

CHARLES LAMB

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"**I** RECKON myself a dab at prose—verse I leave to my betters," Lamb once wrote to Wordsworth; and, in a letter to Charles Lloyd, he tells him, by way of praise, "your verses are as good and as wholesome as prose." "Those cursed Dryads and Pagan trumperies of modern verse have put me out of conceit of the very name of poetry," he has just said. At the age of twenty-one he talks of giving up the writing of poetry. "At present," he writes to Coleridge, "I have not leisure to write verses, nor anything approaching to a fondness for the exercise. . . . The music of poesy may charm for awhile the importunate teasing cares of life; but the teased and troubled man is not in a disposition to make that music." Yet, as we know, Lamb, who had begun with poetry, returned to the writing of poetry at longer or shorter intervals throughout his whole life: was this prose-writer, in whom prose partook so much of the essence of poetry, in any real or considerable sense a poet?

The name of Lamb as a poet is known to most people as the writer of one poem. "The Old Familiar Faces" is scarcely a poem at all; the metre halts, stumbles, there is no touch of magic in it; but it is speech, naked human speech, such as rarely gets through the lovely disguise of verse. It has the raw humanity of Walt Whitman, and almost hurts us by a