

Leigh Hunt in Italy, 1822-5

Nicholas Roe

L.H. was our spiritual grandfather, a free man.

*Virginia Woolf*¹

A little notebook bound in red boards; 'Hunt in Italy' written in pencil on the front cover, with four arabesques. Inside are miscellaneous scribbles: a list of four words - 'mantichora,' 'porpoise,' 'fazzer,' 'boney;' two odd phrases, 'happiness in being' and 'hypochondria a hysterical disorder;' a query: '1789? *Calais sands - Porpoise / Viareggio strand 1822*' and underneath that: '*Mount Edgumbe orangery*,' heavily underlined and then: 'Idea of Italy: vs: miserable actuality.'

This was my sketch of Leigh Hunt's 'first life' - that is, the years leading up to his sojourn in Italy, 1822-5. As a child, he was terrified by the image of a monstrous mantichora, and the word 'porpoise' frightened; the 'fazzer' was a weird creature that stalked the cloisters of Hunt's school at Christ's Hospital and Boney was the awe-inspiring colossus of the age, about whom Hunt was consistently in two minds. As a young man Hunt evolved a philosophy of the heart, with which he tried to contain his struggles with hypochondria, anxiety and depression. Lastly, Mount Edgumbe house stood across Plymouth Sound from Stonehouse, where Hunt and his family wintered, 1821-2, *en route* to Pisa and the *Liberal* and Shelley's cremation on the beach at Viareggio.

The juxtaposition, 'Idea of Italy: miserable actuality,' opens a double perspective: the golden prospect and Hunt's anguish in the days after Shelley's death. He had anticipated that the warm south would embrace him as a haven of sunburnt mirth and happy love. One week after his arrival, he was left shattered and adrift: 'One has been taken, & the other left. Instead of the health which I looked for in his society to restore the springs of life, I waste them with the perpetual pall of sorrow.'²

¹ Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, (eds.) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 5 vols (London. The Hogarth Press, 1977-84), II, 130. Hereafter *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*.

² One of several fragmentary notes at the back of Hunt's journal of his sea voyage to Italy; see Nicholas Roe, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (London. Pimlico, 2005), 348.

Hunt's melancholy reflections might stand as the preface to one version of his years in Italy. This narrative dwells upon the failure of the *Liberal*; Hunt's ill-feelings towards Byron and Mary Shelley; his persistent money problems; his quarrel with his brother John; his wife's alcoholism and illness; the unexpectedly bleak winters and his separation from Elizabeth Kent, 'Bess,' Hunt's sister-in-law, comrade and long-time confidante. Lowering over the whole dismal scene is the loss of Shelley: 'my divine-minded friend, your friend, the friend of the universe.'³ So Hunt's glory days as the editor of the *Examiner*; as the poet of *The Story of Rimini* and as the champion of 'young poets,' came to an end. The remainder of his life would be spent indoors, with eyes turned ruefully upon the past.

Walking through Hunt's Italian haunts now, it's possible to see his experiences in relation to the landscapes, the houses and even the rooms he inhabited. In those surroundings, the light and shade fall quite differently across the contours of his life, revealing patterns of place and feeling that connect Italy in the 1820s with his earlier years. Hunt himself was particularly alert to such symmetries. To take the simplest example, he liked to find reminders of Hampstead everywhere: 'Genoa is truly *la superba*,' he told Elizabeth Kent: 'Imagine a dozen Hampsteads one over the other, intermingled with trees, rock and white streets, houses and palaces.'⁴ Hampstead for Hunt was always associated with shelter, recuperation and home. Above all, it offered him an environment in which he could write – the equivalent of Wordsworth's Grasmere or Emily Bronte's Haworth or Seamus Heaney's Glanmore. To find Genoa like 'a dozen Hampsteads' at the end of his voyage was promising indeed. A few days more would bring the reunion with Shelley and Byron and a new beginning in the 'Paradise of Exiles, Italy!'

An evening at Pisa, summer 1822. Let's join Shelley, Hunt and his family as they leave the warm light along the *Lung'Arno* and step into the hall of Byron's *Casa Lanfranchi*, a cavernous feudal palazzo. Byron reported dungeons below, hidden cells in the walls, a wide marble staircase

³ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

said to have been built by Michaelangelo and ghosts that terrified the servants. After the open road, the Hunts find the interior dim, cool and full of echoes. To the right is the grand staircase up to Byron's apartments on the first floor. Ahead of us is the arched doorway leading into the back rooms Byron has furnished ready for the Hunts' arrival – quite possibly, as we shall see, the original prison rooms. The first room has a vaulted ceiling, with painted designs of flowers and bowls of fruit. To the right is another room with barrel-vaulted ceilings and a window that looks out on a garden with orange trees, a weeping willow and Byron's bathing-room (this room will be Hunt's study and Byron will chat with him through that casement). The main room is painted with frescoes of trees, crumbling sarcophagi and a ruined classical temple – as in a pastoral by Claude or Poussin. Tendrils of painted foliage frame the doors. Overhead is a blue ceiling with white clouds billowing from wall to wall.

