

### 3. Politics, Literature, and Leigh Hunt's Editorial Spirit in *The Liberal*

Leigh Hunt was an established literary figure during the Romantic period, through to the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria. He found fame at the beginning of the nineteenth century as, in the first instance, the editor and director – together with his brother – of the radical magazine *The Examiner*. The journalist was then imprisoned in 1813, following the publication of an article in which he had openly suggested that Prince George was a greedy spendthrift; remarkably, though, this only served to expand Hunt's friendship circle.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many literary figures and intellectuals who shared Hunt's radical ideas visited him in jail; they sympathised with the audacious and inspiring writer. After he left Surrey Gaol, Hunt's new friendship group evolved into the so-called "Cockney School", including poets as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. The writer worked (collaboratively) as an editor and journalist for many magazines as well as publishing collections of poems, reaching the peak of his notoriety during the Romantic period.

Later in his life, Leigh Hunt was still well known to the Victorians as an editor, translator and poet – but he had also, at this stage, become acknowledged as a dramatist. *A Legend of Florence*, dated 1840, was one of Queen Victoria's favourite plays. Moreover, as many will already know, Dickens based his character Harold Skimpole – a heartless sponger in *Bleak House* (1852–1853) – on Hunt. Nowadays, following a period of having received inadequate levels of critical attention, Leigh Hunt is considered to be not only a leading writer but also a pioneering

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1 See Serena Baiesi, "Leigh Hunt's Parlour at Surrey Gaol", in *European Romanticism in Association: Virtual Exhibition*. Available online at: <http://www.euromanticism.org/leigh-hunts-parlour-at-surrey-gaol/>, accessed on 29/10/2020.

editor of his age.<sup>2</sup> Heralded as one of the major and most influential radical journalists of political and literary reviews, he is also regarded as being an *avant-garde* poet in relation to what he saw as a new school of poetry. In addition, he is lauded as a master of the familiar essay, competing directly, in this regard, with Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt whom he both influenced and challenged.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I will firstly discuss Leigh Hunt's editorial role in a number of literary magazines that were published in London during the 1820s before focusing on one of the most peculiar and controversial – but influential – journals of his time: *The Liberal*. This brilliant but ill-fated quarterly was jointly established by Hunt, Shelley and Byron in Italy and was published in London by Hunt's brother, John, in 1822 and 1823. However, the enthusiasm of its founders – that had driven the initiative before and during the initial stages of establishing the publication – gradually faded away after the sudden death of Shelley; as a consequence, the periodical lasted for only four issues. Even though it may sound like a singular literary experiment, I will be framing this Italian literary enterprise in the broader context of Hunt's editorial activities – those from both before and after his sojourn in Italy. Even though Hunt changed the names, content, locations and editorial strategies of his various journals over the years, a particular desire was constantly discernible: a will to popularise collective literary practices and liberal ideals so as change society for the better, fostering and strengthening community spirit. Throughout his various periodicals, Hunt foregrounded the important political and ethical roles of literature.

Hunt stepped out into what was already a very active journalistic field with *The Examiner*; many periodicals were being published in

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- 2 As for Hunt's critical reception in modern times, see Nicholas Roe's edition *Leigh Hunt. Life: Poetics, Politics* (Abingdon: Palgrave 2003). For a modern edition of Hunt's major works, see *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003). However, a complete and updated critical edition of Hunt's extensive literary production has not been collected to date; critical assessment of his works remains fragmentary and discontinuous today.
- 3 Nicholas Roe has scrupulously retraced Hunt's critical reception over the centuries in "Leigh Hunt's Track of Radiance", in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe, (Abingdon: Palgrave 2003), 1–18.

London at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Despite the government's attempt to control the press – with the introduction of taxes on stamped paper dating back to 1712 – new magazines populated a florid journalistic market with antagonistic and dissenting political views and opinions.<sup>5</sup> Hunt edited *The Examiner* from 1808 to 1821 – until he left for Italy. On becoming involved with the periodical, he was already employed as a clerk at the War Office; thus, “when *The Examiner* was fully established,” he happily “quitted the office”.<sup>6</sup>

*The Examiner* was a widely-sold newspaper that offered political and cultural commentaries and, as such, rapidly became a key point of reference for its day. The periodical was divided into several sections – all of which were edited by Hunt: the “Political Examiner”, the “Theatrical Examiner” and the “Literary and Philosophical Examiner”. The repetition of the word “Examiner” in each constituent part of the journal was intentional, as Hunt explains in his piece entitled “On Periodical Essay”: “I regard the various departments of this paper as children of the same family, and therefore though of different professions they all have the same surname”.<sup>7</sup>

In his periodical writing, Hunt intended to establish a sympathetic and friendly connection with his readers: “I look upon a periodical essayist as a writer who claims a peculiar intimacy with the public”.<sup>8</sup> Hunt's journalistic style, with the subject matter being either political or literary, actually gave rise to a new genre of prose writing: that of the familiar essay.<sup>9</sup> Hunt remarked that, if he were to succeed in entertaining his readers with his originality of thought and elucidation, “I shall

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4 For an extensive survey on the circulating newspapers at the time, see *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (London: Routledge, 2016).

5 See Serena Baiesi, “Le riviste letterarie e la critica alla scrittura femminile”, in *Le Poetesse Romantiche Inglesi: Tra Identità e Genere*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropoli (Roma: Carocci, 2002), 202–221.

6 Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, 13.

7 Leigh Hunt “On Periodical Essay” in *The Examiner*, I, 10 January 1808, 26.

8 *Ibid.*, 26.

