Introduction

THE COCKNEY MOMENT

The Cockney Moment begins in January 1813 with the sentencing of the poet and radical journalist Leigh Hunt to two years in prison for libelling the Prince Regent. Politically, Hunt's imprisonment in the Horsemonger Lane Gaol in Southwark, South London was part of that long struggle for constitutional reform that dominated British politics in the early 1800s. But there was a cultural aspect to it as well, which had to do with the very flamboyant way in which this particular martyr for liberty strove to reconcile himself to his condition. Given two rooms of the prison infirmary by special dispensation of the jailer, the controversial editor of *The Examiner* set to work in unprecedented fashion:

> I papered the walls with a trellis of roses; I had the ceiling coloured with clouds and sky; the barred windows I screened with Venetian blinds; and when my book-cases were set up with their busts, and flowers and a pianoforte made their appearance, perhaps there was not a handsomer room on that side the water. I took a pleasure, when a stranger knocked at the door, to see him come in and stare about him. The surprise on issuing from the Borough, and passing through the avenues of a jail, was dramatic. Charles Lamb declared there was no other such room, except in a fairy tale.[1]

Horsemonger Lane, Surrey's County Gaol, was a hanging prison, and one that lumped men and women, rich and poor, criminals and debtors together. Given the harshness of the sentence, and the fact that, according to its jailer, the Lane was 'not fit for a gentleman', it is impossible not to see something heroic in Hunt's suburban makeover, as he strove to put art and nature in the service of liberal optimism.[2] With characteristic spirit, he set to work refashioning his surroundings, brightening the shades of his prison-house in a way that had clear parallels with his notion of social reform as a natural process:

> But I possessed another surprise; which was a garden. There was a little yard outside the room, railed off from another belonging to the neighbouring ward.

This yard I shut in with green palings, adorned it with a trellis, bordered it with a thick bed of earth from a nursery, and even contrived to have a grass-plot. The earth I filled with flowers and young trees. There was an apple tree from which we managed to get a pudding the second year. As to my flowers, they were allowed to be perfect. Thomas Moore, who came to see me with Lord Byron, told me he had seen no such heart's-ease … Here I wrote and read in fine weather, sometimes under an awning. In autumn, my trellises were hung with scarlet runners, which added to the flowery investment. I used to shut my eyes in my arm-chair, and affect to think myself hundreds of miles off. (1, p. 293)

One feature of the little bower Hunt built for himself was the conscious collapsing of conventional distinctions between city and country, interior and exterior, English and Italian. Another equally deliberate element was the elaborate screening of his prison surroundings. By continuing to edit *The Examiner* from prison Hunt showed that he had not been cowed by government repression; but by transforming a place of punishment into a dream-space he had gone one step further, papering over the bare walls of political opposition with an aspirational poetic vision.

Hunt's quarters must have had a striking effect upon his visitors, which included leading liberals such as Henry Brougham and Jeremy Bentham, and fellow writers such as Lamb, Byron, Tom Moore, the historical painter Benjamin Robert Haydon and an important new friend, the radical journalist William Hazlitt. But however inspirational his rooms must have been to some, they must also have seemed a little incongruous, and even disconcerting, to others, openly flaunting, as they did, the complete lack of fit between the imaginative 'nest' Mr Examiner Hunt had built for himself and the objective reality of his condition. Lamb's comment, that he had seen 'no other such, except in a fairy tale', was clearly meant as a compliment, but to those of a more sober disposition it must have seemed that Leigh Hunt had simply been too much of a milksop to live in a prison *as a* prison.[3]

This was by no means Hunt's first foray into imaginative nest-feathering; only the previous year he had written a long essay entitled 'A Day by the Fire' for his short-lived periodical *The Reflector* (1811–12). Coterminous with the Prince Regent libel, this piece has a great claim to inaugurate the Romantic familiar essay as a genre, pre-dating, as it does, most of Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey.[4] The essay begins in mock-heroic manner with the narrator extolling the pleasures of the domestic fireside, berating the cat for his lack of 'sociality' and trying to convince himself he did the right thing in swapping his tea-kettle for a tea-urn: 'I say to myself every now and then during the tea', Hunt writes, ' "A pretty look with it – that

urn" or "It's wonderful what a taste the Greeks had".'[5] He then goes on to paint a vivid picture of a cosy fire on a winter's day, prefiguring, by some ten years, the vivid fireside tableau that prefaced De Quincey's 'Pleasures of Opium'.[6]

