

Leigh Hunt's "World of Books": Bibliomania and the Fancy

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'Mere authors', complains William Hazlitt in 'On the Conversation of Lords' (1826), are regarded by the press as 'dull, illiterate, poor creatures, a sort of pretenders to taste and elegance, and adventurers in intellect'. Unless, that is, they are 'also of gentle blood'.¹

Hazlitt's grievances reflect discussions on the nature of authorship and professionalism found in much early-nineteenth-century periodical writing. Although, as Paul Keen argues, 'the debate about the legitimacy of professional authorship (as opposed to the more genteel model of the amateur man of letters) had largely been won' by the end of the eighteenth century, answers to the question of 'what literary professionalism *meant*: what forms of writing for money were acceptable and even laudable as opposed to the widely reviled' remained unresolved.² Vitriol continued to be directed at writers from the lower-professional classes like Keats, Hunt, and Hazlitt himself, in articles such as the *Blackwood's* 'Cockney School' series. Their version of professional authorship was considered, by some critics, to be presumptuous and overly commercial. 'Mere authors' were paradoxically figured as both ill-educated dilettantes and mercenary hacks. *Blackwood's* 'Z' for instance, imagines Leigh Hunt in the business of compiling *The Examiner* '[sat] at Hampstead with his pen in his hand, from year's end to year's end' engrossed in 'the train of his sweet fancies'. Writing is figured as Hunt's constant occupation, but an idle one. His pen produces only solipsism: 'he never yet published a single Number of the Examiner paper—a single sonnet or song—of which one half at least was not, in some shape or other, dedicated to himself'.³ The image is one of authorial posture and egotistical self-promotion. Hunt poses 'with his pen in his hand', but fails to write anything with it, too busy is he with his 'sweet fancies'. This is neither

productive labour nor original creation. As Kim Wheatley notes, '[Z] invariably visualizes [Hunt] not at work but at leisure, enjoying an absurdly scaled-down yet pretentious version of an aristocratic social life'.⁴ Hazlitt's point is borne out. Without 'gentle blood' Hunt is thought of as parodying, not only an 'aristocratic social life', but an 'aristocratic' claim to authorship.

Hunt would have challenged the notion that 'taste', 'elegance', and 'intellect' were the exclusive preserve of patrician authors. As he states in an 1816 letter to Byron, 'intellectual rank' should come 'before the other subordinate one'.⁵ Despite this belief in an egalitarian republic of letters, aspects of his work suggest that he too was troubled by the possibility of being little more than a fanciful pretender to the title of author. This self-consciousness, I argue, influenced his conceptualisation of the aesthetic category most often associated with the Cockney poets, that of the Fancy. My aim in this article is to chart previously underexamined connections between the discourse of the Fancy and issues of professionalisation in the period. Such comparisons suggest that current, prevalent conceptions of the former category might be further nuanced and that there is much to be gained from considering the Fancy in terms other than as mere corollary to the Imagination.

In recent decades, particularly with the publication of Jeffrey Robinson's *Unfettering Poetry* (2006), definitions of the Fancy have again come to prominence in Romantic studies. Its perceived inferiority to the Imagination and secondary placing in the hierarchy of the period's poetics has been challenged. But there are more to definitions of the term than the Imagination/Fancy dichotomy. It is reductive to think of the Fancy in poetic terms alone. Within the Romantic period itself the word could variously refer to: a reverie; a delusion; a creative composition; a preference; or a group united by a particular preference. Boxing enthusiasts and book collectors, for example, were both collectively known as the Fancy. When discussing Hunt's conceptualisation of the term, it is important to take into account

these parallel meanings. In *Imagination and Fancy* (1844), a poetic treatise published late in his career, he notes the difficulty of defining the word, especially in relation to the Imagination:

[Imagination and Fancy] were formerly identical, or used as such; and neither is the best that might be found. The term Imagination is too confined: often too material. It presents too invariably the idea of a solid body; – of ‘images’ in the sense of the plaster-cast cry about the streets. Fancy, on the other hand, while it means nothing but a spiritual image or apparition (Φαντασμα, appearance, *phantom*), has rarely that freedom from visibility which is one of the highest privileges of imagination.⁶

Imagination and Fancy is uncomfortable with its own terminology. The poetic faculties it describes exist in a complex network of associations that the work ultimately fails to untangle. They remain problematically dualistic, referring to seemingly exclusive states: the ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual’. Like the ‘plaster-casts’ – reproductions of marble busts and sculptures – cried up in the streets, they are inauthentic models of the original concepts to which they refer. They are at once too ‘solid’ and not ‘solid’ enough. Critical consensus figures Hunt as a poet of the Fancy, but his Fancy is not solely poetic, nor is it as consistent as this description might suggest. Robinson argues that Hunt advocated a poetics of the Fancy based on its convivial and outward looking sociality.⁷ But Hunt’s Fancy, to my mind, is not straightforwardly outward looking. Beneath his cheerful advocacy lurks a deeper discomfort over the instability and paradoxical nature of the Fancy itself. His work reflects wider cultural concerns, not just about modes of poetic expression, but also about a range of fanciful pursuits and the extent to which the word’s semantic instability impacted on the writing of its promoters and detractors alike.

