

Fountains and Night Fears: Lamb, De Quincey, and Childhood in the *London Magazine*

Felicity James

IN SEPTEMBER 1821, TWO ESSAYS APPEARED in *The London Magazine*: ‘The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple’, by Elia, and, a few pages further on, the first part of ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater’. By the October issue, the second part of *Confessions* had moved to the opening of the periodical; it was followed by the Elia essay, ‘Witches, and Other Night-fears’.¹ It is this juxtaposition of Thomas De Quincey and Elia that this article sets out to explore, re-placing the *Confessions* alongside Charles Lamb’s essays, and drawing out the teasing interplay between the two.

Both De Quincey and Lamb, I hope to show, repeatedly use the figure of the child to voice doubts, to defamiliarize, often to critique. All three works—‘The Old Benchers’, *Confessions*, and ‘Witches’—take on a child-size perspective to offer sidelong angles on autobiography; on the slippery boundaries of life, fiction, and dream; and, perhaps, on the whole project of the periodical itself. De Quincey’s opium-eater is repeatedly compared to a child: he is as ‘powerless as an infant’, and he experiences ‘the re-awakening of a state of eye generally incident to childhood’ (*LM* IV 372). This can enable deep imaginative pleasure and a freshness of vision. It can also engender horrors and phantoms, the ‘weight of incubus and night-mare’, felt as acutely and impotently as in infancy. Elia, too, evokes both the pleasures and the pains of childhood. In ‘The Old Benchers’, he evokes the joy of childhood associations; in ‘Witches, and Other Night-fears’, this freewheeling associative joy becomes a torment.

These are essays that reach back into the self, and its earliest associations, and also reach out into the other. De Quincey and Lamb are writers of London and the wider Empire, of the city and of the exotic; their work negotiates a fine balance between the personal and the wider social and political scene. This is due in no small part to the *London Magazine* and its very particular rhetoric of metropolitan sociability.² Both the *Confessions* and Elia, as recent scholarship has shown, are very much products of the *London*, and in turn help to shape the developing culture of the magazine.³ In September, De Quincey and Elia are separated by a satirical piece on ‘Recollections in a Country Churchyard’, by ‘Cornelius van Vinkbooms’, a pseudonym of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright;

¹ My references to these works are taken from the original publication in the *London Magazine* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1821), vol. IV: ‘The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple’ (September 1821): 279–84; ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar’ (September 1821): 293–312; ‘Confessions, Part II’ (October 1821): 353–379; ‘Witches, and Other Night-fears’ (October 1821): 384–87; hereafter cited in text as *LM*.

² See also Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810–1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ See, for instance, Gregory Dart’s work, and Simon P. Hull, *Charles Lamb, Elia and the London Magazine: Metropolitan Muse* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). David Higgins has beautifully analysed the negotiations of Lamb and De Quincey with national and personal identity in *Romantic Englishness: Local, National and Global Selves, 1780–1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Karen Fang, in *Romantic Writing and the Empire of Signs: Periodical Culture and Post-Napoleonic Authorship* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), and James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), explore the Romantic imperial and oriental imagination and the periodical.

elsewhere in the September and October issues appear essays on Burns, Shakespeare, Homer, poetry by John Clare, and reviews of London theatre. The *London* is a place where Hazlitt and Lamb engage with one another, a 'relationship which is in turns collaborative and oppositional'; where writers—and readers—interact and answer back.⁴ It enabled and encouraged playful exchange within and across issues, a lost and complex world of 'diurnal reference and innuendo', taking shape against the crises of the 1820s.⁵ By the autumn of 1821, the *London* had lost the shaping editorial hand of John Scott, dead in the botched Chalk Farm duel of February that year; the magazine continued to prosper, but had now entered a period of transition, losing its tight focus, and perhaps, in Mark Parker's reading, taking on a 'more evasive political stance'.⁶ The figure of the child, always important to both De Quincey and Lamb, takes on a special charge in the context of the *London* in that autumn of 1821. Simon Hull's interpretation of Elia in the periodical very suggestively explores Lamb's 'use of the child-figure for a reading of metropolitanism'.⁷ This figure, as Hull shows, is a good way into understanding the delicate negotiations that go on in those half-way spaces of the Inner Temple or the opium reverie. The questioning child allows both De Quincey and Lamb to inhabit a transitional state, poised between the urban and the rural, the prose of the periodical essay and the poetry of the Lakes, and between retreat and engagement.