As the essay develops, the epicurean narrator's thoughts meander, modulate and intertwine, drawing heavily on the rich associations that surround the domestic fireside, while also, like Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), transforming it into an image of the mind in a state of poetic association. The argument is made that English liberty, like English comfort, is something that has had to be cultivated against the hard season. A strong link is asserted between 'our blazing fire' and 'our freedom of speech', the former being at once the spiritual symbol and practical breeding-ground of the latter. So too, the narrator goes on to suggest, the cold, wet climate of Britain has proved an unfailing inspiration to its poets, with their imaginative flights having had to be all the more resourceful because of it. Quoting Cowper, Dryden and Milton, Hunt then embarks upon a little history of hearthside conviviality, making repeated reference to the sheer universality of the experience: 'It is thus [with one's feet on the fender] that the greatest and wisest of mankind have sat and meditated; a homely truism perhaps, but such a one as we are apt enough to forget' (II, p. 410). The moon that we see out of our window, he reminds us, is the same moon that enchanted Homer and Virgil; our fire is the same fire that inspired Milton and Horace. The aim here is to turn one of the commonest and most ubiquitous of household spots into a little link with past greatness, with the daring suggestion being that merely to sit by one's fire, whether one is aware of it or not, is to take part in a rich cultural history. Gradually, as teatime approaches, and the essayist is briefly left alone with his thoughts, the hearth is turned into a symbol for the deepest yearnings of the private imagination. But he is then called back to himself, and to social reality, as his wife and children gather for tea: 'Alas, that flights so lofty should ever be connected with earth by threads as slender as they are long, and that the least twitch of the most common-place hand should be able to snatch down the viewless wanderer to existing comforts!' (II, 412). Here as elsewhere, Hunt seems to have had a gift for turning even the most apparently impertinent and anodyne of subjects to account. Everyone drinks tea, he says, but 'if there is any one station in which it is enjoyed to most advantage, it is that of mediocrity, – that in which all comfort is reckoned to be best appreciated, because while there is taste to enjoy, there is necessity to earn the enjoyment' (II, p. 414). In the final section of the essay the narrator reflects on the moment when all the meals of the day are over

and the last visitor has gone home. 'Then, for imagination's sake, not for superstition's', he adds, 'are recalled the stories of the Secret World and the midnight pranks of Fairyism … idle fancies these, and incomprehensible to minds clogged with everyday earthliness, – but not useless, either as an exercise in invention, or even as adding consciousness to the range and destiny of the soul' (II, p. 418).

'A Day by the Fire' is a seminal Hunt text, both in tone and in subject matter. Almost of all his key traits as a writer are present in it. Most notably, the way that it relates many of the most apparently inconsequential details of common, domestic life to larger questions of literary history, politics and culture is highly characteristic. It is a rhetorically inclusive essay, but it does make a point of favouring those readers of a 'mediocre' station, for whom the simple pleasures of the fireside might be deemed especially valuable. So too it insists on the value of fancy – what we might think of as the idle or recreational imagination – as a kind of healthful exercise, an important stopgap between social aspiration and fulfilment. Rather subtly, Hunt manages to serve up patient reformist optimism in the guise of domestic complacency, supplying us with a kind of key, if one were needed, for interpreting his subsequent aesthetic experiments in the infirmary of the Surrey County Gaol.

THE BARD OF HORSEMONGER LANE

It must have been clear to Hunt's conservative critics relatively early in 1813 that his opposition to imprisonment had taken on an aesthetic as well as a political dimension, but it wasn't until the autumn of that year that the battle was fully joined. On 29 August Hunt had taken his imaginative yearning to a new level, publishing a 'Sonnet to Hampstead' under the signature 'L.H.' sign in *The Examiner*:

> Sweet upland! to whose walks with fond repair,
> Out of thy western slope, I took my rise,
> Day after day, and on these feverish eyes
> Met the moist fingers of the bathing air,
> If health unearn'd of thee I may not share;
> Keep it, I pray thee, where my memory lies,
> In thy green lanes, brown dells, and breezy skies,
> Till I return, and find thee doubly fair.
> Wait then my coming on that lightsome land,
> Health and the joy that out of nature springs,
> And freedom's air-blown locks:– but stay with me,
> Friendship, frank entering with the cordial hand,

> And Honour and the Muse with growing wings;
> And Love Domestic smiling equably.[7]