Hunt's poetics are strongly influenced by his other, less poetic, fancies: his preferences; his delusions; his *phantoms*; and, in particular, his book collecting. The idea of collecting is embedded in numerous definitions of the Fancy. Julie Ellison argues that poetical definitions included 'the process of intellectual sorting – arrangement, classification, and comparison'; while Robinson repeatedly references contemporary accounts that speak of the faculty as 'a gatherer of "raw materials"'.⁸ It is apt, therefore, that the Fancy was also used as a collective noun for book enthusiasts. It not only reflects bibliomaniacs' penchant for 'intellectual sorting' – collecting and categorising books – but the dual nature of the book itself. Like the faculty of the Fancy, books blur subject-object distinctions; their status as material objects and the vessels of immaterial ideas mirrors the paradoxical nature of the Fancy which 'tends to define the lyric subject less insistently, encouraging a continuum between subject and object, or a loss of distinction between them' (*Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics*, 175). Robinson's point that within 'fanciphobic thinking', "'reality" does not belong to the world of the Fancy, even though the Fancy is seen as dwelling in the world of objects', is a paradox equally applicable to the world of books (*Unfettering Poetry*, 28). The act of book collecting stood astride 'the world of objects' and the world of the imagination. It was considered both a foolish pastime and a social good. Hermetic bibliomaniacs might not have been personally active within the public sphere, but the libraries they assembled often contributed to or helped to establish the numerous national collections founded in this period.⁹ A similar combination of materiality and insubstantiality, of inclusive and exclusive social aims, makes Hunt's bibliophilia a useful lens through which to consider his authorial anxieties and definitions of the Fancy more generally.

Hunt's bibliophilia has most frequently been discussed in relation to its more obvious impact on his prose, but his earlier poetry also reflects the bookish vein of his 1820s and 30s essays.¹⁰ Poems dealing with the theme of imaginative transcendence and identified as poetry

of the Fancy often invoke the book-as-object. The central event of *The Story of Rimini* (1816), for instance, is an act of reading that turns into adultery – ‘That day they read no more’ (III. 608) – whilst Paulo’s and Francesca’s love is fostered by their mutual love of books. Equally, ‘Fancy’s Party. A Fragment’ (1818) begins with an image of a book-lined study that transforms into a hot air balloon that transports the speaker out of his ‘dull reality’ (1-7). The books Hunt collected and idolised appear throughout his oeuvre. Interrogating this bookishness exposes the connection between book collectors and professional authors. Both experienced a paradoxical public and critical response to their endeavours and were themselves anxious over the practical worth of their personal Fancy.

I: The Dandy Bibliomanist

Having outlined the charges levelled at ‘mere authors’ in ‘On the Conversation of Lords’, Hazlitt protests that, rather than being full of lower-class ‘adventurers in intellect’ like Hunt, the press is, in fact, saturated with pretenders from the ‘higher classes’:

Not to pass for a literary quack, you must procure a diploma from the College of Heralds. A dandy conceals a bibliomanist; our belles are *blue-stockings*. The Press is so entirely monopolised by beauty, birth, or importance in the State, that an author by profession resigns the field to the crowd of well-dressed competitors, out of modesty or pride, is fain to keep out of sight—

“Or write by stealth and blush to find it fame!”

Lord Byron used to boast that he could bring forward a dozen young men of fashion who could beat all the regular authors at their several weapons of wit or argument; and though I demur to the truth of the assertion, yet there is no saying till the thing is tried. Young

gentlemen make *very pretty sparrers*, but are not the “ugliest customers” when they take off the gloves.

(*CWWH*, xvii. 168-69)

The sartorial elegance of Hazlitt’s ‘well-dressed competitors’ indicates the postural nature of their own literary endeavours. Authorship is put on like clothing. He conflates the fashionable with the aristocratic at this point in the essay, moving from ‘the College of Heralds’ to the dandy ‘bibliomanist’. Dandies need not have been from the higher echelons of society, however. Dandyism was more often thought of as an imitation of aristocratic style. The monarch of dandies, Beau Brummel, for instance, was from an upwardly mobile rather than a noble background. Hazlitt’s central point remains the same for the fashionable and the aristocratic alike, though; those who have ‘beauty, birth, or importance in the state’ write for pleasure rather than from necessity and conviction. As a result, their authorship is superficial. They ‘skim [...] the surface of knowledge’ whereas the ‘author by profession’ ‘reserves himself for great occasions’ (*CWWH*, xvii. 170).