'We are Seven': The Child in De Quincey and Lamb

At the heart of these three works—"The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", 'Witches, and Other Night Fears', the two first parts of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*—there is a child, about seven or eight years old. 'The Old Benchers' begins in the place of Lamb's own childhood:

I was born, and passed the first seven years of my life, in the Temple. Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountain, its river, I had almost said—for in those young years, what was this king of rivers to me, but a stream that watered our pleasant places?—these are of my oldest recollections. (*LM* IV 279)

This is the Inner Temple, where Lamb's father had been a servant to the lawyer Samuel Salt: the essay is a homage both to his father, characteristically disguised in the essay as Lovel, and to the Inner Temple itself—"Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountain, its river"—and its role in shaping 'the first seven years of my life'. The focus on the seven-year-old child will also shape 'My First Play' in December that year; it appears a significant moment for the laying down of creative memories. Compare De Quincey's singling out of the same

⁴ Heather B. Stone, 'William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb and the "London Magazine", 1821', *The Wordsworth Circle* 44.1 (2013), 41–44.

⁵ Mark Parker, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ Parker, *Literary Magazines*, 87.

⁷ Hull, *Metropolitan Muse*, 72.

point to begin his autobiographical narrative in *Confessions*, a few pages further on in the September issue of the *London*: ‘My father died, when I was about seven years old, and left me to the care of four guardians’ (*LM* IV 296). This is the crucial time, too, for ‘Witches, and Other Night-fears’, which explores the nightmares troubling the child Elia ‘from the fourth to the seventh or eighth year of my life’ (*LM* IV 386). Like the little girl De Quincey’s narrator encounters in the lonely London mansion, he is haunted by spectres and terrifying dreams:

I was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors. The night-time solitude, and the dark, were my hell. The sufferings I endured in this nature would justify the expression. I never laid my head on my pillow, I suppose, from the fourth to the seventh or eighth year of my life—so far as memory serves in things so long ago—without an assurance, which realized its own prophecy, of seeing some frightful spectre. (*LM* IV 386)

The power of ‘night-time solitude’ might bring before us De Quincey’s idea in *Suspiria de Profundis* of childhood solitude, a ‘dread, whispering consciousness’ of the solitude of death, closely associated with dream—and with the pointed insight of the child just through infancy, but not yet approaching adolescence. The age of around seven is often seen as a watershed moment in terms of responsibility and learning: in canon law, for example, seven marks the age a child may receive the Eucharist, and until 1780 a child over seven could be legally held responsible for crimes and liable to be hanged or transported.⁸ The age might also have particular personal associations: De Quincey’s sister Elizabeth, who died at the age of eight, although not yet present directly, haunts *Confessions*. Looking back from *Suspiria*, we can see how her features—the ‘features in a child of eight, touched with a pensive tenderness’—shape the faces of the lost children of London: the little girl in the deserted house, and Ann of Oxford Street.⁹

Beneath the essays of both writers lie conversations with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and with their children, both poetic and real. The Inner Temple fountain, which reappears later on, as the child Elia plays tricks with it to astonish his playmates, springs not only from deep biblical sources—the fountains of the Psalms, for instance—but also from the fountain-light of early childhood glimpsed in Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, a foundational poem both for De Quincey and for Lamb. Both instinctively turn to Wordsworthian phrases as they remember childhood feelings. When De Quincey, in the 1856 revision of *Confessions*, muses on his path to addiction, he laments that ‘it should be possible for a child not seventeen years old . . . by a motion this way

⁸ Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, 2 vols. (London and Toronto: Routledge & Kegan Paul and University of Toronto Press, 1973), II 351.

