

WILLIAM HAZLITT

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ON September 18th, 1830, died William Hazlitt, the most brilliant of English literary critics, the master of an exquisite prose style, and a man, neither amiable nor wholly respectable, but one whose acute and original genius and vivid personality possess a curious fascination. There is something enigmatic about his nature. Of many of the great men who have found themselves at odds with the world, we can to some extent divine the causes of their discontent when we know their parentage, upbringing and social environment. Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism, Byron's half-artificial misanthropy, Leopardi's tragic gloom, even the awful despair to which the author of "The City of Dreadful Night" gave utterance, lose much of their mystery when we read the biographies of these authors. But whence came the root of bitterness that grew so rankly in Hazlitt's life, is hard to say. He was most fortunate in the character of both his parents; he was greatly beloved by them, and by his brother and sister; he grew up in that state of "neither poverty nor riches" which the biblical sage desired; and when he reached manhood, his talents soon brought him into congenial and inspiring companionship. But "'tis of ourselves that we are this or that", and the harsher traits of his character seem to have sprung directly from the depths of his own personality.

The elder William Hazlitt was a Unitarian minister, an unworldly, devout and warm-hearted man. His son has given us a pen-portrait of him in describing the noblest type of dissenting minister:

We have known some such in happier days, who had been brought up and lived from youth to age in the one constant belief of God and of his Christ, and who thought all other things but dross compared with the glory hereafter to be revealed. Their youthful hopes and vanity had been mortified in them, even in their boyish days, by the neglect and supercilious regards of the world; and they turned to look into their own minds for something else to build their hopes and confidence upon. They were true priests. They set up an image in their own minds—it was truth; they worshipped an idol there—it was justice. They looked on man as their brother, and only bowed the knee to the Highest. Separate from the world, they walked humbly with

their God, and lived in thought with those who had borne testimony of a good conscience, with the spirits of just men in all ages. . . . This belief they had, that looks at something out of itself, fixed as the stars, deep as the firmament; that makes of its own heart an altar to truth, a place of worship for what is right, at which it does reverence with praise and prayer like a holy thing, apart and content; that feels that the greatest Being in the universe is always near it, and that all things work together for the good of His creatures, under His guiding hand. This covenant they kept, as the stars keep their courses; this principle they stuck by, for want of knowing better, as it sticks by them to the last. It grew with their growth, it does not wither in their decay. It lives when the almond-tree flourishes, and is not bowed down with the tottering knees. It glimmers with the last feeble eyesight, smiles in the faded cheek like infancy, and lights a path before them to the grave!

One is glad to think that this noble panegyric was written while his old father was still living.

It was owing only to his father's strict conscientiousness that Hazlitt did not grow up an American citizen—with what results to his character and genius, it is impossible to guess. In 1783 the elder Hazlitt, who had strongly sympathised with the revolting colonies, sailed for New York, meaning to make his home in the newly formed republic. He took with him his wife, his son John aged fifteen, his daughter Margaret aged thirteen, William aged six, and a little girl who died during their stay in America, which lasted about four years. William seems to have retained no interest in his American experiences, but his sister Margaret, or Peggy as she was called in her family, kept a diary at this period, part of which has been published, that shows her to have been a girl with keen powers of observation and a gift for writing. The presidency of a college was offered to the elder Hazlitt, but it would have involved subscribing to doctrines that he could not accept. Later he was nearly appointed to a church in Boston, but again lack of orthodoxy stood in his way. He became an itinerant preacher, his little son often accompanying him on his journeys, but for the most part the family lived at Weymouth which is not far from Boston. Unitarianism was to become the dominant spiritual and intellectual force in New England, but the Hazlitts had come a generation too soon.