All of this decoration though faded is still visible now and it helps us understand how Hunt contrived to write himself through and eventually out of the tragedy of Shelley's death. Looking around his lodgings, he wrote: 'The look is at first very gloomy and prison-like, but you get used to it.'⁵ That knowing observation comes from one of Hunt's contributions to the *Liberal*, the first of his 'Letters from Abroad.' It reflects Hunt's awareness that his Pisan lodgings uncannily resembled the bower he had constructed for himself ten years earlier inside Horsemonger Lane Prison, with flowered wall-paper, green Venetian blinds and the ceiling painted as a breezy summer sky. It seems likely that Byron intended the rooms to recall the scene of their first meeting in prison, aware that Hunt had been most at home as 'the wit in the dungeon.' The poet's bower had enabled Hunt to survive two years in prison, writing his *Examiner* columns, his sonnets about Hampstead, canto three of *The Story of Rimini* and his masque the *Descent of Liberty*. Now, nearly a thousand miles from smoky Southwark, similar surroundings helped Hunt in the aftermath of Shelley's death.

He flung himself into work on the *Liberal*. Byron had offered *The Vision of Judgment* and Hunt resolved to make a start on writing up his impressions of Italy. When he settled down to describe the *Casa Lanfranchi*, he was immediately in touch with centuries of gaiety and violence:

⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

It is curious to feel oneself sitting quietly in one of the old Italian houses and think of all the interests and passions that have agitated the hearts of so many generations of its tenants; all the revels and the quarrels that have echoed along its walls; all the guitars that have tinkled under its windows; all the scuffles that have disputed its doors. Along the great halls, how many feet have hurried in alarm! how many stately beauties have drawn their quiet trains! how many huge torches have ushered magnificence up the staircases! how much blood perhaps has been shed!⁶

With brisk strokes Hunt captures the deep allure of Italy: all the long generations of passion and revelry; all the music at nightfall; all the scuffles; the hurry and alarms and, in the torch-blaze and the whispering textures of 'ushered magnificence,' the suggestion of intrigue, bloodshed, murder. Hunt is looking back to ideas of Italy in Shakespeare, Webster and Gothic novels, but he is also opening the way for many nineteenth and twentieth-century writers about Italy – most obviously perhaps in his 'Letter from Abroad' about 'Genoa.'

Everywhere Hunt went he absorbed impressions with his painter's eye: faces; the colours of houses; dusty artificial flowers in the churches; huge gold ear-rings; 'a merry old brown gardener, with a great straw-hat and bare legs.' A boatman 'with his brown hue, his white shirt and his red cap, made a complete picture.' In the intense Mediterranean light, the cap appeared 'like a scarlet bud in the blue atmosphere.' Here were gardens with statues and orange-trees and windows with vines trailed sinuously over and around them 'like great luxuriant green hair.' After years of reading, singing and writing Italian, Hunt was fluent in the language. He went into every church he came to, pausing in one to hear a sermon on tears – 'the tears of joy and the tears of sorrow, of penitent tears, tears of anger, spite, ill-temper, worldly regret, love, patience.' At each turning were scenes that reminded him of the poets – Chaucer was said to have been at Genoa. In a back street a man was singing and playing a pipe exactly like the 'ancient shepherds.' As he wandered down another street he heard distant music, a 'bustling sound of feet' and was caught-up in a religious procession: he noted a four-year-old girl with silver crown and sceptre; a little St. John dressed in lamb-skin; clergymen with lighted candles and hordes of ragged little boys collecting drips of wax to sell; a young friar with a head from a Raphael painting; another friar trying to

⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

look saintly while eyeing the girls; St. Antonio in wax, large as life, kneeling before a waxen Virgin and yet more friars, their heads cowled like executioners. The paganism of Italy fascinated him - there was no doubt, Hunt thought, that, just as Jupiter sat now under his new name of St Peter, 'the ancients, under other names, had these identical processions.'