9 See Simon Peter Hull, *The Familiar Essay, Romantic Affect and Metropolitan Culture: The Sweet Security of Streets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

think myself deserving". In terms of his goals, as well as providing amusement, he suggested that the moral benefit of his work made him – as well as his readers – most happy.<sup>10</sup>

As Kenneth Kendall has noted, Hunt's "editorship of the *Examiner* made him an influential public figure, one whose independence brought him the respect of the public and the animosity of politicians, theatre managers, and some of the actors".<sup>11</sup> One may go as far as to assert that *The Examiner's* success was contingent on Hunt's political, literary and theatrical essays; their content was erudite and aesthetic, satirical and filled with political rage.<sup>12</sup> As Hunt wrote in the "Prospectus" of the 1808 edition: "The newspaper proves to be like the generality of it's [sic] species, very mean in it's [sic] subserviency to the follies of the day, very miserable merry in it's [sic] puns and stories, extremely furious in politics, and quite as feeble in criticism".<sup>13</sup>

This periodical advocated for parliamentary reforms in every field of society, ranging from religious to social rights. Together with politics, Hunt stressed the importance of power and the strong link between literature and the fine arts. Although it was a political newspaper, in his articles for *The Examiner*, Hunt did not separate his liberal ideals from his interest in *belles lettres*. As he lamented the lack of attention afforded to art by the majority of contemporary periodicals, he decided that – through his journal – he would undertake original enquiries into English artists and the exhibitions of his day. He believed that his political fights against corruption and in favour of personal and religious freedom were not unrelated to his aesthetic views. Politics and literature were interlinked for him, inextricably bound together, as they both promoted the advancement of a free society. Literature and art were the instruments with which Hunt sought to convey his aesthetics principles and political indignation at what he regarded as the degeneration of

10 Leigh Hunt "On Periodical Essay", 26.

11 Kenneth E. Kendall, *Leigh Hunt's Reflector* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 18.

12 Greg Kucich and Jeffrey N. Cox, eds., "Periodical Essays, 1815–21", in *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra (gen. ed.) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), "Periodical Essays, 1815–21", Vol. 1, xxxvii.

13 *The Examiner*, I, 3 January 1808, 6–8.

society. Due to Hunt's reformist opinions, especially those in favour of Irish independence and Catholic emancipation, *The Examiner* was prosecuted by the government.<sup>14</sup>

In 1810, while still working on *The Examiner*, Hunt started editing another periodical: *The Reflector*. It was a short-lived quarterly magazine that was published and co-owned by his brother John and included contributions from writers like Charles Lamb. It lasted for only four issues over the course of fifteen months between 1811 and 1812.<sup>15</sup> As the subtitle details, the periodical commented on "Subjects of Philosophy, Politics, and The Liberal Arts, conducted by the Editor of the Examiner" and included essays on political and theatrical criticism, translations, poetry and satire, as well as instances of personal essays.<sup>16</sup>

As for its title, Kendall explains: "Hunt chose the Reflector [which is] appropriate because of its double meaning of a mirror and a thinker". The essays covered a variety of subjects, from politics to history and literature. The phrases "thinking man" and "thinking nation" were recurrent ones in *The Examiner* as well as *The Reflector*.<sup>17</sup> The Hunt brothers aimed to rejuvenate the category of the magazine with *The Reflector* and to, in so doing, replicate the success that *The Examiner* had enjoyed as a newspaper. So, once again, Hunt decided to combine the subjects of politics and literature in his periodicals as a form of journalistic entertainment. As Kucich and Cox stress in their introduction to Hunt's periodical writing between 1815 and 1821, *The Reflector* "has been, perhaps, more appreciated for the literary contributions of Lamb and Hunt, but it remained strongly political", constantly advocating social reform.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Reflector*, Hunt published various interesting articles and even poetry. In the first issue, we find "Politics and Poetry" – an

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14 See Nicholas Roe, "Hunt, (James Henry) Leigh (1784–1859), Poet, Journalist, and Literary Critic", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004): online edn., October 2009, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14195>, accessed 1 Dec 2016.

15 Greg Kucich and Jeffrey N. Cox, eds., "Periodical Essays, 1815–21", Vol. 1 134.

16 Kenneth E. Kendall, *Leigh Hunt's Reflector* (Paris: Mouton, 1971).

17 Kendall, *Leigh Hunt's Reflector*, 21.

18 Greg Kucich and Jeffrey N. Cox, eds., "Periodical Essays, 1815–21", 135.

autobiographical satirical meditation on Hunt's work as a poet as well as a political commentator:

Again I stop; – again the toil refuse!  
 Away, for pity's sake, distracting Muse;  
 Nor thus come smiling with thy bridal tricks  
 Between my studious face, and politics.  
 Is it for thee to mock the frowns of fate? [ll. 1–5]<sup>19</sup>

In the last issue, Hunt included the widely acclaimed poem entitled “The Feast of the Poets”. A satirical commentary on contemporary poetry, Hunt re-edited the work many times over the course of his life, including several notes and amendments. It was this publication that attracted Lord Byron's admiration, prompting him to ask Thomas Moore for a personal introduction to the talented Hunt while the latter was in jail in 1813.<sup>20</sup>

Though successful for its duration, *The Reflector* was only in print for a relatively short time. This was probably due to a lack of financial means, despite the fact that it sold well. Its audience counted a large number of radical reformers and each contributor was well-compensated for their writing.<sup>21</sup> However, such editorial success was, unfortunately, insufficient to justify the continuation of the periodical in the longer term. Moreover, in 1812, financial issues arose as a result of the notorious article about the Prince Regent entitled “The Prince on St Patrick's Day” that caused Hunt legal as well as financial troubles. Following prosecution for libel, the Hunt brothers had incurred many expenses for their defence during the legal proceedings. This is not to mention, of course, the fact that – as a result of the final sentence – they faced two years in jail, to be served from 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1813 to 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1815.

