

ALTERITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: CHARLES LAMB'S "THE ESSAYS OF ELIA"

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the unorthodox turn in Charles Lamb's autobiographical writing through the figure of Elia with its potential to test the limits of alterity and one's representation of oneself while challenging at the same time the immunity of self as the origin of knowledge and truth. In so doing, this study also maintains that Elia as the autonomous entity calls into question the authority of the writer as well as any claim on teleology and coherence in the act of writing one's own life specifically. To this end, explication of some of the key passages in the essays is informed by Jacques Derrida's theoretical stance towards autobiography in his seminal work *The Ear of the Other*. In this vein, the article suggests that Elia's individuality and self-consciousness in the essays manifest in unorthodox ways the simultaneous interpretative potential of the figure as the reader of Lamb's life in making.

Keywords: autobiography, otobiography, otherness, alterity, deconstruction

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Although Charles Lamb's biography can largely be inferred from *The Essays of Elia*, he avoids self-absorption by portraying mere everydayness of his time and the individuals in his company; nonetheless, it should not follow that these figures are not of great importance to Lamb in the process of his life-writing, as well as to readers of his work who gain insight not only into a significant portion of the life of the man who bore the name Lamb, who, through his penname Elia, transforms his individuality into unknown possibilities in each essay. Lamb provides Elia with a vehicle for self-expression, enabling him to explore the full spectrum of human experience, from sorrow and joy to the nuances of philosophical thought and the ordinariness of everyday life; hence the approach of an objective, detached observer remains constant. Despite the distance between Lamb and his own self as portrayed by Elia, that which surfaces is a subjectivity in the appropriation of his life and an indivisible mixture of fact and fiction formed by Elia as the life of Charles Lamb it is very peculiar ways. Charles Lamb appears to have striven to overcome the considerable challenge of composing a personal account of his life in the form of his essays, which enables him conceal the personal reminiscences and reflections on humanity behind the persona.

Charles Lamb challenges the conventions of traditional autobiographical writing by presenting himself as Elia, a figure who embodies the one on the margins, the other. Such representations challenge the notion of self as the privileged origin of meaning, knowledge and truth, particularly in relation to past experiences and the present moment. In other words, as Sidonie Smith asserts, in traditional autobiographical writing, the self is not left in a state of indeterminacy, ambiguity, or heterogeneity (1993, p. 6). In this process, the chaotic is silenced, and a teleological, unique, coherent self emerges in its place, and what distinguishes Lamb's approach from such orthodox autobiographical accounts is the absence of an essential purposiveness. Despite the recurrence of images such as old buildings, old people and scenes from the city in his writing, there is no clear sense of direction or purpose to be found. Elia effectively eliminates the direct correlation between the self that is expressed in the act of writing and the narrative that represents the subjectivity of the writer; in other words, the process of self-fashioning is disrupted by Elia's diverse concerns that may encompass a range of subjects. Consequently, the focus on the 'universal subject', which is a central element in traditional autobiographical writing, cannot be maintained as an

autonomous entity within Elia's essays. Elia establishes a connection with other individuals while simultaneously maintaining his distinct identity. In contrast to the well-established autobiographical tradition, which has always flourished on the basis of a unified and coherent self, Elia's work demonstrates a more complex and nuanced understanding thereof in relation to society. Smith notes that this flourishing was predicated on the assumption of a singular and unified self, a narrative that resonated with the reader, and a mimetic medium that guaranteed epistemological correspondence between narrative and lived experience (1993, p. 17); however, Elia's work challenges this assumption by exploring the multifaceted and often contradictory aspects of the self in relation to society.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that Elia was able to negate the entire historical context of his era from his writings; he still alludes to a lived experience, suggesting a sense of closure in each essay, albeit not in the conventional narrative sense. Elia also manifests a kind of individuality and self-consciousness in his writing, which, in conjunction with his presence, gave rise to a text that was self-reflexive and transparent in its own dynamics. In the essays, Elia functions as a kind of literary machine, traversing the conventional boundaries of autobiographical writing. On the one hand, he attempts to recover what has been submerged in the enigmatic depths of memory, and on the other, he discloses his shortcomings, not in regard to his actions in life but in the process of narrating his life. Once the process of narration is complete, the machine is no longer functional, as there is no room for impatience in capturing life in its authentic state. To some extent, Elia fulfils his objective of deconstructing the conventional methods of relating one's life experiences to the format of his essays. In his analysis, Bruner posits that the "inner dynamics" of the writing of one's era, along with the cultural products that emerge from it, are subject to questioning and reinterpretation as time progresses: "Any autobiography configuring a life is not so much a matter of making new discoveries in the archeological record of our experiences, or of revealing the contents of previously hidden 'memories,' but of rewriting a narrative along different interpretative lines" (1984, p. 38). In the "Preface to the Last Essays," Lamb himself identifies this shift in interpretation following the cessation of Elia's narrative in its previous form. In light of the interrelation between Lamb and Elia as explored in various essays, the question of Lamb's estrangement from