Hazlitt’s use of pugilistic metaphor to illustrate his point is significant. Byron may boast of the quick wit of his ‘young gentlemen’, but by positioning them in the boxing ring as opposed to the literary salon Hazlitt suggests their ultimate lack of readiness for the travails of authorship. Though technically proficient, the ‘*pretty sparrer*’ lacks the visceral power of the ‘ugly customers’ aligned with ‘authors by profession’. A sparring match is a practice fight where little is at stake. As an author or a boxer, the aristocratic amateur is at play rather than work. In contrast, the professional, non-aristocratic writer – like professional boxers, who were usually from the lower-orders – is spurred on by need. Without writing he cannot support himself. He does not spar, he fights; he is willing to ‘take off the gloves’ and get his hands dirty. By evoking the boxing ring as an analogue for literary culture Hazlitt puts himself at an advantage over his ‘well-dressed competitors’. Within boxing fraternities,

unlike the press, nobility does not guarantee preferment. Unable to rely on their social status, the aristocratic hobbyist must bow to the practiced, if not *'pretty'*, craft of the professional. As David Higgins argues of Hazlitt's position in 'The Fight', 'On the Conversation of Lords' 'emphasises his membership of the manly fraternity of "The Fancy"', a fraternity 'where different ranks could come into contact, [...] without threatening the social hierarchy', but equally where the lower-class professional, such as boxers Bill Neat and Tim Hickman, may inspire audiences from the middle and upper ranks of society.¹¹

Hazlitt uses his familiarity with the world of pugilism as a means of signalling his literary authority: his investment in his craft and his detachment from the whims of fashion. Hunt attempts a comparable manoeuvre when emphasising his bibliophilia. The constant references to books and reading in his works display his cultural capital. His obsession marks him out as an educated and well-read author, whatever 'Z' might argue to the contrary. In each case, though, an ambivalent public response to bibliomania and boxing – both designated 'the Fancy' – as leisure pursuits complicates any attempt to use them as a means of asserting literary authority. Hunt's and Hazlitt's presentation of their hobbies as markers of their professional competence demonstrates the ways in which the Fancy could problematically intersect with issues of professionalism in the period.

The figure of the 'dandy bibliomanist' conjured towards the beginning of the above passage is particularly expressive of these groups' insecure cultural position. On the one hand, Hazlitt includes the figure as an example of the fashionable gentleman as false author. On the other, his epithet allies the 'dandy bibliomanist' not with writers, but with the predominantly aristocratic class of book-collectors known as the 'bibliomaniacs'. These were figures like John Ker, third Duke of Roxburghe, whose passion was characterised by an interest in rare antique books printed, preferably, in the black letter. Nor was Hazlitt the only commentator to level the charge of dandyism at these collectors. Thomas Frognall Dibdin,

one of the period's most prominent bibliomaniacs, admits to his amusement at 'being designated as the "Beau Brummel" of living authors, in regard to the glossy splendour of [his] publications'.¹² Hazlitt's conflation of the 'dandy' and the 'bibliomanist' conforms to common perceptions of these men as excessively materialistic. They were supposed to acquire volumes for use as expensive furniture items rather than reading materials. As Hazlitt elsewhere notes, when 'a member of the Roxburghe Club' (the most famous of the period's bibliographical societies) has a work bound and added to his collection 'not only his literary taste is gratified, but the pride of property, the love of external elegance and decoration' (*CWWH*, xvii. 168). The 'bibliomanist' does not know about books, he knows about how books are dressed.

However, Hazlitt's replacement of the standard designation 'bibliomaniac' with 'bibliomanist' adds another dimension to his caricature. Rather than a passive sufferer, labouring under an uncontrollable mania, the '-ist' suffix of the latter term would seem to empower the book-enthusiast. In the context of the passage it suggests a kinship between the 'bibliomanist' and the 'pugilist', especially when it is considered that the 'dandy' was a figure associated with both pastimes. I am not suggesting that Hazlitt's vision of the dandy 'bibliomanist' is complimentary. He is clearly one of the essay's '*pretty sparrers*'. Nonetheless, the term can be usefully applied to Hunt who is, in many respects, the archetypal 'dandy bibliomanist'. It is particularly expressive of his fanciful book-love, which can at times seem postural, materialistic, and problematically idle. As he admits in 'My Books', he shares a 'link with the Bibliomaniacs, whom I admit into our relationship because my love is large, and my family pride nothing' (*SWLH*, iii. 33). Hunt acknowledges his kinship with figures like Dibdin, but whilst his biblio-ism mirrors bibliomania, it also remains sensitive to its failings.

