Romanticism and Time
Literary Temporalities

EDITED BY SOPHIE LANIEL-MUSITELLI AND CÉLINE SABIRON

This brilliantly conceived, exhilarating, and wide-ranging collection of essays is essential reading for all those interested in taking the long view of the historical, literary, and philosophical times of British Romanticism.

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Romanticism and Time is a remarkable affirmation of border-crossings and international exchanges in many ways. This major collection of essays represents the work of eminent scholars from France, Germany, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as they in turn represent the Romanticisms that emerged not only from the "four nations" of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland but also from Continental Europe and America. With their commitment to diversity, to change, and to exchange, and because of their awareness of the romanticism of periodization itself, the authors in this volume produce, as Wordsworth might say, a "timely utterance."

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This volume considers Romantic poetry as embedded in and reflecting on the march of time, regarding it not merely as a reaction to the course of events between the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, but also as a form of creative engagement with history in the making. Revising current thinking about periodization, these essays survey the Romantic canon's evolution over time and approach Romanticism as a phenomenon unfolding across national borders.
This essay considers how two Romantic writers, Charles Lamb and Washington Irving, explore the perception-altering powers of absorbed reading. Both men, with their famously antiquarian tastes, have long been portrayed as enemies of change, retreating from the present moment into the comforting familiarity of old times. Upon our closer examination of their writing, however, that received view breaks down—for Lamb and Irving often use texts within texts to recuperate a fuller range of temporal experience than what the advent of industrialisation in a post-revolutionary world seems to allow. In Lamb’s Last Essays of Elia and Irving’s Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., the image of an ideal reading practice—with all its capacity for surprise, improvisation, and leisurely enjoyment—enables us to conceptualise alternative experiences of modern life. Reading well, in other words, becomes a gateway into book-time, a reprieve (however temporary) from the inhumane workings of clock-time.

William Hazlitt concludes The Spirit of the Age (1825) with a chapter about two essayists who, in his estimation, defy that spirit: Charles Lamb and Washington Irving (or ‘Irvine’, as he calls the latter). Though Hazlitt sets himself the task of describing ‘the beauties and defects of each in treating of somewhat similar subjects’, it soon becomes clear that beauties and defects are unevenly portioned out between the two men.¹ He spends the central part of this chapter praising Lamb, who possesses ‘the very soul of an antiquarian, as this implies a reflecting humanity;

the film of the past hovers for ever before him’. Irving’s main attributes, meanwhile, are essentially a caricature of these: his aesthetic represents not antiquarianism, but a mere anachronism that deposits thick scales over his eyes instead of Lamb’s hovering film. Seen in this light, the original Knickerbocker becomes a rambling, Quixotic American tourist in England, recording only what his favourite outdated British sources, like *The Spectator*, have taught him to see.

Instead of tracing the changes that have taken place in society since Addison or Fielding wrote, he transcribes their account in a different hand-writing, and thus keeps us stationary, at least in our most attractive and praise-worthy qualities of simplicity, honesty, hospitality, modesty, and good-nature. This is a very flattering mode of turning fiction into history, or history into fiction; and we should scarcely know ourselves again in the softened and altered likeness, but that it bears the date of 1820, and issues from the press in Albemarle-street.

While Hazlitt’s value judgments may startle us with their sharpness, he sets the table for much critical reception of these writers over the last two hundred years. Crucially, he contends that while the differences between Lamb and Irving are significant, so are the similarities. Hazlitt depicts both men retiring to the comforts of history, whether distant or comparatively recent. If Lamb’s relationship with the past is more methodical and wider-ranging than Irving’s, both are nonetheless living throwbacks, antiques set apart from the crowd by their allegiance to past and passing things. In keeping with this observation, what *The Spirit of the Age* will not attribute to either Lamb or Irving is any coherent sense of the present or the future. Both men, by indulging their old-fashioned tastes, turn away from any sustained contemplation of the changing world around them. Hazlitt brings this point into tight focus with a few pithy phrases directed at Lamb’s work: ‘He evades the present, he mocks the future. His affections revert to, and settle on the past’. The American ‘Irvine’ does about the same thing, mostly because he cannot do more.