Elia must also be considered in the context of Derridean deconstructionist theory as it pertains to autobiography.

The concept of the 'otherness' of the ear is a key theme in Derrida's work, *The Ear of the Other*, and is seen as a crucial yet challenging aspect of autobiographical writing. Jacques Derrida's (1985) approach differs from the conventional perspectives on autobiography in that he delves deeply into the unconventional autobiographical work of Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, employing an unconventional reading. In his lecture, "Otobiographies," Derrida addresses the limitations of textual representation and the enigmatic nature of life from a teleological perspective. In contrast, Derrida correlates the biological with the biographical, employing his own methodology to prompt profound inquiries into the events of signature, the reception of writing, and the inherent incompleteness of autobiography. In accordance with his arguments, the structure of the Nietzschean text leaves the meaning unfinished and the structure of the text cannot be reduced to any definitive 'truth' or even to its signatory. Conversely, the act of signature occurs when the message has been successfully received by the intended audience: "Nietzsche's signature does not take place when he writes. He says clearly that it will take place posthumously, pursuant to the infinite line of credit he has opened for himself, when the other comes to sign with him, to join with him in alliance and, in order to do so, to hear and understand him (1985, p. 50)."

The text is subsequently signed by the other; the event is thus conveyed to the reader, whose particular interpretation cannot be guaranteed. The readers are thus tasked with interpreting the Nietzschean text in accordance with the author's deliberate strategy of deferring the meaning within its structural framework, which is what removes the text from the boundaries of the autobiographical and places it within the field of otobiography. In order to hear and understand it, one must also produce it. Through this production, Nietzsche's signature is embedded in every reading. Derrida posits that, rather than representing a metaphysics of time, the concept of eternal return constitutes the very foundation of Nietzsche's expectations regarding his text. The concept of the eternal return, as experienced through the ears of others, serves to disrupt the closure of Nietzsche's signature. Furthermore, it is necessary to accept the inevitability of the future's unfolding, regardless of how it occurs, which entails transcending the duality of life and death that Derrida discusses in his lecture by

integrating them simultaneously into the text as quotations: "In order to understand anything at all of my Zarathustra, one must perhaps be similarly as conditioned as I am – with one foot beyond life" (1985, p. 9).

Derrida dedicates a significant portion of his analysis to the portrayal of Zarathustra in the "midday" section, emphasising his existence in a state of absolute equanimity, which enables Derrida to posit the existence of a past and future state, as Zarathustra is situated at an equal distance from both: "I look back, I looked forward, and never saw so may and such good things at once" (1985, p. 19). Charles Lamb, in a similar fashion, upon becoming aware of the terrible reality, loses his faith in Elia, who has become a figure too well-known to be the bearer of Lamb's signature. At this point, the dream-like aspect of Elia's persona becomes anchored in his own name, which is evident in the fact that Lamb seeks to connect with a "friend" of Elia who can provide a different point of reference, which is necessary for him. It is also more significant than it first seems, at this point, to note briefly some of the basic conceptions that surrounds the theories on autobiography in modern criticism as that of Gerald Monsman's in his article "Lamb's Art of Autobiography." Monsman identifies three fundamental components of an autobiography: *autos*, the remembering self of the author; *bios*, the life that forms the core of the autobiographical text; and *graphie*, which he defines as "the textual inscription wherein simulacra of the past and present experience are reified" (1983, p. 547). In order to gain insight into the significance of Elia, a pseudonym, the concept of simulacra proves invaluable in understanding the implication that the *auto* is merely a written form that coincides with the textual inscription, the *graphie*, which divides the life of Charles Lamb into at least two distinct phases: the past, which belongs to Lamb, and the present, which belongs to Elia, as evidenced in the essays. In contrast to the Rousseauistic tradition, as Monsman notes, which strives to assuage fears and address shortcomings (1983, p. 547), the collaboration of Lamb and Elia, with their distinct author roles, illustrates the futility of attempting to construct a unified and universal subject.

