

A HOMAGE TO WILLIAM HAZLITT

UN HOMENAJE A WILLIAM HAZLITT

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Abstract: Hazlitt was a man of letters who developed his career in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the public sphere was still strong. Men of letters were a sort of moral guides in times of profound cultural change and political turbulence; they formed public opinion through speaking and writing to a large non-specialized audience about a wide range of issues of public interest including aesthetics, ethics, politics, religion, and science. The stage was divided between conservatives and radicals and, due to the political relevance of the debate and the intense rivalry between the contending parties, there was a violent exchange of ideas. One of the greatest stylists of the English language, Hazlitt was no detached observer but got involved in the defence of his position no matter the cost at a time when not only ideas but matters of style mattered politically. A radical all his life, he combined the ideas of the Enlightenment and Romanticism to defend equality, freedom, autonomy in art and life, and imaginative empathy.

Keywords: Hazlitt; Romanticism; man of letters; imaginative empathy.

Resumen: Hazlitt fue un hombre de letras que desarrolló su carrera profesional a finales del siglo XVIII y principios del XIX, cuando la esfera pública era todavía fuerte. Los hombres de letras eran una especie de guías morales en épocas de profundos cambios culturales y turbulencias políticas; formaban la opinión pública hablando y escribiendo para una gran audiencia no especializada sobre una amplia gama de temas de interés público, como la estética, la ética, la política, la religión y la ciencia. El escenario se dividía entre conservadores y radicales y, debido a la relevancia política del debate y a la intensa rivalidad entre los contrincantes, se producía un violento intercambio de ideas. Hazlitt, uno de los más grandes estilistas de la lengua inglesa, no fue un observador indiferente, sino que se involucró en la defensa de su postura sin importar el precio, en una época en la que no solo las ideas sino también las cuestiones de estilo importaban políticamente. Radical durante toda su vida, combinó las ideas de la Ilustración y el Romanticismo para defender la igualdad, la libertad, la autonomía en el arte y en la vida y la empatía imaginativa.

Palabras clave: Hazlitt; Romanticismo; hombre de letras; empatía imaginativa.

From Samuel Johnson to Christopher Hitchens, a strange, hybrid creature known as the “man of letters” has been an abiding feature of the British literary landscape. There have been some distinguished women of letters, too, not least George Eliot; but the category has been mostly confined to males. To be a kosher man of letters a century or two ago, you had to do more than write poems or novels. You had (for example) to launch a journal, dabble in theatre reviewing, throw off the odd biography, compile a dictionary, deliver public lectures, pen scurrilous essays for periodicals and edit the letters of some political bigwig. The man of letters was a literary jack of all trades, a hand-to-mouth hack who could knock together a popularising account of Darwinism as easily as he could churn out notes on an art exhibition. If he was to keep the wolf from the door, he had to be ready to review anything that came to hand, which meant that he had to be adept at more than one intellectual discipline. In this sense, he was the opposite of the professional academics who would eventually take over from him. He had also to take his political colour from the journals that hired him, if he was to put food on the table. As the reading public and the periodicals market expanded in the nineteenth century, the man of letters found himself able to eat more regularly than ever before. For all its claims to timeless spiritual wisdom, literature was now a full-blooded commercial enterprise.

The man of letters, then, was an intriguing combination of critic, sage, scholar, jour-