Hunt still continued to contribute to *The Examiner* while he was in prison, remaining committed to his principles and his belief that literature had a central role to play in facilitating cultural and political

19 Leigh Hunt, “Politics and Poetics”, in *The Reflector*, I, no. 2, 1811, 361–365.

20 Anthony Holden, *The Wit in the Dungeon: A Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), 79.

21 Kenneth E. Kendall, “Leigh Hunt and *The Reflector*”, in *Leigh Hunt's Reflector* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 28.

advancement. It was in his essay entitled "Young Poets" (1816) that Hunt publicly recognised the poetic power of innovative poets such as Shelley and Keats. Moreover, together with essay writing, Hunt experimented with new poetical aesthetics by creating innovative poetry himself. His successful narrative poem *The Story of Rimini*, published in 1816, granted him a reputation as a ground-breaking writer for a younger generation of poets – and, notably, as the leader of the Cockney School. In this poem, Hunt uses free verse to frame his new interpretation of Dante's narrative from a liberal point of view.<sup>22</sup> Hunt's cultural and intellectual influence can never be considered in isolation from his political commitment, which had increased after his years of imprisonment.

After Hunt left prison, some of his contemporaries noted a change in his style of periodical writing. Marking a departure from the strictly political essays that he had previously written for *The Examiner*, Hunt started to dedicate more attention to aesthetic matters in a new editorial enterprise called *The Indicator*. However, Hunt was not simply seeking to avoid censorship in dedicating space and time in his essays to literary debates; he genuinely believed that it would be more effective, politically, to incorporate politics into poetical discussions as with *The Reflector*. This style of advocating for reform and freedom by harnessing the power of literature, developed by Hunt in his periodicals, went on to have a significant influence on the broad discourse of Romantic ideology.

Hunt's decision to avoid direct confrontation regarding political issues after the post-Waterloo period coincided with the launch of *The Indicator*: a weekly journal that was regularly published, in 76 issues, between October 1819 and March 1821. Hunt's newfound engagement with literary criticism in the pages of this journal once again attested to his active role in promoting political change by means of cultural discussion. The same commitment would soon be discernible from abroad in the pages of *The Liberal*; Hunt made use of foreign literature as a tool for articulating political dissent.

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22 See Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

*The Indicator* was first published in 1819: a very important year for English history, politics and literature.<sup>23</sup> As Hunt remarked in his article dedicated to the “State of the World” and published in *The Examiner* the same year:

This is the commencement, if we are not much mistaken, of one of the most important years that have been seen for a long while. It is quiet; it seems peaceable to us here in Europe; it may even continue so, as far as any great warfare is concerned; but a spirit is abroad, stronger than kings, or armies, or all the most predominant shapes of prejudice and force [...] This spirit is knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

The year 1819 became, as Hunt predicted, the *annus mirabilis* for many English writers – but also a disastrous historical moment in political terms.<sup>25</sup> In a sonnet entitled “England 1819”, Shelley articulates political views that closely resemble Hunt’s, condemning the English government of the period that had adopted repressive policies both at home and abroad. Restrictive rules of this kind led to a surge in protests and radical movements in London as well as in northern industrial towns; numerous demonstrations took place. In response to the unrest and rebellion of the period, the government censured radical papers, banned seditious meetings and imprisoned dissident leaders under the Six Acts. Responding to the social upheaval of the moment, many writers penned both poetry and prose. Though Hunt ultimately decided against publishing Shelley’s provocative verses, he wholeheartedly shared in Shelley’s utopian ideal of a better future and belief in the power of the press to effect political transformation by shaping the minds and hearts of its readers.<sup>26</sup>

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23 See James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

24 Greg Kucich and Jeffrey N. Cox, eds., “Periodical Essays, 1815–21”, Vol. 2 175.

25 *Ibid.*, 173.

26 Shelley wrote *The Mask of Anarchy* in 1819 while he was in Italy, outraged by the political events that were occurring in his motherland. After receiving news of the massacre at St Peter’s Fields in Manchester – where a peaceful crowd of 80,000 people had assembled to hear speakers demand parliamentary reform – he penned this long poem and sent it to Leigh Hunt for publication in *The Examiner*. However, Hunt did not publish Shelley’s work as he was fearful of being charged



*The Indicator* was founded for economic reasons. At the time of John Hunt's retirement as a collaborator, *The Examiner* was experiencing financial difficulties. In launching *The Indicator*, Leigh Hunt intended for the publication to provide cultural reviews on multiple topics, including poems, short stories, translations, reviews, occasional essays and original verses – the majority of which had been composed by him. However, Keats, Shelley, and Lamb also contributed some articles. In terms of its content as well as its collaborative spirit, *The Indicator* could readily be regarded as a follow-up publication to *The Reflector* and a precursor to *The Liberal*.

As for its reception, however, we cannot make such comparisons. It is fair to say that *The Indicator*, like *The Reflector*, was well-received by critics and readers alike, generating good profits. *The Indicator* was published in four editions after the very first issue – in a very short space of time. All of the contributors were enthusiastic about Hunt's editorship and were paid well for their work. However, the same commitment was not discernible in *The Liberal* or among its contributors.