By the autumn of 1787 the family were in London. John Hazlitt, who had determined to be a painter, was soon studying his art in Reynolds's studio; he had been his little brother's earliest teacher, and the latter's education was for some time carried on at home. When, however, his father settled in the village of Wem

in Shropshire, where for many years he ministered to a small congregation of his co-religionists, the young William attended a day-school. At the age of ten he was already hoping to become an artist. He writes to John:

I am a busy-body and do many silly things. I drew eyes and noses till about a fortnight ago. I have drawn a little boy, a man's face, and a little boy's front face taken from a bust. Next Monday I shall begin to read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Eutropius*. I shall like to know all the Latin and Greek I can. I want to learn how to measure the stars. I shall not, I suppose, paint the worse for knowing everything else.

His sister later says of him:

He was at this time the most active, liveliest and happiest of boys; his time, divided between his studies and his childish sports, passed smoothly on. Beloved by all for his amiable temper and manners, pleasing above his years, the delight and pride of his own family.

The father's dearest wish was that this promising lad should follow in his own steps and become a preacher of the gospel, but the gods saw otherwise. In 1793 he entered Hackney Theological College, where Hartley was lecturing on philosophy. Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Divinity were on the curriculum. But one year of the college was as much as he wanted, and 1794 saw him back in his father's house at Wem, where he remained till 1802.

During these eight years he read and thought much, being deeply interested in metaphysical speculation for which he believed himself, probably mistakenly, to have a special ability. He was very slow in acquiring facility in writing, and the realization of this inarticulateness at times greatly depressed him. But reading was a delight, and Burke and Rousseau in different ways lent him fresh inspiration. And in 1798 a still stronger influence came into his life. Samuel Taylor Coleridge visited Shrewsbury to preach at the Unitarian chapel; and Hazlitt, eager to hear him, rose before daybreak to walk the ten miles from Wem to Shrewsbury. His description of his feelings on that memorable day, written twenty years later, when his admiration for Coleridge had greatly cooled, still reflects his early enthusiasm. When he listened to the sermon of this "half-inspired preacher", the charm was complete. "I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres". Coleridge went to see the elder Hazlitt, took an interest in his young admirer, and invited him to visit him at Nether Stowey. This visit took place the following year, when Hazlitt met Wordsworth and his sister, and saw the manuscript of the as yet unpublished *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's

poetry made a deep and lasting impression on him, but to the poet he was not strongly attracted, and in later years he denounced his egotism and his ungenerous attitude toward other literary men with great severity;—himself apparently blind to the nobler and finer aspects of Wordsworth's character.

At this time Hazlitt frequently visited his artist brother, John, who lived in London, and through him he came to know a group of men and women remarkable for their talent and most of them holding advanced opinions in literature, politics and religion, the Lambs, the Burneys, the Stoddarts, Crabb Robinson, Hunt and Godwin. Of these Charles Lamb was specially congenial, and the friendship between them, though later broken for a time by Hazlitt's irritable temper, ended only with his death.

Intercourse of this sort naturally quickened his ambition, but he still felt unable to give adequate expression to his thoughts and feelings in writing, and he returned to his boyish scheme of becoming a painter. In 1803 a visit to the Louvre, then full of the finest pictures and other works of art which Napoleon had taken from Italy and the Netherlands, caused him intense delight. Titian and Rembrandt became the gods of his idolatry, and to emulate these masters seemed the highest form ambition could take. Whether he would have attained eminence as a portrait-painter had he possessed the necessary training, we can only guess; his best-known picture is the portrait of Lamb, now in the National Portrait Gallery; it is rather hard and dry in execution, but was thought a good likeness, and is certainly a creditable work for a painter who was practically self-taught.

