. Wert thou all that I dread to think—wert thou a wretched wanderer in the street, covered with rags, disease, and infamy, I’d clasp thee to my bosom, and live and die with thee, my love. Kiss me, thou little sorceress!” (7: 17).

⁹ “The crowd was very great when we arrived on the spot [...] The odds were still on Gas, but only about five to four. Gully had been down to try Neate, and had backed him considerably, which was a damper to the sanguine confidence of the adverse party. About two hundred thousand pounds were pending” (9: 67)

¹⁰ “The dingy cover that wraps the pages of the *Quarterly Review* does not contain a concentrated essence of taste and knowledge, but is a receptacle for the scum and sediment of all the prejudice, bigotry, ill-will, ignorance, and rancour, afloat in the kingdom. This the fools and knaves who pin their faith on you know, and it is on this account they pin their faith on you” (5: 344).

or, on a larger scale, of Romantic critical sincerity. Rather, Hazlitt freely adapted his writing voice for each context. Even the most familiar of Hazlitt's voices—the frank and straightforward persona of *Table–Talk* and *Plain Speaker* essays—consists of multiple voices that Hazlitt uses strategically in different writing situations and publications. Yet the tendency of much modern criticism is to remove Hazlitt's statements from their contexts, taking a phrase here or a sentence there in order to explain his overarching philosophy. Rather than looking at a single familiar essay as representative of a conversation between Hazlitt and his readers, this kind of criticism draws from numerous texts in an attempt to construct coherent pictures of Hazlitt's thought.¹¹ To treat Hazlitt's work synchronically and systematically in this way is to overlook the characteristically unsystematic conversational aspects of the familiar essay he practices. Hazlitt values the formal possibilities that come through conversation, possibilities that do not exist in the kind of thematic coherence that makes for more compelling criticism. A careful reading of Hazlitt's familiar essays *as* familiar essays, on the other hand, as opposed to his critical and philosophical essays, reveals that many of the precepts and axioms for which Hazlitt is known make sense only in the context of each the essay and the critical dilemmas to which it is responding. In the next section I will show how his “Table–Talk” persona emerged as a response to literary attacks against Hazlitt and his friends that undermined his critical authority and textual authenticity.

¹¹ Even otherwise careful readers of Hazlitt's familiar essays demonstrate a tendency in other contexts to treat Hazlitt's generically and chronologically distinct texts as exhibiting unified (albeit complex) philosophical principles. Although she is aware of the critical difficulties her method may cause for readers of her excellent *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, Natarajan commonly draws from four or five essays written over a span of years in order to illustrate a point. On the subject of Hazlitt's uniformity of Hazlitt's thought, she writes, “the true complexity of Hazlitt's thought is to be found in its quite astonishing consistency, in the way in which a single metaphysical principle—power—brings politics, philosophy, and poetics into a unity that rises above the local ambiguities and apparent contradictions in his writings” (3).

“Impudent Charlatan”: The Challenge to Hazlitt’s Authority

In the three years between the publication of the volume of *The Round Table* and the appearance of the first “Table–Talk” essay in the *London Magazine*, Hazlitt’s reputation was savaged in a series of heated debates with conservative periodicals and reviews. Despite the sense of intimacy and companionship that Hunt and Hazlitt tried to cultivate with readers of *The Round Table*, its publication in 1817 was met with significant critical abuse. Both the attacks against Hazlitt and his responses consisted of much more than name–calling and political posturing, and they shed light on the tenuous status of authority and authenticity in the periodicals during the “AGE OF PERSONALITY” that characterized the late Regency period. Significantly, these attacks did not occur in private but were published in periodicals and pamphlets, essentially appealing to the court of public opinion to see through one side’s falsehood and accept the other’s as truth. As a result, Hazlitt’s critical authority was sabotaged by the negative articles to the extent that simply associating with him was enough to become a target of the conservative periodicals, making it risky to hire him. His anonymous “Table–Talk” essays, which he began to write for the *London Magazine* in June 1820, represent a strategic effort to regain the authority that he had lost.

One of the more ruthless early reviews of *The Round Table*, appearing in the conservative *Quarterly Review*, sums up the volume as filled with “vulgar descriptions, silly paradoxes, flat truisms, misty sophistry, broken English, ill humour, and rancorous abuse” (17: 154–5), and the reviewer—John Russell—does not hesitate to abuse Hazlitt in turn.¹² Despite the fact that most of Russell’s examples are taken from Hunt’s essays (which are clearly marked as such), Hazlitt’s

¹² For example, Hazlitt is accused of presumptuousness for claiming to inherit the tradition of Addison and Steele’s periodicals, and he is ridiculed for supposedly having pretensions to a kind of greatness that extends far beyond his real social position.

name is on the title page and, accordingly, he is the chief target of the attacks.¹³ Even though the review is ostensibly about the *Round Table* volume, Russell's criticism is personal: he calls Hazlitt a "sour Jacobin" and suggests that "if the creature, in his endeavours to crawl into the light, must take his way over the tombs of illustrious men, disfiguring the records of their greatness with the slime and filth which marks his track, it is right to point him out that he may be flung back to the situation in which nature designed that he should grovel" (17: 159). In what is clearly intended as an attack on Hazlitt's reputation, Russell's vicious remarks undermine Hazlitt on all fronts: his character, his friends, his style, his literary pretensions, and his politics.

Russell's criticisms are echoed by an anonymous reviewer for the *British Critic*, who also makes little effort to hide his contempt for *The Round Table* and its authors. He writes, "A production less improving, or less gratifying, we have seldom perused: whether the taste, the tone of mind, or the morality which they display, be upon the whole the most disgusting and contemptible, we should find it not easy to determine; but, unfortunately, such as they are, they are the taste and tone of mind, we had almost said, of the age we live in, but certainly of a very large class of persons at the present time in this country" (7: 554–5). *The Round Table* is treated as representative not only of the authors' serious moral deficiency but as a sign of the degradation of a large segment of British society. According to the reviewer, the sincere and frank discussion promised in the early *Round Table* essays is, in execution, nothing more than an affectation meant to cover up "depravity of principle" and "a shallowness of thought under the solemn garb of philosophy."

¹³ Russell acknowledges, at the end of the review, that many of the essays were written by Hunt, he does not care enough "to discriminate between the productions of the two gentlemen, or to mete out to each his true portion of praise" (17: 159).

The difference between how Hazlitt and Hunt describe the *Round Table* essays—as resembling the fine conversation that occurs among friends during a dinner party—and the critical reactions to the volume is striking. The vehemence with which reviewers attack *The Round Table* indicates that their commentary has more to do with personal details about the authors’ lives—in other words, critical gossip about Hazlitt and Hunt’s social class, political views, and personal lives—than it does with what they have written.¹⁴ Anticipating this objection, however, the reviewer in the *British Critic* assures readers that his judgment of *The Round Table* is “sincere” and “dispassionate”: “contempt, supreme contempt for the talents, and pity for the bad principle displayed by the writers, were the only emotions their performance excited in our minds” (7: 569). According to the reviewer, *The Round Table* promises a genteel conversation among friends but delivers essays on low subjects (such as an aesthetic appreciation of Washerwomen) and bad taste (represented by Hazlitt’s derisive essay on Methodism as “a bastard kind of Popery”), cloaked in “vulgar” language (here meant to read as both common and rude), in a way that seems designed only to “excite the applause and esteem of that numerous class of persons who assemble in pot-houses on Sundays” (7: 565). By contrast, the anonymous reviewer promises that his criticism, which is truly sincere, enables him to see through Hazlitt and Hunt’s masks and expose the depravity under their affected sincerity.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jeffrey Cox has described these attacks against the “Cockney School” writers as “literally reactionary, a conservative response to a preexisting positive presentation of [Hunt’s circle]. These attacks were in fact a counterattack, an act of recognition by ideological enemies of the gathering of writers around Leigh Hunt” (22).

¹⁵ Yet another piece of criticism, which appeared two years later in the *British Review*, describes Hazlitt as “one of the most promising representatives of a class of writers, whose aim appears to be to destroy the very foundations of morality and decorum, by a series of periodical attacks upon all received opinions, and by the systematic ridicule of everything that is serious or respectable” (13: 313–4).

These reviews of *The Round Table* and similar articles mix gossip with criticism to undermine Hazlitt's authority and challenge his authenticity. During the year after *The Round Table* was published, this kind of personal criticism against Hazlitt was everywhere, and his most persistent attackers were the editorial staff of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. In the infamous Cockney school essays that appeared in that magazine, Hazlitt is included in the "set of drivellers" with whom Hunt associates. He is called "an unprincipled blunderer" and "pimpled Hazlitt" and the quality of his criticism is regularly called into question. In an oblique response to this abuse, Hazlitt published an essay in 1818 "On the Ignorance of the Learned" which cut deep against Hazlitt's opponents' idea of their own intellectual superiority. *Blackwood's* responded in turn with "Hazlitt Cross-Questioned," a full-fledged attack that claimed to expose Hazlitt's true character as an "impudent Charlatan": he is described as "a mere quack [...] and a mere bookmaker; one of the sort that lounge in third-rate bookshops, and write third-rate books" (3: 550). The article contained a litany of questions aimed at Hazlitt,¹⁶ implicitly accusing him of being a plagiarist and a deliberate liar, of merely pretending to have an understanding of Greek and Latin, of associating with his "Cockney crew," and of secretly despising himself for sacrificing his best work to the editors of the *Edinburgh Magazine*. In short, it accuses Hazlitt of being a complete fraud. Hazlitt was incensed by the article, and, in answer to it, he composed "A Reply to 'Z.'" which responds, question for question, to the *Blackwood's* attacks and accuses "Z" of having "an utter disregard to truth or even to the character of common veracity"

¹⁶ By framing the allegations as a series of questions and insinuations, rather than direct accusations, the editors attempted to safeguard themselves from charges of libel.

(*Collected Works* 9: 3).¹⁷ Each side, claiming authority, professed to expose the other's lies and to diminish the efficacy of their opponent's criticism.

It was in this politically and emotionally charged context that Hazlitt began to write for the newly established *London Magazine* in January 1820. Seen in the light of Hazlitt's tense relationship with rival reviewers and the interrogation of authenticity and authority that this relationship represents, the *London Magazine* "Table-Talk" series—his first attempt to recreate the kind of project he had worked on with Hunt in *The Round Table*—takes on a very practical function of engaging with readers directly and cultivating each reader's critical potential. Yet despite the familiarizing rhetoric of these essays, I argue that the critical authority Hazlitt adopts in the series of "Table-Talk" essays depends precisely on his unfamiliarity to readers. That is, writing from behind the veil of anonymity, Hazlitt is able to fashion a textual character who is free from the critical controversies that had undermined his authority. Because neither Hazlitt nor the editors of the magazine were particularly concerned with establishing his identity, Hazlitt's personality is absorbed into essays that are invested in establishing a discourse of conversation with readers. In his capacity as the anonymous Table-Talker, rather than as William Hazlitt the professional critic, he creates a new "authentic" persona that grants him the authority to address his readers as amateur critics and, in effect, to teach them how to read critically. In other words, he uses the periodical convention of anonymity to undermine the power of anonymous criticism in other journals.

¹⁷ Hazlitt writes, "If I were in the habit of using the words, Liar, Fool, Coxcomb, Hypocrite, Scoundrel, Blackguard, &c., I should apply them to you, but this would be degrading them still lower unnecessarily, for it is quite as easy to prove you the *things* as to call you the *names*" (*Collected Works* 9: 3). Hazlitt was persuaded against publishing the reply and instead sued William Blackwood for libel, eventually settling out of court.

Anonymity was an important condition of Hazlitt's early employment with the *London Magazine*. Because of the controversies surrounding Hazlitt, his involvement with the magazine initially only came about with some difficulty. John Scott, the magazine's editor, and Robert Baldwin, its publisher, hoped to establish and maintain the credibility of the magazine by keeping it free from the skirmishes that the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine* excelled at instigating. When Scott—who had previously collaborated with Hazlitt—proposed that they recruit Hazlitt, Baldwin hesitated but was eventually persuaded by Scott's confidence in his ability to curtail some of Hazlitt's more combative tendencies, thereby making him an appropriate fit for the magazine.¹⁸ Hazlitt's personality was thus muted in the articles that he wrote under Scott's tenure, and he eventually earned a position as a regular writer for several series, including "Notices of the Fine Arts"—which he shared with Scott—and "Table-Talk."¹⁹

Hazlitt was initially hired to write dramatic criticism.²⁰ Under normal circumstances his anonymity would have been surprising, given how well-known he was as a dramatic critic by the time he began writing for the *London Magazine*.²¹ In fact, a series of eight public lectures on

¹⁸ In a letter to Baldwin, Scott assures his publisher that Hazlitt can be made to fit the magazine's ethos: "I will engage for the gentleman, from what I know of his character, that he would be most ready to listen to suggestions and to strain every nerve for us, in a return for a service. He is naturally grateful, and though an original, is an honest one. I have not spoken to him for several years until Sunday last, but I see that in a very short time I shall be able to influence him to proper subjects and to a proper manner of handling them. — I mean proper in regard to the Magazine: —generally speaking I should have little claim to be his judge or guide" (qtd. in Parker 60).

¹⁹ Hazlitt also filled in as the magazine's temporary editor for a few months after Scott was killed in a duel with a representative of *Blackwood's* in February 1821.

²⁰ Most of these essays were signed L.M. or L., although some were unsigned and two were signed T., the signature he also used for his "Table-Talk" essays. Only the last was signed W.H.

²¹ His first major critical work, *Character's of Shakespear's Plays*, was published just months after *The Round Table*. He also produced a significant dramatic criticism for the *Morning Chronicle*, *The Champion* (which was also edited by John Scott), *The Examiner*, and *The Times*, from which 124 pieces were collected into *A View of the English Stage* in 1818.

Elizabethan drama that he had delivered at the Surrey Institute was published in 1820, just as he was beginning his contributions to the *London Magazine*. The usual periodical practice of the time was to “puff” books by friends and contributors with favorable reviews, but John Scott’s review of Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, while generally kind to Hazlitt, contains a lengthy reflection on the conflict between Hazlitt and *Quarterly Review* that is meant to give readers an idea of Hazlitt’s temperament before drawing attention specifically to the *unsuitability* of Hazlitt’s talents for a magazine like the *London Magazine*.²² Hazlitt’s early involvement with the magazine therefore went completely unacknowledged publicly, and the magazine was clearly not eager to identify its contributor.

Hazlitt’s anonymous presence in the magazine is aided by the fact that, in his early essays on “The Drama,” he tends to treat elements of the theatre only abstractly and in general terms rather than giving criticism of actual plays, in a way that thereby neither draws attention to the reviewer nor links him to attending specific plays.²³ According to Josephine Bauer, Hazlitt was given the drama series because the subject was far removed from politics, and he could write thoroughly and persuasively on his topic without becoming embroiled (and implicating the *London Magazine*) in partisan periodical debates. Mark Parker has even gone as far as to suggest that, through the Drama essays, “Scott forced a kind of re–apprenticeship on Hazlitt” (62) as a means of assuring himself and his publisher that Hazlitt could contribute to the magazine without involving it in the kinds of controversies for which he had earned such a reputation.

²² This review appeared in the March 1820 issue of the magazine, which also included the third of Hazlitt’s anonymous articles of dramatic criticism.

²³ “The Drama. No. I.,” for example, considers the effect constituent elements of drama and comedy on the audience, in comparison to the ways similar elements work for readers of literature, before moving on to some general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of individual contemporary actors.

If the Drama articles were in fact conceived as a trial for Hazlitt, he must have satisfied Scott with what he wrote, because in its June 1820 issue the *London Magazine* began to print a new series written by Hazlitt. “Table–Talk” was a series of semi–critical, miscellaneous essays on subjects such as “The Qualifications Necessary to Success in Life,” “The Difference Between Writing and Speaking,” “The Pleasure of Painting,” and “On Reading Old Books.”²⁴ Like his abstract articles on “The Drama,” Hazlitt’s early “Table–Talk” essays do not really focus on specific works of art. Instead, the anonymous writer, “T.,” presents critical principles—usually abstractly—and applies those principles to various works and situations in a way that cultivates readers’ own critical faculties. No overarching framework is provided for the series, as had been the case with “The Round Table” in the *Examiner*, nor is the series mentioned or acknowledged elsewhere in the magazine.

This silence regarding “Table–Talk” and its author would be as puzzling as the anonymity of his Drama articles, were it not for Hazlitt’s tense relationship with rival periodicals. But the mystery surrounding the early “Table–Talk” essays enables Hazlitt to address his readers unapologetically, without first having to account for his reputation, which had been publicly maligned, or address questions about his authority in light of the many

²⁴ Hazlitt wrote thirteen “Table–Talk”s for the *London Magazine* (signed “T.”) between June 1820 and December of the following year, after which he moved the series to the *New Monthly Magazine* for eleven more numbers, through January 1824. In April 1821, in the midst of the *London Magazine* “Table–Talk” run, Hazlitt also published a volume called *Table–Talk, or Original Essays* under his own name, but, of the volume’s thirteen essays, only two had appeared in the *London Magazine*. A second volume of *Table–Talk* was published in February 1822, including one of the *London Magazine*’s essays and three from the *New Monthly Magazine*. In all, Hazlitt published fifty–one “Table–Talk” essays over the course of two–and–a–half years: ten exclusively in the *London Magazine*; seven exclusively in the *New Monthly Magazine* (which also included a reprint of an essay that had appeared in the *London Magazine*); and thirty–three in volume form. Fifteen more “Table–Talk” essays from the *London Magazine* and the *New Monthly Magazine* were reprinted in *The Plain Speaker*.

accusations about his lack of genteel education.²⁵ The need for him to handle his subjects in a way that fits with the magazine's goals of neutrality also liberates Hazlitt from slipping into the hostility and bitterness that characterized the public debates with his opponents. The "Table-Talk" of the *London Magazine*, in this sense, is a vehicle by which Hazlitt the critic enables his readers to become better critics, too. Thus the non-specialist readers of whom his audience is comprised are taught to judge individual works for themselves rather than rely on the critically authoritative judgment and gossipy personal attacks of others. The essays focus on the cultivation of readers' critical understanding by exposing false common-place ideas and encouraging them to trust their own intuitive reactions rather than the authority of periodical critics like those who wrote for the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*. Meanwhile, Hazlitt's distinctive personality disappears into the essays, which are not at all concerned with developing and maintaining the character of the essayist as had been the convention for periodical essays since the *Tatler* and *Spectator*.²⁶ The series does not focus on the writer, in other words, but on the readers to whom the essays are directed.