It is with this patronizing assessment of Irving and Lamb that my analysis begins. Situating itself in a post-revolutionary, rapidly industrializing world full of Thompsonian clock-time, this chapter

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2 Ibid., p. 411.
3 Ibid., pp. 421–22.
4 Ibid., p. 414.
explores some ways that both men, as figures in their own writing, self-consciously take up valuable time and space with their reading habits, as well as the spatio-temporal stakes of their doing so. In their different national contexts, both writers, repelled by the relentless pace of modern temporalities, strive to imagine environments where time respects the manifold quirks and variations of lived experience, whether at the scale of the individual or that of the modern state. To achieve this labour of imagination, both Lamb’s *Last Essays of Elia* and Irving’s ‘English Writers on America’, from *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, build their images of being-in-time around the highly sensitive chronotope of the book. In other words, taking inspiration from the concept of ‘heterochrony’, or the heterogeneity of modern time, propounded by Laura Bear and Georgiana Born, I submit that Irving and Lamb boldly use fictionalised acts of reading to expand the range—or at least to forestall the narrowing—of available temporal experience in the historical moment of their work.\(^5\)

**Charles Lamb: The Volume of the Mind**

It would be difficult to overstate how profoundly books and reading shape Lamb’s imagination. In a 1796 letter to Coleridge, he frames his recent experience in characteristic fashion: ‘My life has been somewhat diversified of late. The six weeks that finished last year and began this, your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a mad house at Hoxton. I am got somewhat rational now, and don’t bite any one. But mad I was; and many a vagary my imagination played with me, enough to make a volume if all told’.\(^6\) Notice how Lamb ratifies his return to sanity by bringing out a fictional volume. While at a glance this gesture seems to drive home how numerous the vagaries that plagued Lamb have been, in fact it does the opposite. An ingenious and understated shift occurs in the latter half of the final line: suddenly, what has heretofore sounded


like a horrible excess of traumatic incidents—and surely one is too many for most of us—becomes almost too few: ‘enough to make a volume if all told’ (my emphasis). Just as Lamb’s breezy understatement (‘I am got somewhat rational now, and don’t bite anyone. But...’) threatens to collapse under the strain of remembered hardship, he changes tack and presses that memory firmly between the pages of an imagined volume, in the process making those dark days appear rather mercifully brief. For Lamb, the ability to arrange otherwise unintelligible happenings in book form, even where that book is only imagined, is the truest sign of rationality itself, whereas madness finds all things alike in their illegibility. To such an imagination, tempered by the constant threat of insanity, there can be nothing frivolous about learning to read well.

Granted, Lamb’s most famous essays, written under the guise of ‘Elia’, are not this intense—nor, despite their conspiratorial air, this candid. Whether or not we too recognise him as ‘the most lovable figure in English literature’, lightness and gentle eccentricity remain the hallmarks of his style. These qualities are perhaps nowhere more quotably expressed than in the opening lines of ‘Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading’, where Elia explains what role literacy has played in his daily life and worldview.

At the hazard of losing some credit on this head, I must confess that I dedicate no inconsiderable portion of my time to other people’s thoughts. I dream away my life in others’ speculations. I love to lose myself in other men’s minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me.

This benign confession would appear to encourage Hazlitt’s view of Charles Lamb as the ultimate retiring antiquarian, as Lamb himself knows full well: the ‘hazard’ that he accepts at the outset is essentially that of drawing a reaction like what we have seen in _The Spirit of the Age_. Like the perfect antiquarian, Lamb accepts with magnanimity the risk of losing ‘credit’ in the estimation of nameless, absent critics—that is, to restate Hazlitt’s thesis, ‘he evades the present, he mocks the future’. Somewhat surprisingly, the upside of losing that credit proves to be

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8 Charles Lamb, _The Last Essays of Elia_ (London: Edward Moxon, 1833), p. 44.
more loss: of life, self, and ‘no inconsiderable portion’ of time. In fact, the lyrical elegance of these lines suggests that Elia, before our very eyes, might even be losing himself in reminiscences about losing himself. In its first few paragraphs, then, ‘Detached Thoughts’ promises to discover the antiquarian in his most familiar pose, as the ultimate lovable loser.