nalist and dilettante. He was what we might now call a public intellectual, long before the dreaded word ‘intellectual’ was coined in 1870s Europe. But he was less aloof and intimidating than the intellectual, since he needed to stay in close touch with the public in order to shape their views. His writing was more ad hoc and hand-to-mouth. He was entrusted with the momentous task of forming public opinion, and was thus, as one Victorian author remarked, part of the “unelected Commons” of the nation. In this period, the critic was still an influential public figure rather than a cloistered university academic. It fell to him to absorb and interpret new ideas, broadcasting them to a non-specialist reading public; and this meant combining the erudite with the popular in a way that intellectuals rarely do. As such new ideas grew more and more alarming in the Victorian era (atheism, evolution, the findings of geology, rumblings of social revolution), the man of letters became a consoler as well as critic, increasingly adopting a soothing bedside manner to quell the anxieties of the middle classes. He was expected to steer a distinctly nervous public through a tempest of social and cultural change. But he also wrote directly for all the people involved in political decision-making, and his voice could weigh heavily with them. It is probable that any important novel or intellectual controversy of the time would have reached a large proportion of the governing class.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the authority of the man of letters had been drastically diminished. What need was there for public critics when the market itself determined what was worth reading? As knowledge grew more specialist and esoteric, could the man of letters be anything more than an embarrassing amateur? In an age riven by social and political conflict, could he any longer be the mouthpiece of a public consensus? Public opinion, it seemed, was now something to be manipulated rather than commonly constructed. The public critic was on the way out, to be replaced by the political technocrat, public relations consultant and university don. An honorable tradition of such public critics would survive, all the way from Edmund Wilson and Susan Sontag to E.P. Thompson and Edward Said. But they would no longer rub shoulders with the powerful, as they did in the eighteenth-century coffee houses of London. On the contrary, power was now their adversary.

For over a century, one of the finest men of letters ever to emerge in England was shamefully neglected. Nor was this some inexplicable oversight. On the contrary, the sidelining of William Hazlitt was entirely predictable. For one thing, he was an ardent supporter of Napoleon, at a time when Britain was at war with France. This would have been rather like championing Bin Laden in the *New York Times* after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Nor did it help that he published a startlingly candid sexual memoir, *Liber Amoris*, which has provoked the wrath of some modern-day feminists,

though Virginia Woolf revered Hazlitt as a man “inspired by the most genuine passion for the rights and liberties of mankind” (Wu 440). A reviewer of the time attacked “this precious record of vulgarity and nastiness” as revealing the author “in all of the nakedness of his conceit, selfishness, slaving sensuality, filthy profligacy, and howling idiocy” [*sic*] (quoted in Wu 337). But Hazlitt had grown used to this kind of stuff. He once remarked that if your enemies could not find a flaw in your reasoning, they would quickly find one in your reputation.

The true reasons for Hazlitt’s unpopularity, however, run deeper. For one thing, he belonged to an age (early nineteenth-century Britain) in which public discourse was too bellicose and abrasive for the well-mannered Victorians who followed in its wake. It was also to prove offensive for a good many genteel critics of our own time. Hazlitt was too foul-mouthed and belligerent to qualify as a proper gent. The periodical press for which he wrote could be dogmatic, vituperative, scurrilous and shamelessly sectarian. Writs flew liberally to and fro. Hazlitt himself sued the Conservative *Blackwood’s Magazine* for libel, a journal whose editor was an intellectual thug. The editor of the *London Magazine* was killed in a duel with one of his literary rivals. The editors of the radical *Examiner* were imprisoned for an alleged libel of the Prince Regent, a man whom there was much to be libellous about. *Fraser’s Magazine* was an insulting rag crammed with doggerel and brutal burlesque. *Blackwood’s* savaged what it sneeringly called the “Cockney school” of literature, a vein of lower-class vulgarity which included Hazlitt and his friend John Keats. Another Tory organ, the *Quarterly Review*, vented its spleen on Hazlitt, Keats, Shelley and Charlotte Bronte. The *Edinburgh Review* denounced the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge as regressive and ridiculous. In all these cases, social and artistic judgements were hard to distinguish.

When it came to abuse, Hazlitt could certainly compete with the best. He once described Conservatives as wallowing like swine in the trough of their senses, which would certainly draw a stern rebuke from the Speaker of the House of Commons today. Because he was unafraid to pronounce unpalatable truths, Hazlitt was vilified by powerful political opponents, found it hard to drum up work as a result and spent much of his life in poverty. If he spoke up for the poor, it was not from a position of patronage.