More than anything, the series is invested in establishing a discourse of conversation with these readers, and the idea of "Table-Talk" as a kind of conversation enables Hazlitt (disguised as T.) to "discuss" with his readers topics that are closely related to his own critical principles. This, in turn, leads him to address his readers as amateur yet fellow critics and, in effect, to teach them how to read literature, including writing like his own. The focus on conversation, as opposed to the mere assertion of critical truth that characterized Coleridge's attempts in the

²⁵ In the "Hazlitt Cross-Questioned" article in *Blackwood's*, John Gibson Lockhart asks, "[D]o you not congratulate yourself, and the rest of your Cockney crew, on never having received any education?" (3: 551).

²⁶ Recall Mr. Spectator's observation, echoed by Coleridge and Hunt, "that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure, 'till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man, [etc.]."

periodical version of *The Friend*, draws attention to the simulated act of Table–Talk, and the process it represents, as a more sincere response to the kind of criticism appearing in rival periodicals.

According to Hazlitt, the concept of the essay–as-conversation is foundational to the overall goal of the “Table–Talk” essays. Like conversation modeled in *The Round Table*, as discussed in the previous chapter, table–talk suggests a certain level of familiarity between participants in the conversation, while lowering the stakes for what is discussed. As Hazlitt explains in his Advertisement to the 1825 Paris edition of *Table–Talk*,

I had remarked that when I had written or thought upon a particular topic, and afterwards had occasion to speak of it with a friend, the conversation generally took a much wider range and branched off into a number of indirect and collateral questions, which were not strictly connected with the original view of the subject, but which often threw a curious and striking light upon it, or the human life in general. It therefore occurred to me as possible to combine the advantages of these two styles, the *literary* and *conversationalist*; or after stating and enforcing some leading idea, to follow it up by such observations and reflections as would probably suggest themselves in discussing the same question in company with others. This seemed to me to promise a greater sincerity, than could be attained by a more precise and scholastic method. The same consideration had an influence on the familiarity and conversational idiom of the style which I have used. (1: i–ii Hazlitt’s italics)

Hazlitt’s observations about the style of the essays draws attention to some of the ways he saw the series as a departure from his periodical criticism and his published lectures. A conversation, unlike systematic criticism, is infrequently limited to a narrow topic. By their nature,

conversations are allowed to pursue digressions and to take up similar and related subjects, sometimes without ever returning to the point of departure. In the same way, according to Hazlitt, a textual conversation, even though it is only mimetic of certain aspects of an actual conversation, entails an ability to let an essay wander freely after other subjects outside of the constraints of methodical progress. These conversational essays are therefore less rigorous structurally in that they make room for digressions and asides that cast a new light on the primary subjects of the essays. This not only relaxes the writer's focus but adds a feeling of authenticity not found in more artificially precise writing.

Hazlitt may have valued the creative freedom, granted by the conversational aspects of the familiar essay, to explore a topic from various perspectives, but, as I have tried to show in this section, his interest in "promis[ing] a greater sincerity" to readers suggests that he was also aware of the strategic potential to redeem his public character through the series. The best conversations, according to Hazlitt, develop sympathy in a way that draws participants together toward common ground, fosters mutual understanding, and produces friendship. While other writers for the *London Magazine* assumed stylized personae, such as T.G. Wainwright's Janus Weathercock or Lamb's Elia, Hazlitt created a persona that represented an approximated version of himself. For an essayist and critic who had not only been publicly libeled and had his authority undermined by accusations of fraud, but who had also felt the real consequences of these attacks in the decline of sales of his work and being officially or unofficially blacklisted from many periodicals and publishers, the opportunity to address readers familiarly and without past baggage represented the chance to develop a new, more receptive readership. In the process, it also gave him the opportunity to correct his reputation and restore his authority as a writer. As I will show in the next section, by recreating his critical identity anonymously, Hazlitt effectively

establishes “T.” as a friendly and genial character who has critical authority but does not overbearingly assert it.²⁷ Instead, he employs a strategy of familiarity to explain critical principles to readers as a means of empowering them with that authority, as well, thereby instigating a change in the function of criticism.

The *London Magazine* and the Friendly Table–Talker

True to Hazlitt’s ideal of conversation, as outlined in the previous section, the “Table–Talk” essays in the *London Magazine* do not represent a systematic method. They treat miscellaneous subjects from a variety of perspectives, and usually within a single essay Hazlitt will approach a topic from several unrelated angles. Yet inasmuch as each individual “Table–Talk” is concerned with its respective topic, the series as a whole shares a common focus on distinguishing between good and bad art against the authority of popular consensus. The dialogue established between the writer and his readers in the first “Table Talk” essays is predicated on the premise that critical activity is a cooperative enterprise between mutually invested parties, and Hazlitt works within the periodical conventions of anonymity to undermine the problems of anonymous criticism. As the anonymous Table–Talker, he is able to treat his subjects on the offensive rather than defensively—that is, he does not appear to be complaining about his own mistreatment at the hands of critics—and, as he encourages his readers to cultivate their own critical understanding by trusting their intuitive sense, he enables them to rethink their ideas about authors and about their relationship to what they read. I argue in this section that this dialogic approach is intended to provide a clear corrective to modes of criticism that base the evaluation of a work on the reviewer’s (or the reviewing periodical’s) opinion of the author

²⁷ Within the *London Magazine*, Hazlitt’s anonymity as the author of the “Table–Talk” essays officially ended with the publication of the first volume of *Table–Talk*—which was noticed in the magazine and attributed to Hazlitt—in April 1821.

personally—exactly the kind of criticism to which Hazlitt had been subjected—rather than on the merits of the work itself. By discussing aesthetic success and failure through the use of familiar examples rather than by attacking writers of partisan or ideological differences, Hazlitt’s T. both performs and models the kind of objective criticism that he also discusses in the essays.²⁸

Hazlitt directly addresses some of the worst consequences of personality criticism from the series’ first essay, “On the Qualifications Necessary to Success in Life.” In fact, the topic of “success in life” quickly becomes a more narrowly focused treatment of “fame.” The essay is expressly concerned with presenting a reader with a critical paradox: that some of the best artists and writers languish in obscurity, while inferior artists are celebrated for mediocre work. T. argues that because the public responds more readily to charisma and manner in public individuals—from artists to politicians—people are therefore easily duped into overlooking the absence of substance whenever they find these attractive qualities. In other words, the world values performance according to social expectations rather than true authenticity. As T. introduces paradox after paradox to point out the contrast between those who deserve fame and those who receive it, he encourages readers to recognize the absurdity of that distinction, as well. He writes, “The way to fame, through merit alone, is the narrowest, the steepest, the longest, the hardest of all others—(that it is the most certain and lasting, is even a doubt)—the most sterling reputation is, after all, but a species of imposture” (1: 647).²⁹ Over the course of nine double-columned pages, this sentiment becomes like a refrain, and T.’s rejection of the inauthenticity represented by imposture sets the foundation a more objective critical standard. The point of all

²⁸ In order to be consistent with the focus on the important function of anonymity in the *London Magazine* “Table–Talk,” I use “T.” in this section to refer to the author of those essays and “Hazlitt” only in reference to biographical details that would not necessarily be known to readers of the magazine.

²⁹ All quotations to “Table–Talk” in this section are taken from the *London Magazine* and are cited by volume and page number.

this is to highlight the need for criticism that does not base the evaluation of a work of art on the personality or reputation of the artist. Rather than explaining the contrast between success and merit only to complain about the way things are, T. exposes the façade of fame that comes only by way of personality and sets himself up as a critical authority who sees through the bad judgment of other critics. He invites readers to do the same.

The evenhanded matter-of-factness with which T. treats his subject makes him appear sincerely disinterested and therefore critically neutral. This is especially significant considering that the way the essay presents the relationship between fame and personality could suggest to skeptical readers that the writer believes himself to have unfairly been denied the success that he deserves (an attitude that could certainly describe Hazlitt's). T. shrewdly undermines this reading in a footnote on the essay's penultimate page:

I would be permitted to say, that I am so sick of this trade of authorship, that I have a much greater ambition to be the best racket-player, than the best prose-writer of the age. The critics look askance at one's best-meant efforts, but the face of the racket-player is the face of a friend. There is no juggling there. If the stroke is a good one, the hit tells. They do not keep two scores to mark the game, with Whig and Tory notches. The thing is settled at once, and the applause of the *dedans* follows the marker's voice, and seconds the prowess of the hand, and the quickness of the eye. (1: 653).

T.'s longing for the more objective qualification for success in athletics, where talent is immediately and objectively identifiable, serves a clear function of absolving the author from seeming like he is complaining about his own success in life. Structurally, too, the footnote plays a powerful role in the essay. Because T. only writes about himself in a footnote near the end of the essay, as an aside to readers, but not in the body of the essay, he maintains a critical distance

that enables him better to express his frustration on the behalf of other writers who have suffered unjustly in the hands of reviewers.

The lack of personal details in the essay matters to T.'s own authentic self-portrayal as an essayist and critic as well. Were he to write about himself—if the essay were written more as a defense or *apologia*—he would risk reducing his argument to a protest rather than a critical evaluation of the qualifications for success. This in turn would limit the essay's potential of demonstrating principles to readers and increasing their critical capacity. By maintaining critical distance, on the other hand, T. can effectively and sincerely claim in the footnote that he has no desire for success as a prose-writer whatsoever precisely because he has demonstrated in the body of the essay that success has almost no relationship to merit anyway. In a circular performance, he shows his authenticity through his indifference towards popular acceptance of his work and, in the process, makes his opinions seem more reliable than they would be if he appeared self-interested.

The importance of the type of disinterested, authentic criticism modeled in “Table-Talk No. I” is both complicated and reinforced by the *London Magazine* context. The strongest counterpart to T.'s is a short comic article that appears just a few pages later called “Much Ado about Nothing.” The article is about the controversial practice of “puffing,” which was considered to undermine the integrity of all criticism.³⁰ The writer (who claims the authority of an editor of the magazine) tells readers that the most reliable criticism comes from those who do not hide behind pseudonyms or initials (such as, for example, “T.”), because signing one's real

³⁰ In an essay “On Patronage and Puffing” that Hazlitt wrote for the second volume of *Table-Talk*, Hazlitt compares puffing to quack doctors' advertisements of Elixirs of Life. Both prey on the gullibility of the naïve: “there is a wonderful power in words, formed into regular propositions, and printed in capital letters, to draw the assent after them, till we have proof of their fallacy” (6: 259).

name to an article is a way to accept personal responsibility for the content of the review. His example of just such an ideal critic is a contributor to the *London Magazine*, the absurdly-named Egomet Bonmot—“who, by fixing his name without disguise to one of his things in our First, has enabled us to stretch out the right-hand of fellowship in full assurance of identity, and to say,—we desire more of your acquaintance, good master Egomet!” (1:657). Contrary to the anonymous writer of the “Table-Talk” essay, Egomet’s “assurance of identity” unequivocally makes him a friend to the editor and to the magazine’s readers alike. Despite this enthusiastic account of Egomet Bonmot’s disinterestedness, however, a description of his work gradually shows him to be a comically egotistical character. In the last paragraphs, Egomet reveals himself to have been the author of the entire article and claims that the whole thing was meant to provide an example of puffing. What initially seemed to be intended to provide an counterexample to the kind of criticism T. complains about in “On the Qualifications Necessary for Success in Life,” in other words, turns out to be one of the worst examples of inauthentic and unreliable criticism. As readers are let in on the joke, the contrast between this essay and the “Table-Talk” that precedes it reinforces T.’s argument that critical judgment should be based on the authentic merits of a work and not on the imposture of a showy personality, which may be attractive and entertaining but is ultimately empty.

In an effort to cultivate readers’ critical understanding, Hazlitt uses the “Table-Talk” series as an instrument for demonstrating a critical method, relying on intuitive reflection rather than the authority of other critics, and then asking readers to apply that method on their own. In a statement that could very well be used to describe any number of the *London Magazine* essays, he writes, “I shall endeavour to illustrate the difference by familiar examples rather than analytical reasonings. The philosopher of old was not unwise, who defined motion by getting up,

and walking” (2: 22). Throughout, T. is careful to keep his argument from sounding like a series of authoritative critical pronouncements; he describes “Table Talk. No. II. On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking,” for example, as merely an “attempt to explain” the reasons for a commonly observed discrepancy. T.’s interest in discussing his subjects through examples that are readily available to general readers rather than through foreboding precepts and reasoning demonstrates his interest in keeping his method accessible to non–specialist readers.

T.’s use of “familiar examples” represents one of the central strategies that connect the “Table–Talk” essays, despite the differences between their subject matters and the lack of an overarching framework. This continuity of method also helps to flesh out the readers’ idea of what kind of critical authority T. has.³¹ He regularly points out inconsistencies and errors in popular criticism and, in so doing, shows himself to be a better critic than his counterparts. More importantly, he asks his readers to submit to their own critical intuitions. In “On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking,” he writes,

Let the reader judge. His pleasure is the counterpart of, and borrowed from the same source as the writer’s. A man does not read out of vanity, or in company, but to amuse his own thoughts. If the reader, from disinterested and merely intellectual motives, relishes an author’s “fancies and good nights,” the last may be supposed to have relished them no less. If he laughs at a joke, the inventor chuckled over it to the full as much. If he is delighted with a phrase, he may be sure the writer jumped at it—if he is pleased to cull a straggling flower from the page, he may believe that it was plucked with no less fondness from the state of nature. (2: 32)

³¹ This is information that readers would not be able to access outside of the essays themselves. No mention of “Table–Talk” or its author is made elsewhere in either the June or July issue of the *London Magazine*. The serialization that comes with the appearance of subsequent essays suggests a broadening and interconnected scope for “Table–Talk.”

T. draws a link between writers and readers and explains—*as a writer to readers*—that their natural reactions to good writing are shared, through mutual kinship, with writers. Moreover, readers’ responses are valued as purer and truer because the ideal reader T. addresses is disinterested, just as he is; the reader does not care what others think or how his appreciation of a work appears to others, and therefore T. explains that this instinctive response is his most authentic critical guide. Essentially, T. eliminates the authority of the reviewing critic by giving readers their own intuitive guidelines for evaluating works of art.

I argue that even though it complicates the efficacy of Hazlitt’s own critical practice, this undermining of outside authority in favor of readers’ intuitive judgment is a necessary component of the conversational criticism represented by “Table–Talk.” Put another way, the approach that Hazlitt takes in the *London Magazine* series does not so much concede critical authority to readers as it recognizes that, regardless of how much stake the critic may place in a favorable public reception of his opinions, readers will formulate their own opinions in the end. As T. writes in “Table Talk. No. IV. On the Present State of Parliamentary Eloquence,” “In general, to suggest advice, or hazard criticism, is to recommend to others to do something which we know they either will not or cannot do: or it is to desire them either to please us, or do nothing” (2: 373). T.’s open admission of this fact from the outset indicates his acceptance that, for better or for worse, this is simply how things are, which in turn enables him to assume, in the “Table–Talk” series, a different stance from other critics.³² Hazlitt’s model therefore suggests a different kind of authenticity, one that does not depend on his public reputation as a critic but the

³² The greatest difference is perhaps with Coleridge who, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, was clear about his unhappiness with the reading practices of the “multitudinous PUBLIC.” But the position T. assumes in relation to his readers also contrasts significantly with the personality–based criticism of the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*.

sincere *ethos* contained in each essay. This is authenticity that depends on familiarity as much as on standing apart from society. At the same time, the act of relinquishing one kind of authority earns T. another kind: by admitting that he is aware of the limitations even his criticism has for readers, he signals the more discursively collaborative impulse behind the series and makes himself seem genial and friendly rather than pedantic and combative.

However, this balance between individual authenticity and social responsibility also generates tension in the “Table–Talk” essays. T.’s admonition that readers rely on their own critical intuition when determining the strengths of individual authors, for example, is followed by “a definition of the character of an author” (2: 32), which is really a description of T. This general character sketch personalizes the abstract idea of what a “true author” is—contrary to a mere writer—in such a way that readers are encouraged to understand the eccentricities of authors and to sympathize with the fact that a true author is a different kind of social creature from other writers and critics. In fact, the author’s place in– and out of society takes center stage in the conclusion to “Table Talk. No. II,” and T. argues that his dissimilarity from the general public of non–authors or readers is a necessary aspect to his essential nature. He describes writers who, “in society, in public intercourse, feel no excitement [...] but who, when left alone, can lash themselves into a foam. They are never less alone than when alone” (2: 32). These authors show the value of true authenticity by “look[ing] into their own minds, not the faces of a gaping multitude.” In the essay’s focus on the difference between writing and speaking, the character sketch of the author draws attention to the unique, brave, and almost prophetic character of a “true” author. While other writers are concerned primarily with their reception and therefore rely on common–place observations and oft–repeated truisms, writers who are really

authors are interested in developing original ideas and sharing truth, even if they face hardship for doing so.