Though an admitted “glutton of books”, Hunt did not characterise himself as a bibliomaniac *per se*.¹³ He was, however, present at the defining event of the bibliomania boom: the Roxburghe sale of 1812. His experience of the auction would have been vastly different from that of a confirmed bibliomaniac like Dibdin and certainly from that of Dibdin’s aristocratic friends who dominated the bidding: obsessed by completing their extensive collections of incunabula. Nor could he have hoped to purchase many of the rare volumes they fought over. Rather, William Carew Hazlitt suggests that Hunt attended ‘just for the sake of gaining an idea of what such an event was’.¹⁴ Like the dandy at a fight, he is a marginal figure, inhabiting the peripheries of the sale.¹⁵ W. C. Hazlitt’s description suggests that Hunt’s relative anonymity did not trouble him. His position seems to have been one of journalistic curiosity mingled with a faint contempt for the aristocrats that led the proceedings. His method of book buying significantly differed from theirs. The second-hand bookstall was his domain. ‘I could live very well, for the rest of my life, in a lodging above one of the bookseller’s shops on the Quai de Voltaire’ (*ALH*, ii. 191), he states, where texts were sold for sixpence or less, as opposed to thousands of pounds. Hunt would rather see Petrarch as ‘the God of Bibliomaniacs, for he was a collector and a man of genius, which is an union that does not often happen’. In his opinion, modern bibliomaniacs lack that ‘genius’ which distinguishes the true ‘lover of books’ from the mere book collector (*SWLH*, iii. 32) in the same way that the ‘pretty sparrer’ lacks the impetus of the ‘ugly customer’. Hunt’s main point, one made by the majority of bibliomania’s detractors, is that his appreciation of books stems from a love of their contents rather than their covers. However, Hunt’s bibliophilia has a materialistic vein, which is reflected in his conceptualisation of the Fancy and adherence to its poetics.

Though he might distinguish himself from the bibliomaniacs, the reception of Hunt’s poetics and lifestyle by the periodical press problematises this distinction. The Fancy as

bibliomania and the Fancy as poetic mode shared characteristics that left them open to criticism. Dibdin's bibliographical writing, for example, was often criticised with the same charges of artificiality and impracticality levelled at the Cockney-school. What Robinson calls 'the cultural police' (*Unfettering Poetry*, 11) and Ina Ferris terms 'literary culture' are sceptical and disparaging of both the poetry of the Fancy and bibliomaniacal writing.¹⁶ Each set of writers was charged with superficiality and vulgarity. They dealt in conceit instead of reality; bindings instead of texts; they listed images rather than composed poetry; compiled catalogues rather than wrote literature. Much was written (for political reasons, more so in the case of Hunt and his circle than of Dibdin) with the aim of proving that Cockneys and bibliomaniacs alike were not men of genius. For instance, a reviewer in the September 1816 edition of the *Critical Review* argues that he is:

not among those, however, who are accustomed to look upon Mr. Dibdin as a man of pre-eminent talents—certainly not a man of an original mind; and after often hearing him from the pulpit, and reading him from the press, we have come to the opinion, (in which we are aware that some will differ from us,) that, though learned, his learning is of a very in-applicable, and comparatively useless kind; and that taste has been depraved from a natural love of the beautiful to an artificial admiration of the curious.¹⁷

Here, Dibdin is little more than a collector in textual form, 'certainly not a man of an original mind'. His learning leads him to gather raw materials, in much the same way as the Fancy is supposed to, but his 'learning' is insufficient to make anything useful out of them. The charge of possessing unnatural tastes is even levelled at him. Though far from the moral depravity and 'exquisitely bad taste' that *Blackwood's Magazine* saw in Hunt's work, Dibdin's taste is

yet ‘depraved’.¹⁸ Compare the above review to one of ‘Z’s’ ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry’ articles, in which the author calls the Hunt-circle:

fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers, who, without logic enough to analyse a single idea, or imagination enough to form one original image, or learning enough to distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of Cockneys, presume to talk with contempt of some of the most exquisite spirits the world ever produced.¹⁹

Both reviewers share an opinion of their subjects as unoriginal. Where Dibdin fails to appreciate natural beauty, the Cockney School fails to appreciate ‘some of the most exquisite spirits the world ever produced’ and both, with a presumption overreaching their talents, nonetheless intrude their works on the public. ‘Z’ continues his argument by deriding the Cockneys’ ‘laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots’ (‘Cockney School’ [1818], 521). In the same way that the ‘artificial’ and the ‘curious’ have overpowered Dibdin’s intellectual faculties, the Hunt-circle can only describe an artificial, suburban nature, rendering their ‘admiration’ similarly misguided.

The deviation from an appreciation of the substantial (beauty and nature) to the ‘curious’ and ‘artificial’ is to some degree intentional on the part of both Dibdin and Hunt. ‘Curious’ features of individual texts fascinate the true bibliomaniac. Dibdin uses the term repeatedly in *Bibliomania* to refer to important volumes, whilst providing notices of ‘truly valuable, and oftentimes curious and rare, books’ is cited as a central motivation of the work.²⁰ Hunt, too, is happy to admit his preoccupation with the ‘artificial’ as much as the actual. ‘I know not in which I took more delight,’ he admits in his autobiography, ‘the actual fields and woods of my native country, [or] the talk of such things in books’ (*ALH*, ii. 197).