But it was the pen and not the pencil that was to help Hazlitt to a livelihood and ultimately bring him fame. In 1805 he published a philosophical treatise which attracted little attention; this was followed by a political pamphlet containing a keen but mordant character of Pitt, which also had little sale; but his "Reply to Malthus", written in 1807, shows him already in possession of his characteristic style. Little money, however, came to him from any of these efforts, and in 1808 his marriage to Sarah Stoddart caused him to undertake more lucrative means of gaining an income. A short account of Hazlitt's love-affairs must be given; as, unpleasing though most of the incidents are, they throw some light on his curiously complex nature. On his first visit to Wordsworth he is said to have been strongly attracted to Dorothy Wordsworth,—a circumstance that would have been much to his credit were it not that at the same time he engaged in a flirtation with a girl in a neighbouring village, which latter fact so exasperated the girl's other admirers that they threatened to duck him in a horse-

pond,—an adventure which greatly amused Lamb. Sarah Stoddart was the sister of John Stoddart, a well-known journalist with whom Hazlitt had been friendly, but with whom he subsequently quarrelled. Mary Lamb, a friend of both Hazlitt and Miss Stoddart, seems to have had doubts as to the outcome of the match,—doubts which the event fully justified. Sarah Stoddart seems to have been a strong-minded, intelligent woman, without much imagination. Hazlitt's biographers say she was out of sympathy with her husband, but not even a "patient Griselda" could have long endured life with him. For several years they lived together—both were warmly attached to their only child—then they separated without any actual quarrel. Some thirteen years after the marriage Hazlitt became violently enamoured of a servant girl, ignorant, commonplace, and with little beauty, an infatuation that came dangerously near to lunacy. Wishing to be in a position to offer marriage to his innamorata, he suggested divorce to his wife; to this she readily agreed. Divorce in England, however, was too costly for her: Scotland offered it more cheaply, and with fewer delays. To Edinburgh therefore the mis-mated couple repaired; and in spite of evident collusion, the divorce was granted. But the servant girl declined the proposed honour, and married a man in her own circle. Instead of "wasting in despair" Hazlitt, to his friends' astonishment, married a widow lady a short time after, and with her went for a tour on the continent. While visiting the Louvre at Paris he met the first Mrs. Hazlitt; they had a chat, and apparently she visited him at his rooms, as she wrote to their son at school that his father was at the "Hotel des Etrangers" and was "getting his food cooked in the English way". Of the second wife little is known, except that less than a year after the marriage she parted from Hazlitt and they never met again. As lover or husband, he was a failure.

It is pleasanter to turn to Hazlitt's career in literature. For a time he served as dramatic critic for the *Chronicle* newspaper. He was a warm admirer of Edmund Keen, and his brilliant and laudatory notices of Keen's Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and other parts did much to enhance the great actor's reputation. In 1818 appeared Hazlitt's "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays". He was also writing for Leigh Hunt's paper, *The Examiner*; these essays he published as *The Round Table*, which includes some of his best work. Later he gave three series of lectures, afterwards published, on *The English Poets*, *The English Comic Writers*, and *The Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*. They had moderate success as lectures, but to read them is to realise that he was one

of the keenest, most virile and stimulating of literary critics. There is not a dull page, and what he says of the poetry of the eighteenth century has often been borrowed, but has never been surpassed in value by later writers. Other works of our author are *Liber Amoris*, in which under a thin veil he narrates his love affair with his servant-girl enchantress; *The Plain Speaker*, which contained some very plain speaking about both friends and foes; and *The Spirit of the Age, or Contemporary Portraits*, published in 1829, and except for his *Life of Napoleon* the last, and in some respects the best of his books.

Mr. Augustine Birrell finds a resemblance between the style of Hazlitt and that of Newman, but it is difficult to see upon what this view is based. Newman, however deep and strong the feelings to which he gives expression, is always composed and dignified, and his irony is the more effective from the restraint with which it is clothed. His writings remind one of some deep inland lake, its waters clear and transparent, its calm surface reflecting sky and mountain summits; Hazlitt's suggest the rushing torrent, now hidden in the gloom of rock and forest, now gleaming in foaming cascades in the glancing sunlight. Both we can enjoy, but since

The gods approve
The depth and not the tumult of the soul,

the great churchman must take higher rank than the brilliant free-thinker. It is probable that the study of Burke, for whom he had a lifelong admiration, was the most powerful force in developing Hazlitt's style. A passage in praise of Burke as a writer in *The Plain Speaker* is of interest in this connection:

It has always appeared to me that the most perfect prose style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which was the nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over, was Burke's. It has the solidity and sparkling effect of the diamond; all other fine writing is like French paste or Bristol stones in the comparison. . . . It differs from poetry, as I conceive, like the chamois from the eagle; it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, is picturesque, sublime,—but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clambers up by abrupt and intricate ways, and browses upon the roughest bark or crops the tender flower.