But does it? The centrifugal force of this opening belies how much later parts of the essay will treat reading as centripetal: a man reading draws people and things toward himself. Indeed, while the ideas that comprise Lamb’s text are certainly ‘detached’ from one another—self-contained little vignettes and reflections that Elia could rearrange without any loss of meaning—each of them represents reading as an exercise that forges attachment between things. On the topic of bookbinding, Elia declares that ‘[t]o be strong-backed and neat-bound is the desideratum of a volume’—but this is only the most literal and simplistic form of binding that emerges from his bookish pursuits.⁹

More interesting for my purpose is the binding together of place and time that, for Elia, marks every reading experience.

I do not remember a more whimsical surprise than having been once detected—by a familiar damsel—reclined at my ease upon the grass, on Primrose Hill (her Cythera), reading—Pamela. There was nothing in the book to make a man seriously ashamed at the exposure; but as she seated herself down by me, and seemed determined to read in company, I could have wished it had been—any other book. We read on very sociably for a few pages; and, not finding the author much to her taste, she got up, and—went away. Gentle casuist, I leave it to thee to conjecture, whether the blush (for there was one between us) was the property of the nymph or the swain in this dilemma. From me you shall never get the secret.¹⁰

The nameless woman’s arrival, her proximity to the reclining reader, the grass beneath them, the blush they share, even the shortness of their time together—these details of place and time are what define Elia’s ‘whimsical’ memory. The exercise of reading Pamela becomes inextricably linked in Lamb’s essay, and in Elia’s memory, to a delightful encounter one afternoon on Primrose Hill. As this passage makes clear, even through its rosy tint, getting lost in a good book does not mean losing all sense of one’s position in time and space; on the contrary, in

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⁹ Ibid., p. 46.
¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 52–53.
Lamb’s view right reading heightens one’s consciousness of physical and temporal setting. His attachment to world and time, far from slipping away, intensifies through exposure to a good book.

In Chapter 1 of his ‘Forms of Time and the Chronotope of the Novel’, Bakhtin discusses the power of spatial devices in literature to produce chance encounters among characters. The road, Bakhtin’s favourite novelistic chronotope of encounter, is a site where ‘the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity’, often through the motif of meeting.\(^\text{11}\) If we read the Primrose Hill episode through his formalist lens, what spatial marker structures the chance meeting between Elia and his enigmatic fellow reader? The answer is not Primrose Hill itself, but *Pamela*; after all, reading ‘sociably’ would not be possible without something to read. Whereas the essay’s prefatory confession speaks of time ‘lost’ in reading, this case in point shows us something more elegant: time translated into space. It is worth remarking that Elia measures the duration of this pleasant surprise in ‘pages’, not minutes. In this detail we observe Lamb’s novel keeping time more profoundly than any clock: it fuses itself to the span of several minutes and makes them plastic, like the pages; it enables time to possess meaning, to achieve human plenitude through the infusion of vivid thoughts and sensations. This is not empty and homogeneous clock-time, but vividly human book-time.

Another example shows book-time taking effect in a much less idyllic setting than Primrose Hill, and one more central to Lamb’s cosmopolitan aesthetic: the busy companies of London’s streets.

There is a class of street-readers, whom I can never contemplate without affection—the poor gentry, who, not having wherewithal to buy or hire a book, filch a little learning at the open stalls—the owner, with his hard eye, casting envious looks at them all the while, and thinking when they will have done. Venturing tenderly, page after page, expecting every moment when he shall interpose his interdict, and yet unable to deny themselves the gratification, they ‘snatch a fearful joy.’ Martin B----, in this way, by daily fragments, got through two volumes of Clarissa, when the stall-keeper damped his laudable ambition, by asking him (it was in his younger days) whether he meant to purchase the work.\(^\text{12}\)

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Whereas Bakhtin likely would have labelled the novel a ‘minor chronotope’ embedded within the much larger and more pervasive chronotope of the street, Lamb compels all our attention toward street-reading. Elia fuses the passing of ‘page after page’ to that of ‘every moment’ before the stall, turning this volume of *Clarissa* into a clock that not only registers, but also deeply inflects, the movement of time in this scene. Both observers, Elia and the bookstall owner, measure time by the turning of these pages: each flip signals that a little more time has passed, heightening the former’s amusement and the latter’s exasperation. Rather unexpectedly, *Clarissa* grants this seemingly hapless reader a modicum of power over the people around him, whose time-sense throughout the episode depends upon the chronotope (temporarily) in his hands.