Charles Lamb, for instance, paid tribute to Hunt's *Indicator* in a sonnet entitled "To My Friend, the Indicator":

Your Essays indicate a flow,  
 Dear Friend, of brain, which we may elsewhere seek;  
 And to their pages I, and hundred, owe,  
 That Wednesday is the sweetest of the week [...]  
 Wit, poet, prose-man, party man, translator –  
 H --, your best title is INDICATOR.

This periodical was designed to "charm" its readers by means of graceful and familiar topics; it was intended to provide a lively and innovative form of entertainment that would lighten the spirits of its readers – those who were already engaged in the more serious, straightforward and challenging content of *The Examiner*. Whereas Hunt compared *The Examiner* to a "public tavern room", *The Indicator* was a "private room – a retreat from public cares".<sup>27</sup> Later on, *The Liberal* seemed to

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with seditious libel. The first edition of the poem is dated 1832: well after the events in Manchester and Shelley's death.

27 Kucich and Cox, eds., "Periodical Essays, 1815–21", 223.

draw on the spirits of both of the preceding journals, displaying a radical and graceless approach to politics while affording close attention to literature with an all-encompassing, inclusive issue remit. Unfortunately, *The Liberal* did not enjoy the same positive reception as its periodical predecessors.

Moreover, *The Indicator* also had a social function. In its pages, young poets found a welcoming space for their experimental poetry; Keats, for example, published his original version of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” there. It was also a place that hosted literary confrontations, exchanges of opinion, and mutual expressions of admiration and friendship among writers. Still committed to *The Examiner*, Hunt worked for both journals as an editor and contributor, finding both of these editorial spaces to be most inspiring in their own ways. Yet, in March 1821, due to his illness and the pressure of sustaining two periodicals at once, Hunt was forced to give up *The Indicator*.

In his final article of farewell to *The Indicator*, Leigh Hunt’s tone is both melancholic and cheerful, addressing his readers in a spirit of both regret and joviality: “And now, returning to his own shape again, though retaining his birdly propensities, he shakes hand at parting with all his readers male, and give a kiss on the cheek, – nonsense! – on the mouth, to all his fair readers, who have ever had faith in the good intentions of LEIGH HUNT”.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1820s, Hunt’s personal fortunes were at their lowest and he was constantly plagued by illness. He had to show great strength in enduring the hardship and degradation of his personal situation, exacerbated by the growth of his family. His finances were in a state of constant crisis, despite his persistent work as an editor and a writer. He borrowed several sums of money from friends – but all of his editorial ventures were precarious and he found himself having to move house many times. As a man who was unable to manage his means, Hunt’s friends described him as being dejected. Mary Shelley also noted that Hunt “is the same as ever, a person all must love and regret”.<sup>29</sup>

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28 Ibid., 327.

29 Robert Morrison, “Periodical Essays, 1822–38”, Vol. 3, xiii.

In these years, the sadness of Hunt's personal life drove him toward a style of literary production that foregrounded sentimentalism and reflected various subjects that would sell well, no matter the political orientations of its readers. As Robert Morrison has observed: "Neither his health nor his finances could any longer withstand the humiliation and disrepute of substantial public abuse such as he had known in the 1810s. He needed to write what the public would buy; he needed to feed his large family; he needed to preserve his strength".<sup>30</sup>

This is one of the reasons why Hunt eventually left England; Shelley had encouraged him to do so for a long time. His primary motivations were, in fact, to restore his health – and for his wife to be able to do likewise – and to start a new editorial project with Shelley and Byron: a "liberal periodical publication in conjunction with them both."<sup>31</sup> This was a very appealing venture that Hunt embraced in high spirits and with a strong desire "to secure new aid to our prospects, and new friends to the cause of liberty".<sup>32</sup>

Though it is still a topic of debate among critics, the original idea to establish a new periodical in Italy had been Byron's, as Shelley asserts in a letter to Hunt dated August 1828:<sup>33</sup>

My dearest Friend, – Since I last wrote to you, I have been on a visit to Lord Byron at Ravenna. The result of this visit was a determination, on his part, to come and live at Pisa; and I have taken the finest palace on the Lung'Arno for him. But the material part of my visit consists in a message which he desires me to give you, and which, I think, ought to add to your determination – for such a one I hope you have formed – of restoring your shattered health and spirits by a migration of these "region mild of calm and serene air". He proposes that you should come out and go share with him and me, in a periodical work, to be conducted here; in which each of the contracting parties should publish all their original composition and share the profits.<sup>34</sup>

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30 Ibid., xiv.

31 Hunt, *Autobiography* Vol. II, 231.

32 Ibid., 231.

33 See William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and The Liberal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

34 Leigh Hunt, *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Thornton Hunt, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1862), vol. 1, 170.

