



# **The British Periodical Text, 1797-1835**

**A collection of essays edited by Simon Hull**

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## Introduction

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In the autumn of 1821, Keats's close friend and transcriber Richard Woodhouse kept a diary in a legal cause book. In it he vividly captures the lively and at times inflammatory spirit of the London literary scene. His account of a conversation with De Quincey about John Wilson's role in the dispute between *Blackwood's* and *The London Magazine*, which had culminated earlier that year with the death of the *London's* editor, John Scott, after a tragically bungled duel, is particularly revealing for our purposes. Wilson, the one-time devotee of Wordsworth and the so-called Lake School, is presented as a periodical writer who becomes thus—in its most cynical, scabrous incarnation—through his unfortunate experience as a would-be poet of nature:

He was originally possessed of much feeling and enthusiasm. He published some earlier works under the impression of such Sentiments. And it was the reception these works met with that completely turned his Soul. He was laughed at, ridiculed & mocked for these productions. [...] Wilson became jealous of every one who trod in the same path with himself, & vindictive towards the world. He strove to attack & pull down the reputation of all other poets whom he thought he could safely assail—while on the contrary, he was submissive & crouching to all whom the world had marked with its approbation, or whom he thought it was beyond his power to lower. He changed his enthusiasm for hypocrisy.<sup>1</sup>

Wilson's material circumstances may have helped put pay to his

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1 Richard Woodhouse, *Cause Book*, in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 9. 3 (1998), 1–43 (p. 7).

poetic ambitions, and exacerbated his bitterness as a critic. David Higgins proposes that, along with De Quincey and Carlyle, Wilson was an author who, having been forced into periodical writing by an inability ‘to subsist by producing more prestigious forms of literature’, reveals a ‘certain bitterness’ about ‘more fortunate and famous creative artists.’<sup>1</sup> Veering grotesquely between vitriolic censure and lavish praise, Wilson’s critical style is defined by political expediency and motivated by a desire for the acceptance he was refused when struggling as a radical, ‘enthusiastic’, author. Therefore, both the contemporaneous and subsequent image alike of the periodical writer, are of a resentful, frustrated or failed artiste, denied the advantage of birth enjoyed by Byron and Shelley, the financial patronage secured by Coleridge, or, perhaps, the gift of genius itself. This image has persisted and pervaded with good reason. Whatever their achievements in the genre, the fact should not be ignored that Hazlitt, for example, arrived in journalism from a failed career in painting and philosophy, nor the notion dismissed that Hunt always held a ‘never-suppressed preference for poetry.’<sup>2</sup>

Examples equally occur of periodical writing which reflexively turns upon *itself* such an anger of disenfranchisement, the author typically lamenting his enforced labour within a sub-literary milieu marked by the dubious values of anonymity, transience, and commercialism.<sup>3</sup> Mirroring the simultaneously outward and inward-directed anguish of periodical writing, the almost concurrent deaths of John Keats and John Scott in February 1821 implicated the genre in the killing both of a purported genius poet (indeed, the success of periodicals, according to Higgins, was blamed for the death of genius itself), and one of its own, more objectively minded, leading lights. The main contribution to the study of periodical writing made by the essays collected here, I would suggest, is to firmly set the manifest

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1 *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 8.

2 Payson G. Gates, Preface to *William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt: The Continuing Dialogue* (Connecticut: Falls River, 2000), p. vii.

3 For a discussion of the ‘troubling self-consciousness’ of periodical writing as articulated by the Cockney dispute, and informed by anxieties over metropolitan culture, see Greg Dart, ‘Romantic Cockneyism: Hazlitt and the Periodical Press’, *Romanticism*, 6. 2 (2000), 143–62.

and indisputable anxieties of the genre within the less-discussed context of its considerable literary achievements.