But if the novel (or any other text) in Lamb’s essay stands revealed as a chronotope, its chronotopicity flows in ways that ‘Forms of Time’ has not entirely equipped us to recognise. In a sense, Bakhtin’s roads mostly run one way, importing chance, contrast, and even chaos into the universe of the text and the life of its hero.

The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road (“the high road”), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most varied fates may collide and interweave with one another.\(^{13}\)

Just one page later, Bakhtin doubles down by calling the road ‘especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance’\(^{14}\). We have seen a book bring about chance encounters in ‘Detached Thoughts’ (the Primrose Hill episode), as well as the mixing of different social and economic classes (the street-reading anecdote); but while chance plays a part in Elia’s experience as a reader, it is far from the principal ingredient. Lamb will not give himself over to ‘randomness’ in this extreme way, and therefore the promise of the Elian book-as-chronotope is rather different from anything that Bakhtin imagines. If

\(^{13}\) Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time’, p. 243.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 244.
we seldom have much say in what roads we must travel and whom we will encounter along the way, there is a simpler, more straightforward agency available to us in the choice of what to read, when to read it, and, perhaps, with whom. Elia unambiguously emphasises the value of that agency: ‘Much depends upon when and where you read a book. In the five or six impatient minutes, before the dinner is quite ready, who would think of taking up the Fairy Queen for a stop-gap, or a volume of Bishop Andrewes’ sermons?’\(^\text{15}\) The correct answer, obviously, is no one, and the point is that impatient minutes before dinner demand speedy reading material—a proper ‘stop-gap’. Put another way, the problem that Elia sets before his audience is that of choosing what ‘volume’ of textual matter may attach itself comfortably to a certain quantity of time. This is chronotopicity raised from an inevitable narrative fact to an art form, and one that characters within the frame of Lamb’s essays may practise with complete consciousness of so doing. Suddenly the habit of reading well holds the prospect of mastering space-time itself, with the result that both space and time become not only more pleasant, but more legible as well.

The question of how reading signifies in the Romantic imagination is, of course, not a new one, nor does it show signs of subsiding from view. In a recent \textit{PMLA} article, Jonathan Sachs and Andrew Piper remind us that Wordsworth frames reading—specifically the reading of his poetry—as a corrective against the vicious cycle of landmark historical events and their speedy reportage. An example from lyric poetry is found in Wordsworth’s ‘Resolution and Independence’, where the speaker drops into a state of dreamy perceptiveness that can only be expressed with recourse to literary language.

\begin{verbatim}
At length, himself unsettling, he the Pond
Stirred with his Staff, and fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conn’d
As if he had been reading in a book.\(^\text{16}\)
\end{verbatim}

\(^{15}\) Lamb, \textit{Last Essays}, p. 50.
Here, as in *Last Essays*, the author builds a particular relationship to space-time around the image of reading a book. For Wordsworth, ‘the slow time of reading becomes a kind of hortatory slowness, one that responds to a perceived excess of speed by engaging and developing formal problems related to the representation of slowness’. While acknowledging this effect of his poetry, Sachs and Piper challenge the received view that Wordsworth and other Romantics reject fast time altogether, exiling themselves to a bee-loud glade. The article, having noted these writers’ reliance on advanced publishing methods alongside their fascination with ruins and absorbed contemplation, poses a forceful question: ‘What if the oscillation between the craving for rapid communication and the counterforce of slow reading attuned to engagement without eventfulness were reflective of a more holistic sense of time, one that shadows forth the advance of the nineteenth century?’ Perhaps even more conspicuously than Wordsworth’s meditations on nature, Lamb’s book-time, which arises in at least as many forms as there are places to read and varieties of material, accomplishes this elusive shadowing forth. According to his ‘holistic sense of time’, all forms of reading, ably practised by someone who can tell them apart, are necessary to the life of a fully developed modern subject. In short, I read Lamb’s spectacles of reading as another kind of exercise in what Saree Makdisi has called not anti-modernity, but *alter*-modernity, a mode of experience ‘where time itself slips, slides, and sticks’. Clock-time is not, perhaps should not be, vanquished—the bookstall owner will have his *Clarissa* back sooner or later; but until then book-time inscribes in modern spaces the opportunity for more heterogeneous experience than the conventional clock would provide.