Part of the rhetorical strength of T.'s argument in the latter half of the essay, and especially in the "character of the author," is that it comes through the medium it is analyzing and critiquing. The result is what Joel Haefner describes as "an affective aesthetics, concerned with the re-creation of experience in his readers" (69). As readers reflect on the unique demands of writing and the special characteristics of an author's personality, in other words, their attention is inevitably drawn to the fact that they are already engaged in the act of reading an example of the very kind of thing that is being praised. The critical principles that they are asked to consider are immediately applicable to the text that delivers them, and the character sketch of an author gains more force as readers recognize that it comes from an author himself. In this way, the essay sets the stage for its own analysis. T. writes that the disinterested author, who writes from a compulsion to uncover truth, "has more pride in conquering the difficulties of a question than vanity in courting the favor of an audience," and readers, for their part, understand that the author of "Table-Talk" is not writing to please them (or, for that matter, to stir up controversy) but to explain things as clearly and sincerely as possible. The suggestion that they rely on their own intuitive reactions to writing prepares them to exercise that intuition on T.'s own writing, and in doing so they are made to appreciate both the essay and the strength of character demonstrated by its author. The abstractions of the essay become concrete as the text is read.

Much of the effectiveness of what Hazlitt is doing in these essays comes from the fact that he is not, of course, really writing criticism, as he had done in most of his work in the previous decade. I have argued that the idea of table-talk, much like the "Round Table" of Hunt's *Examiner*, reinforces the sense that the essays take the form of casual conversation rather

than critical proclamation, simulating the kind of talk that occurs around a table between a writer and his readers. It is mimetic of a conversation that has no goal greater than increasing the familiarity between parties through engaging and mutually enjoyable discourse. As Hazlitt explains in “On Familiar Style,” the impression of familiarity in this kind of writing comes from writing “as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes” (6: 217). His emphasis on “common conversation” does not suggest that his “Table–Talk” essays are light fare nor unorganized arrangements of ideas, but it does mean that the philosophy of familiarity entails, for the relationship between writer and readers, a change from the usual order of criticism. Table-talk is not criticism; rather, it is the kind of conversation that makes critical readers out of the participants.

T. strengthens this notion of “Table–Talk” as conversation put into writing in “On the Conversation of Authors” when he suggests that readers can discern which authors provide good or bad conversation based on the degree to which their writing reflects a conversational style.³³ Bad conversation, for instance, treats the exchange of ideas as a battle; its participants are ultimately only concerned with victory. Bad conversation also occurs when a person “goes into company, not to contradict, but to *talk at you*” (2: 256 T.’s italics). Good conversation, on the other hand, comes from a genuine interest in the other: T. writes that “The soul of conversation is sympathy” (2: 256), and he later explains that “The art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as of being heard” (2: 259). As he identifies the attitude of generosity and reciprocal exchange that informs the right kind of conversation, T. again models that attitude in his writing.

³³ He writes, for example, “The reader may, if he pleases, get a very good idea of Mr. H[unt]’s conversation from a very agreeable paper he has lately published, called the *Indicator*, than which nothing can be more happily conceived or executed” (3: 259).

This model implicitly suggests that the philosophy of “Table–Talk” that informs the series consists in intellectual honesty that comes at the expense of unthinking and dogmatic critical opinions. T. argues that true sincerity is conversational because it focuses on the process by which knowledge is acquired rather than the assertion of what one already knows.³⁴ This kind of discussion resembles essaying in a truly Montaignian fashion, the point of which is not to establish oneself as an authority but to pursue better understanding for one’s own benefit as much as for the benefit of others. By describing how authenticity emerges through familiarity, T. strengthens his character as one who is invested in listening to his readers rather than just speaking to them. The concern he expresses for them contrasts with the self–interested hostility of those critics who attack individuals whose opinions they disagree with, and, in an essay that is itself mimetic of conversation, T. purposefully casts himself as a truly authentic writer because he is sympathetic to his readers’ interests and concerns.

It is not enough, however, for readers to interpret the “Table–Talk” essays sympathetically. The approach of the series in the *London Magazine* depends on T.’s ability to treat his readers kindly, too. The combative rhetoric of Hazlitt’s periodical writing before he joined the magazine—such as “On the Ignorance of the Learned,” directed toward the writers for *Blackwood’s*—has no place in conversations between friends nor in the “Table–Talk” series. That is, readers must also be willing to play a role in the relationship of familiarity on which the project depends, and it is Hazlitt’s responsibility to facilitate that role. Only as a friendly, agreeable character can T. engage in the type of conversation with his readers that is valued by

³⁴ “[D]iscussion is a pleasant and profitable thing, where you advance and defend your opinions as far as you can, and admit the truth of what is objected against them with equal impartiality; in short, where you do not pretend to set up for an oracle, but freely declare what you really know about any question, or suggest what has struck you as throwing a new light upon it, and let it pass for what it is worth” (2: 255).

the essays and that the essays are intended to perform. The writer is therefore careful to present himself as a friend to the reader and not as a foe.

In light of the criticism to which Hazlitt was subject in reviews of *The Round Table* and his other works, his approach in these *London Magazine* essays demonstrates cautiousness and concern for making the right kind of impression on the reader. I have argued that the early “Table–Talk” essays model criticism that evaluates art and public discourse according to objective qualities rather than the private or personal character of the author, thereby creating an alternative set of critical practices which plant the seed for later models of disinterested criticism, as practiced by Ruskin, Pater, Wilde, and, eventually, the matter–of–fact, anti–biographical New Critics. For Hazlitt, however, it was sufficient to write sincerely without subjecting himself to the personal criticism that dominated in the “AGE OF PERSONALITY.” Readers are encouraged to trust their intuitive sense about the merit of a work rather rely on the usual critical diet of private gossip and near–libelous rumors. But only as T., and not as William Hazlitt, can he develop a sympathetic persona through whom he can engage in this conversation with readers. The anonymous approach to the magazine series allows him to introduce concepts of criticism that prepare readers to become lay–critics, depending on their own intuition and judgment instead of the professional critics who write for the reviewing periodicals. As I will show in the next section, the tone of Hazlitt’s conversation with readers changes dramatically in the first collected volume of *Table–Talk*, when Hazlitt’s is name connected to the essays and the desire for authentic self–presentation is undermined by the necessity for public acceptance. “William Hazlitt,” the author of *Table–Talk*, is just as much an essayistic persona as T. is in the *London Magazine*. Contrary to the disinterested writer of the magazine essays, however, Hazlitt

embraces a more openly combative persona in order to directly influence his readers' critical practices.

The Collected *Table–Talk* and “The Style of a Discontented Man”

In the *London Magazine* “Table–Talk” essays Hazlitt relied on anonymity to circumvent the undermining of his critical authority by conservative periodicals. It is not surprising that the first published notice directly linking Hazlitt to the *London Magazine* appeared in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. The November 1820 issue includes a letter from a *Blackwood’s* contributor in disguise, accusing the *London Magazine* of printing a “violent tirade” against *Blackwood’s*, “a perfect specimen of spite, neutralized by stupidity” (8: 277). In an effort to challenge the credibility of the *London Magazine*, the letter quotes from “Table–Talk. No. IV” and suggests that any opinion published in a magazine that also prints work by Hazlitt is worth nothing.³⁵ By the time the letter was printed in *Blackwood’s*, Hazlitt was already working toward producing a collection of “Table–Talk” essays independently, and the first volume of *Table–Talk; or, Original Essays* was published in April 1821 under Hazlitt’s name.³⁶ But the letter still had consequences: in addition to compromising the effects of anonymity in the “Table–Talk” essays, it pulled the *London Magazine* into the literary battle with *Blackwood’s* over personal criticism and the use of pseudonyms—the very thing Robert Baldwin and John Scott had hoped to avoid—and Scott’s retaliation to this abuse led directly to his death in a duel in February of the next year.

³⁵ The letter also dismisses Elia as an impertinent “Cockney Scribbler,” but the *Blackwood’s* staff either did not know that Lamb was the author of the Elia essays at this point, or they were not interested in publicly lumping him in with Hazlitt.

³⁶ The publication corresponded with the appearance of the ninth essay in the *London Magazine* series.

Despite sharing a name with the magazine series and depending on the same conversational approach, the collected volume of *Table–Talk* differs significantly from the periodical essays.³⁷ With Hazlitt’s name attached to the volume the dialogic, conversational method of Hazlitt’s table–talk takes a much more forceful and direct approach to influencing readers. Whereas the periodical series, as I have shown, confronts the problem of criticism in an “AGE OF PERSONALITY” by encouraging readers to rely on their own critical intuition, the essays in the volume reinforce Hazlitt strengths as a critic who goes against the grain. To bolster his critical persona, Hazlitt embraces what Lamb refers to as “the style of a discontented man” (97), showing a writer who is openly bitter about, among other things, the consequences of the attacks he and his friends have suffered and the ignorance of a public who has accepted those attacks and thereby allowed them to continue. I argue that Hazlitt exploits this public persona—largely created by his opponents—to undermine the influence of periodical criticism. *Table–Talk* combines familiarity with righteous anger to demonstrate the tension between authentic self–presentation and the desire to have one’s work accepted by a fickle public that relies on weak criticism.

In both “Table–Talk” series, Hazlitt’s authentic self–characterization is a device for making him seem reliable to his readers. The tension that emerges in his “attempt to be at once personally sincere and socially coherent” challenges the Romantic notions of authenticity that continue to characterize descriptions of Hazlitt’s work today (Ready 72). While Hazlitt may strive for the ideal of authenticity in his essays and criticism, he is nevertheless preoccupied with his reception by a public whose view of him has been influenced by literary gossip. As he writes

³⁷ Only two of the essays in the collected *Table–Talk* had been previously printed, while the remaining thirteen were published for the first time. The reprinted essays were “On the Pleasure of Painting,” which was the fifth essay in the *London Magazine* series, and “On the Ignorance of the Learned,” which had been published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* in July, 1818.

in “The Indian Jugglers,” “Greatness is great power, producing great effects. It is not enough that a man has great power in himself, he must shew it to all the world in a way that cannot be hid of gainsaid. He must fill up a certain idea in the public mind. I have no other notion of greatness than this two–fold definition, great results springing from great inherent energy” (6: 73). In other words, Hazlitt’s “authentically *literary* criticism,” as Harold Bloom refers to it, may suggest genius, but that genius benefits Hazlitt very little unless his readers are able to recognize it as such. This creates a burden for Hazlitt to portray himself to advantage that is felt much more strongly in *Table–Talk* than in the *London Magazine* series. He therefore becomes a divided self and his table–talk takes on the frustrated and antagonistic tone identified by Lamb.

Hazlitt’s most openly antagonistic gesture was his decision to include “On the Ignorance of the Learned” in his *Table–Talk*, the essay he had published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1818 which had most provoked the staff of *Blackwood’s*.³⁸ By reprinting the controversial essay in a collection otherwise filled with new material, Hazlitt showed that he was still willing to confront the personality critics of the conservative reviews. He is equally quarrelsome in other essays, such as when he argues that the inconsistencies in Joshua Reynolds theories of genius and artistic development imply “a doubt as to the possibility of placing an implicit reliance on his authority” (6: 106), or when he celebrates William Cobbett, the radical and controversial pamphleteer, as “one of the best writers in the language” (6: 43). Hazlitt’s strategy of positioning himself against prevailing opinions, as he had done in the magazine essays, asserts his originality and authenticity, but his combativeness in the volume is clearly designed to provoke a more

³⁸ The essay answers to the most common criticism the *Blackwood’s* writers leveled at the Cockney school: that they were uneducated and that the Cockney writers’ attempts to deal with Greek and Roman subjects was pretentious and unfitting their class. By creating tension between the ideas of ignorance and authentic knowledge, Hazlitt’s response reverses these claims and argues that those who think highly of themselves because they are educated are worse than those who know nothing.

visceral response from readers. Rather than encouraging readers as lay-critics, he reprimands them. Lamb's impression of reading the volume is to "fancy that a disputant is always present, and feel a disposition to take up the cudgels yourself in behalf of the other side of the question," and he claims that "TABLE-TALK is not calculated for cold or squeamish readers" (97). In other words, Hazlitt's table-talk conversation creates a different kind of relationship with readers here than in the *London Magazine*, and by confronting readers and challenging dogmatic opinions, he intervenes in the prevailing reading habits of the English middle class.

One of Hazlitt's primary methods of intervention in the collected essays is to expose the prevalence of close-minded thinking, which is opposed to the fundamental characteristic of the familiar essays: the ability to show greater sincerity through a dialogic approach. When the goal of conversation is to develop mutual understanding rather than simply to make one's views known, the benefit to both parties is greater. The problem with narrow thinking, in other words, is that it focuses on the self too much, rather than on the other, and thereby makes for bad companionship.³⁹ In an essay "Of People with One Idea," Hazlitt ridicules the kind of people named in the title in order to invite a contrast between "people of one idea" and himself. He writes, "I am not for 'a collusion' but 'an exchange' of ideas. It is well to hear what other people have to say on a number of subjects. I do not wish to be always respiring the same confined atmosphere, but to vary the scene, and get a little relief and fresh air out of doors" (6: 58). By

³⁹ Hazlitt gives an example of Robert Owen, who "comes into a room with one of these documents in his hand, with the air of a schoolmaster and a quack-doctor mixed, asks very kindly how you do, and on hearing you are still in an indifferent state of health owing to bad digestion, instantly turns round, and observes, 'That all that will be remedied in his plan,' which he then lays out in exhaustive detail (6: 57). In other words, the example shows that Owen's pretended concern about the health of his interlocutor is only based on self-interest. Hazlitt goes on, "People who thus swell out some vapid scheme of their own into undue importance, seem to me to labour under water in the head—to exhibit a huge hydrocephalus! They may be very worthy people for all that, but they are bad companions and very indifferent reasons" (6: 57).

using himself as an example of intellectual diversity, Hazlitt shows himself to be the ideal alternative to the narrow-minded thinking he criticizes.⁴⁰ His preference for variety is presented rhetorically to make it seem like an authentic part of his nature. Hazlitt's description of himself in this essay therefore portrays him as good companion to his readers, who, in his intellectual diversity, is unafraid to be exposed to and challenged by viewpoints that are contrary to his own.

Hazlitt's claim that he is open to different ways of thinking also authorizes him to assert his prerogative in writing essays about diverse subjects—in other words, the miscellany that makes up *Table-Talk*. In fact, the authority to write on different topics as opposed to those only on which one has acknowledged expertise, is a central difference between having “one idea,” as described by Hazlitt, and the intellectual diversity he celebrates and attributes to himself.⁴¹ He assumes this authority, as I have suggested, by positioning himself against prevailing opinions and common-place ideas in a way that highlights his own authenticity and originality. These qualities are further supported in the *London Magazine*'s reviews of *Table-Talk*, which play an important role in creating the taste by which Hazlitt is enjoyed.⁴² By drawing attention to the

⁴⁰ Notably, this section is also the only part of the essay in which Hazlitt writes in the first-person in a sustained way. The contrast sets up a difference between the “I” of the writer—Hazlitt—and the “they” who are preoccupied with their single ideas, and readers are encouraged to recognize the extent to which that difference qualifies Hazlitt to criticize as he does.

⁴¹ Hazlitt writes, “L. H. once said to me—‘I wonder I never heard you speak upon this subject before, which you seem to have studied a good deal.’ I answered, ‘Why, we were not reduced to that, that I know of!’” (6: 59).

⁴² A notice in the magazine of the publication of *Table-Talk* praises Hazlitt's ability “to consult his own nature” on the subjects he treats rather than looking at what others have said, and the writer of the notice suggests that his “fearless and profound self-investigation” ultimately leads to the greater truth in his essays contain. (3: 431). Hazlitt's authenticity is also celebrated in a review that appeared in the May 1821 issue of the magazine, in which he is described as “most felicitous when he discusses things rather than books—when he analyzes social manners, or fathoms the depths of the heart” (3: 545). For this reviewer, Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* essays “do not merely guide us in our estimate of the works of others, or unravel the subtleties of habit, or explain the mysteries of the heart; but they give us pieces of sentiment in themselves worthy of a high place in the chambers of memory.” While these reviews reinforce the idea of Hazlitt's

value of the essays as “authentic” criticism and claiming that they have a transformational influence on those who read them, both of the magazine’s reviews of *Table–Talk* emphasize the unique strength of character that is required to give substance to abstract qualities with the level of success Hazlitt achieves.

The ideal of authenticity that Hazlitt espouses in the text, however, is continually under threat by the reality of his public character—that is, his reputation as a controversial writer who, according to his opponents at *Blackwood’s* and the *Quarterly Review*, is uneducated, low-born, and Cockney, “wild, black-bill Hazlitt” (*Blackwood’s* 3: 550). This distinction between how Hazlitt portrays himself and how he knows he will appear to many of his readers—a distinction that, due to the aura of anonymity, is not present in the *London Magazine* series—generates the tension that permeates the volume of *Table–Talk*, and Hazlitt uses this tension to create what appears to be an extremely conflicted character. In “Of People with One Idea,” as we have seen, Hazlitt suggests that he is self-assured about his own strengths as a writer. Yet this notion is undermined in “The Indian Jugglers,” when he unhappily complains about the difficulty and thanklessness of writing.⁴³ He writes, “What abortions are these Essays! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions! How little is made out, and that little how ill! Yet they are the best I can do” (6: 68).⁴⁴ Hazlitt’s commitment to writing authentically and sincerely is undermined by his awareness that his writing puts him on display.

sincerity, the integrity of their criticism is undermined by the fact that they appear in a magazine currently publishing Hazlitt’s work.

⁴³ These comments echo the footnote, examined in the previous section, to the *London Magazine* essay “On the Qualifications Necessary to Success in Life,” in which T. contrasts the difficulty of writing with the objective standards of athletics. But whereas the footnote suggests T.’s disinterestedness, the observations in “The Indian Jugglers” are featured prominently and point to Hazlitt’s much more ambivalent attitude about his writing.