Only one month after the appearance of this sonnet, there appeared a long article in *The Satirist* lampooning Hunt as 'The Bard of Horsemonger Lane'.[8] This piece was, in effect, a line-by-line critique of Hunt's poem, and it was prefaced by the ironic announcement that, it being natural for poets to 'love to confer immortality on those places which have been honoured with their presence', the *Satirist*'s readers would be 'delighted to find' that 'the Muse of Mr Examiner Hunt has been called from the depths of Horsemonger Lane jail, to save Hampstead from oblivion – Yes, Mr Editor, this mighty task has been happily performed by Mr Leigh Hunt; and cockney apprehensions on this head are now set at rest for ever by the following delicious *morçeau*'. The *Satirist* then proceeded to play merry havoc with Hunt's loose-limbed versification, pretending not to understand 'took my rise' or 'fond repair', and worrying at great length over the meaning of such phrases as 'if health unearn'd of thee I may not share' and 'keep it … where my memory lies'. It also made fun of (what it considered to be) the flat stupidity of Hunt's imagery ('green lanes, brown dells, and breezy skies') before concluding with some sly insinuations about the upstart arrogance of the whole.

Ostensibly *The Satirist's* reference to 'cockneyism' could not have been more casual, but in fact the entire article drew heavily on a long tradition of Cockney satire. The Cockney had been a figure of fun in English culture for well over four hundred years. In Chaucer's time the word had been a synonym for a stupid milksop or cissy, and by Shakespeare's it had developed strong links with town-dwellers, especially Londoners.[9] The etymology of the term was always a matter of debate, not least in the early nineteenth century, with some commentators considering it to derive from *Cocagne*, a mythical land of peace and plenty, some from *coken-ey*, a misshapen or 'cock's' egg, and some from the old French word *coqueline*, an effeminate or pampered child.[10] But even though nobody was sure of its provenance, everyone knew what it meant: a Cockney was a living paradox, a metropolitan provincial, the stunted offspring of a big city. In the literature of the early modern period the Cockney was invariably a comic type. In his *Anecdotes of the English Language* (1803), the antiquarian Samuel Pegge had located a typical example of this kind of humour in the second act of *King Lear* (1603):

> LEAR O me! my heart, my rising heart! but, down!
> FOOL Cry to it nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i'th' paste alive; she knapp'd 'em o'th'coxcombs with a stick, and cried, 'Down,

> wantons, down!' 'Twas her brother that, in pure kindness to his horses, buttered his hay. (II. iv. 119–23)

Here, as elsewhere in early modern literature, the Cockney is characteristically pert but clueless, especially when it comes to practical or 'country' matters. There was something very traditional and reassuring about this stereotype, and this in spite or perhaps even because of the fact that it was often the Cockney's very modernity that was the object of satire. Cockneys, it was suggested, were curious hothouse flowers, early casualties, as it were, of the modern division of labour. Puffed up by the important role they see themselves as playing in a highly specialized urban environment, they come a cropper as soon as they stray beyond the narrow confines of their place and profession. 'Of all the fools I e'er knew', opined the *New London Magazine* in 1788, 'Cockneys, I'm sure, the world out-do.'[11] Typically, both on the stage and on the page, they are completely lacking in any awareness of the way in which the city has misshapen them, hence their characteristic combination of ignorance and self-conceit. 'There is no popular subject of satire, on which the modern common-places of wit and ridicule have been exhausted with more success', wrote the *London Magazine* in 1761, 'than on that of a mere cockney affecting the pleasures of the country.'[12]

'The Bard of Horsemonger Lane' is very much part of this tradition, for the overarching joke about Leigh Hunt in this piece is not just that he is a Cockney jailbird dreaming of the countryside, but that the only countryside he can conjure up for himself is the already suburban and semi-domesticated landscape of Hampstead. There is something astonishingly blinkered and self-deceiving about this, or so the *Satirist* suggests, but what really rounds off Hunt's Cockney character, in its eyes, are his extraordinary delusions of grandeur:

> '*Freedom's air-blown locks*' is what every poet must feel, who has had the opportunities afforded to Mr. Hunt of contemplating *locks* of a different description. His kind invitation to *Honour, Friendship, the Muse with growing wings* and *Love domestic smiling equably*, to stay with him, is not less beautiful, and will doubtless be eagerly accepted by those gentry. *The Muse* in particular will feel overwhelmed with gratitude for the honour, and perhaps want words to express it.[13]

Unobtrusive though it might seem on first reading, the idea of Leigh Hunt as a Cockney is in fact the controlling idea of 'The Bard of Horsemonger Lane'; not only that, it is an idea pursued with some persistence and rigour, a little reminder, if reminder were needed, of the political animus that Hunt unfailingly provoked.