With all his celebrated sweetness, then, does Lamb merely detach himself from the social and political realities of English life in the 1830s? Are his books a winding escape route that leads away from pressing responsibilities, as Hazlitt, with his obvious admiration of Lamb’s style,
seems nevertheless to imply? I think not. Far from rejecting the present or future, Lamb’s bookish lifestyle is concerned with recovering them.

To appreciate the stakes of proper literacy for Lamb, we might contrast ‘Detached Thoughts’ with the far less harmonious image of texts in time that Lamb develops throughout ‘Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago’, an essay that first appears in an 1831 issue of the Englishman’s Magazine, and which is subsequently published in Last Essays of Elia (1833). Lamb spends this work reflecting on his youthful experience as a writer for two very different periodicals, the Morning Post and, later, the Albion. The first thing to emerge from these reflections is an unlikely origin story for Hazlitt’s detached antiquarian. The Post hires Lamb to write joke columns about the whims of contemporary fashion, like pink-coloured hose. It seems that for a while every newspaper employed someone to do this kind of writing, the conventions of which were well established when Lamb came along: ‘The chat of the day, scandal, but, above all, dress, furnished the material. The length of no paragraph was to exceed seven lines. Shorter they might be, but they must be poignant’.

Besides showing us the education of a younger and less self-assured Charles Lamb, this essay provides a cross-section of the ‘magazine revolution’ in England that extends from 1800 to around 1830. The revolution is marked by feverish anxieties concerning high and low culture, emergent publishing practices, and the nature of authorship. Enemies of the periodical press find it riddled with so-called Cockneyism, an umbrella term that encompasses every kind of slippage from a rigidly defined ‘elite’ literacy. More than a disparaging reference to writers’ birthplace or background, ‘Cockney’ in this context strikes at magazines’ dangerously metropolitan ethos. ‘The fear behind the disputation’, Simon Hull explains, ‘was that the new magazines, even the more literary ones, mindlessly mirrored the transience and ephemerality of the city that spawned them, by reproducing the city’s degrading predilection for spectacle and fashion at the cost of supposedly timeless products of fine art and canonical literature’.

Lamb is a fringe Cockney writer whose idiosyncratic outlook on the movement becomes clear in his ‘Newspapers’ essay. Taking his

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20 Lamb, Last Essays, p. 155.
reader inside this storm of anxiety, he shows us quite another kind of degradation: that of the magazine writer himself. He describes in striking detail the pressure that comes with feeding a hungry periodical press. As a joke writer for the *Morning Post*, young Elia is expected to ‘furnish a daily quantum of witty paragraphs’, an arrangement that his older self cannot deprecate extravagantly enough.

No fractious operants ever turned out for half the tyranny, which this necessity exercised upon us. Half a dozen jests in a day (bating Sundays too), why, it seems nothing! We make twice the number every day in our lives as a matter of course, and claim no Sabbatical exemptions. But then they come into our head. But when the head has to go out to them—when the mountain must go to Mahomet—Reader, try it for once, only for one short twelvemonth.\(^\text{22}\)

I am particularly interested in the figure that writing cuts in this periodical piece. For Lamb, the difference between telling jokes ‘as a matter of course’ and writing them day after day could not be more significant: the first is a natural process that allows the mind to spring forward or recline as it chooses, while the second is a gamut of hard deadlines, unbearably equidistant from each other. According to the elder Elia, jokes simply come into our head; when or why they do so is not, and need not be, specified. Contrasting this serendipitous arrangement with the magazine writer’s lot, Lamb twice emphasises that oppressiveness of obligation: ‘the head has to go out to them […] the mountain must go to Mahomet’ (my emphasis). That latter image drives home how totally the natural order of things is reversed during his breathless *Morning Post* days.