⁴⁴ The review of *Table–Talk* in the *Quarterly Review* concludes with this quotation as “an unlucky moment” in which Hazlitt confesses “the true scope of his own abilities” (26: 108).

His public identity in this sense undermines his authenticity in the social realm; and Hazlitt's public expression of this frustration is a subtle appeal for readers' sympathy.

Hazlitt's bitterness in *Table-Talk* is therefore a strategic manifestation of the textual self that best represents the problem of authentic self-presentation in the "AGE OF PERSONALITY." The sense of resentment in his essays, moreover, entails a very different relationship with readers than that created by the *London Magazine* series. Hazlitt does not treat his readers as friends and companions but points out their errors in accepting popular opinion rather than practicing the kind of intuitive criticism he models in the magazine "Table-Talk." Nowhere is this more apparent than in "On Living to One's-Self," the volume's clearest expression of Hazlitt's discontent and the strongest explanation for what produces that state. By criticizing the public for giving power to the reviewing periodicals, Hazlitt draws a distinction between living authentically, for one's own satisfaction, and the frustrations of trying to please an undiscerning public. Ready describes the essay as "a prose analogue to [the] great poetic meditations" of Wordsworth and Coleridge, "a dramatic monologue that reveals something different from the speaker's beginning intention. [...] It tries to extol retirement, but its real subject is a bitter knowledge of inevitable involvement" (72). Compared to Coleridge's conversation poems, in which the poet's return to society marks a rejection of pantheism (and the poet's recognition of god-like presence within himself) and an acceptance of religious orthodoxy, Hazlitt's essay suggests the need to reject the public so that he can return to the condition of authentic living.

The essay can be divided into two parts: the first describes the writer living in a blissful state during which he is unobstructed in his search for truth and is beholden to no one, and the second shows how public ignorance destroys what is inherently good about that state. While the first part of the essay iterates the value of Hazlitt's authentic ideal, and the second half shows

readers the consequences of the undermining of that ideal in the social world. Hazlitt constructs an idyllic picture of a time when he lived “in the world, as in it, not of it,” without caring how he was perceived by others or feeling the need to adapt in order to strike a socially appropriate figure.⁴⁵ This picture highlights his authority on the essay’s topic of authentic living, but in the context of the rest of *Table–Talk* it also draws attention to the difference the carefree youth of the past and the embittered author of *Table–Talk*. The essay generates tension out of the difference between these two states, and it depends on readers’ ability to recognize that difference.

The opposing psychological states Hazlitt describes in the essay are vivid, but they are textual constructs meant to create the impression of a real emotional journey. Hazlitt’s past state of contentment contrasts sharply with the “spirit of sour misanthropy” that pervades the rest of the essay, brought about when the writer is forced to pander to public opinion rather than being true to himself.⁴⁶ He claims to have been abused by lazy readers who too readily believe everything that is written in the reviews and therefore develop their opinions of authors based on what bad critics write. Notably, Hazlitt does not blame his opponents at the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood’s* for the wrongs he and his friends have suffered; instead, he places blame on the public—made up of his readers—that creates a market for such literary and political gossip by believing the reviews and encouraging their sensational criticism.⁴⁷ This admonition makes

⁴⁵ “I cared for nothing, I wanted nothing. I took my time to consider whatever occurred to me, and was in no hurry to give a sophisticated answer to a questions—there was no printer’s devil waiting for me. I used to write a page or two perhaps in half a year [...]” (6: 80).

⁴⁶ He writes, “If I had sufficient provocation to rail at the public, as Ben Johnson did at the audience in the Prologues to his plays, I think I should do it in good set terms, nearly as follows. There is not a more mean, stupid, dastardly, pitiful, selfish, spiteful, envious, ungrateful animal than the Public. It is the greatest of cowards, for it is afraid of itself. From its unwieldy, overgrown dimensions, it dreads the least opposition to it, and shakes like isinglass at the touch of a finger” (6: 85).

⁴⁷ He specifically mentions *Blackwood’s* “Cockney School” essays for having caused “all the people of London” to be afraid to read works by authors names in the essays “lest they too

readers consider the consequences of their own bad reading habits. By exemplifying the tension between living and writing authentically, on one hand, and, on the other, the frustration of trying to satisfy readers, Hazlitt creates a scenario by which the same readers he reprimands will recognize their bad reading and accept his ideal of authenticity.

As a carefully plotted dramatization of Hazlitt's development from contentment to bitterness, the essay justifies the reasons for the discontent that fills the volume of *Table-Talk*. Yet as his frustration and righteous anger toward the public draws to a climax, he suddenly proclaims, "Enough: my soul, turn from them, and let me try to regain the obscurity and quiet that love, 'far from the madding strife,' in some sequestered corner of my own, or in some far-distant land!" (6: 87), publicly declaring the wish to return to the prelapsarian state his youth. The pretense Hazlitt makes of attempting to soothe his anger and calm himself down—within the essay—signals his attempt to return to the state of authentic living he had lost.

By describing his past authenticity for readers, Hazlitt shows that his reputation as a discontented critic is not representative of his "true" self. He is not naturally angry or bitter or frustrated, but he has been made to seem that way by writers from periodicals like the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, as well as the readers who believe them.⁴⁸ He co-opts his negative public persona, created as much by his opponents and critics as by Hazlitt himself, to turn the power of periodical criticism against the periodicals themselves. And he

should be convicted of cockneyism," and, in an emotional apostrophe to the "brave public!" blames the Cockney essays for Keats's death (6: 86). It is also worth noting that "One Living to One's-Self" is the only dated *Table-Talk* essay, although the date Hazlitt ascribes to it, January 18–19, 1821, precedes Keats's death by more than a month.

⁴⁸ The *Blackwood's* review of *Table-Talk* bases some of its most biting criticism of Hazlitt on this essay, and specifically on Hazlitt's admonition of the public. For example, the reviewer writes, "Some people will say, 'No, no, this is too much old boy: Hazlitt is a bad writer, we grant, but not quite such a ninny neither'" (12: 158), to which he proceeds to demonstrate, with much satisfaction, how much a ninny Hazlitt in fact is.

highlights his authenticity to expose the inauthenticity of others. In this way, Hazlitt stands out to a public that has been conditioned by the proliferation of gossipy criticism in an “AGE OF PERSONALITY” and fashions himself into the true representative of “authentic” criticism.

The self-narrative Hazlitt creates about “Living to One’s–Self” in an age of public scrutiny corresponds nicely with other critical narratives about misunderstood Romantic artists, such as Keats and Coleridge, who fought bravely against critical ignorance to create authentic work that would eventually transcend its historical moment. According to this narrative, which Hazlitt himself had a hand in creating, he tried to live “authentically,” without caring what others thought of him, and his work consequently bears the mark of genius while the criticisms of most of his contemporaries have disappeared into the archives of literary history.⁴⁹ As I have tried to argue, the way these narratives recapitulate Hazlitt’s own views about authenticity are problematic at best. Hazlitt’s authenticity—deployed differently in the *London Magazine* “Table–Talk” essays and the collected volumes of *Table–Talk*—is not a character trait but a rhetorical device, useful for seeming reliable and trustworthy to readers in an age when such attitudes were at a premium. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how Charles Lamb tests the limitations of Romantic authenticity with the Elia persona that he creates for the *London Magazine*. In contrast to Hazlitt’s “Table–Talk,” the Elia essays are deliberately disorienting in order to heighten readers’ dependence on Elia. The “phantom cloud of Elia” in the magazine

⁴⁹ Hazlitt, of course, was aware of this irony and was prescient enough (or vain enough) to believe it would apply to him: “As a general rule, all those who live by the public starve, and are made a bye–word and a standing jest into the bargain. – Posterity is no better (not a bit more enlightened or more liberal) except that you are no longer in their power, and that the voice of common fame saves them the trouble of deciding on your claims. [...] Our posterity will be the living public of a future generation. When a man is dead, they put money in his coffin, erect monuments to his memory, and celebrate the anniversary of his birthday in set speeches. Would they take any notice of him if he were living? No!” (6: 87).

thrives on the instability of character that is produced by Lamb's equivocal descriptions of Elia and—significantly—by his deliberate attempts to alienate Elia from the historical Charles Lamb.

Chapter 5: The Character of Elia in the *London Magazine*

I conclude this study of the Romantic familiar essay by examining Charles Lamb's Elia essays. In contrast to the usual critical claims that the Elia essays "formed an almost complete record of [Lamb's] life, together with an intimate and candid commentary upon it" (Bryan and Crane xlix), I show how the essays bearing Elia's signature in the *London Magazine* consistently undermine the possibility that one's life can be recorded in any satisfying way. These essays paradoxically present one of the strongest characters of the early nineteenth-century even as they call his existence into question. The Elia essays are deliberately disorienting, exhibiting a sophisticated type of playfulness that heightens readers' dependence on the narrator. The character in these essays displays instability, produced by Lamb's equivocal descriptions of Elia and his deliberate attempts to distance Elia from the historical Charles Lamb. Elia's playfulness contributes to the formation of a literary character and creates a forum for the familiar and sympathetic reading that Elia and his essays model.

The first section of this chapter looks at the earliest essays to show how Lamb's initial presentation of Elia arouses readers' interest in the series through his ambiguous self-presentation. Elia destabilizes his own textual authority by playing with the concepts of authenticity and identity, and he encourages readers first to doubt his reliability and then, somewhat paradoxically, to submit to it ironically. The next section demonstrates that Elia's authenticity and identity are further questioned by the surrounding material about him in the *London Magazine*, and it shows how that context begins to stabilize Elia's indeterminate textual character. The third section demonstrates how after Elia's character is stabilized, Lamb once again challenges reader expectation by taking essays in surprising directions. Finally, the fourth section considers the effects the essays' republication as a collection had on the Elian persona

and on his role in the *London Magazine*. The collected volume replaced the disorganized magazine essays with a stable, “authorized” text, essentially killing off the magazine’s version of Elia and changing the way that the essays—and their persona—would subsequently be read.

Playing with Authenticity and Identity

Elia is a shadowy figure, defined by his paradoxes and contrasts. He seems like a displaced character in the mass-produced, metropolitan magazine, one who lives in the present but comes from somewhere else; his thoughts tend to dwell on the previous century rather than his own and, although he frequently adopts the posture of an old man, his age is indeterminate. Elia writes with a nostalgic longing for a past that always seems irretrievable, but his melancholy tone is frequently tempered with whimsy and playfulness. Despite the fact that his work as a trading-house clerk precludes him from belonging to a privileged class of professional writers—although his acquaintances with authors like Lamb and Coleridge would seem to place him close to their circles—he nevertheless shows himself to be a thoughtful and erudite reader. While these contrasts could be disorienting and therefore alienate readers, Elia is good-natured and friendly, suggestive of an ironic detachment that manifests itself as a highly developed sense of play in the essays. The result is a kind of familiarity with readers that is remarkably different from anything else that has been considered in this study. Whereas most essayists, following Montaigne, attempt to avoid giving the impression of a “studied posture,” Lamb’s Elia highlights the futility of this kind of self-presentation. I will focus on two examples of Elia’s playfulness in the *London Magazine* essays: play of authenticity, through which he raises doubts about his reliability, and play of identity, by which he invites readers to question his existence. Together, these constitute the foundation of Elia’s textual character.

Lamb's Elia essays unsettle the generic expectation of the familiar essay as a vehicle for authentic self-revelation. On the surface, however, the opposite seems to be the case: his essays appear deeply intimate and authentic. Throughout the essays, he builds a relationship with readers that is entirely predicated on his natural presentation of himself, imitating Montaigne's creation of a textual persona through thematic and stylistic choices that make him appear authentically immanent in his text. However, Elia regularly undermines the reliability and trustworthiness earned by his "authentic" self-revelation by introducing equivocal elements into his essays. In "Recollections of the South Sea House," the result is a complex interweaving of realistic details and suggestive half-truths that encourage readers to constantly ask what is true and false. In fact, as the opening paragraph of that essay shows, reader involvement is frequently at the foreground of the essays:

READER, in thy passage from the Bank—where thou hast been receiving thy half-yearly dividends (supposing thou art a lean annuitant like myself)—to the Flower Pot, to secure a place for Dalston, or Shacklewell, or some other thy suburban retreat northerly,—didst thou never observe a melancholy-looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice, to the left—where Threadneedle-street abuts upon Bishopsgate? I dare say thou hast often admired its magnificent portals ever gaping wide, and disclosing to view a grace court, with cloisters, and pillars, with few or no traces of goers-in or comers-out—a desolation something like Balcutha's. (2: 142)

In this passage, Elia interrupts the reader, whom he casts as one going about his business of securing his income and paying rent. There is almost a sense that he is pulling the reader aside to point out something important, but in fact the subject of discussion here is the nearly-deserted South Sea trading house. As Elia assumes a nostalgic tone, he begins to speak of the great past of

the building, the bustling atmosphere that had characterized it in times of prosperity, and the impressive architecture and furniture with which it was filled before being abandoned to disrepair and decay.

The narrative realism of this introduction is heightened as the essayist (so far unnamed) gives a brief history of the house and describes it, as he remembers it, “forty years ago.” He recalls “great dead tomes” filled with “sums in triple columnations, set down with formal superfluity of cyphers” and “heavy odd-shaped penknives” that add to the verisimilitude of the scene he depicts. These descriptions enhance what Sarah Lodge calls the “‘aura’ of the authentic” in the essay, which legitimizes Elia’s authority on the topic (186). Meanwhile, the essay is also haunted by the specter of inauthenticity. A footnote to the end of the opening sentence ensures that readers recognize “a desolation something like Balcutha’s” as an allusion to the Ossian cycle, James Macpherson’s infamous forgery of third-century Scottish poetry. And the South Sea House itself, as Elia explains, is a visible memorial of another kind of forgery, the “tremendous HOAX” that created a stock market bubble and crash in 1720. This contrast between Elia’s written reality in the essay and the exposed fictions on which that reality is based invites readers to question Elia’s authority.

Readers are consequently teased by the fact that Elia’s authenticity is unverifiable, inscribed in the South Sea House’s “layers of dust” that only he has access to. Through most of the essay, the speaker appears to be in something akin to a reverie as he reflects on the house’s past and conjures up the names and faces of clerks, now all deceased, that he remembers from forty years earlier. He describes several of those clerks, focusing on details that were peculiar to each one, such as Evans, who “wore his hair, to the last, powdered and frizzed out, in the fashion [of] *Maccaronies*” (2: 143), or “fine rattling rattleheaded Plumer” who claimed to be the

illegitimate offspring of an aristocratic family. Elia's detailed descriptions create a sense of importance about these otherwise insignificant individuals. Yet after many paragraphs about characters with whom readers are unfamiliar, Elia asks, "Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while—peradventure the very *names*, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic—insubstantial—like Henry Pimpernel, and old John Naps of Greece:— Be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being. Their importance is from the past" (2: 146).¹ Despite his dismissive reassurances, Elia creates a problem for readers of his first essay: the names that they read and the people those names represent may be not have any real substance. Readers are absorbed (or bored) by accounts that seem to be based on extremely detailed memories only to discover, from Elia himself, that they may not be real. Moreover, whether the characters are substantial or not, they are unverifiable because the only link between the names and the readers is Elia himself. While an unreliable account like this in a magazine essay was nothing new—the writers at *Blackwood's* excelled at mixing half-truths with fictions—Elia signals his (possible) deception as a kind of playfulness by drawing readers' attention to his unreliability. Readers are therefore invited to see through the hoax—if it is indeed a hoax—and puzzle over Elia's authentic unreliability.

This play with authenticity frequently extends to Elia's name, as well. Coming as it does at the end of "Recollections of the South Sea House," his comment about fantastic and insubstantial names can only draw readers' attention to the strange, Italian-sounding name that

¹ Henry Pimpernel and John Naps are an allusion to another hoax, this one from the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*. When Christopher Sly gets drunk and passes out, a Lord and his servants decide to play a joke on him and convince Sly that he is a Lord just coming to his senses following a fifteen-year illness. To complete the ruse they tell Sly that, in his fevered state, he called on Pimpernel and Naps. Elia's reference to the scene draws readers attention to the hoax within the hoax but also points to Sly's eventual willingness to play along, no matter how preposterous the game may be.

appears immediately after that comment. The convention of anonymity and pseudonymity made the presence of “insubstantial names” commonplace in early nineteenth-century magazines. In the previous chapter I argued that these conventions, by which the identities of contributors were protected and writers were safeguarded from being sued for libel, enabled Hazlitt to address his readers without the baggage of his past confrontations with *Blackwood’s Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*. While some pseudonyms became larger-than-life personalities (such as John Gibson Lockhart’s “Z.,” the author of *Blackwood’s Cockney School* attacks), their ubiquity in magazines meant that most were overlooked or omitted.² However, while it would by no means be unusual for readers of the *London Magazine* to assume that “Elia” is just another pseudonym, the manner in which Elia draws attention to his name is uncharacteristic of other periodical pseudonyms. Just as his suggestion that he may have been playing inevitably draws the readers’ attention to Elia’s unreliability, his remark about insubstantial names asks readers to notice a signature that they might otherwise overlook, paradoxically highlighting and downplaying the importance of the name at the same time.³

² In the August 1820 issue of the *London Magazine* that includes “Recollections of the South Sea House,” most of the articles do not include any signature at all. Only four articles besides Elia’s are signed. Two of these feature “real” names: the critic Octavius Gilchrist (“A Character of Pope”) and the painter B. R. Haydon (“Mr. Haydon’s Address to the Public”); the other two do not: one of Hazlitt’s Drama essays (signed “T.”) and a letter to the editor of the magazine (signed “One of the Fancy”).