The distinctive form of Elia's essays, along with their structural and self-reflexive nature, convey meanings that extend beyond their literal content. These forms and techniques serve to equate the narrative meaning with the very structure of the texts. First and foremost, the events in Elia's life are not of a kind that may be experienced by

any individual in society; they are unique to Elia himself. Nevertheless, Elia immediately engages the reader with direct references and a sense of rhetorical authorship, fostering a sense of shared consciousness in both the text and the reader. In the opening sentence of "The South-Sea House," the author immediately engages the reader with a rhetorical question: "READER, in thy passage from the Bank –where thou hast been receiving thy half-yearly dividends... didst thou never observe a melancholy-looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice to the left...?" (p. 41). This technique not only piques the reader's interest but also subtly conditions the reader to perceive the surrounding environment in a particular way. Although it is evident that Elia is aware that not all his readers may be familiar with the location he is describing, he repeatedly makes bold assertions, as evidenced by the following example: "I dare say thou hast often admired its magnificent portals ever grasping wide, and disclosing to view a grave court, with cloisters, and pillars, with few or no traces of gores in..." (p. 41). He is aware of the extent of his rhetorical devices, which result in the conversion of the reader into the text. Rather than concealing the deficiencies of his rhetoric, he explicitly acknowledges them through phrases such as "I remember to have seen..." (p. 47). Furthermore, the locations referenced in his accounts serve to elucidate the characters of individuals from the past as embodied in the physical settings, and vice versa: "They partook of the genius of the place!" (p. 45). The conjunction of space and time in the act of narration results in the coexistence of the present and the past.

In his article "The Circular Journey and the Natural Authority of Form," William Zeiger posits that the form need only be sufficiently specific to evoke its archetype in the reader's mind. The reader may conclude, in accordance with the author's argument, that "Yes, that is the way things go" (1990, p. 209). Elia, however, challenges this assertion by eschewing the use of the past as a means of imparting lessons and instead directing the reader's attention towards a broader argument that deviates from his specific past experiences (Jessup, 1954, p. 246). His objective is to identify the distinctive quality within the context of the familiar, as he asserts in "The South Sea House:" "Whom next shall we summon from the dusty dead, in whom common qualities become uncommon?" The work of Charles Lamb evinces a depth and complexity that extends beyond the confines of the experiences of a mere vagabond. Rather than adopting the methodology of an archeologist, he explores the essence of a bygone era,

integrating the tangible world into his mental landscape in a seamless manner. As evidenced by the opening sentence of "South-Sea House," among numerous other examples, the reader is initially introduced to specific locations and subsequently guided into the realm of abstract experiences and sentiments expressed by the narrator (Haven, 1963, p. 142). To illustrate, in his adult world, fountains are "fast vanishing...dried up, or bricked over" whereas "one is left, as in that little green nook behind the South-Sea House, what a freshness it gives to the dreary pile!" (Lamb, 2011, p. 266). The theme of childhood is a pervasive one in Lamb's writing, frequently evoking memories from his own childhood. In this specific reference to another essay by himself and to his childhood memories, Elia employs a recurring image of 'water' in "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," and links his essays in a unified manner as if striving to fulfill his objective of composing his life, not in a teleological manner but in a cyclical one.

In addition, the form of Elia's essays is worthy of further consideration, particularly in light of the mockery that pervades each narrative. This does not necessarily imply that Elia solely mocks the reader's reading process through the constant revelation of the fictional aspects of the essays; instead, he also illuminates the potential inaccuracy of his narration through metafictional commentaries on himself and the written text. He highlights the challenges associated with recalling and interpreting his past experiences, emphasizing the fluidity and subjectivity of memory and interpretation: "P.S. I have done injustice to the soft shade of Samuel Salt. See what it is to trust to imperfect memory, and the erring notices of childhood.... let no one receive the narratives of Elia for true records! They are, in truth, but shadows of fact – verisimilitudes, not verities- or sitting but upon the remote edges and outskirts of history (p. 280)." The distinction between the author's actual experiences and the fictional elements becomes increasingly indistinct, given the inherent limitations of reproducing the original accounts. The reader is deceived to the extent that they permit it: "Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while – peradventure the very *names*, which I have summoned 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" (p. 56). The significance of these figures is derived from the author's personal history, and is currently manifested

in his memories, although he is uncertain about the specifics of what he recalls. The only remaining possibility is that, despite the lack of evidence to the contrary, Elia did indeed exist.