Descriptions in books, like flowers in window-pots, can serve just as well as the real scene, or wild flower, to excite the imagination.

That said, neither author views their preoccupation with the ‘artificial’, the ‘curious’, and the bookish as entirely unproblematic. Dibdin does, after all, ‘urge every sober and cautious collector not to be fascinated by the terms “*Curious and Rare*” in the ‘Cures’ section of *Bibliomania* (687). Hunt, too, can appear sceptical of his book-Fancy. When speaking of his lack of financial sense (a trait common to many bibliomaniacs) he admits to a wish ‘that the strangest accidents of education, and the most inconsiderate habit of taking books for the only ends of life, had not conspired to make me so ridiculous’ (*ALH*, ii. 49). By the time he wrote *Imagination and Fancy*, he seems almost to have acquiesced to his critics’ point of view, arguing that poetry of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century ‘has since been called Artificial Poetry [...] in contradistinction to Natural; or Poetry seen chiefly through art and books, and not in its first sources’ (*SWLH*, iv. 28). Whilst he does not criticise it with the same vehemence as ‘Z’ criticises him, the implication is that this is poetry of the second order, despite the fact that Hunt’s own creative perspective was dominated by ‘art and books’. Marginalised by reviewers and cultural commentators, bibliomaniacs and proponents of the Fancy (both poetic and bibliographical) are forced to confront and sometimes accept the validity of representations which figure their collective identity as low-brow, idle, and even delusional.

II: The World of Books

Hunt reacts to these doubts by constructing a semi-serious version of the world of the Fancy as substantial. More than simply an ‘abiding tendency to integrate his imagination with the material world around him’, Hunt’s otherwise surprising emphasis on the materiality of the Fancy allows him to defend various forms of imaginative escape such as reading and literary composition.²¹ His reconfiguration of the Fancy is an expression of his desire to integrate

fanciful and professional worlds, providing a significant example of the ways in which these spheres could intersect in the period. What it also reveals, however, is his fear that this reconciliation might ultimately prove unworkable.

Jacqueline George notes that Hunt's authorial perspective is tripartite, shifting between 'the actual world, the world described in books, and the world of literary canonicity' (George, 245). As a physical and an ideational object the book bridges the gap between these worlds, worlds that Hunt's writing strives to bring together. This attempt is clearest in his essays 'Fiction and Matter of Fact' (1825) and 'The World of Books' (1833).²² In both, Hunt presents his readers with a 'two worlds' theory. 'The globe we inhabit,' he states, 'is divisible into two worlds [...] the common geographical world, and the world of books' ('World', 98) or 'the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world that we feel with our hearts and imaginations' ('Fiction', 9). Key to both essays is an idealist Berkelean argument that 'the only proof of either is in our perception' ('Fiction', 11). Hunt contends that 'it would puzzle a wise man to prove to himself that I was not, in some spiritual measure, in any place where I chose to pitch my imagination' ('World', 96) and that it might also 'puzzle a wise man to prove' that the matter of fact, physical world was any more 'real' than its fictional counterpart. Rather, our perception of the 'visible and immediate' (fact) and 'the possible and the remote' (fiction) are 'as real, the one as the other' ('Fiction', 11). With no one perceptual faculty taking precedence over another, felt or imagined experience is seen as equivalent to lived experience.

The artificiality his critics charge him with is thus reconfigured as higher sensitivity to the emotional depth of experience. The ability to see beyond the physical to its 'connection with the great mysteries of nature' ('Fiction', 15) is creative. Comprehension increases beyond the limits of mechanical proof. Similarly to Hazlitt's contention that the amateur author merely 'skims the surface of knowledge', those concerned only with fact 'do not see

the reality of the [world of fiction]' and, 'keep but a blind and prone beating upon their own surface' ('Fiction', 10-11). In *Imagination and Fancy*, Hunt might have represented this as an exclusive 'privilege of imagination', but in 'Fiction' it is 'the man of fancy' (11) that lives this enriched life, engaged with both realities. He is figured, paradoxically, as more active than the matter-of-fact-man who is 'prone', despite his activities requiring no bodily exertion. Hunt makes the argument that a substantial and practically useful knowledge of the real world can be gleaned from reading and supposedly 'artificial' experiences. He not only undercuts his readers' easy acceptance of the existence of material reality by highlighting its basis in perception, but represents the 'world of books' as an equally material reality. It is, he asserts, 'hardly less tangible' (98) than its physical counterpart. It can be felt in an emotional sense, but also in the sense that it can be touched.