³ The name itself also represents another kind of playfulness. When the first and last letters are switched, Elia becomes “a lie,” and when it is pronounced *Ellia*, as Lamb once suggested it should be, it is a homophone for “a liar.” There was also a real Elia, although he died (unbeknownst to Lamb) shortly before Lamb began to write the essays. In a letter to John Taylor, Lamb explains that he borrowed the name from one of his fellow clerks at the South Sea House (where he had worked twenty-nine, not forty, years earlier): “I having a brother now there [at the South Sea House], and doubting how he might relish certain descriptions in [the essay], I clapt down the name of name of Elia to it, which passed off pretty well, for Elia himself added the function of an author to that of a scrivener, like myself” (*Letters 2*: 302). David Chandler has traced “Elia, the real” to Felix Ellia, who was in fact a clerk at the South Sea House and who wrote an original novel, *Norman Banditti, or the Fortress of Coutance*, in 1799.

Lest readers be inclined to doubt that Elia's name is part of his play of authenticity, he makes this clear when he opens "Oxford in the Vacation," the second essay, by imagining the reader asking *Who is Elia?* This question is a variant echo of Mr. Spectator's observation, as we saw earlier, that readers seldom read anything with pleasure until they have some sense of the author's character. Elia's response is to explain that, like the characters he describes in "Recollections of the South Sea House," he is a trading house clerk. As with his ambiguous conclusion to the "South Sea House," however, his description of himself raises more questions than it answers:

Well, I do agnize something of the sort. I confess that it is my humour, my fancy—in the forepart of the day, when the mind of your man of letters requires some relaxation—(and none better than such as at first sight seems most abhorrent from his beloved studies)—to while away some good hours of my time in the contemplation of indigos, cottons, raw silks, piece-goods, flowered or otherwise. In the first place * * * * * and then it sends you home with such increased appetite to your books * * * * * not to say, that your outside sheets, and waste wrappers of foolscap, do receive into them, most kindly and naturally, the impression of sonnets, epigrams, *essays*—so that the very parings of a counting-house are, in some sort, the settings up of an author. The enfranchised quill, that has plodded all the morning among the cart-rucks of figures and cyphers, frisks and curvets so at its ease over the flowery carpet-ground of a midnight dissertation.—It feels its promotion. * * * * * So that you see, upon the whole, the literary dignity of Elia is very little, if at all, compromised in the condescension. (2: 365)

If Elia's playful equivocation invited readers to question the authenticity of the first essay, this kind of self-presentation turns reader expectation on its head. Rather than admitting, as might be

assumed, that he is a clerk “who sucks his sustenance [...] through a quill” and a writer only by hobby, Elia describes his clerking job as a leisure activity, something he does to give him a break from the more strenuous task of writing and a place, in fact, that inspires him in his more serious work of authorship. His self-description is complicated, moreover, by his deletions (marked by Shandean asterisks), which draw attention to the fact that something in this otherwise enthusiastic account is being suppressed—and, in the tradition of *Tristram Shandy*, he implicitly invites readers to fill in the blanks. Elia appears to reveal with one hand while covering up with the other.

The ambiguities created by the way Elia plays with his own authenticity make him seem unreliable, a writer of questionable authority who consistently problematizes the authentic representation of the outside world. In fact, the tension created through the way Elia talks to his readers is fundamentally Romantic: it is the problem of the writer’s authority and the degree to which readers are willing to trust that authority. Elia’s realism and the exacting details of his essays rub against the readers’ awareness as, save for a few details, Elia is usually the only source of that realism.⁴ To that extent, Elia’s authentic inauthenticity feeds into early-nineteenth-century fears about (and popular taste for) textual inauthenticity and forgery—most notably instigated in the previous century by Macpherson’s Ossian cycle and Thomas Chatterton’s Rowley poems.⁵ As Margaret Russett has argued, concerns about forgeries were

⁴ The details that are accessible—such as the physical location of the South Sea House discussed above or descriptions of Oxford in the second essays—are, as I have been suggesting, important for enhancing the verisimilitude of the other details that readers can not independently verify.

⁵ A related and not inconsequential fear was that of social impostors like John Hatfield, who captured the nation’s attention in 1802 when he posed as “Colonel Hope” and bigamously married a young woman from the Lake District before he was found out, and Mary Baker, an unemployed former servant who fooled an entire town for ten weeks in the spring of 1817 by presenting herself as Princess Caraboo.

especially heightened for readers and writers of literary magazines. The editor of the *London Magazine*, John Scott, charged *Blackwood's Magazine* with converting this “fashion of hoaxing and masquerading” into a “scandalous juggling of signatures and characters” in Romantic magazines (172).⁶ Without a doubt, Elia’s equivocal self–presentation fits comfortably into the tradition of these texts. Yet although the Elia essays suggest that they are as insubstantial as the names they contain, the formal reflexivity of Elia’s playfulness—his wink to his readers—invites readers to see through the text’s referential uncertainty and accept its authenticity anyway. His instruction at the end of “Recollections of the South Sea House”—“Be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being”—is therefore both an assertion of Elia’s textual authority and, complexly, a familiarizing device that prompts readers to recognize their own role in willingly assenting to that authority by playing along.

By aligning himself with a “fashion of hoaxing,” Elia’s pretension of authenticity raises questions about his identity as well. Readers are continually provoked into considering whether Elia is a real person with a material presence outside the text. Although Elia’s textual voice is strong, his identity, as projected by the essays, is often surprisingly indeterminate. For example, when he briefly introduces himself in “Oxford in the Vacation,” his asterisks and cancellations restrict the degree to which readers can learn very much about Elia. This ambiguous self–presentation means that the question he imagines his readers asking, *Who is Elia?*, cannot be

⁶ John Scott blames this fashion, in part, on Walter Scott, whom he names as the “Great Unknown” author of the Scotch novels, but he also exonerates Scott from the misuse of anonymity he supposedly cleared the way for: “In the age of Byron, of Shelley, of Hunt, of Wilson, we owe—(and momentous is the obligation)—to the author of the Scotch Novels, our chief, perhaps our only assurance, that the literature of the present era will not be indelibly branded hereafter with a diseased, false, affected, profligate, whining, and hypocritical character” (*London Magazine* 2: 515). In addition to naming the Author of Waverly, Scott also publicly names the editors of *Blackwood's*.

answered in any satisfying way. The frequency with which Elia reflects on his ambiguous identity invites readers to question that identity as well as its relationship to his writing.

The relationship between identity and writing is the dominant theme of “New Year’s Eve,” a semi-autobiographical essay that turns into an extended meditation on death. The central problem for the essay, underlying Elia’s equivocal self-presentation here and elsewhere, is his own uncertainty of identity caused by the unreliability of his memory. In contrast to the apparent effortless with which Elia remembers and records exact details about people and places in his other essays, his attempts to recall his childhood self—“that ‘other me,’ there in the background”—are overwhelmed by the irreconcilable difference between the child and his present identity. For Elia the child is not the father of the man but an alien self, almost unrecognizable in the dissimilarity. When he reflects on the disparity between past and present Elia, he wonders, “From what have I not fallen, if the child I remember was indeed myself—and not some dissembling guardian, presenting a false identity, to give the rule to my unpractised steps, and regulate the tone of my moral being!” (3: 6). The passage contains an echo of Wordsworth’s “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey,”⁷ but in Elia’s revision of Wordsworth, the “moral being” is a guardian that finds its source not in nature or the language of the sense but in the (dis)organizing principle of a false identity.

Elia’s difficulty of recognizing the continuity between the “other me” of childhood and his present self introduces a crisis of identity. According to Mark Schoenfield, identity depends on a Humean notion of “resemblance, contiguity, and causation,” which allows the individual to recognize memories of past thoughts and events as consistent with one’s present self. Writing

⁷ “Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains [...]; well pleased to recognize / In nature and the language of the sense, / The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being” (ll. 105–7, 110–14).

therefore becomes “textual supplementation,” a means for strengthening one’s identity because it creates a permanent record of past iterations of the self that can then be referred to at will (114). As we saw earlier, Montaigne’s *Essais* emerged out of similar impulse to create a record of his own thoughts.⁸ While written iterations of the self become, in the context of publication, documents by which identity is preserved for—and presented to—readers, Elia’s inability to reconcile himself to his childhood “other me” problematizes the contiguity necessary for identity formation.

However, what appears to be an identity crisis is really a complex example of how Elia plays with the concept of identity in the essays. Paradoxically, these meditations on his false identity are the closest Elia comes to revealing his true identity—according to the conventional terms of the autobiographical pact—for the boy he describes is not Elia but Charles Lamb.⁹ Once he arrives at this threshold, however, Elia withdraws completely from his readers. He writes,

That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause; simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favorite? If these speculations seem fantastical to thee, reader—(a busy man, perchance), if I tread out of the way of thy sympathy, and am

⁸ Montaigne’s essays also willingly complicate the problem of contiguity between past and present thoughts, most notably in the way that he introduced new ideas in later essays without revising his earlier work, even if contradictions resulted.

⁹ The childhood memories Elia alludes to—some of which only would have been recognizable by those who were close to Lamb—include the pain caused by his sister’s madness and matricide, the hardship that event inflicted on the family, his own illnesses, his speech impediment, and his earlier failures as a writer.

singularly—conceited only; I retire, impenetrable to ridicule, under the phantom cloud of Elia. (3: 6)

Elia's penchant to doubt the relationship between his present state and the child in his memory is reconciled under the phantom cloud of Elia, the named manifestation of a division in the self. At the brink of self-revelation, then, Elia becomes a Janus figure, the two-faced god of both new years and thresholds. Like Janus, Elia looks both to the past and the future, but he dwells in neither.¹⁰ The loss of his past essentially liberates Elia from his fear of death. The effects of the Elian phantom cloud are felt in the essay, as the passage divides the melancholy tone of the essay's first half from the feeling of contentment—and repudiation of death—with which it ends.

As a commentary on the function of identity, authenticity, and familiarity in the essay, “New Year's Eve” represents a startling reversal of Montaigne's promise to show himself to his readers, faults and all, so that he will be seen in his natural state. By contrast, Elia allows Lamb to be himself by not being himself. At the same time, Elia's play with his identity requires readers to be familiar with the conventions of the essay and autobiographical writing so he can work against those conventions. His echoes of Wordsworth show that Elia also knowingly participates in Romantic ideas about identity, memory, and selfhood only to ironically undermine those ideas.

I close this section with one more example of Elia's play with identity, his well-known essay on “Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago” (November 1820). In this essay, Elia's self-portrait is deliberately positioned in such a way as to contrast with a previously published account given by one of his school-fellows: Charles Lamb, who had written (and published

¹⁰ The Janus figure bears other significance for readers of the *London Magazine* as well. One of the most frequent contributors for the magazine is “Janus Weathercock,” a pseudonym for T.G. Wainwright. In many ways, Wainwright's Janus is an even more equivocal and playful persona than Elia.

under his own name) an article for the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in June 1813, "On CHRIST'S HOSPITAL, and the Character of the CHRIST'S HOSPITAL BOYS." Lamb's essay had been written in response to allegations that his old school was showing favoritism toward boys who came from richer families, and he republished the essay as "Recollections of Christ's Hospital" in his collected *Works* in 1818. It is that second, republished version that Elia takes up in his Christ's Hospital essay:

In Mr. Lamb's "Works," published a year or two since, I find a magnificent eulogy to my old school, such as it was, or now appears to have been, between the years 1782 and 1789. It happens, very oddly, that my own standing at Christ's was nearly corresponding with his; and, with all gratitude to him for his enthusiasm for the cloisters, I think he has contrived to bring together whatever can be said in praise of them, dropping all the other side of the argument most ingeniously.

I remember L. at school; and can well recollect that he had some peculiar advantages, which I and others of his school-fellows had not. His friends lived in town, and were near at hand; and he had the privilege of going to see them, almost as often as he wished, through some invidious distinction, which was denied to us. (2: 483)

Elia defines himself as one in close proximity to Lamb—who, as a writer of some reputation, had a name recognizable to most readers—and, in doing so, establishes the difference between his identity and Lamb's. Elia's stay at Christ's "was *nearly* corresponding" with Lamb's; they overlapped, but they did not perfectly coincide. Elia's self-alignment with "other schoolfellows," adds a degree of anonymity to his claim that he lacked certain advantages to which Lamb was privileged.

In fact, Elia's "Christ's Hospital" essay is a revisionist approach to Lamb's essay on the same topic. The first few paragraphs are devoted to describing the special treatment Lamb received during his time there, such as the right to eat roast veal, personally delivered by relatives, when everyone else (including Elia) had to eat boiled beef, or to take "tea and hot rolls in a morning" while the rest were limited to "a penny loaf—our *crug*—moistened with attenuated small beer." Given that Lamb's original essay was written in response to concerns about some Christ's Hospital boys receiving special treatment, and given the laudatory tones in which Lamb praises his old school, Elia's contrasting account is all the more striking because it undermines Lamb's authority on the subject.

In another complex example of identity play, Elia's essay is an extended challenge to Lamb for ignoring the other side of the argument and overlooking the real situation of the less fortunate boys at the school.¹¹ As James Treadwell argues, Elia's reading of Lamb's account "is not so much contradicting his precursor as showing that his precursor has no identity at all. [...] In the very process of hiding his own history, [Lamb] reveals (is made by Elia to reveal) the hidden motivation of his recollections, the origins of his memory" ("Impersonation" 511). Elia's version, in other words, is more trustworthy than Lamb's precisely because Elia is able to address the accusations of favoritism in ways that Lamb, who according to Elia *did* receive preferential treatment, cannot. Through his writing, Elia manufactures textual authority at the expense of Lamb's. The effect of this complex identity play is to create a character that is close

¹¹ In his 1899 edition of *Essays of Elia*, Alfred Ainger explains the reason for Elia contradicting Lamb: "Lamb now seems to have remembered that there were other aspects of schoolboy life under its shelter that might be profitably dealt with. The 'poor friendless boy,' in whose character he now writes, was his old school fellow Coleridge" (338). This reading has been echoed by Thomas McFarland and Grevel Lindop. In my view, these are the kinds of readings of familiar essays that most need to be reconsidered. Although the memories may be Coleridge's, the voice with which they're delivered—and the attitude that voice represents—most certainly is not.

enough to the real Lamb in terms of history, education, and social connections, but who is nevertheless distinct in important ways, even to the point of unsettling Lamb's reliability in order to better establish Elia's independent identity.

Elia's play allows Lamb to author his authenticity, to legitimize Elia by making him legible. In the same way that Mr. Spectator seeks to "Print out [his] self" in the pages of the *Spectator*, Elia's indeterminate phantom cloud literally becomes, in the printed text, form, the lasting impression of something that lacks material presence.¹² Moreover, when the essays are printed in the *London Magazine* and published—in the word's original sense of being made public—his presence becomes part of a reciprocal exchange with readers. As I have been suggesting throughout this dissertation, the transformation of real and imagined readers from Montaigne to the early–nineteenth–century essayists created the need for strategies to mediate the vulnerability of exposing oneself to readers. Lamb's strategy of disorienting readers through play is both one of the most extreme and one of the most successful examples of this. Elia's playful exchange with readers cultivates an essayistic character who seems to have real textual presence, regardless of his material indeterminacy. As I will show in the next section, the surrounding text of the *London Magazine* both contributes to and further complicates that character.

Elia's Life in the *London Magazine* Context

Shortly after the Elia essays began to appear in the *London Magazine*, Lamb's identity as

¹² As Elia claims in a footnote in "Oxford in the Vacation," "There is something to me repugnant, at any time, in written hand. The text never seems determinate. Print settles it" (2: 367).

Elia's author started to become known.¹³ The authorship of the essays was never a closely-guarded secret, as it was with some other anonymous writers, but the playfulness of authenticity and identity on which the series is built depends on Elia's individuality. For the purposes of the essays, that means that Elia needs to be seen as separate from Charles Lamb. When Elia openly discredits and disagrees with Lamb in his "Christ's Hospital" essay, for example, his textual identity is actually defined *against* Lamb's. When the two are conflated, much of the original power of the essay is diminished. Yet as Elia's distinct character began to be threatened in this way, an abundance of extra-essayistic material about Elia began to appear in the *London Magazine*. This material helped give Elia a real presence in the magazine that extends beyond his essays, thereby reinforcing and stabilizing the phantom cloud of Elia.

The first public exposure of Elia's "real" identity came from Leigh Hunt. In a review of Lamb's *Works* that appeared in the January 31, 1821, issue of *The Indicator*, Hunt laments that few readers are aware of Lamb's excellence: "He is not so much known as he is admired [...]. The truth is, that Mr. Lamb in general has performed his services to the literary world so anonymously, and in his most trivial subjects has such a delicate and extreme sense of all that is human, that common readers have not been aware of half his merits, nor great numbers of his existence" (*Indicator* 2: 129). The injustice, for Hunt, is not that so few readers have read Lamb's work—many have read it and admire it. Rather, the problem is that, because of the

¹³ There is little critical consensus on the extent to which readers of the magazine knew that Elia was Lamb. There were efforts to make the connection in other contexts, but the division is generally maintained in the London itself. James Treadwell suggests that no one was really fooled by the pseudonym (*Autobiographical Writing* 213), but I am more inclined to agree with David Chandler, who points out that the evidence connecting Elia with Lamb "is drawn entirely from Lamb's own circle, and hardly proves that the average reader of the London Magazine saw through the hoax" ("Elia, the Real" 682). At any rate, with circulation estimates between 1,600 and 1,800, it seems highly probable that only a comparative few readers would know about the connection.

conventions of anonymous and pseudonymous publishing, those who do admire individual parts of Lamb's work are unaware of the source and, therefore, are unable to connect the piece they admire with his other works. Given the growing popularity of the Elia essays, Hunt takes the opportunity to familiarize his readers with Lamb's current project by observing, "We believe we are taking no greater liberty with him than our motives will warrant, when we add that he sometimes writes in the *London Magazine* under the signature ELIA" (2: 129). Although Hunt claims that his exposure is for altruistic readers—he wants to earn more admirers for Lamb—his article created a crisis of sorts for Elia.