⁹ ‘Suspiria de Profundis: Part One’, in *Articles from Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine and Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, ed. Frederick Burwick, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003), XV 153 (126–204).

or that, to change the currents of his destiny, to poison the fountains of his peace'.¹⁰ Here a snippet from *The Borderers*—'The motion of a muscle—this way or that'—almost imperceptibly works itself into De Quincey's expression of regret and self-betrayal.

The presence of the seven-year-old child in both the essays of Elia and the *Confessions* also irresistibly recalls the little Cottage girl of 'We are Seven', who is not only one of seven, but also not very far from that age herself, 'eight years old, she said'. This particular poem, of course, had a formative effect on De Quincey. He reports having encountered 'We are Seven' at the age of fourteen, and he seems to have felt a special interpretative claim over the poem. Writing to Wordsworth about his reading of *Lyrical Ballads*, De Quincey, as Margaret Russett puts it, 'emerges as the personification of Wordsworthian childhood, chastened and subdued; a figure inhabiting the corpus of Wordsworth's poetry'.¹¹ Later, he even goes so far as to contradict Wordsworth over the age of the child involved:

The little Carnarvonshire child in 'We are Seven', who is represented as repelling the idea of death under an absolute inability to receive it, had completed her eighth year. But this might be an ambitious exaggeration, such as aspiring female children are generally disposed to practise. It is more probable that she might be in the currency of her eighth year. Naturally we must not exact from Wordsworth any pedantic rigour of accuracy in such a case: but assuredly we have a right to presume that his principle, if tenable at all, must apply to all children below the age of *five*. However, I will say *four*.¹²

De Quincey not only sympathizes with Wordsworth's misunderstood child, he knows the child better than the poet himself. A similar self-conscious sympathy with the misunderstood child of about four to eight years old emerges in the Elia essays:

Parents do not know what they do when they leave tender babes alone to go to sleep in the dark. The feeling about for a friendly arm—the hoping for a familiar voice—when they wake screaming—and find none to soothe them— (*LM* IV 386)

Both De Quincey and Lamb know better than parents or elder poets. They take up a child's perspective on the misunderstandings that happen in the space when child and adult meet, the dubious back and forth between them.

¹⁰ 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater' (1856), in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater 1821–1856*, ed. Grevel Lindop, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), II 109 (88–278).

¹¹ Margaret Russett, 'Wordsworth's Gothic Interpreter: De Quincey Personifies "We Are Seven"', *Studies in Romanticism* 30.3 (1991): 363 (345–65).

¹² 'Barbara Lewthwaite', in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater 1821–1856*, II 276 (274–78).

Both take on the child's stubborn resistance, almost a deliberate misunderstanding or mocking of the difficult questions posed by the world.

In both 'The Old Benchers' and the first part of *Confessions* the delicate perspective of the child is set in opposition to stern, but also somehow strange lawyer figures. In the first part of *Confessions* the deserted house in London belongs to 'one of those anomalous practitioners in lower departments of the law': his ethics are dubious, his activities shadowy, and his study is 'a Blue-beard room' (*LM* IV 303). 'The Old Benchers' also presents lawyers who are close to mythical figures. They supposedly belong to a rational world; to the child Elia they are as inscrutable, wrathful, and terrifying as Solomon in his Temple. Lamb's father's employer Samuel Salt, on the other hand, is not frightening, but his grasp on reality is tenuous in a different way. He has 'the reputation of being a very clever man, and of excellent discernment in the chamber practice of the law' but he is really, as his servant well knows, shy, indolent, easily outwitted, 'a child might pose him in a minute'; 'I suspect his knowledge did not amount to much' (*LM* IV 281). Who knows best: the adult lawyer figure or the questioning child?