The irony is that the cue for this use of Cockneyism as a term of contemporary satire may have come from *The Examiner* itself. Early in 1813, in the first few months of Hunt's incarceration, the task of writing the paper's theatrical reviews had been taken up by Thomas Barnes, the future editor of *The Times* and a former schoolfellow of Hunt's at Christ's Hospital. On 14 March 1813 a review had been published in the 'Theatrical Examiner', probably by Barnes, in which significant praise had been given to James Kenney's new farce, *Love, Law and Physic*, which had recently opened at Covent Garden. The highlight of the piece was John Liston's performance as Lubin Log, an ignorant Cockney shopman from Southwark. This character was by no means the first comic Cockney on the London stage; and on paper at least he was not markedly different from his predecessors. But to Barnes there was clearly something new about Liston's performance – something genuinely cutting and contemporary. 'In the present little piece', he says,

> there is an able delineation of a *Cockney*, being, as far as we recollect, the first, and certainly the best description of that facetious animal on the stage. It is a most amusing exhibition: the invulnerable self-complacency, the prim conceit arising not more from the contemplation of his own qualities, than from the circumstance of his being a citizen of no mean city, the unaccommodating selfishness, and the illiterate vulgarity of manner and of idiom which distinguish the native London shopman, render him one of the fittest subjects in the whole range of character, for the lash of comic satire. Mr Kenney's picture is to the life; the phraseology at once dull and vivacious, while its pert *slang* and ungrammatical idiomacy is rendered with an accuracy which makes one half-suspect that the author has more than a geographical knowledge of Tooley-street. The diction of a Cockney is fairer game for ridicule than that of a rustic or provincialist. The most uncouth dialects have the authority of antiquity on their side, and are indeed but remnants of separate languages now obsolete: but the dialect of a cockney is mere barbarous inaccuracy, and false pronunciation.[14]

Barnes was not alone in seeing something special in Lubin Log, for he went on to become one of the characters that really made Liston's name.[15] With only the playtext to hand, and without the benefit of the original performance, it is not at all easy to tell why Log was so popular, but I think that the *Examiner* review does furnish up a few interesting suggestions. Clearly, one of Kenney and Liston's achievements was to make Barnes think not of a theatrical but of a real social type. There seems to have been a startling sociological accuracy about the depiction, both in language and in attitude, and this seems to have helped generate a genuinely satirical effect. Inspired by this, Barnes was evidently encouraged to

think of Cockneyism as a new phenomenon that had not yet been properly represented, and to locate it not, as most of his predecessors would have done, in a few verbal tics or in a particular mental perspective, but in a specific social niche.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the term 'Cockney' was always more or less a term of derogation, but it had no special class character.[16] It still hadn't attained that low dignity with which it was imbued in the late Victorian period, when, as Gareth Stedman Jones has shown, it became an affectionate, and even a sentimental term for the East End working classes.[17] On the stage, a Cockney might be the equivalent of the old-style 'cit' of seventeenth-century comedy, but he might equally be a London apprentice or artisan. He could be a rich grocer like the aptly named Cockney in Charles Dibdin's comic opera *Love in the City* (1767), or a stock-broker, like Cosey the reluctant country-dweller in Thomas Morton's *Town and Country* (1807). Sometimes Cockneys spoke dialect, as was the case with Tom Tug in Dibdin's 1774 ballad opera *The Waterman*, sometimes they were more faux-genteel and country-loving, like Mrs Bundle in the same play.[18] Cockneyism, in short, *could* be about speech, and *was always* about attitude, but it was *never* the preserve of a specific rank or class.[19]

In Barnes's review, however, the shop-keeping class has been singled out – as if for the first time – as the real home of the Cockney character, the place where its peculiar mixture of pertness and illiteracy, dullness and vivacity, was most fully expressed. This is not mere idiosyncracy on his part, I would argue: it is a sign of the times. Whether he was fully aware of it or not, Barnes's new vision of Cockneyism was simultaneously a social narrowing, and a geographical expansion, of earlier versions of the type. In eighteenth-century literature the Cockney was generally a child of the City, that is, the old medieval city at the eastern end of the metropolis. Sometimes, indeed, it was precisely his status as the product of a curious, neo-medieval polity that was held up for mockery.[20] But what happens in the early nineteenth century, as we shall see, is that the Cockney starts to lose that exclusive connection with the City proper, and begins, with increasing regularity, to be associated with its environs – old suburbs such as Southwark and Clerkenwell, but also newer ones such as Islington, Pentonville, Dulwich and Camden Town.