Constantly under attack from his own writing schedule, the young Elia has no choice but to cram his daily assignments into so-called ‘No Man’s Time’, the short period during which one waits for breakfast—and a segment of day that his ‘Detached Thoughts’ essay would consecrate to the sleepy enjoyment of some light reading, if not to actual sleep. (He also takes to drinking heavily in the evening.) All the hours of the day, even those traditionally too nebulous to be claimed by any pursuit, become stuffed with some form of activity. The periodical press forces Elia to endure the worst kind of monotony: life moves at the same

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\(^{22}\) Lamb, *Last Essays*, p. 159.
blistering speed from morning until night. It is composed exclusively of those ‘impatient minutes’ that he described in ‘Detached Thoughts’—which leave no room to lose oneself in anything. The onerous ‘daily quantum’ of words, an obligation rooted in time as well as language, changes Elia’s relationship to both: instead of combining harmoniously in rich moments of literate experience, they stifle one another and the artist’s creative powers. In other words, the problem with writing for magazines is a problem of excessive homogenization—the magazine industry waxing industrial with its ‘manufactory of jokes’ (90). Carlyle, in ‘Signs of the Times’, might have treated this routine as one further example of dynamical genius giving way to mechanical process, with the end result that ‘nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods’.23 The Prelude offers a similarly stinging rebuke of ‘Sages, who in their prescience would control/All accidents, and to the very road/Which they have fashion’d would confine us down’.24 In the ‘Newspapers’ essay, daily deadlines and word counts have overrun the young writer’s imagination, leaving no space for impractical, unruly things like improvisation and whim. The birth of the magazine writer, it seems, must be ransomed with the death of the reader.

Significantly, if magazines have been the instrument of Elia’s imaginative suffocation in the past, he does not permanently fall out with them on that account. At the start of his ‘Newspapers’ essay, Elia freely grants that articles written in his youth—‘the first callow flights in authorship’—however painful they were to produce, make pleasurable reading years later.25 For Lamb’s persona, every kind of reading material is always on the table. As we have seen, Lamb’s fictionalised self holds that the art of reading well consists of choosing exactly the right text for the right time of day, month, and year. When such a pairing is successful—when a text fits perfectly into its slot—the result is a heightening of perception wherein time amplifies one’s relationship to place and time instead of negating it. More generally, Lamb assures us several times in this collection that periodicals, like other varieties of texts, have their

24 Gill, Wordsworth, p. 444.
25 Lamb, Last Essays, p. 155.
perfect moments in the varied life of a good reader. How lovingly he describes a fortunate encounter with a magazine: ‘Coming in to an inn at night—having ordered your supper—what can be more delightful than to find lying in the window-seat, left there time out of mind by the carelessness of some former guest—two or three numbers of the old Town and Country Magazine, with its amusing tête-à-tête pictures—’. This, too, is book-time: not an impersonal succession of equally spaced clicks, but a temporality intimately attuned to the unpredictable movements of human subjectivity. Looking around Lamb’s corpus, we find a rapturous rhetorical question for almost every kind of reading experience, even the most unlikely. ‘In secular occasions, what so pleasant as to be reading a book through a long winter evening, with a friend sitting by—say, a wife—he, or she, too, (if that be probable), reading another, without interruption, or oral communication?’ The multiplication of details here tends toward the absurd, an effect that Lamb acknowledges with unrepentant good cheer (‘if that be probable’). His point, in these and many similar passages, is how brilliantly the right text fits into the right stretch of time, and vice versa.

All of this is not to say that Charles Lamb preferred reading over writing. The more substantive insight of ‘Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago’, when considered alongside ‘Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading’, is that reading presents at least as much promise for meaningful engagement with the world outside one’s study as does writing, and perhaps much more. It is Elia the magazine writer, not Elia the sociably reading antiquarian, who becomes detached from everything around him, and from his own thoughts. Lines generated mechanically to meet deadlines are themselves dead, whereas lines read in the natural course of life and time deepen the impressions left by that course within the mind of the reader.