Hunt's review was published too late for Elia's response to appear in the February issue of the *London Magazine*, but in a postscript to the March essay, "A Chapter on Ears," he addresses his exposure. Elia writes,

A writer [...] has thought it fit to insinuate, that I *Elia* do not write the little sketches that bear my signature, in this Magazine; but that the true author is a Mr. L—b. Observe the critical period at which he has chosen to impute the calumny!—on the very eve of the publication of our last number—affording no scope for explanation for a full month—during which time, I must needs lie writhing and tossing, under the cruel imputation of nonentity.—Good heavens! That a plain man must not be allowed *to be*—

They call this an age of personality: but surely this spirit of anti-personality (if I may so express it) is something worse. (3: 266)

Hunt's divulgence creates an ontological crisis for Elia. Once he is allowed to be absorbed into Lamb, he ceases to be himself as a character distinct from his creator. In the previous chapter, we saw how what Coleridge called the "AGE OF PERSONALITY" subjected several writers to gossip and personal criticism. Elia's situation is even more serious. In fact, "Elia" just becomes a

pseudonym, with no character, personality, or essence of his own. He is a nonentity who lacks any sort of meaningful existence. As Elia goes on to write, “Other murderers stab but at our existence, a frail and perishing trifle at the best. But here is an assassin, who aims at our very essence; who not only forbids us *to be* any longer, but *to have been* at all” (3: 266). Elia is defending himself against the absolute erasure of his past.¹⁴

Elia responds to this attack on his past and present existence by deflecting the exposure back to its source. He identifies the real name of the *Indicator* writer who was trying to expose him as “Boldero” and accuses him to have been “entertaining the town” under a pseudonym: “Leigh Hunt.” He claims the name is “Clearly a fictitious appellation: for if we admit the latter of these names to be in a manner English, what is *Leigh*? Christian nomenclature knows no such” (3: 266). Whereas the exposure implied that Elia was a fictitious signature for the author Charles Lamb, this reversal makes Hunt’s true identity even less real than his own pseudonym. Later, Elia attacks the name “Boldero,” too, calling it “barbarous” and, in a footnote, claiming, “It is clearly of transatlantic origin.” In other words, and in a prominent reversal, Elia insists that his *own* name, and the person it represents, is more real than either “Boldero” and “Leigh Hunt.”

After Elia deflects the exposure back to Hunt, he endeavors to verify his existence, independent of Lamb, by providing evidence of his birth and lineage. He points readers toward the parish register and assures them that his Italian lineage is traceable through official records, dating as far back as the reign of Henry VII, when his ancestors came to England from Geneva.

¹⁴ Without overlooking the obvious playfulness of Elia’s indignant tone, it is worth noting that Lamb’s name is presented here only through deletion. In the “Christ’s Hospital” essay, Elia not only used Lamb’s name but devoted a large amount of space to describing Lamb as a former school-fellow. Now that Lamb’s identity has been brought closer to Elia’s through Hunt’s unveiling, Elia places Lamb at a greater distance, further highlighted by an indefinite article. That is, Lamb is not “Mr. Lamb” or, more familiarly, “L.,” as he appeared in the “Christ’s Hospital” essay, but “a Mr. L—b,” as if he is entirely unfamiliar to Elia. Elia is consequently forced to alienate himself from Lamb from this point on.

Of course, all of Elia's evidence is really unverifiable because it does not exist, but it helps to flesh out his character, paratextually, and perhaps more definitively than anything he might say in the essays themselves. For the first time in the series, Elia ceases to be a mere pseudonym or character limited to the confines of his essays and becomes an independent textual presence within the greater context of the *London Magazine*.

The postscript on Elia's identity that contains the mock-debate with Hunt over his personhood was removed from the published version of the essay, thus relegating that debate to the framework of the *London Magazine*. Although some of the early Elia essays, as we have seen, go out of their way to establish Elia's character as separate from Lamb's, the question of Elia's identity is put to the test more regularly in the magazine than in the essays themselves. Recurring references to Elia in the magazine, which began to appear with increasing frequency after this debate, work together to constitute what Simon Hull terms Elia's "extra-essayistic ontology," which in turn reveals Elia to be "a figure created *by* Lamb, but *for* the *London Magazine*" (4). Support for Elia develops gradually alongside the essays, giving the magazine cause to claim a stake of ownership in him. He is referred to in the magazine on more than one occasion as "Our Elia," and that investment and sense of ownership extends to a kind of protectiveness mixed with adulation. This means that Elia's character is able to develop even more fully in the magazine than would be possible in the essays themselves. Elia takes on something like a life of his own in the *London Magazine*, and that in turn helps to develop the persona within the essays.

The cultivation of Elia's extra-essayistic identity in the *London Magazine* began shortly after the appearance of the first Elia essay. In addition to containing Elia's "Oxford in the Vacation," the October 1820 issue also includes an essay by Bryan Procter (under the

pseudonym Pomarius)¹⁵ called “The Cider Cellar,” which begins with a review of Elia’s first essay:

I read with much pleasure, in THE LONDON MAGAZINE, a delightful paper entitled, *Recollections of the South Sea House*. There was a fine antique air about it which became the subject: the characters were sketched with delicacy, and their foibles and good qualities drawn out in the truest spirit of humanity. I was carried back at once into the days when Steele, and Addison, and Garth, were flesh and blood like ourselves. Now they are mere names:—and names, indeed, of little power or interest, except with elderly gentlemen like myself, who still entertain a respect for what was venerable in childhood; and who do not readily consent to float up and down, backwards and forwards, on the varying tide of literary opinion. (2: 384)

Pomarius’ commentary on the essay wastes no time in affirming Elia’s contribution to the *London Magazine*. Through these claims, readers are encouraged to see Elia as kindred with the periodical essayists of the previous century.¹⁶ In the *London Magazine*, Pomarius is a kind of model reader for Elia’s essay and, as such, provides a model response. He recognizes that the association with the elder authors no longer means what it once did, but he explains his own continued admiration for them (and, by extension, for Elia) as coming from one who is not easily swayed by the fashions of literary taste. This comment both highlights and celebrates Elia’s originality. Finally, in the ultimate show of sympathy and solidarity with Elia’s excellence, “The Cider Cellar” proceeds in imitation of “The South Sea House,” focusing on an underground

¹⁵ Procter was also better known as the poet “Barry Cornwall.”

¹⁶ As we have seen, this is the same tradition Hazlitt and Hunt tried to align themselves with in “The Round Table.” The difference in this case, however, is that Elia himself never claims the association and is therefore exempt from criticism for having done so. Hunt and Hazlitt, it will be recalled, were criticized heavily for assuming themselves worthy imitators of the older periodical writers.

alehouse that is presented as a more informal version of the coffee-houses of the previous century. In the same manner and tone of the Elia essay, it recalls the Cider Cellar's not-too-distant heyday and gives a series of brief character sketches of those who used to frequent the establishment.¹⁷ In addition to publicly articulating the pleasure of reading Elia's essay, then, Pomarius' flattery through imitation legitimizes the Elia project and encourages readers to appreciate the original essay even more.

"The Cider Cellar" essay offers the first such model of readers reacting to the Elia essays in the *London Magazine*. This kind of response, and others like it, works as a metacommentary to create an almost dialogic relationship between the essays and the magazine in which they appear. Contributions by other writers of the *London Magazine*, such as Procter, John Scott, T.G. Wainwright, and the poet John Clare (who, in a sonnet "To Elia" in one of the rare issues without a new Elia essay, pleads, "wake again thy wild harp's tenderest strings, / Sing on sweet Bard, let fairy loves again / Smile in thy dreams, with angel ecstasies" [6: 151]) regularly refer to Elia and discuss the fineness of his essays. Another example is the "Epistle to Elia," a verse epistle submitted, not by a regular writer for the magazine but by a correspondent named Olen, in response to the melancholy reflections in Elia's "New Year's Eve" essay. The writer encourages Elia to believe that the Christian soul is eternal and reminds him that, even as Elia regrets growing older and anticipates his eventual death, he will not lose the memory of what he cherishes in this present life.¹⁸ Olen not only responds to Elia's concerns seriously, as a reader

¹⁷ Like Elia, Pomarius also assumes an older persona by casting himself as an "elderly gentleman." Procter was 32 when the essay was published.

¹⁸ According to the poet, even Elia's books will be recalled in the next life: "The soul that revell'd in thy *Burton's* page / Shall be alive with thee; the bard and sage / Thou lovedst here, they wait but thy arrival" (4: 128).

who is invested in the person behind the pseudonym,¹⁹ but he also shows that he is picking up on the most representative details of Elia's character, including his longing for the past and uncertainty toward his future, the pleasure he takes in good conversation, and his love for reading the seventeenth-century writers. In this way, Olen's poem also models reader response and substantiates Elia's textual character.

Although these debates about Elia's identity and the details about how he and his essays were invoked and celebrated in the *London Magazine* may seem trivial for an understanding of Lamb's familiar essays, the role that these texts play in developing Elia's extra-essayistic identity is far from insignificant. In contrast to the ambiguities that we saw result from the play of authenticity and identity in the early essays, the magazine framework begins the process of stabilizing Elia's textual character. And, as Elia's fictional self becomes more real in the pages of the magazine, the essays themselves become less dependent on the perpetual creation of an essayistic persona. Many of the middle and late Elia essays—including "Distant Correspondents" (March 1822), "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers" (May 1822), "A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis" (June 1822), and "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig" (September 1822)—maintain many of the representative Elian elements but do not play with Elia's authenticity and identity as overtly as we saw in the earlier essays. Readers are conditioned in how to read the essays not just by the essays themselves but by the added strength given to them paratextually. Once Elia's character is fleshed out by the magazine, he no longer needs to perpetually create himself through his text. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section,

¹⁹ Lamb's response to the poem, in a letter to John Taylor, is less certain about Elia's standing: "Poor Elia [...] does not pretend to so very clear a state of future being as Olen seems gifted with. He stumbles about dark mountains at best; but he knows at least how to be thankful for this life, and is too thankful indeed for certain relationships lent him here, not to tremble for a possible resumption of the gift. He is too apt to express himself lightly, and cannot be sorry for the present occasion, as it has called forth a reproof so Christian-like" (Letters 2: 302).

the stability created by the extra-essayistic magazine context creates another opportunity for Lamb to play with readers and destabilize his character in the later essays.

The Difference a Name Makes

The way that Lamb and the *London Magazine* deploy Elia's name through the series' early essays shows the extent to which they were invested in keeping the name separate from Lamb's, at least within the frame of the magazine. But the name by itself has no inherent value in relation to individual essays, beyond perhaps a few brief instances, like those cited above when Elia writes about his own name. The real value of the name for the series is that "Elia" ties the essays together; it serves as a link from one essay to the next. As Philippe Lejeune suggests,

For the reader, who does not know the real person, all the while believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse, and so he imagines what he is like from what he produces. Perhaps one is an author only with his second book, when the proper name inscribed on the cover becomes the 'common factor' of at least two different texts and thus gives the idea of a person who cannot be reduced to any of the texts in particular, and who, capable of producing others surpasses them all. (11)

In Elia's case, the signature at the end of an essay, like the name on the cover of a book, becomes the common factor of the essays that enables readers to create a more coherent and complex idea of who Elia is and, equally important, what an Elia essay is.

The Elia essays are miscellaneous, but when they are brought together by a common name, their similarities and recurring themes begin to emerge. What may be a characteristic of just one essay—for example, Elia's affectation of an ornate, seventeenth-century prose style, or his persistently nostalgic stance—becomes part of a larger pattern when it is shared by several

related essays. This is why it is so important that Elia distances his name from Lamb's: he is effectively establishing a set of characteristics that is separate from the rest of Lamb's writings. Thus an Elia essay can be defined only in relation to other Elia essays, rather than as an offshoot of Lamb's larger body of work. The name in this case works as a kind of signal that, like a designation of genre, establishes a code or contract between writers and readers, telling readers what to expect based on patterns with which they are familiar.

Of course, the contract that genres suggest can be broken, and the same is true of the expectations that come along with Elia's name, the constancy of which enables Lamb to play with readers' expectations by taking later essays in unexpected directions. One example of this kind of play is "Dream Children; A Reverie," the eighteenth Elia essay to appear in the *London Magazine*. The essay begins with an Elian statement about the relationship between children and adults: "CHILDREN love to listen to stories about their elders, when *they* were children; to stretch their imagination to the conception of a traditionary great-uncle, or grandame, whom they never saw" (5: 21). This claim sets the perfect stage for an Elia essay, for readers already understand that he is one who does not miss an opportunity to tell stories about the past. True to expectation, he proceeds, "It was in this spirit that my little ones crept about me the other evening to hear about their great-grandmother Field, who lived in a great house in Norfolk (a hundred times bigger than that in which they and Papa lived)." The rest of the essay features his re-narration of the stories he told the children, Alice and John. There are two levels of story-telling in the essay: the stories that Elia tells to the children, which are available to the reader only indirectly; and the story about the story-telling itself, which includes the first level but adds details of how the children responded while listening. Within the frame, Elia's story-telling is occasionally interrupted to acknowledge the children's responses (e.g., "Here Alice put out one of her dear

mother's looks, too tender to be called upbraiding;" "Here John smiled, as much to say 'that would be foolish indeed'" [5: 22]). From a narrative perspective, these interruptions heighten the realism of the essay by capturing each of the little fidgets and squirms made by the children. They also break the progress of the stories Elia tells, thereby keeping the readers at a distance from the stories contained in the essay.

The stories Elia tells the children, like the essay, are typically Elian. His recollections of the children's great-grandmother—her life, her death, her funeral, and her goodness—transition into stories of the various adventures of Elia when visiting her house as a child. Readers see Elia in familiar territory as he speaks nostalgically about his shadowy past. Yet a sudden change occurs when, with a tone of increasingly heightened pathos, Elia begins to reflect on the children's uncle, John L———:

[...] how he used to carry me upon his back when I was a lame-footed boy—for he was a good bit older than me—many a mile when I could not walk for pain;—and how in after life he became lame-footed too, and I did not always (I fear) make allowances enough for him when he was impatient, and in pain, nor remember sufficiently how considerate he had been to me when I was lame-footed; and how when he died, though he had not been dead an hour, it seemed as if he had died a great while ago, such a distance there is betwixt life and death; and how I bore his death as I thought pretty well at first, but afterwards it haunted and haunted me; and though I did not cry or take it to heart as some do, and as I think he would have done if I had died, yet I missed him all day long, and knew not till then how much I had loved him. (5: 23)

This section of the essay is the longest without any interruption from the children. Elia is caught up in these recollections and readers are carried with him as the inner level of narration

temporarily slips away, allowing the emotional force of Elia's pain to build, unbroken. This intensity proves too great for the children, however, who burst in upon the narrative with tears and mourning and ask him "not to go on about their uncle, but to tell them some stories about their pretty dead mother." When he complies and begins to tell them about his courting of Alice W——n, the essay quickly moves from somber, to strange, to surreal. Elia falls into a kind of trance as he stares at the children, and they begin to fade away from him until, just before vanishing, they say, "We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and name'" (5: 23). As the children are revealed to be phantoms, they fade away from Elia, and all that remains for him to hold on to is their insubstantial names.

Only at this point of the essay does the title, "Dream Children; A Reverie," begin to make sense. The children to whom Elia has been telling his stories are not real children at all; they are children in a dream. Readers of the Elia essays knew that he was a bachelor and had no children of his own, but the framework of the essay causes a suspension of disbelief. The sense of verisimilitude created by the way the children's responses are woven into the narrative seems to put to rest any doubts that the children themselves may not be real. When they are eventually revealed in the conclusion to be dream figures, readers are effectively shocked awake with Elia, who realizes that he has fallen asleep by the fire. The essay thus depends on readers' expectations of Elia and their understanding of how his essays function; it unsettles both and then returns to an even more familiar picture of the character, as an aging bachelor sleeping in his armchair. The weight of the essay depends on the establishment of a familiar idea of Elia's personality and style in readers' minds, which he is then able to play with in unexpected ways.

The editors of the *London Magazine* further play with the idea Elia's identity and readers' familiarity with Elia in the August 1822 issue when they reprint "Confessions of a Drunkard," an essay that had been published several times under different names (but never Lamb's).²⁰ In the summer of 1822, Charles and Mary Lamb visited France, and the July issue of the magazine was the first without an Elia essay since September 1820, as the series was just beginning. Rather than have a second consecutive issue without Elia, Lamb and the current editor of the magazine, John Taylor, decided to reprint one of Lamb's earlier essays under Elia's name. Consequently, this is the first unoriginal Elia essay to appear in the magazine, and the editors felt it necessary to explain the explain the origin of "Confessions of a Drunkard," as they do in the "Lion's Head" section of the magazine under the heading "Reprints of ELIA."²¹ They explain that Elia, like many other magazine writers, occasionally writes for other publications under pseudonyms and anonymously. According to the note, the decision to reprint one of his earlier essays represents an effort to rescue Elia's other work from obscurity.²²

The editors' explanation for reprinting "Confessions of a Drunkard" goes far beyond simply explaining that the earlier essay was written by the same Elia with whom readers of the

²⁰ The first version of the essay was published, under the name Ebrosius, in Jeremy Bentham and James Mill's *Philanthropist* in 1813; then in Basil Montagu's collection *Some Enquiries into the Effects of Fermented Liquors* (1814), under the heading "Do Fermented Liquors Contribute to Moral Excellence?"; and again, under the "Confessions" title, in the *Literary Journal* in 1818. In "Charles Lamb's 'Confessions of a Drunkard': Constructing Subjectivity Through Context," Bonnie Woodward looks at seven published versions of the essay that appeared throughout the nineteenth century to show how each site and time of publication changes the context and suggested interpretation of the essay.

