

John Wilson¹
'The Cockney School of Poetry. No. VIII. Hunt's
Bacchus in Tuscany'²
(XVIII, August 1825, pp. 155–60)

In 1822, Leigh Hunt left England for Italy, where he hoped to join the Shelleys and Byron and to contribute to their planned periodical, the *Liberal*. Hunt had relinquished the editorship of the *Examiner* in 1821 but continued to write articles for it even after his departure from England. The delays imposed by the post, however, meant that he was less able to write political commentary and was increasingly required to turn to more general or literary topics. The *Liberal* didn't last long after Shelley's death in 1822, and Hunt and his family returned overland to England shortly after this review appeared, in 1825. While he was in Italy, Hunt published two books of poetry: *Ultra-Crepidarius: A Satire on William Gifford* (1823) and the free translation *Bacchus in Tuscany: A Dithyrambic Poem, from the Italian of Redi* (1825). The latter poem is a light-hearted (indeed light-headed) monologue about the virtues of different kinds of wine, spoken by Bacchus, the god of wine, mirth and revelry.

Hunt's departure from England did not save him from the wrath of *Blackwood's*, although the Cockney School attacks were not quite so frequent as they had been between 1817 and 1819, when Keats and Shelley were still alive. By the time the eighth numbered article in the Cockney School series appeared in August 1825, *Blackwood's* had created a vocabulary for invective against the Cockneys which it could draw on with extreme economy. The slightest

1. John Gibson Lockhart had been the mainstay of the Cockney School articles that appeared over the signature of Z., but John Wilson was increasingly taking control of the *Noctes Ambrosianae* by this time, and, since this article adopts the style of the *Noctes*, it is appropriate that this review is attributed to Wilson. Strout confirms the attribution from evidence in the correspondence between William Blackwood and his son Alexander about Professor Wilson's articles. On 1 July 1825, William Blackwood, writing from London, tells his son, 'I am not sure but what the Professor's article on Leigh Hunt would open the Number very well'. On 6 July, Alexander in a letter to his father mentions the Professor's article on the Cockney School.

2. Edited by Tom Mole.

mention of yellow breeches, tea-drinking, pimples or Lisson Grove could trigger a series of associations running through the earlier Cockney School articles that increased the cumulative effect of the assaults on Hunt and his circle. Having built up the image of Hunt as a sentimental tea-drinker, the eighth Cockney School essay pretends to be astonished and alarmed at his conversion to the alcoholic pursuits of Bacchus. While it draws on the image of Hunt concocted in earlier articles, however, this review also departs somewhat from the earlier instalments by including elements from the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Having written a drinking song, Hunt is now welcomed to the drinking circle in Ambrose's Tavern, where he entertains the company with his singing – although characteristically he commits some social slips. First, he reveals his ignorance of the protocols of Edinburgh drinking sessions, and secondly, his bawdy verse embarrasses even *Blackwood's* resident hard-drinking rake, Morgan Odoherly.

Hunt himself does not appear to have thought very highly of *Bacchus in Tuscany*, and he did not reprint it in full in later collected editions of his works. For this reason, quotations here are identified by page references to the first edition as well as by line numbers. In an edition of his poems from 1849, Hunt reprinted a few selected passages from the poem and prefaced them with a note, explaining that 'The Author has translated the whole of this popular piece of Italian pleasantry ... but even in the original it is perhaps too long, especially as a monologue ... and the local nature of the subjects and the allusions renders it, for the most part, of little interest to a foreign reader'. He went on to defend himself against charges of Cockney versification by asserting, 'The reader will be good enough to bear in mind, that strange compound epithets and other audacities of style are among the privileges of Dithyrambic poetry'.¹

1. Leigh Hunt, *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt* (London, Edward Moxon, 1849), p. 209.

The Cockney School of Poetry

No. VIII

Bacchus in Tuscany. By Leigh Hunt. London, 1825.