The vivid details Hunt drew from the streets and alleys of Genoa would later bring 'life's flash' to the painterly impressions of Italy in Robert Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* - 'a hurry of feet' and 'whiffs of song,' the urchin watching

Which gentleman processional and fine,
Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
The dropping of the wax to sell again ...⁷

Brother Lippo's gathering of 'old gossips,' 'candle-ends,' 'earrings and a bunch of flowers' would revisit the territory that Hunt had discovered in 1822 and written about in his 'Letters from Abroad.' Hunt's sense of lurking danger - huge torches, ushered magnificence, friars cowled like executioners - would later be at the heart of Dickens's and E. M. Forster's visions in which Italian vivaciousness can quickly turn to violence.

Hunt's writings about Italy marked a stylistic breakthrough with far-reaching implications. His 'Letters from Abroad' adopt a fanciful, free-flowing, associative technique that gathers elusive, momentary impressions - much as he had done in *The Story of Rimini* and in the prose poem *A Now. Descriptive of a Hot Day* written with John Keats in summer 1820. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* had speculated that Fancy might be 'a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space.' Echoing Coleridge, Hunt's *Wishing-Cap Papers* deliberately 'mak[e] as little of time as ... of space' and in some ways they anticipate the experimental techniques of twentieth-century literary Modernism.⁸

⁷ Ian Jack (ed.), *Browning. Poetical Works, 1833-1864* (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1970), 568-78.

⁸ James Engell and W. J. Bate, (eds.) *Biographia Literaria*, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 7, 2 vols. (Princeton and London. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd and Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 305. Leigh Hunt, 'The Wishing Cap' in *The Wishing-Cap Papers. By Leigh Hunt* (Boston and New York. Lee, Shepard and Dillingham, 1873), 16. Hereafter *Wishing-Cap Papers*.

A year passes. Hunt and his family move from Pisa to the village of Albaro, above Genoa, where they part from Byron and Mary Shelley, and then onwards in late August 1823 to Florence. '[W]e get out into the country air in a day or two,' Hunt writes and on 19 October, his 39th birthday, he dates from 'bel Maiano.'⁹

Maiano was and is a hamlet about three miles to the north of Florence, in sight of Fiesole and bordering on the 'Valle delle Donna' – Boccaccio's setting for the *Decameron*. An ideal spot for any admirer of Italian poetry, one might think, and there were additional attractions for Hunt as well. Like Hampstead, Maiano was outside the city yet within easy reach of it and the enclosed setting of Hunt's new home, surrounded by hills, resembled the Vale of Health. Hunt described it all in a letter sent to his sister-in-law with an engraving of his new home:

I look right across to Fiesole out of my study window, taking a full view of the Doccia by the way; which is the name of that arcaded house you see up aloft, so called from a water-spout, which is the origin of the little rivulet just mentioned. The hill in the background (a part of the Apennines) which has unfortunately been stripped of its trees, in process of time for firewood (though not quite so barely as in the picture) ought to send its line further on-ward ... On this slope of it, which is full of green lanes, & olive-trees, & vines, our house stands. It is a sort of large farm-house, though the ground floor, which is occupied by another family in summer time, & is locked up in winter, partakes more of the villa. The remainder, which we occupy, we have never taken kindly to, on account of a certain dreariness & inconvenience and this is the reason why I have never sent you the particulars of it, our rooms having been changed several times. In spring & summer however I hope to occupy sometimes a room more retired from the rest of the family than my present study, & sometimes a most cheerful little summer-house at the very top of the house in a little turret. But at present I can sit in neither for *good*, as there are no fire-places in them; & the winter here, though very fine overhead, is colder than we expected.¹⁰

Hunt's fifteenth-century 'farm-house' is no longer to be seen, but the nineteenth-century development on the site is all too visible in the shape

⁹ Leigh Hunt to John Hunt, 3 October 1823; Leigh Hunt to R. Finch, 19 October 1823.

David R. Cheney Papers, MSS 157, Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, The University of Toledo, hereafter *Cheney Papers*.