The receipt of such an appealing invitation could not, of course, leave Hunt indifferent to the content, especially as Shelley asserted in the same letter: “the profits of any scheme in which you and Lord Byron engage, must, from various, yet cooperating reasons, be very great.” Again, Shelley is keen to remark that his own role would be that of a “silent partner” in the enterprise that, from the very start, was intended to be both literary and business-like in focus and spirit: “nothing would induce me to share in the profits, and still less, in the borrowed splendour of such a partnership”.<sup>35</sup>

From the very conception of the new periodical, Hunt excitedly imagined the potential of such an extraordinary collaboration: an opportunity to exhibit his expert competence as an editor. In a letter to Percy and Mary Shelley, dated September 1821 – before Hunt travelled to Italy – he enthusiastically outlined the project that, as Shelley had previously suggested, could improve his precarious finances:

With regard to the proposed publication of Lord B., about which you talk so modestly, he has it in his power, I believe, to set up not only myself and family in our finances again, but one of the best-hearted men in the world, my brother and his. I allude, of course, to the work in which he proposes me to join him. I feel with you, quite, on the other point, as I always have. I agree to his proposal with the less scruple because I have had a good deal of experience in periodical writing, and known what the getting up of the *machine* requires, as well as the soul of it. You see I am not so modest as you are by a great deal, and do not mean to let you be so either. What? Are there not the three of us? And ought we not to have as much strength and variety as possible? We will divide the world between us, like the Triumvirate.<sup>36</sup>

After some delay, Hunt found a way – and the financial means – to join his expatriate friends abroad. Hunt’s large family embarked on a long and difficult journey by boat; having left Hampstead in November 1821, they did not arrive in Genova until June 1822. Shelley enthusiastically welcomed Hunt to Italy. The two friends spent a day talking and walking around Pisa where the Hunt family were to occupy the rooms that were situated on the ground floor of Byron’s palace.

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35 Hunt, *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*, vol. 1, 170.

36 *Ibid.*, 172–173.

The three writers immediately began to undertake their collaborative activities on the periodical, as described in a letter that Hunt wrote to his sister-in-law, Bessy, on 8th July 1822:

I shall get over for our new work, especially since Lord B. enters into it with great ardour. He has given directions to Murray to put a variety of MS. into the hands of my brother John for it, and Shelley has some excellent MS. ready also. The title, I believe, will be the *Hesperides*; – but you will have the first number shortly. You may announce the title at once, for I think it certain.<sup>37</sup>

All of the major contributors already had manuscripts at the ready for the journal – except for Hunt, who composed his original pieces, like his famous “Letters from Abroad”, during his time in Italy.<sup>38</sup> As we now know, the title soon changed from *Hesperides* to *The Liberal*, as determined by Byron.

Byron's editor John Murray was not enthusiastic about this editorial collaboration. However, Byron's contributions to *The Liberal* would not have been accommodated in Murray's publications anyway; their content would have been deemed to be far too explicitly radical.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Moore, in particular – together with John Cam Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnaird – repeatedly wrote to Byron in order to try to discourage his collaboration with Hunt on such an innovative and risky editorial enterprise in Italy; *The Liberal* was perceived as being a bad business venture even before it came to life.<sup>40</sup> However, Byron persisted in his partnership with Hunt – at least until the publication of the third issue in April 1823.

Unfortunately, just one week after Hunt had arrived in Italy, Shelley drowned on the Bay of Lerici on 8th July 1822. Thus, his fundamental

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37 Leigh Hunt, *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Thornton Hunt (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1862), vol. 1, 189.

38 Lord Byron's *The Vision of Judgment* and Shelley's translation of “May-day Night” from Goëthe's *Faust* were included in the first issue of *The Liberal* (October 1822).

39 Lord Byron's anonymous publication, *The Vision of Judgment*, was deemed libellous; John Hunt faced court once again. See William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and The Liberal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 126–134.

40 See William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and The Liberal*.

role as a mediator between “the wren and the eagle” – as he had termed the Byron-Hunt friendship from the time that they had first met during Hunt’s imprisonment – came to an abrupt end.<sup>41</sup> In September 1822, following Shelley’s death, the Hunt family, Byron and Mary Shelley left Pisa for Albaro, near Genova, where the Hunts went on to live with Mary Shelley. Four issues of *The Liberal* were published in London by John Hunt between 1822 and 1823 and were sent to the two surviving editors in Italy. The first issue was a success – despite the harsh attacks that it endured from the conservative press.<sup>42</sup>

What made *The Liberal* so unique in the context of Hunt’s vast editorial experience was the spirit of collaborative creativity in which it was produced: it saw Hunt sharing his traditional role of principal editor with Byron. Moreover, it was markedly different from the other periodicals on which Hunt had worked. It had been founded abroad, in Italy – and foregrounded literature as the main focus of the journal. The strong associations between the articles, translations, poems, short stories, and other forms of writing that were published in *The Liberal* with Italian culture, literature and politics also made this periodical exceptional in terms of its conception and output. In fact, the subtitle of the periodical nicely encapsulated this combination of literature, political commentary and the southern location of its composition – as well as the general political ideology to be found therein: *The Liberal, Verse and Prose from the South*.<sup>43</sup>

Such an experimental and radical periodical could not have been published in England. The geographical distance from Italy enabled experimentation with content and form that greatly intrigued the editors. The contributors – whose details were deliberately kept anonymous – addressed their articles and poems to a specifically British

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41 Michael Steier, *Byron, Hunt, and the Politics of Literary Engagement* (Abington: Routledge, 2020), 1.

42 See William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and The Liberal*.

43 For a discussion of the meaning of “south” in this periodical, see Jane Stabler, “Religious Liberty in the ‘Liberal’, 1822–23”, in *Branch: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web, ([https://branchcollective.org/?ps\\_articles=jane-stabler-religious-liberty-in-the-liberal](https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=jane-stabler-religious-liberty-in-the-liberal)) accessed on 01/09/2020.

audience. It is interesting to note, though, that many of the translations were preceded by the original poems in order to highlight the quality of the translation while embracing and displaying an appreciation of the language and literature of Italy. An example of this can be found in the case of Byron's translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore* which was published in the fourth issue of the periodical (July 1823). Several prefatory materials were included in each issue to introduce the works as well as to provide an overview of the general aim of the editors.