The interest in Romantic-era periodicals maintained since the mid-‘eighties and Jon Klancher’s influential text, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, has taken various theoretical and thematic directions.<sup>1</sup> Analysis ranges from Klancher’s essentially Marxist notion of the role periodicals played in defining an intellectual middle-class, to Jeffrey Cox’s new historicist approach of re-situating canonical poetry within the immediate critical context of contemporary reviews.<sup>2</sup> The periodical text has itself been explored as a prime site of, to re-apply Klancher’s term, ‘trans-authorial’ discourse: the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia has been reapplied by Mark Schoenfield and Mark Parker, to show how in any given issue of a miscellaneous magazine individual essays are mediated by often strategically placed, adjacent articles, as dictated by the editor’s political agenda.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, there have been author-centred studies that have reappraised the major essayists in the context of their work for the periodical press: Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, have each received attention as authors whose work is informed by an intensely commercial and competitive, yet highly sociable milieu.<sup>4</sup> In the process, definitive Romantic themes such as autobiography and genius have been reappraised through the lens of what is, after all, a preternaturally dialogic and discursive medium.

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1 A comprehensive survey of these directions can be found in Kim Wheatley’s introduction to the collection of essays, *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 1–18. Wheatley rightly identifies Jerome McGann’s seminal new historicist text, *The Romantic Ideology* (1985), as laying the theoretical foundation for the interest in periodical writing that followed it.

2 In *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt, and Their Circle* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

3 Mark Schoenfield, ‘Voices Together: Lamb, Hazlitt, and the London’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 29 (Summer 1990), 257–72; Mark Parker, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

4 I allude, respectively, to the following: James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature, 1783–1834* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), Ch. 8, pp. 209–40; Dart, ‘Romantic Cockneyism’; Margaret Russett, *De Quincey’s Romanticism: Canonical Minority and the Forms of Transmission* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

I use both these closely related terms to emphasise the combined conversational and desultory features of the genre: its fluidity of form, versatility of style, and sheer multiplicity as text. The Romantic periodical text plays host to different, heteroglossic voices that collude and collide, yet these are voices that are themselves often characterised by wide-ranging subject matter, shifts in argumentative positioning, and the double-voiced effect of irony. As such, De Quincey's two-part autobiographical narrative for *The London Magazine*, 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater' is a classic example. Delivered in an idiosyncratic and digressive style rich with literary allusion, it veers between self-justification and self-condemnation, and pathos and wry humour, thus leaving the reader never quite certain either of the confessor's sincerity or his seriousness. In the same magazine the following year, Lamb's 'Confessions of a Drunkard' similarly teases the reader with an ambivalent tone between confessional sincerity and parody – of, not least of all, De Quincey's text. Like the congruently phantasmal figure of the pseudonymous periodical persona itself, parody is an elusive yet pervasive phenomenon, and the archetypal expression of double-speak in its simultaneous invocation of the satirist and its subject.

Moreover, the concrete and the abstract are also combined within individual essays, to create a sort of dual vision. A quick eye for domestic, physical detail, a desire to be entertained by all that the city has to offer, the appetite of a gourmand and relish for consumer items such as sundials, china teacups, fine art prints and first editions, are juxtaposed with abstract discussion of philosophy and aesthetics. Typifying this dual vision is Hazlitt's famous essay, 'My First Acquaintance With Poets, which first appeared in *The Liberal* in April 1823. An almost bathetic description of Wordsworth – Hazlitt observes a rolling, Peter Bell-like gait and an oddly convulsive laugh, before relating how the poet greedily devoured a hunk of cheese – is almost contradictorily intermingled with his being imputed an unreal aura of stateliness and visionary power. Similarly, in the essay 'On Getting Up on Cold Mornings' (*The Indicator*, 19 January 1820), Leigh Hunt bandies about the names of great artists and images of statesman simply to link them by the presence of a beard, hence to



argue against the tiresome ritual of shaving. Such casual, sometimes provocative acts of displacement bespeak an admirably balanced and grounded view of intellectual and artistic endeavour. They simultaneously dismantle the ivory tower of genius – not least of all the writer’s own – and promote the Platonic role of philosophy and art in transforming and ordering the otherwise oppressively mundane, material world.<sup>1</sup>