¹⁰ Leigh Hunt to Elizabeth Kent, 8 January 1824. *Cheney Papers*.

of the *Villa Di Maiano*. Queen Victoria stayed here in 1883 and the villa also featured in the Merchant/Ivory film of *Room with a View* and Zefferelli's *Tea with Mussolini*. A massive, two-storey tower replaces the little turret room where Hunt put up green blinds, book-shelves and a little sofa and prepared to write his *Wishing-Cap Essays*:

I do what I can. I think of Petrarch and Boccaccio, of Milton and Galileo and Fiesole, which I see from my window. And which is a common boundary to my walks. I endeavor to keep the vines and the olive trees new to me ... In short, I am in a world of poetry and romance, of vines and olives and myrtles (which grow wild), of blue mountains and never-ending orchards, with a beautiful city in the middle of it. What signifies? I think of an English field in a sylvan country, a cottage and oaks in the corner, a path and stile and a turf full of daisies and a child's book with a picture in it becomes more precious to me than all the landscapes of Claude.¹¹

Once again, Hunt arranged his study to recreate the bower he had enjoyed in prison: 'It may not be the most grateful thing in the world to think of a jail while strolling about the most classical ground in Tuscany,' Hunt writes, adding: 'I confess I think of it very often.'¹² Exile at Maiano over the cold winter of 1823-4 had effectively pitched him back into prison, enabling him to recapture the circumstances of his earlier poems and essays with, now, a more daring edge, 'making as little of time as ... of space.'

I make love very often a hundred years ago and may dine to-morrow at the table of Anacreon. My tea I am fond of taking with Pope and the Miss Blounts. A person in Tuscany often rouses me out of the club, at the Mermaid in Cornhill, where I am listening to Beaumont and Ben Jonson. I make nothing of being in Arcady at twelve o'clock and with Horace between two and three.¹³

The Wishing-Cap draws in history, biography, poetry, reminiscence, theatre, gossip and anecdote and takes its bearings from place – most often the geography of London – rather than 'the order of time:'

There, at Will's Coffee-House, used to sit Dryden in his arm-chair, encouraging a young author with a pinch out of his snuff-box. Addison is keeping it up over the way at Button's, with Steele, Garth, Congreve and Colonel Brett

¹¹ 'Spring,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 78-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³ 'The Wishing Cap,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 16.

(who married Savage's mother and bought Cibber's wig). Here come, to attend a rehearsal, Mrs. Barry, who acted such fine love-parts with her husband; Mrs. Bracegirdle, Congreve's mistress and Mrs. Oldfield, the Flavia of the *Tatler*, who gave Savage a pension.¹⁴

These historical figures mingle alongside Hunt's friends and contemporaries Charles and Mary Lamb, William Hazlitt, Edmund Kean and Vincent Novello and the narrative develops along and across the streets and squares of London:

In Leicester Square, at the house of Sir Joshua Reynolds ... were many meetings of Johnson, Goldsmith and others. Leicester House (now lost in the large house with shops on the north side) was the residence of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who affected the love of liberty and patronized Thomson. Whitcomb Street was formerly called Hedge Lane, no doubt from a lane which ran up from Charing Cross to the fields about Piccadilly and Marylebone. Think of lovers having walked there on a May-morning! In a house opposite Coventry Street lodged an early friend of mine ... an intelligent fellow, full of goodness and in love with music and poetry and all good things. I once walked with him a hundred and twelve miles along the coast from Margate to Brighton, talking, laughing and singing all the way ... We did it in four days. Poor J. R.! He had an overstock of love, which was not very happily placed. He became sick, unsuccessful, a wanderer and was at last taken prisoner by the French and died during the long detention of his countrymen by Napoleon. He wrote me a long letter from Bagnères, where he had been suffered to go for the benefit of his health and I delayed, from day to day, in order to write him as long an answer, till I delayed for months and heard of his death. The letter has been on my conscience ever since.¹⁵

In a few lines Hunt ranges from literary associations, through local history, to personal memories, a death in far-off France and his own enduring regret. Hunt's light touch is inimitable, but the associative technique whereby memory is separated from the order of time and space may have proved liberating for one of his twentieth-century admirers, the author of *Street Haunting. A London Adventure*: Virginia Woolf.

Hunt's reflections on time and space hark back to Laurence Sterne, yet also sound startlingly modern:

¹⁴ 'A Walk in Covent Garden,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 23-4.

¹⁵ 'Piccadilly and the West End,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 34-5.