Leigh Hunt produced several pieces – including translations as well as original poetry – for each issue of *The Liberal*. As a result, he was not only the main editor but also the major contributor. Far from constituting a somewhat random literary experiment, the journal was in fact part of a more complex editorial “journey” that had been skilfully coordinated by Hunt in a very special and specific location – and under difficult personal and economic circumstances.

The role that Hunt played as editor of *The Liberal* seemed fitting in that it was a natural continuation of sorts of the work that he had already mastered as a major editor and owner of *The Examiner*. Moreover, in terms of its content, there is a clear continuity between *The Liberal*, *The Reflector* and *The Indicator*, given the focus on literature and politics in the former publications. Neither Shelley nor Byron possessed the same ability to draw people together to work toward a common intellectual and political aim. Together, though, Leigh and John Hunt – with Shelley and Byron – could recruit several contributors for the issues who would be highly suitable for the periodical in terms of both the proposed content and political orientation. As a matter of fact, important writers such as Mary Shelley, William Hazlitt, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Charles Armitage Brown and Horace Smith sent their essays, short stories, and other original minor pieces to the miscellany.

Leigh Hunt had considerable experience as a literary editor, inspired by a clear liberal agenda. In the pages of his periodicals, he had always promoted new talented individuals and poetical innovation – as demonstrated with the earlier examples of contributions from Shelley and Keats that appeared in *The Examiner* – and circulated important prose writings such as those by Lamb and Hazlitt. As aforementioned, Hunt

also used his journals as suitable publications through which he could share his own poetical works. However, while the periodical enjoyed a large, supportive readership, Hunt's liberal ideas and innovative poetics faced strong opposition from conservative readers and critics. Tory writers and publishers openly expressed their disapproval of Hunt's literary school – especially those who contributed to the *Blackwood's Magazine*, in which numerous articles from 1817 to 1819 expressed opposition to Hunt's ideas and poetics.

On a personal level, Hunt was attacked by intellectuals who reproached his insolence in criticising aristocratic ethics as well as his constant requests for financial help from his titled friends. Hunt's moral integrity was under scrutiny – especially because, as well as not belonging to high society, he had taken it upon himself to establish a liberal and heterogeneous circle of writers and artists. Consequently, in order to sustain his affinity with his readers, Hunt wrote “Letters to the Readers of the Examiner” in the winter of 1822 by way of promising that, after his arrival in Italy, his work on a new periodical would not disappoint their expectations – despite all of the “idle misrepresentations” that were already circulating in the British press.<sup>44</sup> In spite of Hunt's quarrels with Byron about personal and literary issues, *The Liberal* was an experimental project in which its leaders kept their promises in terms of content and political orientation up to the fourth and final issue.<sup>45</sup>

As with his previous periodical, in *The Liberal*, Hunt presented a combination of poetry and politics. This is the reason why, from the point of view of the Tory press, the circle of liberal intellectuals in Pisa aroused suspicion and apprehension. Conversely, from the perspective of the radical press, *The Liberal* was considered to be a primarily literary periodical – not a journal that openly or effectively engaged with political issues. *The Liberal* was meant to be a collaborative journal. As such, the associated partnership – including Byron, Shelley and the

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44 *The Examiner*, no. 748 (26 May 1822), 329–330.

45 To gain an accurate critical understanding of Hunt's and Byron's relationship – and their partnership, working on *The Liberal* – see Michael Steier, *Byron, Hunt, and the Politics of Literary Engagement* (Abington: Routledge, 2020).



Hunt brothers – and the ostensible failure of their project have been key points of focus for many critical investigations.<sup>46</sup> In particular, the majority of Romantic scholars have narrated the vicissitudes of fortune that both preceded and followed the publication of the journal, as documented in Byron's letters.<sup>47</sup> However, if we position Byron's writing and correspondence in dialogue with Hunt's and we analyse their respective works in parallel, we can read *The Liberal* from a fresh critical perspective. As Michael Steier has remarked in a recent study on the literary friendship between Hunt and Byron:

Contrary to the long-standing critical view that *The Liberal* was a collaborative "failure", new evidence, combined with a fresh look at the contents of the early numbers of the miscellany, suggests that the Byron-Hunt collaboration in Italy, despite a series of mounting domestic and private tensions, was more durable and creatively meaningful than has been generally perceived.<sup>48</sup>

As a matter of fact, from the "Preface" of the first issue, it is easy to detect the overall aim of the editors: to collaboratively embark on an endeavour to publish a new English journal abroad that promotes reform. Written by Hunt, the opening remarks of the first issue reiterate his remarks in other editorials – but in a more straightforward way and using the collective "we" subject pronoun. Hunt's ambition is to contribute, together with his fellow writers, to investigations of liberal ideals by means of both prose and poetry, enlisting Italian literature as a (if not the) major source of inspiration:

The object of our work is not political, except inasmuch as all writing now-a-days must involve something to that effect, the connexion between politics and all other subjects of interest to mankind having been discovered, never again to be done

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46 Daisy Hay, "Liberals, Liberales and The Liberal: A Reassessment", *European Romantic Review* 19, no. 4 (2008): 307–320; Michael Eberle-Sinatra, *Leigh Hunt and the London Literary Scene: A Reception History of his Major Works, 1805–1828* (London: Routledge, 2005).

47 See Eleanor M. Gate, "Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, and Mary Shelley: The Long Goodbye", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, no. 35 (1986): 149–167; William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and The Liberal*.