Hazlitt was an unabashed political radical, which is another reason why he was for so long denied his due as one of the supreme craftsmen of the English language. The modern age expects its critics to be dispassionate, whereas Hazlitt was a full-blooded partisan. In an age of brutal political repression, when Britain was effectively a police state, he was quite right to be so. Any posture of disinterestedness in such conditions would have played straight into the hands of the political autocrats. The ideal, Hazlitt

thought, lay not in some tepid middle ground, but in pushing an idea as far as it would go. He was allergic to the liberal banality that the truth lies somewhere between extremes. There was indeed, he believed, a genuine kind of disinterestedness, but it had nothing to do with some lofty neutrality. It consisted rather of the ability to feel one's way beyond one's own selfish interests into the needs and interests of others. He could, for example, melt his own mind into the mind of a man like Edmund Burke, much as he abhorred Burke's traditionalist politics. Like many others, he found such imaginative empathy in Shakespeare above all; but it also formed the subject of his first book, a philosophical study of human action. It seems ironic, then, that a writer who is often upbraided for his inveterate prejudices began his career by praising the virtue of disinterestedness. But the irony is only apparent. Disinterestedness for Hazlitt meant a selfless sympathy that could surmount vested interests, and this, in the context of his day, was hardly an impartial case.

If the contention between the periodicals of Hazlitt's day was so ferocious, it was largely because it had become well-nigh impossible to distinguish literature and politics, and this at a time of world-shaking political events. If criticism was so vital, it was largely because the political stakes were so high. A certain 'low' species of imagery could suggest dangerously republican sentiments, whereas a relish for the neo-classical might imply support for the authoritarian government in Whitehall. Political battle could be joined over questions of rhyme or diction. Critics as astute as Hazlitt could unpack a whole politics from a rhetorical turn of phrase, and later critics have done much the same with his own scintillating prose.

Literary judgements were also hard to separate from philosophical ones. To speak up for universal reason, like Tom Paine, was to place oneself firmly on the left; to view reason as less crucial than habit or instinct probably meant opposing the French Revolution. Rarely in the annals of British culture have art, politics and philosophy been so densely interwoven. Is William Blake's vision religious, artistic, political, philosophical, or all of these things together? In what sense is Paine's anemic literary style, as opposed to Edmund Burke's gorgeous, impassioned prose, a pointer to where these men stand on the major social issues of their time?

The issues at question were certainly momentous. Hazlitt was born in 1778, only two years after Britain's colony across the Atlantic declared its independence. It was a nation in which he had an early involvement, as we shall see in a moment. When he was 11 years old, the Bastille fell in Paris, and along with it the detested *Ancien Régime* in France. There were mutinies in the British navy when Hazlitt was a young man, along with some vicious anti-trade union legislation from a badly rattled government. The Brit-

ain in which this doughty dissenter grew up was stiff with spies, agents provocateurs, bread riots, police riots, treason trials, machine breaking, rural militancy, prosecutions for sedition and transportation for the starving who stole. Those suspected of political rebellion might live just long enough to see their genitals cut off and their bowels extracted from their half-hanged bodies. In these early years of the Industrial Revolution, more than one in twenty of the population were destitute, while some of those fortunate enough to work were unfortunate enough to be worked to death. The British working class, which would later provide some organized resistance to these horrors, was still in the making; so it fell to the literati—to writers like Blake, Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Keats, Byron, Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt—to develop a critique which the militants of the British labour movement would later make their own.

Hazlitt, then, was part of a current of radical Romanticism for which the opposite of oppressive power was the creative imagination. The imagination represented a freedom and spiritual wealth which were not to be found in the dark Satanic mills of early industrial Britain. It was a transformative power, and as such had affinities with revolutionary politics. It was a sign of the human capacity to project beyond the present, and thus foreshadowed utopia. The imagination was boundless, and so was uniquely precious in a civilisation in which everything could be weighed and measured. Art was play, not labour, and so held out a promise of emancipation to the wage-slaves of the first industrial capitalist nation in history. The work of art obeyed no law but its own, and could therefore be seen as a model of human autonomy. It was self-determining, just as peoples and nations ought to be. It had no reason or purpose beyond its own self-delight; and in a utilitarian age which judged things in terms of their practical functions, this glorious uselessness carried with it some subversive implications.