MR LEIGH HUNT and we have been so long separated by cruel time and space, whom the gods will not annihilate so as to make two lovers happy, that our meeting now is of the warmest kind; nor would it be right, if it were possible, to restrain the ardour of our friendship. Heaven knows, that any little disagreements that have ever occurred between us, were attributable solely to his own petulance, and that he has always found us ready to forgive and forget. Mr Hunt is well known to be an amiable man, in spite of his Cockneyisms; and, for a long series of Numbers, we did our best to cure him of that distemper. We purged him – we bled him – we blistered him¹ – we bandaged him – but all would not do – we could not reach the seat of the disease. It was in his blood, his bone, and his brain; and to have cured, it would have been absolutely necessary to have killed him, which our feelings would not permit. We therefore let him alone, and ordered him to Italy.² He obeyed our mandate with laudable alacrity; and from the following letter to his brother John, it would seem that our interesting patient is in the way of convalescence: –

“MY DEAR JOHN, – I cannot send you, as I could wish, a pipe of Tuscan wine, or a hamper of Tuscan sunshine, which is much the same thing; so in default of being able to do this, I do what I can, and send you, for a new year’s present, a translation of a Tuscan bacchanal.

“May it give you a hundredth part of the elevation which you have often caused to the heart of

“Your affectionate Brother,

“LEIGH HUNT.

“*Florence, January 1, 1825.*”³

This is written in a pleasant vein; yet, strange to say, it makes us melancholy. We anticipate the most serious consequences to Mr Hunt’s ultimate health, from the sudden and violent change of regimen indicated in this epistle dedicatory.

For many years – indeed during the whole of his youth and prime of manhood – Mr Hunt lived on the poorest diet. When editor of the *Examiner*, he used to publish a weekly bulletin of the state of his bowels, which, we are sorry to say, were almost always weak and sadly out of order. Contrary to our earnest and urgent entreaties, he would drink nothing stronger than saloop.⁴ He absolutely drenched his stomach with that beverage; occasionally, to be sure, he had recourse to the weakest of teas – nor in hottest weather did he not indulge in a limited allowance of lemonade. But it is sufficiently correct for general

purposes like ours, to say that he abjured all potent potations⁵ – that his liquids were thin and attenuated to a degree – and that nothing generous was suffered to mingle with his daily drink. His solids were equally unsatisfactory. A mere wafer of fatless ham, between the finest shives⁶ of bread, constituted a breakfast – of the forenoon abstinences of Lisson Grove,⁷ a lunch would have been a ludicrous misnomer – at the sight of a sirloin, he would have immediately fainted away beside the dinner-board – and an ounce of tripe would to him have been a heavy supper. These are all matters of private concern; but our amiable patient endeavoured to create for them a deep public interest. He made frequent appeal to the people of England on his temperance, and often concluded a leading article on the state of Europe, by information concerning the state of his own stomach, which for the present shall be left to the reader's imagination. Kings knew when he had a cough – the People were summoned to behold the wry face with which he took a purge or a bolus emetic⁸ – and both Houses of Parliament were told to suspend their deliberations when he moved an adjournment to the garden. Many, indeed, were the daily, as well as weekly, periodicals, which he at that time edited; and it did not require a person of our perspicacity to see, that the King of Cockney-Land was fast hurrying to an untimely grave. “O for a blast of that dread horn,”⁹ to warn him from such deleterious diet! But, Cassandra-like,¹⁰ we prophesied in vain, ruin, shame, expatriation, and death to this great Trojan. What got we for our truly Christian pains, but infatuated abuse? Cup after cup of saloop did he continue to swallow in defiance of us – his inspired oracle. With a libation of unmixed water from the New-River¹¹ did he devote us to the infernal gods – or, with long and loud gulps of thrice-distilled bohea,¹² desecrate us to the Furies. With an air of offended majesty, that was meant to wither us into annihilation, he drew on his yellow breeches till their amplitude embraced his regal seat of honour, and perking up his little finger,¹³ that glittered with a crisp brooch containing a lock of Milton's hair¹⁴ (congenial spirit), he ever and anon for our poor sakes cast Scotland with all her pines into the sea. Still our affection for our unhappy patient was unabated. We, Z., were called in; and that severe practitioner sent him first to Coventry, then to Pisa, and finally to Florence.¹⁵

“In medio tutissimus ibis,”¹⁶ were the last words that Z. addressed to his majesty on his embarkation for Italy. How miserably that wisest advice has been neglected too clearly appears from this volume! Always in extremes, Mr Hunt must needs now tipple all day long. “Wine – wine – generous wine,”¹⁷ is his waking and sleeping war-cry! His slokening¹⁸ slogan! What a change, from a four-cup-o-tea-man into a three-bottle toper¹⁹ o' strong drink! He that used to sip like a grasshopper, now swills like a hippopotamus. Instead of “praying for another dish of saloop,” he calls with an oath for a bumper of “Monte Pulciano, the king of all wine.”²⁰ Hear, Cockney-land! the Audacious Apostate.