48 Michael Steier, *Byron, Hunt, and the Politics of Literary Engagement* (Abington: Routledge, 2020), 165.

away. We wish to do our work quietly, if people will let us, – to contribute our liberalities in the shape of Poetry, Essays, Tales, Translations, and other amenities [...]. Italian literature, in particular, will be a favourite subject with us; and so was German and Spanish to have been, till we lost the accomplished Scholar and Friend who was to share our task; but perhaps we may be able to get a supply of the scholarship, though not of the friendship. It may be our good fortune to have more than one foreign correspondent, who will be an acquisition to the reader.<sup>49</sup>

Here, Hunt pays tribute to his lost friend, Shelley, whose contribution can only be seen explicitly in the first issue. The inclusive spirit of the miscellany with regard to other European literature as well as foreign correspondents meant that Hunt had a wide editorial perspective that was not limited to works or writers of a strictly British literary background. When compared with his previous periodicals, in which Hunt had already promoted interconnections between political and social issues and literary works, in *The Liberal*, Hunt presents the reading public with a larger scope, encompassing a new kind of liberalism and a European rather than a British perspective.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, *The Liberal* boasted an extraordinary variety of genres and styles: a formula that had already been employed by Hunt in his earlier publications. As previously referenced, the original aim of the project was to convey – through literature and satire – the British spirit of liberalism from Italy. In the pages of *The Liberal*, one may discern the geographical displacement of its contributors, who had inevitably reinvented their identities by means of appropriating the Italian cultural system. As Maria Schoina asserts, “the Romantics’ positioning in the Italian scene of their day by means of a rhetoric of biculturalism,

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49 *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, 2 vols. (London: John Hunt, 1822–23), 1: vii.

50 For a discussion on the meanings of “Liberal” and “Liberalism” in this context, see Daisy Hay, “Liberals, Liberales and The Liberal: A Reassessment”, *European Romantic Review* 19, no. 4 (2008): 307–320; Jonathan Gross, “Byron and The Liberal: Periodical as Political Posture”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 471–485; Jane Stabler, “Religious Liberty in the ‘Liberal’, 1822–23”, *Branch: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web.; and Franca Dellarosa’s essay entitled “Cockney Imprint: The Liberal and its Reception, 1822” in this publication.

distinction and insider knowledge figures identity as the product of a sophisticated cultural interrelation and connection".<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, Leigh Hunt's editorial work and his literary outputs afford insights into a bicultural sensibility, demonstrating a deep understanding of Italian culture and literature. In his contributions to *The Liberal*, Hunt asserts his aesthetic ideals and his enduring interest in the social as well as the natural environment by means of various genres. Notably, in his "Letters from Abroad" – published as a series across issues – Hunt is attentive to the interactions between people and their surroundings; it is a bond, he contends, that ought to be based on sympathy and responsibility.<sup>52</sup> The exploration of the urban landscape becomes a journey into memory, culture, achievement, progress and beauty; for this reason, Morrison defines Hunt as one of environmentalism's unacknowledged legislators.<sup>53</sup>

For Hunt, Italian places and people represented an attractive and alternative spatiality that could be imagined and reinvented for the British audience in accordance with his personal sensibility. In his "Letters from Abroad", for example, Hunt registers the power of space and place which is infused by Italian culture and art and transformed by his poetical imagination into something special and unique. In "Letter I. – Pisa", Hunt narrates his impressions while he approaches the city as an aesthetic traveller in accordance with the rules of the picturesque, but also from the point of view of an "enthusiastic admirer of Italy, who

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51 Maria Schoina, *Romantic 'Anglo-Italians': Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle* (Farnham: Ashgate 2009), 153.

52 Published respectively from the first issue of *The Liberal* to the fourth and last: "Letter I – Pisa"; "Letter II – Genoa"; "Letter III – Italy" (addressed to Hunt's friend, Novello); "Letter IV – To C." (unknown addressee). Some of the content of these letters can also be found in later works such as *Byron and his Contemporaries* (1828) and Hunt's *Autobiography* (1850). For a discussion of these essays, see Maria Schoina, "Leigh Hunt's 'Letters from Abroad' and the 'Anglo-Italian' Discourse of *The Liberal*", *Romanticism* 12, no. 2 (2006): 115–125; Tim Webb's essay entitled "'Letters from Abroad': Leigh Hunt and the Traveller's Epistle" in this publication.

53 Morrison is here rephrasing P. B. Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) and his definition of the role of the romantic poet. See Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra (gen. ed.), cit. Vol. 3, xiv.

is in Tuscany for the first time”, and who shares with his reader a truly sensorial experience:

What renders Pisa interesting now, and will continue to render it so as long as it exists, is its being left to a comparative solitude, and its containing one of the most singular, and many of the most ancient specimens of the arts, in Italy. [...] Let the reader imagine a small white city, with a tower also white, leaning very distinctly in the distance at one end of it, trees on either side, and blue mountains for the back-ground. Such is the first sight of Pisa, as the traveller sees it in coming from Leghorn.<sup>54</sup>

Hunt was a keen observer of Italian manners, language and colours. He displayed a comparative disposition that inevitably suggested English omniscience and superiority while reaffirming his liberalism. Hunt refused to despair or to surrender to any despotic power and continued to fight for intellectual and political freedom from outside England. Italy enabled him to displace his geographical location and employ Italian literary and cultural references so as to discuss domestic affairs and the state of art in Britain. Commenting on classical music to his friend Novello in “Letter III – Italy”, Hunt infuses an artistic conversation with some powerful political observations, deploring the political subjugation of the Italian people to a foreign power:

I mean to shew you how it was that they [Italians] were prepared to undervalue Mozart; and I think I can now explain to you, in one word, how it is that they contrive to render themselves deaf to the rest of his merits, and the inspiration which he himself drank at an Italian source. Mozart was German. I do not mean simply that he was a German in music; but he was a German by birth. The Germans in Italy, the lords over Italian freedom and the Italian soil, trumpet his superiority over Italian composers; and however right may be, at all events with regard to modern ones, this is enough to make the Italians hate him. It mortifies them the more, because they know that he is an exception to the general dullness of their conquerors.<sup>55</sup>

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54 Leigh Hunt, “Letter I. – Pisa.” from “Letters from abroad” in *The Liberal*, Vol. I, 1822, 99.