I am taking the essay in this analysis as the principle form of periodical writing because, in effect, it encapsulates the genre. Produced in the first instance for, and typically referential to, the periodical press, it uniquely assimilates the discursive and dialogic conditions of the periodical as text. It might indeed be more accurate to use the term, ‘essayistic writing’, as the forms discussed in the present collection include the satirical squib, drama review, mock-travelogue, sports journalism, editorial puff and correspondence piece, all of which either exhibit or participate in the same dialogic and discursive dynamic as the essay proper (although itself a problematic concept), and the periodical text as a whole. First and foremost, however, it is the essay, as broadly informed by periodical culture, which is the appropriative agent, as in the appropriation of the ‘low’ idiom of sporting slang to the more traditional, polite (or ‘genteel’) style in Hazlitt’s ‘The Fight’, for instance. The essay, or the act of *essaying* – proffering ideas or stylistic approaches in the singular or weighed against each other, in a spirit of experimentation and inclusiveness—is perhaps the key expression of the magazine’s inherent sociability.

The assimilation of the periodical text by the essay and/or essayistic writing has important implications for how we read periodicals. The dialogic and discursive essay challenges the variously proposed idea of a trans-authorial phenomenon, by suggesting that individual writers can effectively pre-empt mediation by the surrounding text/s, or a given magazine’s political agenda. As Sean Burke has compellingly argued, the weakness of deconstructive attempts to slay the

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1 See Uttara Natarajan, ‘The Veil of Familiarity: Romantic Philosophy and the Familiar Essay’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 42. 1 (Spring 2003), 27–44. Although discussing the essay in isolation from the periodical text, Natarajan’s claim for its ideal combination of ‘metaphysical speculation’ and domestic intimacy largely informs the above notion of dual vision and balance.

author is that they are predicated on a monolithic and indeed monologic figure ('a father worthy of slaying'), a figure patently at odds with that of the periodical writer.<sup>1</sup> When this figure in its most sophisticated, reflexive incarnation assumes an extra-essayistic or paratextual presence, furthermore, as my own contribution on Lamb's Elia persona argues, the boundary between text and self is blurred, thus enacting an unlikely site for the return of the author. For Lamb, writing the periodical text becomes a bold, emancipatory act in relation to the wing-clipped essays edited for book publication.

Beyond the pre-emptive, organic form of the essay, then, the periodical's tendency to dialogism and discursiveness would appear to make it a semantically unstable, and therefore politically undesirable artform. Yet at the same time the double-voice of parody is an attractive satirical device because it turns the voice of the other upon itself with delicious irony. Similarly, the periodical's capacity for proliferation, which, compared to the book, enables it to reach a larger and more diverse reading public in a much shorter space of time, makes it both a highly prized and feared political weapon. John Halliwell's contribution engages with the equally feared uncontrollability and desired accessibility of the periodical text as a vehicle for politico-poetical satire. The earlier-cited examples of double-voiced periodical writing by De Quincey and Lamb can be seen as apolitical variations on Canning and Frere's earlier attacks on Southey in *The Anti-Jacobin*, a magazine that ushers in the interrelated Romantic phenomena of print culture and parody. Indeed, although clearly very different to the miscellaneous format that was to dominate in the 1820s, with its large pool of regular, diverse contributors, even *The Anti-Jacobin's* single-themed remit and politically unified, small group of writers manage to produce a 'cacophony of voices' in Halliwell's analysis, some disarming others provocative. Halliwell identifies a perhaps surprisingly complex, layered tone from Canning in particular, who effects an ironic form of self-deprecation over the poetic capabilities of his own magazine, whilst accusing his Jacobin targets of grossly misusing their considerably greater poetic powers.

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1 *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999).

Halliwell investigates the *Anti-Jacobin's* appropriation of 'the discursive power of satire within radical print culture', as an attempt to 'police or regulate the boundaries of the public sphere'. The *Anti-Jacobin* and its use of satire therefore represents in Halliwell's analysis an alternative approach to governmental tactics (legislation, prosecution, coercion, bribery) against the influence of the burgeoning print culture that the government identified as the lifeblood of radical opposition. This approach equates to fighting fire with fire, with the unintended consequence of the fire spreading. Just as the effectiveness of Canning and Frere's parody of Southey's politico-poetical idiom depends on a highly intimate knowledge of their subject, so the *Anti-Jacobin* owes its very existence to radical magazines like *The Morning Chronicle* and its own use of political verse satire. Halliwell identifies how the *Anti-Jacobin* broadened its satire to attack, ironically, the sexual / textual licentiousness of radical print culture itself: the magazine ultimately succeeds in broadening rather than narrowing satire's political scope, as a result of the periodical text's generic propensity to beget other periodical texts across the political spectrum.