²¹ According to E.V. Lucas, the note was written by Lamb himself. Whether it was written by Lamb, Taylor, or someone else is less important than the fact that it appeared in "The Lion's Head" and thus became the official editorial voice of the magazine. On the other hand, if the note was in fact written by Lamb, it serves as yet more evidence of the degree to which he was personally invested in maintaining a certain distance between Elia and himself.

²² This is, of course, what Hunt had been attempting to do for Lamb and Elia when he explained the connection in the *Indicator*.

London Magazine are familiar. They also give an account of the essays' composition when they claim that Elia "had been reading among the Essays of a contemporary, who has perversely been confounded with him, a paper in which *Edax* (or the *Great Eater*) humorously complaineth of an inordinate appetite; and it struck him, that a better paper [...] might be made out of the imagined experiences of a *Great Drinker*" (6: 99). This refers to an essay titled "Edax on Appetite," which was first printed in *The Reflector* in 1811 and, as might be expected, was written by Lamb. In other words, and in what is a clear unsettling of Elia's relationship to Charles Lamb, "The Lion's Head" claims that the inspiration for the reprinted "Confessions" essay came about when Elia read an essay written by Lamb, but published under the pseudonym Edax. It is a case of one of Lamb's personas inspiring an essay by another persona. "Edax on Appetite," unlike "Confessions of a Drunkard," was reprinted among Lamb's collected *Works* in 1818, thereby making Edax much more easily identifiable as Lamb, and so Lamb-as-Edax is presented as a "contemporary" to Elia who has been confounded with him. The editors add yet another level of confusion of identity when they explain that Elia himself wrote the "Confessions" in an effort to improve on Lamb-as-Edax's concept—and this not in his own voice, but in that of an assumed persona, one "no more resembling the man Elia, than the fictitious Edax may be supposed to identify itself with Mr. L., its author."

At a certain point, all these exchanges of identity become ridiculous. In one of the strongest pieces of indirect commentary on the relationship between writers and their essayistic personae, it is clear that, however much the real identity of Elia may have been known to Lamb's fellow writers, Lamb and the *London Magazine* were invested in maintaining a unique identity for Elia that was distinct from his creator. Edax is fictitious, and should not be confused with Lamb; by the same token, the persona of "Confessions of a Drunkard" is fictitious and should not be

confused with Elia, whose separation from Lamb is again implicitly reasserted. Furthermore, by establishing the difference between Elia and the persona of the “Confessions,” the note also raises the possibility that what is true for the persona of the essay is not true for its author. A review of John Reid’s *Essays on Hypochondriasis and Other Nervous Affections* in the April 1822 *Quarterly Review* quotes from the version of the essay in Montagu’s collection “which affords a fearful picture of the consequences of intemperance, and which we have reason to know is a true tale” (27: 120). In the *London Magazine*, “The Lion’s Head” suggests that the *Quarterly Review*’s reading of the essay is naïve. Although Elia may have been drunk from time to time, the editors explain, the accounts in the essay are heightened and exaggerated, and by failing to interpret them as such the *Quarterly Review* sets itself up for ridicule.

As paratext, the “Lion’s Head” explanation for the reprint of “Confessions of a Drunkard” goes a long way toward framing the reading of the essay in the *London Magazine* and toward reframing how the essay should be understood in its earlier contexts, either as a sincere temperance tract or as an ironic treatment of the subject. Both of the previous contexts for the essay’s publication—*The Philanthropist* (which Lamb apparently did not authorize to publish the essay) and Basil Montagu’s *Enquiries into the Effects of Fermented Liquors* (which he did authorize)—were significantly conservative publications: the former was a platform for James Mill’s utilitarian principles, while the latter was a pro-temperance tract. Both contexts would frame the pathos of the Drunkard, writing through tears as he struggles to regain control of his life, as coming from a serious cautionary figure whose warning readers would do well to heed.²³ In the *London Magazine*, however, and as written by Elia, readers come to the essay with a sense

²³ Lamb’s alcoholism has become well known, and Lucas, citing a letter Lamb wrote to Wordsworth around the same time that “Confessions” was written, claims that Lamb was indeed concerned about his dependence on gin at this time.

of detachment and expectation of irony. Even apart from the play of names and identity in the paratextual explanation, the essay's earnestness is supplanted by a subversive playfulness that undermines its message. Once it has Elia's name attached to it, it takes on a satiric nature. Moreover, while the essay feels noticeably different from what readers might expect from an Elia essay—the melancholic tone that often accompanies his essays is replaced here by melodrama—the character of Elia has been established so well by this point that readers are able to understand the distinctness of his assumed persona without being thrown off by what would otherwise appear to be a discontinuous portrayal of character.

Finally, the appearance of the essay in August of 1822 takes on an entirely new characteristic that could not have been present in any earlier version, for this was the first time it was published after De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" had appeared in the *London Magazine* in September, October, and December of the previous year. In the aftermath of the hugely successful Opium confessions, Elia's confessions of his own kind of intoxication resonates as a parody of the other text.²⁴ This carries extra weight for Elia, for when Lamb's essay is appropriated by Elia and the magazine, it fits in a way that is characteristic of both writer and context. Lamb's essay, whether sincere or not in its original writing, becomes Elia's parody of another of Lamb's essays and at the same time lampoons one of the *London Magazine's* most sensational articles, thereby giving the magazine a doubly-complex framework of self-aware savviness.

²⁴ As Simon Hull explains, "[T]he texts together [exhibit] a plurality of voice in the *London* which is anathema to the utilitarian and temperance reformists, and characteristic also, of course, of just Elia himself" (Hull 79).

Elia's Afterlives

Near the end of 1822, Lamb endeavored to have a collection of Elia essays printed by Taylor & Hessey, his publishers at the *London Magazine*. The collection, *Elia. Essays Which Have Appeared under That Signature in the London Magazine*, included twenty-seven of the twenty-eight Elia essays that had appeared in the magazine up to that time, albeit in a slightly re-arranged order.²⁵ The reorganization of the essays—especially in the middle of the volume, where essays published months apart appear side-by-side—creates a new context for reading Elia's otherwise disconnected thoughts. In this section, I will show the effects that the collection and publication of the essays had on both Elia's character and the role he played in the *London Magazine*.

The organization of the essays into a new medium of publication entails drastic changes in how readers encounter Elia. That is, when the essays are read in the context of each other, rather than individually and in the context of the *London Magazine*, the character that emerges from them is fully defined in a way that he could not be in essays spread over twenty-eight months of the magazine. The task of reading the extant Elia essays before they were collected would require readers to have access to issues of the *London Magazine* spanning from August 1820 through November 1822. To say nothing of the cost of acquiring all twenty-eight issues of the magazine (which would have been substantially greater than the 5s.6d. that the first edition of the *Essays of Elia* sold for), nor of the space requirements for storing them, compared with the 346-page first edition, when they are placed side by side in a collection, the essays form a continuous narrative of Elia's character in a way that would have been impossible in the

²⁵ The omitted essay, "Confessions of a Drunkard," was replaced by "Valentine's Day," which had appeared anonymously in Hunt's *Examiner* (1819) and *Indicator* (1821), but never in the *London Magazine*.

periodical context. Additionally, many of the essays underwent slight changes in republication. Hull claims that the editorial changes “typically remove material considered to be too trivial, too topical [...] for the relative feature of timelessness implied by the very fact of book publication” (9). Yet there is more at stake for the changes in the collected essays than mere triviality, not the least of which is that the collection removes the essays from the supportive context of the *London Magazine* as well as the extra-essayistic conversation surrounding Elia’s “real” identity, such as the post-script surrounding Hunt’s exposure of Elia or the debates in the “Lion’s Head” section of the magazine. The collection takes the unstable magazine text—which, as we have seen, depends on ambiguous and ironic play with authenticity and identity—and replaces it with a stable, authorized text.

When the *Essays of Elia* were being prepared for the press, Lamb wrote to Taylor to include a Dedication to the volume, imploring the “Friendly and Judicious Reader” to “take these papers as they were meant; not understanding every thing perversely in the absolute and literal sense, but giving fair construction as to an after dinner conversation” (*Letters* 2: 350). Immediately after Lamb writes the dedication, he has a change of heart. He writes, “On better considering, pray omit that Dedication. The Essays want no preface; they are *all Preface*.” He proposes, “Let ELIA come forth bare as he was born,” and, in place of the preface, Lamb instead wrote an essay called “A Character of the Late Elia,” which effectively announced the Elia’s death. The essay, which appeared in the next issue of the *London Magazine* (January 1823), under the signature “Phil-Elia,” friend of Elia, gave Lamb the opportunity to discuss Elia indirectly (though still not as “Charles Lamb”) from the perspective of somebody who knew him well and who understood the import of the series, as well as how it was received by readers.

“A Character of the Late Elia” is the final example I offer here of the sophisticated play with authenticity and identity that we have been observing throughout this chapter. Because the essay is the closest the *London Magazine* ever gets to presenting a direct sketch of Elia’s character, it is also a highly complex document for undermining Elia’s authenticity and reinforcing the function of the essays in the magazine. Phil–Elia describes Elia’s work as “villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases” (7: 20), confirming suspicions first raised by Elia at the end of “Recollections of the South Sea House” that Elia was a liar and that his essays are made up of equivocal and duplicitous play.²⁶ As we saw earlier, Elia’s character is constructed through the way he obfuscates his own authenticity and identity. Thus Phil–Elia resolves one of the central tensions of the series by definitively answering the doubts upon which Elia’s character depended. Significantly, this acknowledgment of Elia’s self–presentation is the first to be authorized by the *London Magazine*.

By announcing Elia’s death and undermining the central tension surrounding his identity, “A Character of the Late Elia” explains to readers of the *London Magazine* why the series is ending. According to Phil–Elia, the death could not have come at a more appropriate time; he seems more relieved at Elia’s passing than anything else. He writes, “To say the truth, it is time he were gone. The humour of the thing, if there was ever much in it, was pretty well exhausted; and a two years’ and a half existence has been a tolerable duration for a phantom” (7: 19). But while Lamb had intended to conclude the Elia series with the collection of the essays, the essay by Phil–Elia allows room for the emergence of more essays after Elia’s death. He explains that

²⁶ Moreover, he explains that “what he tells us, as of himself, was often true only (historically) of another; as in his Fourth Essay (to save many instances)—where under the *first person* (his favorite figure) he shadows forth the forlorn estate of a country–boy placed at a London school, far from his friends and connections—in direct opposition to his own early history” (7: 20). The essay referred to is “Recollections of Christ’s Hospital”, which was actually the third essay.

“A few critical dissertations were found in his escrutoire [sic], which have been handed over to the Editor of this Magazine, in which it is to be hoped they will shortly appear, retaining his accustomed signature” (7: 21), and he also tells readers that other Elia manuscripts were recovered from the East India House where Elia worked. The presence of other essays that have outlived their author has an authenticating effect for both Elia’s character and his work.²⁷ The found documents constitute Elia’s literary remains.

In the wake of Elia’s death, his ghost continues to haunt the *London Magazine*. In fact, the first essay in the January issue, “Rejoicing on the New Year’s Coming of Age,” is signed “Elia’s Ghost,” and the themes of death and ghostliness hover over the entire issue. For example, the “Lion’s Head” section announces, “Elia is dead!” but promises that “his *ghostship* has promised us very *material* assistance in our future Numbers” (7: 3) and claims, “Elia’s ghost [...] cannot sleep in its grave, for it has been constantly with us since his death, and vows it must still write for its peace of mind. Indeed the first paper in our present Number [the essay by Elia’s Ghost] is one of its *grave* consolations.” The “Lion’s Head” also claims that sometimes the magazine’s editors are themselves “as shadowy as ghosts” (7: 3); later, a series of brief miscellaneous articles includes a notice of “Presence of Mind in a Ghost,” a short narrative relating an account from 1421 of a widow who was visited by her husband’s ghost and ultimately had her life saved by it; and Janus Weathercock, who becomes almost incoherent in his meditations on Elia’s life, claims that “ELIA’S ghost is impatient” (7: 51). Janus’s grief over Elia’s death is so great that it

²⁷ Ian Duncan theorizes the “authenticity effect” that extratextual evidence has for texts of questionable origin: “The ‘authenticity effect’ [...] advertises a problematical, unstable boundary between history and fiction, evidence and invention, textual surface and ontological depth” (277).

seems to kill him, too.²⁸ In the “Lion’s Head” and throughout the issue of the magazine, the mock seriousness with which Elia’s death is treated highlights readers’ awareness that Elia was never a real person, but at the same time it reinforces his autonomy as a character existing within the *London Magazine*.

The following issue of the magazine returns to the subject of Elia’s death, this time making Lamb a culprit. In a mock court report called “The Literary Police Office, Bow–Street,” celebrated writers are described as coming before the court and facing charges for their work.²⁹ The whole article is written in good humor and the crimes that the writers are accused of are generally laughable minor misdemeanors. The only serious crime included in the list is attributed to Charles Lamb, who is “charged with the barbarous murder of the late Mr. Elia” (7: 160).

²⁸ The essay concludes with an affecting account of Janus’s last conversation with Elia before his passing: Elia “recurred several times to his sensation of approaching death—not gloomily—but as of a retirement from business,—a pleasant journey to a sunnier climate. The serene solemnity of his voice overcame me;—the tears poured thick from their well-heads—I tried to rally myself and him:—but my throat swelled—and stopped my words.

His pipe had gone out—he held it to the flame of the candle—but in vain.

It was empty!—his mind had been wandering. He smiled placidly and knocked out the ashes—“even so silently,” said he, “may my fiery spark steal from its vehicle of ashes and clay!”

I felt oppressed—many things had contributed lately to break and daunt my once elastic spirits—I rose to go—he shook me by the hand,—neither of us spoke—with that I went my way—and I saw him no more!—

How much is lost to this miserable world—which knew him not while it possessed him!—I knew him—I,—who am left to weep.—Eheu! Elia! Vale! GOOD NIGHT TO ALL.” (7:52). The editors affixed a footnote to the final valediction: “Janus was here taken too sick–hearted to proceed. He is now _____.”

The announcement of this essay in the “Lion’s Head” explains that Janus claims to have died, but assures readers that they are familiar with Janus’s tricks. They write, “now, our Readers must not be surprised to find Janus get up, after his laying out, and go about his ordinary concerns. Depend upon it, Readers, he [...] is no more dead than we are!” (7: 4). No such claim is made, however, about Elia.

²⁹ In the “report,” which was written by John Hamilton Reynolds, Wordsworth is charged with copying childish poems from his grandmother (and threatening to bludgeon the magistrates with a copy of *The Excursion*); Coleridge is charged with “idling about the suburbs of town”; John Clare is charged with fathering an illegitimate child with one of the Muses; and Byron is accused of “a violent assault upon several literary gentlemen” and of “keeping *unlawful game* in his house, without a license”—among many other offenses (7: 159).

According to the “report,” “The evidence was indisputable—and Mr. Lamb was committed. There appears to have been no apparent motive for this horrible murder, unless the prisoner had an eye to poor Mr. Elia’s situation in the LONDON MAGAZINE. The Prisoner is a large gaunt-looking fellow, with a queer eye, and a broad overhanging brow. If no witnesses had come forward—his looks would *have appeared against him!*” In contrast to the admiration the magazine had always displayed toward Elia, as discussed earlier, Lamb is described as a haggard individual who, simply by appearances, betrays his degeneracy. There are no Elia essays, by Elia’s Ghost or otherwise, in this issue, thereby emphasizing his material departure from the world of the magazine, but there is a sonnet “To Elia” by Lamb’s friend Bernard Barton, in which the poet expresses his resistance to let Elia go.

Elia’s Ghost must have heard Barton’s pleas, because his death was ultimately short-lived. The “Lion’s Head” to the March issue of the *London Magazine* contains the triumphant announcement, “Elia is *not* dead!” followed by a note by Elia himself, blaming Janus Weathercock for propagating a hoax about his death and for having written the January ghost essay, “which, how like it is to any of the undoubted Essays of the author, may be seen by comparing it to the volume just published” (7: 243). The play with hoaxes and forged identity with which the original series began in “Recollections of the South Sea House” marks Elia’s rebirth in the magazine. Although Lamb, not Wainwright, wrote the January essay, Elia’s reference to the published collection significantly encourages readers to see the book, rather than the magazine, as constituting the authoritative Elian text. The book is the measure by which all

subsequent Elia essays are to be tested, and the *London Magazine* consequently becomes of secondary importance for him.³⁰

In the ghosts and phantom clouds of Elia, Montaigne finds his Romantic foil. The central tenets of Montaigne's project, as declared in his note "To the Reader," to portray the author in natural state, "without straining or artifice," are repudiated by Elia's equivocal self-presentation. The disorienting and destabilizing playfulness of the Elia essays in the *London Magazine* tests early-nineteenth-century ideals of identity and authenticity, but it also encourages a sense of kinship with Elia. The supporting extra-essayistic framework, which gives Elia a textual life that extends beyond beyond the essays, stabilizes his authority at the expense of Charles Lamb's. And, as we have seen, while the publication of the essays entailed Elia's death, it also created an authoritative Elian text, thereby resolving many of the questions of identity and reliability that informed the magazine series. At the same time, the collection also launched the critical trajectory of how the series would be read from that point on—as Lamb's personal and familiar essays.³¹ Once the collected version of the essays is officially attributed to Lamb, as nearly every

³⁰ The same issue of the magazine contains a new essay, "Old China," that officially marked Elia's return to the *London* after his brief absence. Although Lamb continued the series, the frequency of new essays gradually declined, as did the essays' focus on the Elian perspective and style. A handful of essays appeared before the *London Magazine* was sold in 1825, one was printed in *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1826, and the last two appeared in *The Englishmen's Magazine* in 1831, after a silence of five years. In 1833, Lamb's adopted son-in-law collected and published *Last Essays of Elia*, not entirely with Lamb's consent, and used a slightly revised version of "A Character of the Late Elia" as the preface to the new volume.