The reason is not hard to find. Between 1810 and 1815, with the dust finally settling on twenty years of European conflict, and attention slowly turning to social changes at home, the rapid dilation and transformation of one particular stratum of British society was gradually

becoming more visible, not least in London where its growth had been most marked. Clerkenwell, Islington, Pentonville and Camden Town were suburbs now swollen with clerks and attorney's apprentices who commuted to the City every day. In a seminal article on the subject, Geoffrey Crossick has argued that the term 'lower middle class' can be used to designate the conflation of two broad occupational groups in the early 1800s: the old petite bourgeoisie of shopkeepers and small businessmen and the new and burgeoning army of urban white-collar workers who manned the expanding service sector.[21] But such labels as 'lower middle class' and 'petite bourgeoisie' did not exist in the early 1800s. In the eyes of many, the phenomenon could only be thought of as a worrying expansion of that unfortunate no man's land between the polite and the plebeian. In 1833 Edward Gibbon Wakefield sought to sum it up in terms of the growth of an 'uneasy' class.[22] In Barnes's review, however, a more evocative name was being hazarded – and that name was 'Cockney'.

That the growth of this milieu was by no means a matter for celebration, even for a liberal such as Barnes, can be seen from his withering critique of Cockney dialect. Ten years earlier Samuel Pegge had striven hard to defend the London vernacular in his *Anecdotes of the English Language*, arguing that 'what is called *vulgarity* is barely a residuum of what was antiently the established national dialect, at different time periods, from time immemorial'.[23] Cockney, he insisted, was 'for the most part, composed of *Saxonisms*' with the odd little bit of Latin or Old French thrown in. Committed to a notion of the Cockney as a traditional, even reassuring figure, Pegge tried to represent him as a much-maligned custodian of the most important Old English dialect. Barnes's view, however, which was also that of many of his polite contemporaries, was that Cockney language had no authenticity at all. 'Barbarous', 'false', 'ungrammatical' and full of 'pert slang', it was all about the shock of the new, not the secret survival of the old. Of course, it is very difficult to tell how far the author of *The Satirist*'s 'The Bard of Horsemonger Lane' might have been inspired by Kenney's *Love, Law and Physic*, or by Barnes's *Examiner* review of it. But what one can say, I think, is that these two instances are highly representative (if not constitutive) of a subtle but important shift in social attitudes, as the figure of the Cockney begins to accrue new freight and meaning in the 1810s. Growing as never before in pertness and ambition, the old milksop was fast becoming a symbol for all that was wrong with modern life, not least in his promiscuous straddling of city and suburb, old and new, vulgar and genteel.

THE POLITICS OF FAMILIARITY

Within a year of being released from the Surrey County Gaol in January 1815, Hunt moved with his wife and children to the Vale of Health near Hampstead Heath, where he lost no time in embellishing his cottage with classical busts, books and bowers. Before long, many of London's artistic and journalistic avant-garde had tasted his Hampstead hospitality, including figures as diverse as the Novellos, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Hazlitt and B. R. Haydon. Hunt's Cockney aesthetic, which had been incubated (and consolidated) in Horsemonger Lane, was now ready to start a revolution in the suburbs.[24] Politically, Hunt remained as engaged as ever, continuing to write regular editorials for *The Examiner* as the national situation worsened; but he was also to become remarkably active in the field of poetry and belles-lettres. This was the period in which he did more than anyone else to found second-generation Romanticism. In his prose writings he wrote manifestos for a New School of writing, championed Keats and Shelley in *The Examiner* and collaborated on a collection of reflective essays, *The Round Table* (1817), with the radical journalist Hazlitt. In his poetic productions he continued to pursue his own particular brand of suburban pastoral: retelling Dante's tragic tale of Paolo and Francesca in the *Story of Rimini* (1816), doing an English version of Greek myth in his 1818 poem *The Nymphs* and writing more sonnets in praise of Hampstead.

Like 'A Day by the Fire', many of the literary works that Hunt wrote in this period are explicitly recreational in nature. But even his most apparently frivolous pieces had a serious message. What unites them all is what one might call an aesthetics of familiarity. Familiarity was a key concept for Hunt; indeed it had something of the same status in his work as the idea of sympathy had in Hazlitt. Primarily, it was a way of thinking about the ideal writer–reader relationship – a relationship of warmth and candour and shared common feelings. 'I look upon a periodical essayist, as a writer who claims a peculiar intimacy with the public', he had written, in an early essay on this subject, in January 1808.[25] But it was also a way of positioning oneself in relation to politics and high culture. 'It is a curious and pleasant thing to consider', he wrote in an essay on 'Social Genealogy' for *The Indicator*, 'that a link of personal acquaintance can be traced up from the authors of our own times to those of Shakespeare, and to Shakespeare himself'.[26]

Perhaps the best example of Hunt's habit of familiarizing the classics is in the sonnet 'To Robert Batty, M.D., on His Giving Me a Lock of Milton's Hair', which was first collected in *Foliage* in 1818. In this poem,