'A delightful but naughty, wayward child': The Child-Like De Quincey and Lamb

De Quincey and Lamb might be seen, themselves, to bring the worlds of adult and child together, to question the distinction between them: both have their particular reasons for doing so. Small in stature and eccentric in approach, they often put others in mind of children. We might think about that famous description of De Quincey by Thomas Carlyle:

One of the smallest man-figures I ever saw; shaped like a pair of tongs; and hardly above five feet in all: when he sat, you would have taken him, by candlelight, for the beautifullest little Child; blue-eyed, blonde-haired, sparkling face,—had there not been a something too, which said, '*Eccovi*, this Child has been in Hell!'—¹³

In that startling contrast, inflected by Dante, Carlyle acknowledges the darkness of childhood in De Quincey's world. He, and Lamb, inhabit the pains, as well as the pleasures, of childhood. There is a similarly dark parallel drawn by De Quincey himself. Recalling the Lambs in the winter of 1821 in his review of *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb*, De Quincey emphasises the child-like aspect of Charles:

I have heard more persons than I can now distinctly recall, observe of Lamb when sleeping—that his countenance in that state assumed

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, *Pen Portraits by Thomas Carlyle: Found in His Works and Correspondence* by R. Brimsley Johnson (London: George Allen, 1896), 25–26. See Pete Newbon, *The Boy-Man, Masculinity and Immaturity in the Long Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 291.

an expression almost seraphic, from its intellectual beauty of outline, its childlike simplicity, and its benignity.¹⁴

This benign child-like calm, however, is only temporary—an after-dinner sleep brought on by wine. It is soon dispelled by what De Quincey calls the ‘fantastic playfulness’ of his restless, ‘fiery’ eyes: a playfulness De Quincey links to ‘that disastrous alliance with insanity which tainted his own life, and laid desolate his sister’s’.¹⁵ Lamb’s child-likeness is at once playful, but also reckless, restless, tinged with mania. It is worth setting De Quincey’s observation against the strange self-description by Elia, which becomes the ‘Preface’ to the *Last Essays of Elia*:

He did not conform to the march of time, but was dragged along in the procession. His manners lagged behind his years. He was too much of the boy-man. The toga virilis never sate gracefully on his shoulders. The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood. These were weaknesses; but such as they were, they are a key to explicate some of his writings. (*LM VII 21*)

Again, we might read something frightening in the way the impressions of infancy have burnt into Elia. This is not the celestial light of ‘Intimations’, but something more painful, with the potential to scar. Being in touch with infancy at once enables, and also holds back, his later self: ‘He was too much of the boy-man’.

Pete Newbon’s excellent study *The Boy-Man, Masculinity and Immaturity in the Long Nineteenth Century* takes its title from this Elian self-description and sees the boy-man as an important Romantic phenomenon. ‘The nature of the boy-man is avowedly “amphibian”: caught in an oscillating equipoise between competing states of childhood nostalgia and adult knowingness’, Newbon writes.¹⁶ This in-between state is also aligned, in Elia’s case, to the Lambs’ precarious social and cultural position. Brought up in the Inner Temple, living in proximity to authority, the Lambs were nevertheless the children of servants, their social position made still more dubious by Mary’s mental illness. Forced to take responsibility for Mary, there may have been a good reason why Lamb retreated from the competitive egotism of male metropolitan behaviour, and why Elia bridles against the idea of the ‘mannish’. But this was also a product of the current social position. As Jane Aaron suggests, Lamb’s boy-man status is a powerful tool of critique, particularly against the ‘new demarcation and separation of child, male, and female role’ beginning to make

¹⁴ ‘Final Memorials of Charles Lamb’, in *Articles from Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine, MacPhail’s Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal, The Glasgow Athenaeum Album, The North British Review, and Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine 1847–9*, ed. Robert Morrison, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), XVI 391–92 (365–397).

¹⁵ De Quincey, ‘Final Memorials’, 392.