American Antiquarian

What about Washington Irving? Is he nothing more than a would-be antiquarian, as The Spirit of the Age indicates? His Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1819–20) ridicules overweening antiquarianism itself with spectacle that might have stunned even Hazlitt. In particular, an entry titled ‘The Art of Book-Making’, set mostly in a reading room of
the British Museum, unleashes the wrath of Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, and other reanimated literary giants upon a present generation of book manufacturers who will not stop plundering the past.

In the height of this literary masquerade, a cry suddenly resounded from every side, of “Thieves! thieves!” I looked, and lo! the portraits about the walls became animated! The old authors thrust out, first a head, then a shoulder, from the canvas, looked down curiously for an instant upon the motley throng, and then descended, with fury in their eyes, to claim their rifled property. The scene of scampering and hubbub that ensued baffles all description. The unhappy culprits endeavored in vain to escape with their plunder. On one side might be seen half a dozen old monks, stripping a modern professor; on another, there was sad devastation carried into the ranks of modern dramatic writers. Beaumont and Fletcher, side by side, raged round the field like Castor and Pollux, and sturdy Ben Jonson enacted more wonders than when a volunteer with the army in Flanders. As to the dapper little compiler of farragos mentioned some time since, he had arrayed himself in as many patches and colors as harlequin, and there was as fierce a contention of claimants about him, as about the dead body of Patroclus.26

This sketch uses rampaging Renaissance dramatists and medieval monks to portray the vicelike grip in which nineteenth-century England is held by its own illustrious past. In answer to the stereotype that Americans, with their lack of castles and long history, are incapable of producing art without borrowing from the British, Irving shows us the English borrowing maniacally from themselves. The ‘moral’ here is that authors of every national affiliation need not, and should not, become mere reproductions of their ancestors.

Still, there is everything to be gained in Irving’s world by learning to read properly. Keeping Lamb’s literacy and the book-as-chronotope in view, I want to explore a side of Irving different from the meandering tourist that becomes his favourite persona. Another of the less celebrated entries in his Sketch-Book is a brief, polemical essay called ‘English Writers on America’, in which books and reading, with all their perception-altering powers, are put to a practical use. Built on the same logic of discriminating literacy that we find everywhere in Lamb’s writing, Irving’s essay strives toward an intervention on the globally conscious

landscape of American culture. What Lamb is satisfied to suggest about the recuperative power of skilful reading, Irving declares boldly and with a patriotic animus.

 Appropriately nestled between ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and the idyllic ‘Rural Life in England’, ‘English Writers on America’ pivots continually between the two nations. It is the Sketch-Book’s most rigorous and insightful attempt at capturing the transatlantic spirit of the age. In some ways, this offering reads like an outlier, even among the diverse entries in Irving’s book. The mask of Geoffrey Crayon, if it is not dropped altogether, seems incidental here as Irving speaks directly and with an un-Crayonesque strain of urgency to his countrymen right from the essay’s first line: ‘It is with feelings of deep regret that I observe the literary animosity daily growing up between England and America’. In this way, Irving locates himself at a crossroads in American history. He positions himself as the mediator standing between a stubborn father and an unruly child. ‘The national character’, he continues, ‘is yet in a state of fermentation’.27 Spurred by a strong desire for autonomy, and disgusted by their country’s recent state of intellectual ‘vassalage’ in cultural matters, many American writers and readers have turned away from the lessons that England’s past can impart. I say ‘many’, but the essay implies ‘nearly all’. Indeed, Irving’s constant denomination of Americans as ‘we’ belies how much this essay places him against the national zeitgeist—to all appearances, an old-fashioned figure, drifting apart from the main current of American thought.

 And yet he soon turns the tables, implying that Americans’ single-minded focus on the future keeps them in the past. Without pronouncing the actual words, Irving casts current Anglo-American cultural relations as so much fallout of the War of 1812, and even of the Revolutionary War. A growing nation, unprepared for its newfound importance on the world stage, has rushed toward complete autonomy rather than seek wisdom and guidance in past models. ‘We are a young people’, says the author to his countrymen, the English always implicitly within earshot, ‘necessarily an imitative one, and must take our examples and models, in a great degree, from the existing nations of Europe’.28 As he further

27 Ibid., p. 51.
28 Ibid., p. 57.
Romanticism and Time explains, however, that imitation has its limits, beyond which only cultural servitude awaits.