55 Leigh Hunt, “Letter III. – Italy.” from “Letters from abroad” in *The Liberal*, Vol. II, 1823, 49–50.

It is true that, in his writings on foreign art and literature, Hunt included political messages against despotic power or tyranny, referring to his domestic situation, in order to promote a process of cultural as well as political education in general terms. As Kucich and Cox convincingly assert, Hunt believed that: "one might not be able to change the government in the next election but one could educate the next generation to have a broader, more liberal view". Despite the fact that Wordsworth and Southey in particular supported a conservative government, Hunt and his circle of literary friends believed that "a counter poetics dedicated to imaginative empathy, social freedom, and political progress could accelerate the march of reform".<sup>56</sup>

Hunt was reconsidering the principles of his predecessors and, in particular, those writers and intellectuals who had fought against oppression – such as John Milton in the early modern period. Meanwhile, he also dedicated much attention to his contemporaries who, like Robert Southey, were poet laureates and represented the literary establishment. Through the pages of *The Liberal*, during the years that he spent abroad, Hunt promoted Italian writers such as Alfieri, Ariosto and Tasso who, in their writings, exalted principles of liberty and freedom. In fact, in *The Liberal*, Hunt includes passages from Italian literature, like Alfieri's verses or other minor writers, in their original forms before providing his own translations. His intent appears to have been to share, with an English audience, a true "taste" of Italian culture that could be new to a general public, embedded in his descriptions of a cultural, sensorial and political journey. In adopting this approach, Hunt united the interests of Britain with those of Europe: a will to universal progress in the cause of liberty. Influencing public opinion was the only means of overthrowing despotism and promoting the need for a progressive future.

Following the last issue of *The Liberal*, Hunt reassessed and revised his perceptions of his Italian experiences in other publications. His new essays were inspired by his initial writings as well as by the latest episodes in his life abroad. Following the mixed – often controversial – overall reception of *The Liberal* and its failure to make a profit, the relationship between Hunt and Byron became strained. When financial

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56 Morrison and Eberle-Sinatra, lii.

difficulties arose, they decided to part ways. Byron concisely described Hunt's circumstances at the time as follows:

I have done all I can for Leigh Hunt – since he came here – but it is almost useless – his wife is ill – his six children not very tractable and in the affairs of this world he himself is a child. The death of Shelley left them totally aground – and I could not see them in such a state without using the common feelings of humanity – & what means were in my power to set them afloat again.<sup>57</sup>

In July 1823, Byron left Italy for Greece, Mary Shelley set off for England and, in September, the Hunts relocated to Florence where they remained, “living in [a] primitive manner”, until their return to England two years later.<sup>58</sup> Hunt was still struggling financially. This time, his friend Charles Armitage Brown – who was himself living in Florence – helped Hunt with his economic difficulties. Hunt's literary output from this period included poetical works and essays such as “The Wishing Cup” papers that were published in *The Examiner* between 1824 and 1825. The Hunts left Italy in September 1825.

The proposal for another publication came during the summer of 1823 while the fourth and final issue of *The Liberal* was in the process of being published (30th July 1823). While Byron was planning his escape to Greece, Hunt, still based in Italy, turned his energies toward *The Literary Examiner*: a new journal that had been established by his brother in order to offset the low, limited income generated by *The Liberal*. The rationale for offering a new periodical was to try to regain popularity by means of the well-established tradition of issuing a weekly publication: one that had brought the Hunts success in the past. *The Literary Examiner* would accompany *The Examiner* in the form of a review of books, following the structure of the preceding *Indicator*.

Hunt was now writing from Florence and, off to a promising start, he provided *The Literary Examiner* with additional material. Italy, as a geographical space, was central to Hunt's articles – as it had previously

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57 Citation from Nicholas Roe, “Hunt, (James Henry) Leigh (1784–1859)”, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Available online at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14195>, accessed on 01/09/2020.

58 *Ibid.*

been in *The Liberal* – as was Italian poetry. The review was successful, though many critics read it without real interest (Mary Shelly included). When Hunt's illness worsened in mid-September, the journal rapidly declined; the final issue appeared in December of that year.

In conclusion, Hunt's role as editor of and contributor to *The Liberal* reflects his literary corpus as a whole, even when considering the fact that it was a collaborative venture with co-editors as well as its specifically Italian context. Accordingly, we should avoid regarding Hunt's role as the editor of *The Liberal* in isolation from his previous and subsequent literary activities. On the contrary, this miscellany reaffirms Hunt's unwavering commitment to the promotion of literature as a means of reforming society – in Britain as well as in Europe. We should not, as such, consider *The Liberal* to be a failure as it has been labelled for decades. Instead, we ought to acknowledge it as a powerful instrument that, infused with English liberalism and Italian culture, disseminated ideas of reform and social equality: ones that were shared by many writers of the Romantic period – Leigh Hunt *in primis*.

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