¹⁶ Newbon, *The Boy-Man*, 135.

itself felt in the early nineteenth century.¹⁷ Although the essays of Elia are often ‘organized around a central core of childhood reminiscence’, this is not for wallowing sentimental purposes, but, rather, as a protest:

when read in the immediate historical context of his times, many of Charles’s essays which deal with childhood can be seen as a subtle attack upon the new insistence on a male role dedicated to industriousness, competitiveness, and self-control.¹⁸

For Newbon, it is similarly both a literary and a political position: ‘boy-men,’ argues Newbon, ‘formed part of an idiosyncratic collective in late Georgian literary society, as an offshoot of the phenomenon of “cockneyism”’.¹⁹ Indeed, one of the definitions of Cockney is

A spoilt or pampered person, esp. a child; an indulged, fastidious, or feeble person, esp. one who is affectedly so; a person who lacks strength of character.²⁰

Just as the insult of Cockney could be reclaimed as a badge of honour, so this language of ‘feebleness’ could actually become a point of strength; the language of childhood, similarly, can be used as a tool of resistance. It might be glimpsed in Leigh Hunt’s rosy-papered room in the Horsemonger Lane Gaol, its ceiling painted with clouds and sky: ‘Charles Lamb declared there was no other such room, except in a fairy tale’.²¹ Passing his jail sentence inside a self-created fairy tale, accompanied by his own children, there is something child-like—stubborn, self-willed,—about Hunt’s determinedly optimistic narrative of liberty and liberalism. The child and the Cockney both look from below, their status not quite defined, able guilelessly to question or to mock familiar conventions.

It is no coincidence that the *Anti-Jacobin* attacked Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb for the ‘baby language’ of *Blank Verse*, the volume of poetry they jointly produced in the 1790s:

This Mr. Charles Lloyd we conceive to be one of the twin-bards who unite their impotent efforts to propagate their principles, which are alike marked by folly and by wickedness, in a kind of baby language which they are pleased to term *blank-verse*.²²

¹⁷ Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness. Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 54.

¹⁸ Ibid, 55.

¹⁹ Newbon, *The Boy-Man*, 6.

²⁰ ‘cockney, n. and adj.’, in *OED Online*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press). March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/35467. Accessed 19 April 2023.

²¹ *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London: The Cresset Press, 1949), 243.

²² *Anti-Jacobin Review* (August 1798), 178.

But, to use the language with which Charles himself would attack Mary Jane Godwin later, these are bad babies; the *Anti-Jacobin* viewed the naivety of *Blank Verse* as deliberately provocative. No-one has written better on this question than David Fairer, who points out the revolutionary potential of infant speech. The child's attentiveness, their questions—at once obtuse, but sharply pointed—can challenge systems of power. But as Fairer brilliantly concludes, there is an ambivalence about this childishness:

The poets in the 1790s who believed that individual integrity and virtue could be taught a language, and that from virtuous dwelling-places would come voices to challenge evil and injustice, found themselves facing a paradox: the baby beginning to speak has revolutionary potentialities—it is an irreducible element of natural feeling, a fresh start, and under benevolent fostering it can find an inner voice that offers an alternative to established power structures—but in face of disillusionment and despair this voice can offer instead a memorialized emotional sanctuary.²³

Baby language can speak both to revolution and to nostalgia: making things new, but also turning back towards the old. In Pete Newbon's words, there is something 'amphibian' about the boy-man, half-retreat, half-resistance.

The Lambs' own children's literature, written for the Godwins' Juvenile Library, also possesses this double-edged quality, appealing at once to imaginative wildness and constraint: versions of Shakespeare that simultaneously re-imagine and censor the Bard; poetry for children that is both rebellious and educational. *The King and Queen of Hearts*, for example, a little copper-plate chapbook that represents Charles Lamb's first foray into the children's book-market, nicely shows up the capacity of the Lambs' work to speak to power. His King of Hearts is obese and pleasure-loving, overtly compared to Henry VIII, but surely with a sidelong glance at George, the Regent in waiting, at whom Lamb would take direct aim in 'The Triumph of the Whale', published in Leigh Hunt's *The Examiner* in 1812. The monarchs of Lamb's nursery rhyme, too, are corpulent and drunken: here, the King and Queen are shown greedily devouring the tarts, and in the last panel, raucously falling about, 'Great Kings and Queens indeed get tipsy'. *The King and Queen of Hearts*, which on one level is simply a nursery rhyme, bold, lively, irreverent, might also be read as refracting some of the questions about authority being more seriously posed elsewhere by both Godwin and Lamb. Rebellion, and often a hint of savagery, lurks around the edges of the frame, yet direct confrontation is always evaded—a characteristic feature of Charles Lamb's writing, and a necessary one for Mary.

