

PEDESTRIAN ROMANTICS:  
THE ENGLISH FAMILIAR ESSAY IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

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**1) Foreword: Hungarian precedents, methodological problems and the corpus discussed**

Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi and the literary circle of the journal *Nyugat* first showed sustained interest in the essayists of British Romanticism in Hungary. The translations they planned, however – with the significant exception of *Az angol postakocsi: Angol romantikus esszék* ([The English Stage-Coach: English Romantic Essays] Budapest: Európa, 1986), edited by Kálmán Ruttkay – have come to nothing, and no thorough interpretation of these oeuvres has been published in Hungarian. Long after the passing of the *Nyugat*-generation, István Gál still lamented (in 1973) that “the romantic prose writers, and especially the essayists have remained largely unknown in Hungary. Although Kosztolányi

discovered Charles Lamb around the end of his life, no one has critically examined the work of his two contemporaries, and equals, Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt. It is regrettable, since their natural, lively, conversational style would improve Hungarian essay-writing.” The dissertation – together with the translations published while the dissertation was being written – is, on the one hand, intended to contribute to the belated Hungarian reception of this important literary tradition. On the other hand, it has been encouraged by two important recent developments. One of them is the increased critical interest in the history of British criticism and aesthetics in Hungary, as witnessed by the translations of classics such as Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, or the anthology edited by Ágnes Péter: *Angol romantika: esszék, naplók, levelek* ([English Romanticism: Essays, journals, letters.] Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó, 2003). The other is the long-standing attention devoted to the problems associated with the genre of the essay, instances of which can be seen in the papers collected in the 2002/1 issue of the journal *Alföld*, or those presented at the 2008 conference on the philosophical essay at Pécs.

The second sub-chapter serves to clarify some of the methodological questions related to the usage of genre-categories in the dissertation: it argues that even though serious doubts have been raised concerning traditional conceptions of genre in recent decades, in a less ambitious and not prescriptive sense the tools offered by genre theory and genre history are still of use. Using terminology introduced by Jean-Marie Schaeffer I call this “synthetic genericity”, and examine (in chapter 2) the construction, by the texts themselves, of a tradition from which the set of norms vis-à-vis which the poetics

of the romantic familiar essay is best understood can be deduced. Following the theory of Alistair Fowler the essay is described here as part of a larger, historically unstable category of prose genres, members of which are seen as only *potentially* literary, only occasionally making it into the category of “literature” itself. With reference to the work of Northrop Fry, Hans Robert Jauss, and Frederic Jameson I discuss the genre of the familiar essay in the romantic period as based on an unwritten contract between a specific group of writers and their audience at a specific moment in history, which defines the rhetorical situation in which the essays address their readers. The last sub-chapter explains that it is this approach that excludes from discussion such eminent contemporaries of Hazlitt, Lamb, and Hunt as Thomas De Quincey and S.T. Coleridge.

## **2) Historical precedents and the specificities of the romantic familiar essay**

By the early nineteenth century – as witnessed by the important collected editions – a canon of the British essay seemed to take shape, and a tradition was perceptible, which provided a point of reference for the self-interpretation and self-positioning of the romantics. This chapter makes some of those norms explicit, which were shared by Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb, and which underlie their critical assessments of the four eighteenth-century essay writers – Joseph Addison, Richard Steel, Oliver Goldsmith, and Samuel Johnson – whom they saw as their most important forerunners. These assessments form the basis of my interpretation of the fundamental rhetorical situation that united the texts treated here into

a distinct literary genre, one that is based on a friendly, even intimate conversation between equals.

In the second half of the chapter I discuss the connections between the most influential twentieth-century philosophical definitions of the genre of the essay (most importantly those of Lukács and Adorno), and the romantic tradition thus defined.

## **3) The category of the common and the poetics of the essay in William Hazlitt**

This chapter is based on the interpretation of a key-word of Hazlitt’s. This is *common*, both in the sense of ‘shared by everyone’, and ‘ordinary’ or ‘everyday.’ The chapter maps Hazlitt’s pursuit of the common from his early philosophical publications, through the critical writings of the 1810s and the brilliant familiar essays of the early 1820s, to the late *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, as evidence of his fundamental need to base his work on the ideal of “the common.” The years seem to have brought disillusionment to Hazlitt, but in the case of that part of the oeuvre which is most pertinent to the present discussion this is exactly the ideal that shines through the lines. The familiar essay, as practiced by Hazlitt, builds on ordinary, familiar language, and the fictitious situation of a conversation respecting problems or experiences that are common to every member of the society.