³¹ In *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), Hazlitt chapter on Lamb is titled "Elia," and his brief biography of Lamb is taken almost entirely from the Elia essays. A review of *The Last Essays of Elia* published shortly after Lamb's death in 1834, a writer for the *Quarterly Review* observes, "His poems, his criticism, his essays,—call them his *Elias*, to distinguish them from anything else in the world,—these were not merely written *by* Lamb,—they *were* and *are* Lamb,—just the gentle, fantastic, subtle creature himself printed off. In a library of a thousand volumes you shall not find two that will give you such a bright and living impress of the author's own very soul" (54: 59).

edition has been since 1835, the issue of authenticity and identity is diminished and he becomes just a pseudonym. The “phantom cloud of Elia” dissipates to reveal Charles Lamb.

Conclusion: Women's Writing and the Romantic Familiar Essay

I have been arguing throughout this dissertation that the elements of informality, self-revelation, and direct address in the familiar essay reflect strategies for securing a relationship with readers and setting up standards of proper reading. In the early nineteenth-century, these formal and rhetorical devices intersected with several emerging social formations, including the reading public; mass-market periodicals; politics and party-alignment; literary criticism; anonymous publication; and constructions of identity and authenticity. I have demonstrated that the self-fashioning and audience formation in the familiar essays in the Romantic period are determined neither by the spirit of the age nor by the generic conventions of the essay exclusively, but rather by an intersection of these forms. These essays, despite their diversity, share a preoccupation with cultivating a relationship of familiarity with sympathetic readers in the midst of a socially and politically volatile periodical scene.

As I have shown, Coleridge, exasperated by an intellectually lazy reading public, declared himself a Friend to his readers, but he also asked them to be his co-laborers and was frustrated when they were not willing to commit to the “effort of attention” required to understand his complex style. Compared to *The Friend*, the style and tone of Hunt's familiar essays created the impression of a conversational exchange between the writer and his readers, and they make Hunt, whether in his role as the Reflector or the President of the Round Table, seem like a friendly, good-natured character. Hunt's friend Hazlitt, in an attempt to regain critical authority that had been undermined by conservative periodicals, embraced an ethos of authenticity that exemplified the intuitive criticism he encouraged his readers to practice. Finally, Charles Lamb's playful Elia essays exhibited a character whose textual presence seemed so real that he connected with readers and was celebrated in the *London Magazine* despite the fact that

he regularly called his reliability and identity into question. For Hazlitt, the Elia essays represented the apotheosis of essay-writing in his era, both because of Lamb's style and because of the way they convey the character of the author.

Writing in 1905, Virginia Woolf observed that, despite the proliferation of essays then being published in Edwardian England, "no one has approached the essays of Elia" (1: 25). Seventeen years later, she claimed that the personality of the essayist—his ability to give "himself" to readers—"had been in exile since the death of Charles Lamb. Matthew Arnold was never to his readers Matt, nor Walter Pater affectionately abbreviated in a thousand homes to Wat" (4: 220). Woolf's observations about the history of the essay have been echoed by several critics and anthologists of the genre: after Lamb and Hazlitt, essayists adopted a more formal style and tone and, in general, their work seems less concerned with creating an intimate relationship with readers than with keeping readers at a safe, polite distance.¹ But while this summary dismissal of Victorian essays may oversimplify the state of the genre after Lamb, Woolf's comments also raise an important set of questions for any study of the history of the essay. Who were the women practitioners of the genre? Are female essayists ignored or overlooked, or is the familiar essay a gendered genre that, prior the twentieth century at least, naturally lends itself more to men than women? To conclude this, I will briefly reflect on these questions as they relate to this study of the Romantic familiar essay.

Woolf's history of the essay consisted primarily of the same writers that have been considered here: Montaigne, Bacon, Addison, Johnson, Hazlitt, and Lamb. This standard points

¹ Denise Gigante ends her 2008 anthology, *The Great Age of the English Essay*, with Lamb and De Quincey. In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate suggests that "Lamb and Hazlitt brought the idiosyncratic personal essay to such a zenith of development that for a good while after them it had nowhere to go but down. The Victorian era saw a turn toward the formal essay, the so-called essay of ideas written by Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Macaulay, Pater" (xlviii).

to the patriarchal origins of the genre, as well as its continual practice by predominantly white, European men. I have alluded to several instances in which essays are directed toward female readers, such as in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. These readers are often included as correspondents (although much of this correspondence was written by the male essayists in disguise), but women were seldom included as writers of essays. In *The Politics of the Essay*, Ruth–Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman propose that the fundamental principle of the essay—suggesting a writer who speaks with authority, based on his own observations about the world—naturally lends itself to masculine rather than feminine experience before the twentieth century. Lopate also echoes this perspective:

The personal essay, for all its protestations of littleness and marginality, in fact leans on a tone of easy, gentlemanly, “natural” authority which comes from being in the world—the tone precisely most difficult for women, especially those raised traditionally, to assert. [...] Until recently, it was easier for women writers either to conceal themselves behind their characters in novels and plays or to fight against the tyranny of men in polemical treatises than to adopt the light irony or immodestly confessional self–exposure of the personal essayist. (liii)

While this analysis seems somewhat reductive in light of the amount of nonfictional, personal writing produced by women in the three hundred years after Montaigne, comparative reception histories point to a strong disparity between essays written by men and women. Until recently, female writers have been included in critical discussions of the essay as a genre only to the extent that they write “good” essays. This problematically reproduces the patriarchal standard by which the essay developed—an essay by a woman qualifies as “good” insofar as it resembles essays that have been written by men (Joeres and Mittman 14).

Although it has been explored very little, there exists an alternative tradition of essays written by women who do not simply reproduce the masculine voice and approach of Montaigne and his successors. For example, the tremendous popularity of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* led to hundreds of imitators in the eighteenth century, including a *Female Tatler* (1709–10) and a *Female Spectator* (1744–6), both of which aimed to reproduce the approach of the originals for the benefit and entertainment of female readers.² The *Female Tatler*'s counterpart to the *Tatler*'s Sir Isaac Bickerstaff was Mrs. Phoebe Crackenthorpe, who was joined by a "Society of Modest Ladies." Even though these essays were all signed by women, however, they were written mostly by men (Goldsmith 43–4). The *Female Spectator*, on the other hand, was the work of playwright and novelist Eliza Haywood. Through four different female personae, Haywood wrote accounts—from the perspective of women—of unhappy marriages, adultery, and unwanted pregnancies, and blamed these circumstances on over-protective fathers and the lack of good education available to women.

In another periodical, the *Parrot* (1746), Haywood takes on a female persona who, not "blest with the retentive faculty," resembles the "dangerous bird" from which the paper derives its name (96). While the Parrot's writing is stylistically similar to Mr. Spectator's, she feminizes that style by referring to it as "blabbing" and "prating" about things she should keep to herself.³ At the same time, she defends this style from the criticisms of "Would-be-Wits":

A whole *posse* of these, whom I think you call *Critics*, will likely fall upon me; they will cavil at my style, my manner, perhaps hunt out a verb misplaced, and then triumph in my

² As I explained in Chapter Two, Steele claimed to have named the *Tatler* in honor of the "tattling" tendencies of the "fair sex" (*Tatler* 1: 15).

³ By the Parrot's own account, "The midnight whisper through the bars of a window, or the key-hole of a door, by me repeated the next morning, has saved many a husband's honour, a virgin's chastity, and a whole family's disgrace" (97).

want of grammar; they will quote rules on rules against me, quarrel with my figures in speech, find fault with this *contrast*, and that *antithesis*, and cry shame on my ill *rhetoric*. But let them look to themselves; every thing, when attacked, has a right to make use of what weapons of defence are in their power: if they rail against the *diction* of the *Parrot*, the *Parrot* will cry out against the *vices* and *follies* of *humanity*: if they bring down their *Horace*, their *Cicero*, and their *Virgil*, I shall be obliged to have recourse to *Socrates*, *Seneca*, *Epictetus*, *Juvenal*, and some other old gentlemen, who, perhaps, they will like as little to be told of. I can set *maxim* against *mode*, and am able to produce undeniable proofs, that the *Parrot* cannot be more unskilled in *oratory*, than some *men* are in *morality*, or the precepts of right reason. (100)

The contrast between the looseness of the Parrot's informal, conversational, feminine style and the looseness of masculine morality gives Haywood's persona the upper hand against her male critics. This strong characterization of her style reinforces a distinction between masculine ("oratorical") and feminine ("prating") writing; it also anticipates Hazlitt's comments about the familiar style as suggestive of "greater sincerity" than a more formally precise style.⁴ The Parrot's writing may be feminine, but it is deliberately made to appear so.⁵

⁴ Other critics have argued that the conversational style is already "feminine." See Bean, who compares Margaret Fuller's prose with Thoreau's (28). While I find it somewhat problematic to impose socially constructed gender categories onto prose styles, it is worth noting that the derogatory term "Cockney"—as applied to Hunt, Hazlitt, and Elia (but not Lamb)—also carried strong connotations of effeminacy (Mellor 172).

⁵ In the opening to her first number, the Parrot writes, "Well, I am got upon my swing,—the Town are gathering thick about me, and I have liberty to prate (as my publisher flatters himself) to a very crowded audience; but as vain as he, and some other would make me, I am sensible that the greatest part come only to divert themselves" (93). In other words, she knowingly appropriates her male publisher's deprecating description of her writing as "prating" and invests the label with power by making it her own.

Despite Haywood's experimentation with the periodical essay in the 1740s, almost no conversational or familiar essays written by women have been preserved after that time. This does not mean that women did not write familiar essays, but if they did their essays were not received in the same way as Hazlitt and Lamb's. Moreover, the conditions that I have argued were essential to the development of the Romantic familiar essay—especially the identity obfuscation of anonymous publishing in periodicals—make it difficult to find contributions to the genre by women writers.⁶ With the exception of a few writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Dorothy Wordsworth, very little critical attention was given to the work of Romantic women writers until the 1980s. Although much important work has since been put into recovering texts by women writers, the ephemerality and quaintness of the familiar essay—already a marginalized genre—has made it a less desirable candidate for preservation than the poetry and fiction of similarly marginalized writers.

In addition to poetry and novels, women in the early nineteenth century produced an abundance of nonfictional prose.⁷ Compared to Haywood's "prating," the intellectual seriousness represented by the Bluestockings in the second half of the eighteenth century (and the desire to be taken seriously as women) may have contributed to the solemnity of the essays written during this time, such as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* or Maria Edgeworth's "Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification." Indeed, much of the nonfictional prose written by women during the Romantic period was autobiographical, political, polemic, or

⁶ Additionally, periodicals like *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *London Magazine* projected themselves as extremely masculine spaces. Lisa Niles has described *Blackwood's* as "the *Maga* for the Single Man" (102), and Alexis Easley has argued that periodical attitudes toward female contributors did not begin to change until the late 1830s (30).

⁷ These contributions are still overlooked in genre studies of the period. In their critical anthology on *Nonfictional Romantic Prose* (2004), Steven Sondrup and Virgil Nemoianu include one essay (out of twenty-six) that is devoted to prose written by women, and the disparity in representation is not addressed.

didactic, none of which lend themselves to the familiar essay. There are exceptions, however. As I argued in the first chapter, although Wollstonecraft's *Letters from Sweden* appear to anticipate the Romantic familiar essay, their generic designation as "letters" inhibits the kind of audience formation that I have been arguing is an essential characteristic of the genre. In other words, readers always are aware that they are not Wollstonecraft's primary audience.

Given her close working relationship with her brother Charles, Mary Lamb would perhaps be the most likely female author to have written familiar essays.⁸ Mary published one essay, "On Needlework," in the *British Lady's Magazine and Monthly Miscellany*, a periodical directed toward upper-class women. Writing as "Sempronia," Mary encourages readers of the magazine to give up doing their own needlework in order to help keep poorer seamstresses employed. She also suggests that, once readers have freed up their time from needlework, they will be able to dedicate more time to their own "intellectual improvement," thereby making themselves fitting "conversational companions" to their husbands and increasing the likelihood that husbands will spend their leisure time at home rather than elsewhere (339).⁹ Like Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, "On Needlework," is not a familiar essay, not least because it is directed toward the editor of the *British Lady's Magazine* and therefore does not encourage a sense of kinship between Sempronia and her readers.

There was at least one Romantic woman writer who wrote familiar essays, however. In fact, although they have never been anthologized or received much critical attention, Letitia Landon wrote three: "Grasmere Lake: A Sketch, by a Cockney!" for a literary annual that she

⁸ Mary is a recurring character in Lamb's essays as Bridget Elia, the writer's cousin.

⁹ Sempronia writes, "The disadvantages we labour under from an education differing from a manly one make the hours in which we *sit and do nothing* in men's company too often any thing but a relaxation; although, as to pleasure and instruction, time so passed may be esteemed more or less delightful" (339).

edited in 1834; “Calendar of the London Seasons;” and “An Old Lady from the Last Century,” both published in the *New Monthly Magazine* that same year. All three essays are strongly imitative of Hunt’s *Indicator* essays, and this resemblance is intensified by the male persona Landon assumes. In “Grasmere Lake,” she writes as a Cockney shopkeeper and poetry-lover who inherits a house in Grasmere. The Cockney writes,

The influence of the Lake poets was on “the haunted air.” I went to bed, and dreamt of getting up early, and really had new-laid eggs, and milk from the cow, for breakfast; but—for the truth may be told, when we are tired to death of keeping it ourselves—I am a miserable man: I really do not know what to do with myself, the nights are so long; for I go to bed soon, and get up late—and the days are yet longer. (193)

The Cockney’s poetic dream of living in the Lake District is corrupted by his realization of how boring things are there. He explains that he cannot even pass his time hunting because his misery is so great that he might be tempted to shoot himself, “and I don’t want to die; I only want to live, and live poetically.” The essay closes with his fantasy about a young poet committing suicide in his garden so people will come to visit the site and he will have company. As a parody of Hunt’s essays, and as a satirical sendup of contemporary poetry and the memorializing of dead poets, Landon’s essay is a sharp critique of the Romantic ideology. Because they are so clearly an imitation of Hunt, however, it is difficult to see Landon’s few familiar essays as contributing anything new to the genre. This is not to suggest that Landon’s essays are merely derivative, nor that, as a woman, she was incapable of producing the same familiarizing effects of Hunt’s essays. Rather, she was writing in a drastically different situation than Hunt, and her parody reflects that difference.

Far more work needs to be done to consider the influence of female essayists on the essay genre. Hopefully, these brief reflections provide a contribution to that work. Most of the familiar essays that were published in England after 1834, regardless of the gender of their writers, are mere echoes of the Romantic familiar essayists than innovations in the genre. Whereas Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb looked to Montaigne, the *Tatler*, and the *Spectator* as their most immediate predecessors, the essayists of the later nineteenth-century looked to Hazlitt and Lamb. Alexander Smith's *Dreamthorp* essays are modeled after Elia, Robert Louis Stevenson claimed to have "played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt" and to Lamb (144), Virginia Woolf felt that she would never be able to write as well as Lamb,¹⁰ and other late-Victorian and early-Modernist familiar essayists—including Max Beerbohm, Hilaire Belloc, and G.K. Chesterton—all mix Hazlitt's epigrammatic prose and love of paradox with Hunt's penchant for writing on random subjects and Lamb's sense of humor.¹¹

Landon's parody of Hunt and similar parodies that appeared in the 1830s show that, by 1834, the kind of essay for which Hunt had been made the target of the "Cockney School" attacks in *Blackwood's* could be included among the miscellany of literary annuals.¹² While critics have puzzled over the rapid disappearance of the familiar essay after Lamb, the explanation may be found in the shifting of social formations that occurred as Britain

¹⁰ In a letter to Clive Bell, she writes, "I have been reading Lamb and Landor—and set beside them a page of my own prose. Lord! what rapid stuff! If you could have seen my misery as I was at this exercise you might have believed in my modesty" (330).

¹¹ As a reflection of the playfulness of the familiar essays written around the turn of the century, Beerbohm's first collection of essays, published when he was 24, was *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, and included an exhaustive bibliography. Belloc published a collection with titles reminiscent of Hunt's attitude: *On Nothing and Kindred Subjects*, which he followed up with *On Everything, On Anything, and On Something*, which he dedicated "To Someone."

¹² By 1838, the De Quinceyan style that frequently appeared in *Blackwood's* had become formulaic to the point that Edgar Allan Poe could parody it in "How to Write a Blackwood Article."

transitioned into the age of Victoria. For that matter, the difference between the familiar essays that have been the subject of this study and those that followed them is less a contrast of kind than of circumstance. As we have seen, the genre's characteristics of familiarity and self-fashioning developed in the midst of a growing anxiety of reception. Although writers of the familiar essay frame their projects differently—Coleridge by casting himself as a Friend to dedicated readers, Hunt by inviting readers to join his Round Table, Hazlitt by promising greater sincerity through his Table-Talk, and Lamb by inviting readers to play—each writer points to the importance of establishing an intimate relationship with his unknown readers. In an age of hostile periodical criticism and uncertain authorship, this emphasis on relationships over mere rhetoric is symptomatic of a desire for change in the dynamic between readers and writers. It also suggests the need for a change in critical approaches to the genre of the familiar essay, which I hope this study initiates. When the Romantic familiar essay is read for form, rather than for content, it is no longer quaint nor documentary. Instead, it must be seen as a complex strategy for intervening in Romantic reading practices, as well as a formally self-reflexive commentary on those practices.

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