²³ David Fairer, 'Baby Language and Revolution: The Early Poetry of Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 74 (1991): 48 (33–52); Fairer explores this concept further in *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

This might also be the same impulse that's behind Lamb's behaviour at the Immortal Dinner—his insults to John Kingston, Wordsworth's superior in the Stamp Office, as reported in Haydon's *Autobiography*,

After an awful pause the comptroller said: 'Don't you think Newton a great genius?' I could not stand it any longer. Keats put his head into my books. Ritchie squeezed in a laugh. Wordsworth seemed asking himself: 'Who is this?' Lamb got up and taking a candle, said: 'Sir, will you allow me to look at your phrenological development?' He then turned his back on the poor man, and at every question of the comptroller he chaunted:

'Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John
Went to bed with his breeches on.'²⁴

Lamb's behaviour is covered over as a drunken jape, yet it reveals a particular sort of childlikeness, scornful, savage. Lamb is deliberately and acutely taunting Wordsworth, tormenting through the medium of nursery rhyme. But not going *too* far: the controller is able to be soothed, flattered into overlooking it; Lamb allows himself to be hurried off and shut away. Drunkenness is an enabler and a handy excuse for this rebellious, angry mockery: a state of willed irresponsibility.

At first glance, this raucousness seems a distinct contrast to De Quincey's visions of afflicted childhood—and his attitude, certainly his *early* attitude, to Wordsworth. For De Quincey, the nursery often appears as a place of solitude and sorrow; he is the 'dark interpreter' of the Wordsworthian vision of childhood, which he approaches with solemn reverence. Indeed, one record of a meeting of De Quincey and Lamb, by Richard Woodhouse, suggests that their different attitudes to Wordsworth may have caused some ill-feeling:

The Opium-Eater was formerly (indeed he is still) a great Admirer of Wordsworth. . . . Meeting one time with Charles Lamb, who he understood had praised Wordsworth's poetry, he was induced to mention that Poet's name & speak of him in high terms. Lamb gave him praise, but rather more qualified than the Opium-Eater expected; who spoke with much warmth on the subject; & complained that Lamb did not do Wordsworth justice. Upon which Lamb, in his dry facetious way, observed 'If we are to talk in this strain, we ought to have said grace before we began our conversation'. This observation so annoyed the Opium-Eater that he instantly left the room, and has never seen Lamb since.²⁵

²⁴ *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon: Historical Painter, from His Autobiography and Journals*, ed. Tom Taylor, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, 1853), I 355–56.

²⁵ Robert Morrison, 'Richard Woodhouse's Cause Book: The Opium-Eater, the Magazine Wars, and the London Literary Scene in 1821', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 9.3 (1998): 12 (1–43). My thanks to Robert Morrison for his helpful discussion of the relationship between De Quincey and Lamb and pointing me both to the 'Cause Book' and to their exchange of letters.

The closing assertion is not quite correct—De Quincey and Lamb did have further acquaintance—but the tone of the passage has the ring of truth, that ‘dry facetious’ quality of Lamb set against the warm enthusiasm of the younger man, both of them in fact keenly sympathetic readers. Yet as we have seen in his treatment of ‘We are Seven’, there is at the heart of De Quincey’s Wordsworth-worship the stubborn acuity of the child, sometimes playful, sometimes contradictory. The playful side emerges particularly strongly in the letters he sends the young Wordsworths. Here he enters fully into their games, doodling, teasing, planning modifications to their toy carriage; a child-like lively sympathy that needs to be set alongside the more famous example of his almost suffocating affection for, and then sorrow over, the infant Kate Wordsworth. But like his reading of Wordsworth’s poems, there is something proprietorial in his relationship with the Wordsworth children, a suggestion that he knows them better than their parents.