#### 4) “This-worldly religion” and the importance of the essay in Leigh Hunt

The starting point of this chapter is a religious experience that goes back to Hunt’s childhood, and informs the whole of the oeuvre. In 1791 – during the French Revolution – Hunt’s family joined the congregation of a Universalist preacher and author, Elhanan Winchester. They thus became part of a dissenting community that associated the need for spiritual with that of political reform. According to Universalist teaching, with the Second Coming the creation as a whole will return to the creator, and thus, the complete historical process can be viewed as a slow, gradual progression through which the ultimate good unfolds itself. I emphasise that these convictions remained with Hunt all through his life because literature on the topic is still dominated by the view that the really significant part of Hunt’s work is restricted to the doubtlessly very brave early political writings (mostly of the 1810s), and everything that he produced after that is best described as slow decline. The chapter argues, however that the same fundamental ideas and beliefs inform the political writings as the less confrontative, but not at all apolitical writings. It attempts to show, moreover, that the convictions that derive from Universalist faith are voiced most perfectly in the familiar essays, the power of which to embrace the most humble, indeed the most destitute subjects is best explained by Hunt’s ultimately religious optimism.

#### 5) The poetics of limitation in Charles Lamb’s *Essays of Elia*

This chapter takes issue with one of the most deep-seated prejudices in Lamb-reception (and through that the reception of the romantic familiar essay in general), namely the idea that Lamb could somehow be seen as the “small” counterpart of the “great” romantics, and especially Coleridge, or, in other words, that the difference between these authors would be one of degree, not of kind. To contest this approach, I focus on the passages in which Lamb (with all due respect, of course) defines his art as fundamentally different from that of Coleridge or Wordsworth. This chapter describes the establishment of limits and the “inhabiting” of a limited word as an essential gesture of the poetics that Lamb sees as his own. In contrast to many of his contemporaries Lamb’s prose flourishes in well-known, familiar, social, shared urban places. Coleridge’s poetry, as well as his carrier in general, presents to Lamb an example of a glorious, but fundamentally dangerous visionary art. The glory of Coleridge is associated (partly for biographical reasons) in Lamb’s mind with the ever haunting idea of madness, and the essayist prefers, for his own purposes, sober prose over visionary poetry.

Lamb’s thinking about comedy well exemplifies the consciously cultivated “limitedness”, which is fundamental to his mature prose poetics. Lamb argues that the members of the audience of a good comic performance find themselves in a curious in-between position, where, on the one hand, the moral norms that they live their everyday lives by have to be suspended (and thus moral judgements are irrelevant), but, on the other hand, they are not

separated from their quotidian experiences to the extent that they could fully identify with any of the characters (as is usually the case in tragedy). The chapter argues that the readers of the *Essays of Elia* are in a similar position: the essays are closely connected to the everyday – and generations of diligent scholars have managed to identify the real-life “equivalent” of almost every single person, object, or place in his works – but the familiar world is seen from an unfamiliar perspective: Elia lives *between* “reality” and “fiction.” The last sub-chapter describes clowning and elegy as the two most important artistic means of creating this change in perspective.

## **6) Conclusion: The avoidance of the sublime in the English Romantic Essay**

The first chapter of the dissertation argues that Hunt, Hazlitt and Lamb form a unified group in the history of the essay as genre. The three central chapters discuss specific motifs in the work of the three essayists that can be seen as leading them towards the essay, and that provide an explanation for why they produced their best work as essayists. The last chapter treats the three authors as a group once again, but this time from the perspective of a problem that belongs to the history of aesthetics. The category of the sublime is central to most critical discussions of romanticism, but a fundamental theme that unites the three oeuvres that this dissertation has been about is exactly the avoidance of the experiences, stylistic registers, and rhetorical modes associated with the sublime. I argue that the wariness regarding both the natural and the rhetorical sublime

represents more than an accidental similarity in the personal psychology of the three authors: it is a primary poetical principle of a genre that, in the words of Hazlitt, “makes familiar with the world of men and women”, and does not go beyond that. If the system of values behind the aesthetics of the sublime can be characterised with the following keywords: excess, transgression, and domination, then the romantic familiar essay counters with: respecting the human boundaries, responsibility towards the common world, and equality between friends.