Here, and elsewhere, Hunt searches for and constructs 'a *real* place of books' (*SWLH*, iii. 26, my emphasis). This place can be created in the imagination with an emphasis on its materiality, or it can be literally constructed as a study. In 'My Books' it is ideally configured as a 'small snug place almost entirely walled with books' where the reader is in close physical proximity to his volumes: 'when I speak of being in contact with my books, I mean it literally. I like to be able to lean my head against them' (*SWLH*, iii. 25, 24). Snuggness and privacy are central to reinforcing the sense of the study as the realm of the Fancy or, more specifically, a realm where the 'tangible' and the fancied intertwine. The book-room itself, and the books it contains must be a physical reality; they must reassure the inhabitant of the materiality of the space and his centrality to it. Hence, Hunt has 'a particular hatred of a round table [...] covered and irradiated with books'. 'Instead of bringing the books around you,' he argues, 'they all seem turning another way, and eluding your hands' (*SWLH*, iii. 26). Works organised on a round table 'elude' the reader's hands, but also, it is implied, his mind.

To be ‘in contact’ with a book, however, is to be assured of your possession. You may grasp it both physically and intellectually.

At the same time, Hunt is eager to cultivate the alternative, imaginative reality of the Fancy, layered over the physical space of the book-room. A ‘real place of books’ should, in a sense, cease to be ‘real’ when the man of letters chooses to indulge his Fancy. Hunt says that he has his books ‘in a sort of sidelong mind’s eye’ whilst writing. They act on him in this manner ‘like a second thought, which is none; like a waterfall, or a whispering wind’ (*SWLH*, iii. 25). The books on his shelves are transformed from strikingly physical objects, with which he must be ‘in contact’, to the ephemeral backdrop of his imagination. They are almost nothing: ‘a second thought, which is *none*’. Having argued for the absolute necessity of the material presence of his volumes in his study Hunt then dematerialises them. The elision of his books’ physicality, though, allows for the realisation of his imaginative world. When he reads or writes he exchanges one tactile reality for another. The book-room becomes a natural landscape, complete with waterfalls and ‘whispering wind[s]’: the equally ‘tangible’ ‘world of books’. A material Fancy usurps an immaterial reality so that the ideal study is figured as both a place of real books and a real place of books.

However, the conflict between the ‘tangible’ and the ‘spectral’ in definitions of the Fancy persists. Though an enthusiastic paean to the ideal study and the numerous pleasures of the book-object, ‘My Books’ also registers Hunt’s anxiety over his authorial status and related bibliophilia. It hints at the fact that the integration of material and ideational worlds might be ultimately untenable. He admits, for instance, that books and periodical writing – his main source of income – are not easy bedfellows. ‘Though its demands seem otherwise,’ the latter he argues, ‘is not favourable to reading; it becomes too much a matter of business; and will either be attended to at the expense of the writer’s books; or books, the very admonishers of his industry, will make him idle’ (*SWLH*, iii. 35). Hunt is torn between

‘industry’ and ‘idleness’. Suddenly, books appear less a self-justifying symbol of the author’s learned profession than a troubling Fancy which lures him from his practical duties: ‘Z’s’ accusations of solipsism and an effete indulgence in ‘sweet fancies’ seem worryingly accurate. It is in such instances that fanciful pursuit and professional labour come into tension and the ‘snug’ study becomes problematically hermetic, so much so that it is transformed from book-room into prison cell.

Critics have variously noted the literary significance of Hunt’s room in the infirmary of Horsemonger Lane gaol.²³ This ‘fairy tale’ room (*ALH*, ii. 9), however, was a dual space: at once a vibrant literary salon and the site of much suffering for Hunt. His book-room, too, is double: simultaneously a haven and a landscape troubled by painful associations and authorial anxiety. Hunt’s writing on his prison experience and his descriptions of studies and book-rooms display an intriguing concurrence. In part, this is the result of the transformation of his prison quarters into a wallpapered study complete with bookcases, a terrace garden, and even a piano. In this room, he forged and reinforced his persona as a book-fancying man of letters, existing on the border between Fancy and reality. The relative comfort of the cell was not, in itself, unusual for the period, nor was its role as a nexus of sociability. Gregory Dart and Iain McCalman both describe Regency prisons as the site of oppositional relations – public and private, actual and fictive – that reflected the external world and stimulated the creativity of their inmates.²⁴ Dart’s account of debtors’ prisons in the 1820s is particularly relevant to Hunt’s experience. Due to the permeable class boundaries that allowed a wide array of mock social interactions to take place within its walls, his work outlines an inherently paradoxical space. It was at once imaginative and performative, but also ‘the ultimate hiding place of the real’ (Dart, 216). Certainly, Hunt was involved in an intricate negotiation between ‘the real’ and the fancied in his Horsemonger cell. It was a space of wilful fantasy and, often, ill-hidden realities. The infirmary was another manifestation of his

ideal study, not the worse for being confined or confusing the boundary between Fancy and actuality.

This correlation between garret and dungeon is, perhaps, less reassuring when the direction of influence is reversed and the book-room takes on characteristics of the prison. Hunt repeatedly, perhaps pathologically, returns to the prison space in his writing. At times, cell and study seem interchangeable. The frequency with which he speaks, in 'My Books', of being 'surrounded' by books and the manner in which he does so is cloying. He is 'walled with books'; 'I therefore walled myself in'; 'I entrench myself in my books, equally against sorrow and the weather'; and, tellingly:

I turn my back upon the sea: I shut up even one of the side windows
looking upon the mountains; and retain no prospect but that of the
trees. On the right and left of me are bookshelves: a bookcase is
affectionately open in front of me; and thus kindly enclosed with my
books and the green leaves, I write.