De Quincey’s own daughter Florence recalled his ‘love of children and power of winning their confidence’, recalling his interventions to soothe her own restless nights—exactly the sort of night-time solace the narrator of ‘Witches and Other Night-fears’ sought. The child is transported ‘from a weariful bed and the wisdom of nursery discipline’ to ‘the dignity and delight of “sitting up with papa”’, and ‘a petting and soothing process of inexpressible sweetness, and coffee well loaded with sugar’, accompanied by the shared reading of ‘some delightful book’.²⁶ As that ‘coffee well loaded with sugar’ might suggest, there is also a certain lack of responsibility in both De Quincey’s treatment of children—and of himself. In adult life he seems to have performed a child-role, not caring about squalor or paying the bills, ‘dressing in a boy’s duffel great-coat, very threadbare with a hole in it’. His treatment of the Wordsworth family veered into mischief in his later revelations; his daughter Emily would characterise him as ‘a delightful but naughty, wayward child, that wanted a whipping at times, but always sweet and tender’.²⁷ Judith Plotz, noting these examples, has written illuminatingly about De Quincey himself perhaps having a ‘a hidden will to remain in the world of childhood’.²⁸ His contemporaries frequently called attention to, in the words of Dorothy Wordsworth, his ‘*unfortunately* diminutive’ size, leading Plotz to speculate on his ‘equivocal attitude toward food’: ‘Could he have *made* his body *childlike*?’ She points out that ‘anorexia in our era is frequently decoded as a tactic of resistance to patriarchy’—but an ambiguous one.²⁹ It is another form, perhaps, of rebellion which might also be a retreat or evasion.

The Child in the London Magazine

In conclusion, we might ask how this language of childhood works within the periodical: specifically, within the *London*. The *London* often invokes play—

²⁶ Thomas De Quincey: *His Life and Writings. With Unpublished Correspondence*, ed. Alexander Hay Japp (London: Hogg, 1890), 238.

²⁷ Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 182.

²⁸ Plotz, *Romanticism*, 189.

²⁹ Plotz, *Vocation of Childhood*, 184, 190.

sometimes in terms of the theatre; sometimes in terms of games, sports or competition; often in terms of the back-and-forth parry, word-play and literary sparring of the regular contributors, a game into which readers, too, could enter. This is one of the important principles advanced in its prospectus, an attempt to capture the fast-moving metropolitan spirit of the age, in contrast to the ponderous self-congratulatory meditations of the previous century. Now, writes the first editor John Scott in his 'Prospectus', reprinted in the 'Preface' to the first number:

discussion must start fleeter and subtler game; excitements must be stronger; the stakes of all sorts higher; the game more complicated and hazardous. (*LM* I v)

The high-stakes language of the hunt takes on a poignancy in light of John Scott's death: a moment when the verbal duelling of the periodical crossed over—awkwardly, messily, tragically—into real life.³⁰ Perhaps this knowledge heightens the importance of childhood for both De Quincey and Lamb in the autumn of 1821. Their children engage not in high-stakes, hazardous competition, but roam, sometimes boisterously, sometimes simply imaginatively, within safely contained spaces of the past. These spaces may be those of humour and fun—as in the games with the Inner Temple fountain—they can also open into nightmare, as in the bad dreams of 'Witches' or the hunger and loneliness of the London children in *Confessions*. But they are past: those things are gone. The fountains are 'dried up'; the darkness of the deserted house in *Confessions* resolves itself into a lighted drawing-room. Childhood joy, childhood fear, exists only as an underground stream, or a shadow, in these bustling places of metropolitan business.

As such, do these lost children of the *London Magazine* have any larger purpose? Or is this language of childhood simply that of nostalgia and retreat? Perhaps one way to look at it is to see both De Quincey and Lamb as using the language of childhood to play inside the structures of authority—like the child Elia inside the Inner Temple—if never to set about dismantling them.³¹ This uncertain, child-like movement, half-play, half-challenge, might have something in common with their approach to Wordsworth. They play with his children, and with his literary representations of children; they play, as we have seen, sometimes mockingly, with his words, rebelling against his poetic authority but also, simultaneously, paying homage.