The apparent 'callousness' or 'heartlessness' of Romantic periodical writing identified by Richard Cronin provides a further manifestation of a delicately maintained balance or duality of tone which is at once imbued with an ironical, provocative social awareness, and glossed with a metropolitan sophistication that, Cronin proposes, looks forward to the detachment of modernism. Such finely judged tonal poise therefore represents periodical writing both at its most innovative and self-confident. Cronin observes that 'by 1821 periodical writers, even if they were unsure of their status, were very confident of their modernity'. To read Romantic periodical writing in this way, as a major literary achievement, is to challenge the notion of it as being merely about a pre-realist aesthetic of uncertainty, revealing thus an issue-fudging failure of moral nerve, as a mere stage in the evolution of the gritty, implicitly superior, realism of Dickens and Gaskell.<sup>1</sup>

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1 A good example of this critical tendency can be found in Deborah Epstein Nord's book, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995). In the first chapter, 'The City as Theatre: London in the 1820s', Epstein Nord argues from her reading of texts by Pearce Egan, De Quincey and Lamb that, in contrast to Dickens's succeeding urban

due to a propensity to play with this figure in a way that often leaves the reader uncertain as to Lamb's position. On the one hand Elia can seem a shallow exponent of the city-as-theatre aesthetic when he celebrates sweeps and beggars as a part of the amoral pantomime and masquerade of the London life that he clearly loves. But in the context of intense debate over Poor Law reform and the march of utilitarian societies against the traditional, patriarchal system of relief – a movement to which he is explicitly opposed—Elia's blending of the human subject into the cityscape effectively renders it invisible, and indeed irrelevant, to such reformers. In this latter reading, in which Lamb's supposed heartlessness ironically counters that which he perceives in the reformers, he appears as an altogether more socially concerned, and less tentative, writer.

The confidence of periodical writing can itself, of course, be a cause of anxiety. In imitating Lamb, another writer for *The London Magazine*, George Darley, sought to capture for himself the finely tuned, yet seemingly effortless, detachment of the quintessential, self-assured, periodical writer. Michael Bradshaw's reading of the Irish poet and dramatist Darley, focuses on the often belligerent persona which Darley adopts for writing dramatic criticism, John Lacy, to present a profoundly unsettled writer. As with the proudly rustic Hogg's inability to quite fit in with the Edinburgh periodical crowd, Darley carries with his Celtic identity an innate sense of displacement among the nationalistic English fraternity of the *London*. Bradshaw sees Darley's faltering attempts at urbane poise as the failing of a writer trying too hard to fit into a pre-existing corporate image, and moreover, through an apparent addiction to pseudonymity, indulging in 'a whole range of anxious experiments with authorial identity'.

As a further point of interest arising from Bradshaw's essay, Darley's tonally unstable critique of contemporary drama adds a lesser-known voice to the whole Romantic debate over closet drama. Darley, like Lamb, Hazlitt, and Coleridge before him, emphasises the 'ascendancy of intense poetry over stageable action'. Yet Darley's uncertain sense of identity as a periodical writer causes his very animosity towards the overt theatricality of English tragedy (as epitomised by the 'voluptuous Italianate and Orientalist Byron') to be expressed

minology, is therefore to assert the broad appeal of the urban intellectual. Like Cronin, therefore, Strachan presents us with a confident, anxiety-free model of periodical writer, one who is more than happy to play with different voices within a single identity.

In summary, then, the essays in this collection work together *as* a collection because they explore both models of writing, the anxious, and the confident, as dictated by the author's handling of the particular demands of the periodical text. Authors that to varying degrees and in different ways struggle with or resist the conditions of the periodical text, and those that appropriate or assimilate them through the essayistic figure. This collection indicates above all that the periodical text presented a sufficiently novel and challenging medium in the Romantic period to bring about a particularly vibrant and varied response from the authors who, for whatever reason, used it.

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