It is a vulgar supposition, that one man of forty and another man of forty are of the same age and that if two persons set out at four o'clock to dinner and arrive at the same place at the hour commonly called five, they have both taken the same time to arrive ... We have no idea of time but that of space. In thinking of the hour between one and two, we measure a distance on our watches. Now, as in the same space of measurement may be crammed many particles and in the same journey one road may be straight and another crooked, so in the same space of time (the common phrase), we may include many different masses of duration and varieties of experience.¹⁶

Twentieth-century buzz-words like 'relativity' come to mind, although Hunt comes closest, perhaps, to evoking the effects of Virginia Woolf's novels in which time and space are infinitely permeable to consciousness. The following passage from *Orlando* is well-known, but not usually juxtaposed with Leigh Hunt:

But time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect on the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be represented on the time piece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.¹⁷

I'm not fixing Hunt as a 'source' for Woolf, but merely suggesting that Hunt's writings may have helped her towards her own distinctive manner: 'I like [Hunt's] inquisitive human sympathies,' she writes, 'history so dull because of its battles & laws; & sea voyages in books so dull because the traveller will describe beauties instead of going into the cabins & saying what the sailors looked like, wore, eat, said, how they behaved.'¹⁸ Here is Mrs. Ramsay 'going into' things past in *To the Lighthouse*:

And was Carrie still living at Marlow and was everything still the same? Oh she could remember it as if it were yesterday – going on the river, feeling very cold. But if the Mannings made a plan they stuck to it. Never should she forget Herbert killing a wasp with a teaspoon on the

¹⁶ 'The Wishing Cap,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 16-17.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando. A Biography* (Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1972), 69.

¹⁸ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 130.

bank! And it was still going on, Mrs. Ramsay mused, gliding like a ghost among the chairs and tables of that drawing-room on the banks of the Thames where she had been so very, very cold twenty years ago; but now she went among them like a ghost and it fascinated her, as if, while she had changed, that particular day, now become very still and beautiful, had remained there, all these years.

Whereas Hunt had written from prison or exile in terms of fanciful projections across time and space, Woolf's narrative hovers between the present and the past like a spectre beyond the world of time. Like Hunt, Woolf is keenly alert to the goings-on of London life and, again like him, she can move from vivid detail to a more abstracted, ghost-like manner. Here is Clarissa Dalloway crossing Victoria Street one morning in June after the war:

even now, at this hour, discreet old dowagers were shooting out on errands of mystery and the shop-keepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans ... and she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party. But how strange, on entering the park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-moving happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling and who should be coming along with his back against the Government buildings, most appropriately, carrying a despatch box stamped with the Royal Arms, who but Hugh Whitbread; her old friend Hugh – the admirable Hugh!

'Good morning to you, Clarissa!' said Hugh, rather extravagantly, for they had known each other as children. 'Where are you off to?'

'I love walking in London,' said Mrs Dalloway. 'Really, it's better than walking in the country.'¹⁹

Walking in London better than walking in the country: that hits the authentic note of Hunt's essays, as does the imperceptible transition from the sights and sounds of London to a more reflective voice that is unaware of the hour, 'how strange ... the silence; the mist.' Hunt is always capable of such moments. In his early *Reflector* essay, *A Day by the Fire*, for instance, and in his collaboration with Keats, *A Now. Descriptive of a*

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Frogmore, St Albans. Granada, 1981), 6-7.

Hot Day, where Hunt writes of the peculiar effects of embracing the 'space of time' or 'mass of duration' in a single moment. Far from excluding varieties of experience, Hunt finds that writing to 'now,' to the instant, opens the present to infinite possibilities, 'bringing the most remote things together,' Hunt says, much as Lily Briscoe will glimpse how Mrs. Ramsay 'brought together this and that and then this and so made ... something – this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking, which survived, after all these years, complete.'²⁰

Hunt's *Wishing-Cap Papers* were an attempt to cast off the 'perpetual pall of sorrow' and 'live in imagination:' 'I can dilate myself, till mountains become mole-hills,' he writes, 'or shrink into such diminutive compass, as to stand by the side of a brook and live in imagination on the banks of it, with the little insects, as if it were some mighty river. Millions of times have I ridden on the bat's back and gone to sleep in a buttercup.'²¹ Ironically, in attempting to banish the thought of Shelley's death - 'It is not for me to think of the drowning' – Hunt had projected himself as the 'airy spirit' that would become the Victorian idea of his lost friend, Shelley/Ariel. Woolf's writings are saturated with references to Shelley. Her affinity with Hunt, sketched in this essay, is less well known although Woolf herself acknowledged the likeness. A century after Shelley's death and some six decades since Hunt's, Virginia Woolf greeted them across the years and claimed kinship with both: 'These free, vigorous spirits advance the world,' she observed, '& when one comes across them in the strange waste of the past one says, "Ah! you're my sort," – a great compliment.'²²

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²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Frogmore, St Albans. Granada, 1981), 150.

²¹ 'The Wishing Cap,' in *Wishing-Cap Papers*, 18.

²² *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, 130.