In this double approach, they mirror an underlying principle of the *London Magazine* itself. While it makes large claims about its identity and role in

³⁰ On this, see Simon Hull, *Metropolitan Muse*, 27–28.

³¹ A further example comes when, in the 1856 revision of *Confessions*, De Quincey adds an account of a childhood visit to the 'Whispering Gallery' in St. Paul's Cathedral, when the 'solemn but not acceptable truth' whispered by his friend reaches the listening narrator 'as a deafening menace in tempestuous uproars'. It becomes, in memory, a dreadful warning as he prepares to run away from school, and in his early travels—a 'death-like revelation' of future regret (*Confessions* (1856), II 155–56). Again, the narrator is figured as a child within a grand structure of authority, from whose edicts he can never truly escape.

metropolitan and in literary life—and by extension, the life of the Empire—it also often casts those aspirations in a doubtful light through wordplay, humour, or in its layering of allusions. Sometimes, just as it did for De Quincey and Lamb, this can position itself in relation to Wordsworth. Let's return to the Prospectus to the *London*:

one of the principal objects of the LONDON MAGAZINE will be to convey the very 'image, form, and pressure' of that '*mighty heart*' whose vast pulsations circulate life, strength, and spirits, throughout this great Empire. (*LM* I iv)

It is a striking, but ambiguously allusive, ambition. The 'image, form, and pressure' recalls Hamlet's instructions to the players in Act 3, scene 2:

hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.³²

But the *London* is not holding a mirror to Nature, exactly: it is taking the pulse of London, that 'mighty heart', which in Scott's extended metaphor sustains the life of the Empire too. Metropolitan and imperial are intimately linked in, and through, the pages of the periodical, as the works of both De Quincey and Lamb demonstrate. The 'Old Benchers', like so much of Lamb's work, is, after all, written on purloined East India Office paper, playing with 'the parings of a counting-house' (*LM* II 366). The imperial project and the Romantic imagination are deeply implicated in one another, and the *London Magazine*, sustained by Wordsworth and Shakespeare, forging its own Cockney literary canon, going out into the 'great Empire', takes its part in this.

But from the start of the *London Magazine*, there is also an undercurrent of uncertainty. Take that 'mighty heart' allusion, so confidently flourished here. Wordsworth's beautiful urban pastoral gives life and strength and spirits both to the periodical and to the greater Empire:

N'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!³³

But the calm of 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' derives its power from its temporary, fragile nature. This is a deceptive calm, perhaps just hinted at by

³² *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2. See William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 699.

³³ *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 147.

the word 'lying' in the final line, and by Wordsworth's source.³⁴ His allusion comes from Antony's characterisation of Julius Caesar's betrayal at the hands of Brutus in Act 3, scene 2 of the Shakespeare play:

For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquish'd him. Then burst his mighty heart.³⁵

So from the start of the *London Magazine* project, there is an echo of deception and betrayal, inflected by Hamlet and Julius Caesar: something tentative at play behind the grand imperial flourish of the proposal.

We see that uneasy quality in the work both of Lamb and De Quincey, and their interest in doubtful spaces inside the capital: the moth-eaten South Sea House, echoing with empty promises of the last century, the gardens of the Inner Temple, remnants of an earlier age; the desolate London house inhabited by De Quincey's young narrator and the neglected child at the beginning of *Confessions*. Both, I suggest, deliberately use the language of childhood and the figure of the child at large in London to show up hollows and doubtful spaces behind the façade of the metropolitan. The child—playing, dreaming, fearing—poses the questions we have forgotten how to ask, or voices the doubts we have covered over.

³⁴ The poem itself, of course, has as an unspoken presence an abandoned child, Caroline. Thanks to the Treaty of Amiens, William and Dorothy were at last able to travel to meet Annette Vallon and Caroline in Calais in September 1802, staying en route with the Lambs, a context which illuminates the hesitating, hopeful openness of the poem's close.

³⁵ *Julius Caesar* Act 3, scene 2. See William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* eds. Wells, Taylor, Jowett, and Montgomery, 644.