"Cups of chocolate,
 Aye, or tea,
 Are not medicines
 Made for me.
 I would sooner take to poison,
 Than a single cup set eyes on
 Of that bitter and guilty stuff ye
 Talk of by the name of coffee!
 Let the Arabs and the Turks
 Count it 'mongst their cruel works:
 Foe of mankind, black and turbid,
 Let the throats of slaves absorb it.
 Down in Tartarus,
 Down in Erebus,
 'Twas the detestable Fifty invented it:
 The Furies then took it,
 To grind and to cook it,
 And to Proserpine all three presented it.
 If the Mussulman in Asia
 Doats on a beverage so unseemly,
 I differ with the man extremely."²¹

Was there, in the whole history of men or angels, ever such another shocking abandonment of principle! Here is a king, who, during a long and prosperous reign, had ruled over Cockney-land according to those principles which seated him on the throne of those realms. And now, hear it, O Heaven! and give ear, thou Earth!²² He breaks through every tie held most sacred within sound of Bow-Bell,²³ abjures all that he ever gloried in, and, not satisfied with forgetting the objects once dearest to him in life, bids them all go to hell together!

"Down in Tartarus,
 Down in Erebus,"²⁴

and sends after their descent into those dismal regions a shower of curses, to embitter their final fall and irretrievable ruin. What is the worst conduct of the Holy Alliance to this! What a crash among the crockery! cups and saucers, poories²⁵ and tea-pots, muffin-plates and sugar-basins, all kicked to the bottomless pit in one undistinguishable overthrow! If there be any public spirit, any patriotism, any independence, any freedom in that Land, the present King's crown is not worth three weeks' purchase. Where sleepest thou, O Tims the Avenger?²⁶ We are willing to pawn our pen that thou wilt not suffer this sacrilegious despot long to trample upon the charities of life.

“I would sooner take to poison,
Than a single cup set eyes on,
Of that bitter and guilty stuff ye
Talk of by the name of coffee!”²⁷

Monster of iniquity! are you not afraid that the bolt of heaven will strike you dead in your impiety? Yet mark how, in spite of, and unknown to, himself, he abjures the dearest principles in the choicest language of Cockneydom! He curses the coffee that he drew in with this mother's milk, in language that proves his lineal descent from King Lud;²⁸ and avows his preference of poison, in terms redolent of saloop, the most innoxious of liquids that gurgle from the fountains of Cheapside.²⁹

Nothing is so tiresome in criticism as dwelling too long on one key. Let us therefore change the key, and strike a different note. What think you, gentle reader, of Leigh Hunt, who so long enacted the character of “Apollar in Cockaigne,”³⁰ undertaking that of “Bacchus in Tuscany?” Must he not be a perfect Jack of all trades? In good truth, Leigh Hunt is never in his proper element, unless he be a Heathen God. We remember he once performed Jupiter Tonans,³¹ but his thunder was so poor that it would not have soured small beer. As he shook his locks, his wig fell off, a disaster which convulsed Olympus. His mode of handling the eagle betrayed a most ungodlike timidity of his talons, and his behaviour to Hebe, “with such an air,”³² was about as celestial as that of a natty Bagman to the barmaid of the Hen and Chickens.³³ As he swore by Styx, his face was as prim as that of an apprentice to a button-maker making an affidavit,³⁴ and in the character of Cloud-compeller, he could not have been backed against ODoherty with a cigar.³⁵ In Bacchus he is equally droll. Instead of rolling on in a car drawn by tigers, or lions, or panthers,³⁶ Leigh makes his entrée in a sort of shandry-dan,³⁷ lugged along by a brace of donkeys. What a conqueror of India! Lord have mercy upon him, he could with difficulty cross the kennel.³⁸ As well might the poor starved apothecary³⁹ assert himself to be Sir John Falstaff. Why, he cannot even look rosy about the gills. He cannot show an “honest face.” That is a most ineffectual stagger. But, hear! hear!