If Hazlitt's invective seems sometimes unnecessarily bitter, we should remember how violent was the abuse to which he and his fellow reformers were subjected. The editor of *The Eatanswill Gazette* and his rival journalist were courteous opponents com-

pared with Gifford, Lockhart and their associates on the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's Magazine*. Writing anonymously in *Blackwood*, Lockhart in a notice of Hunt's "Rimini" speaks of "its glittering and rancid obscenities" and of the "extreme moral depravity of the Cockney School"—the name he had invented for such writers as Lamb, Keats, Hunt and Hazlitt. Each new work of Hazlitt's was the occasion of an outflow of abuse from Gifford. His "Character of Pitt" in *The Round Table* is denominated "loathsome trash." The *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* were said in the *Quarterly* to disgrace literature, while the *Lectures on the English Poets* were "predatory incursions on common sense", being only "an incoherent jumble of grand words." To this rank and foolish stuff Hazlitt replied with "A Letter to William Gifford, Esq." which, if cleverer, was little less abusive than Gifford himself.

In general, however, Hazlitt's weapon was not the bludgeon but the rapier, and his thrusts were hard to parry. He writes of Rogers, for instance; "he is a very lady-like poet." One passage in a poem of Moore's "resembles a strawberry ice-cream." In Campbell's *Pleasures of Hope*, he says, "a painful attention is paid to the expression in proportion as there is little to express." For the most part Hazlitt is a fair critic in matters of literature and art. He can see merits as well as faults. In respect to politics, however, his prejudices often obscure his judgment. In regard to the Duke of Wellington, for example, his pronouncements are absurd. But Wellington was a double offender, since he was not only a Tory statesman, but the conqueror of that "benefactor of the human race", Napoleon. That Hazlitt idolized the man whom Englishmen regarded with horror and detestation not unmixed with fear, had much to do with his own bitterness, and partly accounts for the abuse with which he was loaded. With few friends, and holding what many considered to be dangerous opinions, and without all the humanising effects of a happy home life, he had nothing to check the faults belonging to his disposition. Writing to explain the pleasure we take in tragedy, he says "to hate is as natural as to love", and for himself this was unfortunately true.

It is only fair to recall that, to the few who remained his friends, Hazlitt's companionship was something well worth having. Tal-four writes of him:

When at his ease and entered on a favorite topic, no conversation was ever more delightful. He did not talk for effect, to dazzle, to surprise, or annoy, but with the most simple and honest desire to make his view of the subject entirely apprehended by his hearer. . . . He loved "to hear the chimes at midnight" with-

out considering them as a summons to rise. At these seasons, when in his happiest mood, he used to dwell on the conversational powers of his friends, and live over again the delightful hours he had passed with them.

Lamb said, "I think I shall go to my grave without finding, or expecting to find, such another companion."

The *Life of Napoleon* was a complete failure financially. Scott's "Life" had already appeared, and though Hazlitt's was the less dull of the two, the abuser of the dead emperor was naturally more approved of than his enthusiastic admirer. The firm that published Hazlitt's book also became bankrupt at this time, and he received nothing. He had never been an extravagant man, but he had not saved, and his last days were spent in poverty. He became ill with inflammation of the stomach, bearing his sufferings with great courage. Charles Lamb and other friends cared for his wants, and were present at his death. It is touching to hear that in his last illness he longed to see his mother, but she was eighty-four years old and could not come. His last words were: "Well, I've had a happy life"—a strange statement, surely. But William Hazlitt was a strange man.