From this point onwards, the focus shifts from the structure of the narratives to the question of whether a narrator such as Elia can be identified. One might even inquire whether he is an uncertain person. In Charles Lamb's narrative, the distinction between Elia's virtuosity and actuality appears to be non-existent, he is a self-sufficient entity, existing independently. The textual reality of Elia is disrupted by Lamb at a late stage, following the completion of Elia's role as a mask for Lamb. In essence, Elia is a more profound human being when confronted with the full spectrum of the self, encompassing not only its positive attributes but also its shortcomings and imperfections:

Elia becomes Lamb's way of reinstating the life and its accidents, a pardoning and regeneration of the man-in-the-world without a disavowing of his guilt and morality. Through the Elian alter ego, Lamb can confess the fearful "story" of his personal guilt yet catch within his verbal net a limping reflection of his now absent wholeness (Monsman, 1983, p. 551).

This concept of "absent wholeness" represents the ordinary aspects of human existence, devoid of the idealised or perfected qualities often attributed to individuals. Elia eschews generalisations in favour of particularisation, whereby he highlights the uncommon aspects of individuals from the past. In lieu of pursuing abstract ideals and absoluteness, he proposes concrete human qualities. As Bertham Jessup notes, the author does not evade the realism of his society; rather, his realism encompasses a broader temporal range than the present and the practical (1954, p. 248).

In his writings, Charles Lamb presents Elia as a verifiable individual whose existence mirrors his own character; moreover, Lamb permits Elia to idealise itself not as a universal entity but as an individual situated within the context of the street and as a member of society. This represents a departure from Lamb's own position within the social order. Consequently, Elia can be regarded as an idealisation of Lamb without compromising its credibility. Elia represents the other in Lamb's person, whose role begins where the author's social status cannot afford to express him, which is achieved

through a consistent alternation of narration between Lamb and Elia. Concurrently, while commenting on Elia's life, Lamb also finds a means of commenting on his own life, thus affording multiple perspectives on a single event. The following example demonstrates how Lamb employs an unconventional technique to achieve an unorthodox confession. This technique has its roots in the earliest examples of autobiographical writing, in which the author divides themselves into two distinct personas: the first representing the 'lived' subject, the object of study; the second representing the 'unified' subject, capable of grappling with the past. What sets Lamb's approach apart from the majority of autobiographical examples is the absence of any attempt to disguise this self-reflection in the guise of complete consciousness in the present. Instead, he attempts to elucidate the distinction between his two selves as clearly as possible, thereby exposing the traditional and flawed assumption that a single subject can simultaneously grasp both the present and the past:

IN Mr. Lamb's "Works," published a year ago or two since, I find a magnificent eulogy on my old school, such as it was, or now appears to him 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. (p. 71)

Furthermore, Elia recalls L. at school. In other words, even when viewed as a subject of study, one can still recall Elia's "remembering L. at school...;" it is therefore evident that even when the subject is being studied, it is not possible to recall the past identity with the same clarity as it is experienced in the present. Conversely, it is not solely Elia who recalls past events. In "Christ's Hospital," Lamb makes reference to Elia's acquaintances when employing the first-person perspective. The following two individuals, presumed to be still alive, are identified as friends of Elia. Given the evident fact that Lamb began to compose with his own hand, it is pertinent to question why he employed Elia as a conduit. It is conceivable that he is now able to corroborate the past with greater ease, as the conclusion of Elia's life draws near. It would appear that he is unable to recall with the same clarity the past identity he had at school as he does the present. Conversely, it is not solely Elia who evinces a recollection of past events. In

“Christ's Hospital,” Lamb refers to friends of Elia when the pen is in Elia's hand, stating, “Next follow two, who ought to be alive, and the friends of Elia...” (p. 95). It is curious that Lamb continues to utilise Elia as a vehicle, given that it is evident that he began to write with his own pen. It may be the case that he is now able to verify the past with greater ease, as the end of Elia's life draws near.