“God's my life, what glorious claret!
Blessed be the ground that bare it!
'Tis Avignon. Don't say 'a flask of it,'
Into my soul I pour 'a cask of it!'
Artiminos finer still,
Under a tun there's no having one's fill:
A tun! – a tun!
The deed is done.”⁴⁰

We much fear that Mr Hunt never was drunk; and if we are right in our apprehension, pray what right has he to enact Bacchus in Tuscany? Is he not,

Adjutant,⁴¹ shamming Abraham,⁴² pretending to be bouzy,⁴³ in the following dismal chaunt of merriment?

[Quotes Hunt's *Bacchus in Tuscany*, ll. 100–33, pp. 7–8, beginning 'Ciccio d'Andrea himself one day, / 'Mid his thunders of eloquence bursting away, / Sweet in his gravity, / Fierce in his suavity, / Dared in my own proper presence to talk, / Of that stuff of Aversa, half acid and chalk', and ending 'And 'midst our bellying bottles and vast flasks / There shall be present at our tasks / For lofty arbiter (and witness gay too) / My gentle Marquis there of Oliveto'. In this passage, Bacchus vents his ire against those who enthuse over wines he does not like, but says that they may forget their differences after drinking a few bottles of wine together.]

Thou pimped spirit of Drunken Barnaby!⁴⁴ What thinkest thou of this Bacchanal, nay, of this Bacchus? Is he not enough to set the table in a snore?⁴⁵ However, let him drivel on, and then sconce him⁴⁶ in a tumbler of salt and water.

"Let me purify my mouth
In an holy cup o' the south;
In a golden pitcher let me
Head and ears for comfort get me,
And drink of the wine of the vine benign,
That sparkles warm in Sansovine;
Or of that vermilion charmer
And heart warmer,
Which brought up in Tregonzano
An old stony giggiano,
Blooms so bright and lifts the head so
Of the toasters of Arezzo.
'Twill be haply still more up,
Sparkling, piquant, quick i' the cup,
If, O page, adroit and steady,
In thy tuck'd-up choral surplice,
Thou infusest that Albano,
That Vaiano,
Which engoldens and empurples
In the grounds there of my Redi."⁴⁷

Come now, Hunt, off with your salt and water. – What! will you rebel against the chair?⁴⁸ you have been sconced for an hour's consummate and unprovoked drivelling, which you are pleased to call drunkenness; but that won't go down in such a company as this – so – that's a good boy – a little wider – that will do!

See how it runs down his gizzern,
 His gizzern, his gizzern,
 See how it runs down his gizzern,
 Ye ho, ye ho, ye ho!!⁴⁹

Now that you have submitted yourself with a tolerably good grace to lawful authority, O Bacchus in Tuscany, another strain!

“What wine is that I see? Ah,
 Bright as a John Dory:
 It should be Malvagia,
 Trebbia's praise and glory.
 It is, i' faith, it is:
 Push it nearer, pri'thee;
 And let me, thou fair bliss,
 Fill this magnum with thee.
 I'faith, it's a good wine,
 And much agrees with me.
 Here's a health to thee and thy line,
 Prince of Tuscany.”⁵⁰

Bravo! Bravissimo! Encore! Encore! still a small smell of saloop – but very fair – very fair for a novice. Go on, my dear Leigh. Never mind the Aspirates.⁵¹ Come, be classical.

[Quotes Hunt's *Bacchus in Tuscany*, ll. 384–414, pp. 23–4, beginning 'To the sound of the cymbal, / And sound of the crotalus, / Girt with your Nebrides, / Ho, ye Bassarides, / Up, up, and mingle me / Cups of that purple grape', and ending 'Let the villagers raise o'er us / Clappings to our chorus; / And all around resound / Talabalács, tamburins, and horns, / And pipes, the bag-pipes, and the things you know, boys, / That cry out Ho-boys!'. In this passage, Bacchus calls for more wine, and for singing of love songs and songs of revelry.]

Bacchus! my worthy fellow, have you forgot Ariadne?⁵²

“The ruby dew that stills
 Upon Valdarno's hills,
 Touches the sense with odour so divine,
 That not the violet,
 With lips with morning wet,
 Utters such sweetness from her little shrine.
 When I drink of it, I rise
 Over the hill that makes poets wise,
 And in my voice and in my song,
 Grow so sweet and grow so strong,
 I challenge Phœbus with his delphic eyes.