(SWLH, iii. 25)

He pointedly 'turn[s his] back' on the outside world, 'shut[ing]' himself in and it out. The book-room manifests a new prison. Volumes that once covered his cell's walls are now cell walls themselves. Even the fact that Hunt chooses to look out upon trees recalls the view from his window in the infirmary which 'looked upon trees and flowers' (ALH, ii. 11). Bookshelves may make 'affectionate' and 'kind' walls, but they are walls nonetheless, permeable only through acts of the imagination.

In both the study and the cell, the Fancy reigns, while a painful or inconvenient reality is problematically obscured. In many ways, confinement fuels or, indeed, necessitates creativity as external sources of inspiration are denied. Indeed, Hunt's imprisonment was a fertile time when he composed substantial sections of *The Story of Rimini* and *The Descent of*

Liberty (1815). Yet, even ‘entrenched’ among his books and eulogising their restorative powers he cannot help ‘confessing a great pain in the midst of [them]’ (*SWLH*, iii. 24). If *The Story of Rimini* represents a flight of poetic Fancy, it is by no means a flight capable of affecting a full-scale escape from reality. Hunt asserts that canto II and a portion of canto III were composed in the Surrey Gaol (*SWLH*, v. 182n). The opening to canto III certainly bears out this claim:

Now why must I disturb a dream of bliss,
 Or bring cold sorrow ‘twixt the wedded kiss?
 Sad is the strain, with which I cheer my long
 And caged hours, and try my native tongue;
 Now too, while rains autumnal, as I sing,
 Wash the dull bars, chilling my sicklied wing,
 And all the climate presses on my sense;
 But thoughts it furnishes of things far hence,
 And leafy dreams affords me, and a feeling
 Which I should else disdain, tear-dipped and healing.

(III. 1-10)

On one level, the ‘dream of bliss’ is that of the poem’s heroine Francesca. At this point, she believes she has been wed to Paulo when, in fact, he is only acting as a proxy for his brother, her true husband. The immediate interjection of Hunt’s poetic voice following this preliminary lament, however, suggests that he has also disturbed his own ‘dream of bliss’. He has broken the fourth wall and disrupted the fictive narrative of the poem. Having written the previous canto during his incarceration, by the opening of canto III – with its overt reference to his time in jail (the ‘dull bars’ and ‘caged hours’) – he appears unable to sustain his fantasy.

The ‘caged’ space ‘furnishes [thoughts] of things far hence’, but it also points to their unreality. For, when the fantasy is resumed – the speaker claims he has had ‘Enough of this’ (III. 14) – its action is reminiscent of the reality it is supposed to transcend. Similarly to Hunt, Francesca is incarcerated: transported from her home to a metaphorical prison in her new husband’s castle. As a means to alleviate her disappointment, her father decorates her new room in the style of her paternal home:

The very books and all transported there,
 The leafy tapestry, and the crimson chair,
 The lute, the glass that told the shedding hours,
 The little urn of silver for the flowers.

(III. 153-57)

This is another version of Hunt’s ideal book-room, almost identical to those outlined in ‘My Books’, the beginning of ‘Fancy’s Party’, and that recreated in Horsemonger gaol. *Rimini*’s characters are engaged in the same two-way transformations of cell into study and study into cell as their author. In this way, Hunt’s *Fancy* mirrors his troubled reality. It disguises rather than elides actual events. *Fancy* does not provide an unbounded escape from reality, but constitutes a complex re-appropriation of it. The perpetual return to the prison space is a return to a site in which the boundary between the day-to-day and the world of the imagination is fruitfully, if problematically, permeable: one in which the ‘World of Books’ can be fully realised. Indeed, the fact that in the prison space the author’s isolation is forced further supports his perpetual inhabitation of *Fancy* worlds. Configuring his book-room as a prison allows Hunt to return to a state in which his indulgence in ‘sweet fancies’ was a necessity rather than a choice, when it was more difficult for his detractors to accuse him of idleness, or being merely a ‘fanciful dreaming tea-drinker’.