One might posit that it is Lamb who perceives the imminent demise of Elia. In the closing paragraph of “The South-Sea House” and in numerous statements in “Oxford in Vacation,” Lamb, along with many others, begins to exhibit signs of mental distress despite Elia's continued role as the “proper name” that bears the burden: The reader may be forgiven for asking who Elia is. From this point onwards, he begins to confess, but still in the name of Elia. “I confess that it is my humour, my fancy –in the forepart of the day...” (p. 267). Lamb begins to dismantle the constructed persona of Elia as a means of disassociating himself from the burden of responsibility for the narrative, which had been created to absolve him of accountability for his own life.

In this essay, Lamb presents himself in stark contrast to the public figures of past times, as if to amplify the unspoken sentiments of Elia beyond their original scope: “Tipp never mounted the box of a stage-coach in his life; or leaned against the rails of a balcony; or walked upon the ridge of a parapet...” (p. 52-3). Since Tipp “was formal, ruled by a ruler” and since he “made the best executer in the world: he was plagued with incessant executorships accordingly, which excited his spleen and soothed his vanity in equal ratios” (p. 52). In contrast, Elia (that is to say, Lamb) appears to be the opposite. By juxtaposing himself with public figures, Elia asserts his identity and distinctive characteristics: “I am not the man to decide the limits of civil and ecclesiastical authority –I am plain Elia- no Selden, or Archbishop of Usher- though at present in the thick of their books, here in the heart of learning...” (p. 60). Elia is Elia, just as Lamb is Lamb, or Elia is Lamb. The crux of the matter is that it is the reality of Lamb, as perceived by both Lamb himself and by society at large, that renders Elia a popular persona. Once the mask of Elia is removed, the persona dies and is buried in the past, becoming one with antiquity: “Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? That, being nothing, art every thing... the mighty future is as nothing, being every thing! The past is very thing, being nothing!” (p. 62).

In the "Preface to the Late Essays," Lamb offers a critique of Elia. The form of Elia's essays and Elia's admission to the public could not overcome the futility of Lamb's endeavour to construct a self. Elia's life, characterised by a sense of guilt, disappointment, pleasure and the mundane, is interrupted by Lamb at a point where it begins to diverge from the life of Charles Lamb and to deviate from the path of returning to the innocent times of childhood. Lamb makes it clear that the demise of Elia is neither a calamitous occurrence nor an unexpected one, he regards this event with composure and welcomes it with dignity: "This poor gentleman, who for some months past had been in a declining way, hath at length paid his final tribute to nature" (p. 29). Given that the mission has been accomplished, it is now time for him to depart. As evidenced by his tone in announcing his friend's demise, Lamb appears to regard the event as a burden he has successfully shed. Lamb considered Elia's essays to be somewhat rudimentary and lacking in polish. For Lamb, Elia's essays are crude

"a sort of unlicked, incondite things- villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases ... They had not been his, if they had been other than such; and better it is, that a writer should be natural in a self-pleasing quaintness, than to affect a naturalness (so called) that should be strange to him" (p. 30).

Lamb proceeds to articulate his perspectives on Elia, asserting that he was a distinctive individual, a mere mortal who was inherently incapable of comprehending his own nature. His philosophy was dependent on the experiences of an ordinary individual, rather than on the achievements of prominent figures: "He chose his companions for some individuality of character which they manifested. Hence, not many persons of science, and few professed *literati*, were of his councils" (p. 32). In addition, Lamb posits that Elia resented being treated with gravitas and sought to emulate the prevailing attitudes of his contemporaries. He behaved as though he were absent, yet simultaneously present. In Lamb's words, Elia would "interrupt the gravest discussion with some light jest; and yet, perhaps, not quite irrelevant in his ears that could understand it" (p. 31).

Elia fulfils at the this points its potential to find the contours of one's capabilities of writing one's own life in rather unconventional ways, having provided a room for alterity without the confines of one's part memories and present moment. The autonomy on the part of Elia enables Lamb to stretch beyond any teleology and

coherence as expected from conventional autobiographical writing. It is through eliminating the restrictions imposed on the writing subject and its self, Elia turn the floor on a self-conscious narrative which gives rise to the idea of Elia not only as a mere penname but simultaneously a reader of Lamb's life with its signature in Derridean terms; that is Charles Lamb's past and present are made present—in the sense also of representation—by Elia in enigmatic ways that are not much common to conventional autobiographical writing.

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