Give me then, from a golden measure,
The ruby that is my treasure, my treasure;
And like to the lark that goes maddening above,
I'll sing songs of love!
Songs will I sing more moving and fine,
Than the bubbling and quaffing of Gersole wine.
Then the rote shall go round,
And the cymbals kiss,
And I'll praise Ariadne,
My beauty, my bliss!
I'll sing of her tresses,
I'll sing of her kisses;
Now, now it increases,
The fervour increases,
The fervour, the boiling and venomous bliss."⁵³

Hush – halt. You are bringing the blush into the virgin cheek of ODoherty.
Change the measure into something more chaste.

"He who drinks water,
I wish to observe,
Gets nothing from me;
He may eat it and starve,
Whether it's well, or whether it's fountain,
Or whether it comes foaming white from the mountain,
I cannot admire it,
Nor ever desire it:
'Tis a fool, and a madman, and impudent wretch,
Who now will live in a nasty ditch,
And then grow proud, and full of his whims,
Comes playing the devil and cursing his brims,
And swells, and tumbles, and bothers his margins,
And ruins the flowers, although they be virgins.
Moles and piers, were it not for him,
Would last for ever,
If they're built clever;
But no – it's all one with him – sink or swim.
Let the people yclept Mameluke
Praise the Nile without any rebuke;
Let the Spaniards praise the Tagus;
I cannot like either, even for negus.
If any follower of mine
Dares so far forget his wine,
As to drink an atom of water,
Here's the hand should devote him to slaughter.

Let your meagre doctorlings
 Gather herbs and such like things;
 Fellows, that with streams and stills
 Think to cure all sorts of ills.
 I've no faith in their washery,
 Nor think it worth a glance of my eye:
 Yes, I laugh at them for that matter,
 To think how they, with their heaps of water,
 Petrify their skulls profound,
 And make 'em all so thick and so round,
 That Viviani, with all his mathematics,
 Would fail to square the circle of their attics.

Away with all water,
 Wherever I come;
 I forbid it ye, gentlemen,
 All and some;
 Lemonade water,
 Jessamine water,
 Our tavern knows none of 'em,
 Water's a hum.

Jessamine makes a pretty crown;
 But as a drink, 'twill never go down.
 All your hydromels and flips
 Come not near these prudent lips.
 All your sippings and sherbets,
 And a thousand such pretty sweets,
 Let your mincing ladies take 'em,
 And fops whose little fingers ache 'em.
 Wine! Wine! is your only drink;
 Grief never dares to look at the brink;
 Six times a-year to be mad with wine,
 I hold it no shame, but a very good sign.
 I, for my part, take my can,
 Solely to act like a gentleman."⁵⁴

Why, Bacchus, your enemy Somnus⁵⁵ has been in the room all the time you were singing. He has this moment gone to the door; but give us another stave,⁵⁶ and there can be no doubt of his speedy return.

[Quotes a passage from Hunt's *Bacchus in Tuscany*, ll. 803–60, pp. 46–50, beginning 'Hallo! What phenomenon's this, / That makes my head turn round? / I'faith I think it is / A turning of the ground!' in which Bacchus, now rather unsteady on his feet, takes to the water in a boat for a pleasure cruise. He repeatedly tries to propose a toast to Ariadne, but breaks off to

encourage the rowers not to slacken their efforts. He urges Ariadne to 'sing me a little, and play to me too / On the mandola, the coocooroocoo', and the quotation ends with the following toast.]

I'll give thee a toas –
I'll give thee a toast – and then, you know, you
Shall give me one too.
Arianeeny, my quainty, my queeny,
Sing me, you ro –
Sing me, you ro –
Sing me, you rogue, and play to me, do,
On the viò –
On the viòla, the coocooroocoo,
The coocooroocoo,
The coocooroocoo.
On the viòla, the coocooroocoo.⁵⁷

*Enter MR AMBROSE.*⁵⁸

Mr Ambrose. I beg pardon, sir, – didn't you ring the bell?

North. Yes, Ambrose. Take Bacchus in Tuscany to the Cherry Chamber. You see that he has reached an era of the highest civilisation.

Bac. On the viòla, the coocooroocoo!
The coocooroocoo,
The coocooroocoo,
On the viòla, the coocooroocoo!

ODoherty. Damn the ninny – more oysters.⁵⁹