Let it be the pride of our writers, therefore, discarding all feelings of irritation, and disdaining to retaliate the illiberality of British authors, to speak of the English nation without prejudice, and with determined candor. While they rebuke the indiscriminating bigotry with which some of our countrymen admire and imitate every thing English, merely because it is English, let them frankly point out what is really worthy of approbation. We may thus place England before us as a perpetual volume of reference, wherein are recorded sound deductions from ages of experience; and while we avoid the errors and absurdities which may have crept into the page, we may draw thence golden maxims of practical wisdom, wherewith to strengthen and to embellish our national character.  

Here, in the same breath, Irving rejects the abject imitation of British influence and the indiscriminate dismissal of all British culture. Forging a proper relationship with the mother country will take greater discernment and care than either facile, knee-jerk reaction would reflect. First and foremost, however, it will take time. More offensive to Irving than either of these extremes is the breakneck pace at which American culture has hurtled between them. Wholesale dismissal of English influence is the reckless work of a moment, as is total approbation of that influence in its every detail. In what feels like a typically American manoeuvre, Irving steers us toward the middle ground. Some English attributes are ‘attractive and praise-worthy’, in Hazlitt’s phrase, others less so. Americans must give themselves time to figure out the difference.  

This is finally the principal work of Irving’s essay: to slow time down, at least intermittently. The chronotopic device of this deceleration comes in the last line, where Irving likens English history to a ‘perpetual volume of reference’. One can hardly overstate the importance of ‘perpetual’ for that phrase, and indeed for the argument of Irving’s essay. History is not a magazine that one peruses idly before dinner, but a vast encyclopaedia to be consulted time and again in times of need. Indeed, the ‘golden maxims’ contained in this volume of reference seem almost beside the point; more significant is the process of searching them out, the structure of gradual development, appropriately guided by exterior influences,

29 Ibid.
that careful and repeated consultation of England’s history will impress on young nation in a hurry. Put another way: Americans must recognise how valuable a reference work lies within their grasp, and then take all the time necessary to read it well.

Even as ‘English Writers on America’ confirms his deep regard for history, Irving’s bookish prescription also reveals his stake in the future. In almost Bergsonian fashion, Irving asserts that reading the past is work for the present and the future. For America to continue thriving, its people must now cultivate in themselves a more mindful relationship to history, the figure of which in this essay is the reference volume. Repetitive consultations of the national text differ from more impersonal and oppressive varieties of routine, like Lamb’s daily quantum of words, because they allow subjectivity to structure chronological time and not the other way around. If American time has accelerated to an excessive rate, the solution lies in treating the world like a book and reading it with Elian levels of discrimination and feeling.

Like Lamb, then, Irving has felt the excessive speed at which events, both great and small, seem to follow upon one another at the present time. If the style of this straight-talking essay seems unusual coming from this author, the worldview undergirding its message is quite familiar. Irving always treats haste as a mistake, whether grave or ridiculous, and his ‘English Writers on America’ urges patience and bemoans decisions made recklessly by a nation with time to spare. Far be it from Geoffrey Crayon to question the likelihood of unabated progress well into America’s future. He does, however, predicate that American success on the antiquarian capabilities of her people—for how can we treat English culture as a volume of reference without first learning how to read an actual volume of reference? In a surprise turn of events, the bookworm shall inherit the earth.

Contrary to Hazlitt’s claim that Lamb and Irving invariably settle on the past, I would reclaim both men as prophets of a possible future more humane than what came about in England and America through the nineteenth century. If learning to read, according to these essayists, cannot save the world, at least it can make the world habitable from one hour, one day, to the next. An age of monotonous progress and homogeneous time needs literature to restore meaningful difference to the hours that compose an individual human life. As Romantics facing
the dawn of full-scale industrialization, both men wish to experience everyday time on a level that is profoundly sensitive to the faltering, inconsistent, endlessly variable movements of human existence.

**Works Cited**