But in his self-imposed imprisonment, Hunt's indulgence in the Fancy can seem less a release than a problematic turning away from practical existence; therefore his arguments for the substantiality of Fancy worlds can seem defensive. Not only did some periodical critics view this aesthetic category with suspicion, but its own proponents were equally troubled by its dualistic and inscrutable nature: its blurring of the boundary between the practical and the idle, the escapist and the carceral, the material and the ideational. In the notes accompanying *The Feast of the Poets*, even Hunt refers to a problematic 'overgrowth of fancy at certain periods of its flourishing' (*SWLH*, v. 54); whilst in his appraisal of 'Mr Cumberland' and 'Mr Montgomery' he acknowledges an 'ideal sickliness' about the former, associated with his 'inaptitude [...] to fall in with the real forms and spirits of life', and cites the 'most visible defect' of the latter as 'a sickliness of fancy' (*SWLH*, v. 50). Nor was this solely a feature of the Fancy in its aesthetic or poetic aspect, as its usage within boxing and bibliomaniacal societies attests. Whether poetically or bibliographically, then, the man of Fancy walked a treacherous path on the margins of acceptable culture. Rather than being a straightforward proponent of a poetics of the Fancy, Hunt the 'dandy bibliomanist' negotiated the indistinct boundary between the pull of 'sweet fancies' and the demands of professional labour.

¹ *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols, London, 1932), xvii, 162-175, 168.

² Paul Keen, *Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, 2012), 5.

³ Z, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry No. V', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 5.25 (April 1819), 97-100, 98.

⁴ Kim Wheatley, 'The Blackwood's Attacks on Leigh Hunt', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 47 (June 1992), 1-31, 11.

⁵ Leigh Hunt, 'Letter to Byron, April 1816', in Timothy Webb, 'After Horsemonger Lane: Leigh Hunt's Letters to Byron (1815-1816)', *Romanticism*, 16.3 (October 2010), 233-266, 252.

⁶ *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra (6 vols, London, 2003), iv, 1-124, 21.

⁷ Jeffrey Robinson, 'Leigh Hunt and the Poetics and Politics of the Fancy', in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Nicolas Roe (London, 2003), 156-179.

⁸ Julie Ellison, 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', in *Re-visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia, 1994), 228-255, 228; Jeffrey Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York, 2006), 25.

⁹ See Philip Connell, 'Bibliomania: book collecting, cultural politics, and the rise of literary heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations*, 71 (Summer 2000), 24-47.

¹⁰ See Deidre Lynch, "'Wedded to Books': Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists', *Romantic Libraries* (College Park, 2004), Web. 20 Oct. 2010 <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/lynch/lynch.html>>; and Ina Ferris, 'Bibliographic Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object', *Romantic Libraries* (College Park, 2004), Web. 20 Oct. 2010 <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/ferris/ferris.html>>.

¹¹ David Higgins, 'Englishness, Effeminacy, and the *New Monthly Magazine*: Hazlitt's "The Fight" in Context', *Romanticism*, 10.2 (July 2004), 173-90, 174.

¹² Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *Reminiscences of a Literary Life* (2 vols, London, 1836), ii. 688n.

¹³ *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt: With Reminiscences of Friends and Contemporaries, and with Thornton Hunt's Introduction and Postscript* (2 vols, London, 1903), ii. 155.

¹⁴ W. C. Hazlitt, *The Book Collector* (London, 1904), 39.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Cox argues that ‘for Hunt and his group, this apparent marginalization was a guarantee of their resistance to established power’ (*Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* [Cambridge, 1998, 12]). See also *Unfettering Poetry*, 199.

¹⁶ Ina Ferris, ‘Book Fancy: Bibliomania and the Literary Word’, *The Keats-Shelley Journal*, 58 (2009), 33-52, 34.

¹⁷ ‘Typographical Antiquities; or the History of Printing in England, Scotland, and Ireland; containing Memoirs of our Ancient Printers, and a Register of the Books printed by them’, in *The Critical Review, or, Annals of literature*, 4.3 (September 1816), 245-55, 245.

¹⁸ Z, ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 2.7 (October 1817), 38-41, 38.

¹⁹ Z, ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 3.17 (August 1818), 519-24, 521.

²⁰ Dibdin, *Bibliomania: or Book-Madness, a Bibliographical Romance in Six Parts* (London, 1811), 311, 518, vi.

²¹ Jacqueline George, “‘All these lovers of books have themselves become books!’: Leigh Hunt in his Library”, *The Eighteenth Century*, 50 (Summer/Fall 2009), 245-261, 256.

²² ‘The World of Books’, *Essays and Sketches by Leigh Hunt*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (Oxford, 1906), 96-104; ‘Fiction and Matter of Fact’, *Men, Women, and Books* (2 vols, New York, 1847), i. 7-15.

²³ Greg Kucich, “‘The Wit in the Dungeon’: Leigh Hunt and the Insolent Politics of Cockney Coteries”, *Romanticism on the Net*, 14 (May 1999), Web. 20 Mar. 2012
<<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1999/v/n14/005850ar.html>>, para. 1.

²⁴ See Iain McCalman, ‘Newgate in Revolution: Radical Enthusiasm and Romantic Counterculture’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22.1 (February 1998), 95-110; and Gregory Dart,

‘A World Within Walls: Haydon, *The Mock Election* and 1820s Debtors’ Prisons’, in *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Philip Connell and Nigel Leask (Cambridge, 2009), 214-235.