From William Blake to Oscar Wilde, art was an image of what men and women could themselves become in changed political conditions. They, too, could be gloriously pointless; in fact, this was the whole point of human existence, which the grey-bearded puritans and chill-blooded champions of the work ethic had never understood. Human beings resembled works of art in being ends in themselves; and any attempt to use them for goals beyond themselves would violate their true nature. Ironically, then, art for art's sake was not a retreat from politics; it was a politics in itself.

Romanticism was not the only source of Hazlitt's dissent. He was also heir to the radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, with its faith in liberty, equality, freedom of inquiry and a rational social order. It was a legacy he inherited from his father, a Unitarian minister from Tipperary who had openly espoused the cause of American independence at a time when it was dangerous to do so in Britain. A newspaper arti-

cle Hazlitt Senior wrote on the British torture of American prisoners of war brought him death threats. In his native Ireland, the radical Enlightenment took the political form of the revolutionary United Irishmen, whose doomed insurrection of 1798 he supported, and with some of whose leaders he had connections. He was also a friend of Benjamin Franklin, and when young William was five he transported the family to the more politically congenial climate of America. Britain seemed to him a den of injustice, while America promised to be a haven of freedom. Writing his first letter at the age of eight, Hazlitt Junior said of America “that it would have been a great deal better if the white people had not found it out” (quoted in Wu 36). “Let the [Indians have] it to themselves for it was made for them” (36), this pocket-sized anti-colonialist went on to insist.

The Hazlitts settled at first—where else?—in Philadelphia; but Hazlitt Sr. failed to secure a clerical post there and moved to Boston, where he won an enthusiastic following among the city’s liberal-minded churchgoers. Even here, however, he could find no permanent position. The land of liberty had yet to catch up with his brand of rational dissent. Reluctantly, then, he shipped himself and his family back to benighted Britain, but before doing so left a quiet revolution behind him. It was through his influence that King’s Chapel in Boston severed its affiliation with the Episcopal Church and became America’s first Unitarian institution. The man who produced one of Britain’s finest men of letters also planted a new creed in the New World.

Hazlitt Jr. had been trained up to be a Unitarian minister, and once back in London attended a Unitarian college denounced by the political establishment as a hotbed of heresy and sedition. It was here that he first encountered the philosophers of the French Enlightenment, who set his thought firmly in a republican mould. His religious belief, however, dwindled as his political faith grew, so that by the age of seventeen he had blossomed into what he himself an avowed infidel. “Nothing”, he was to write later, “can surely surpass the excesses, the horrors, the refinements in cruelty, and the cold-blooded malignity which have been exercised in the name and under the garb of religion” (*The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* 203).

When this young God-denier finally launched upon a precarious artistic career, it was not as a writer but as a painter. In fact, he was competent enough to exhibit at the Royal Academy, an institution he would later castigate for its artistic conservatism. What turned him to literature was an encounter with the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as a fruitful friendship with the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, both at that time enthusiasts for radical reform. Hazlitt would later pillory the two for their political apostasy, as Wordsworth ended up writing third-rate sonnets in praise of capital punishment and Coleridge clamoured for working men’s protests to be violently suppressed. He was

also to rub shoulders with Keats, Shelley and Charles Lamb. He became an increasingly prominent man of letters, one both revered and reviled, with all the typical versatility of the species. In a career of unstinting literary labour, he delivered public lectures on philosophy, Shakespeare, English poetry and English stage comedy, worked at drama and painting, wrote on literature and politics for a range of major journals and published a series of works—*Table Talk*, *The Spirit of the Age*, *Political Essays*, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*—which in the words of one reviewer of the time established him as “one of the ablest and most eloquent critics of our nation” (quoted in Cook xlvii).

He was also, one should add, one of the most superb stylists. Few British critics can bring a person, a political ideology, or a piece of writing as vividly alive as Hazlitt. Few of them, too, could match his combination of grace and grittiness, subtlety and satiric force. Writing of a contemporary fop who complained of the misfortune that his lame leg was also his favourite one, he finds in this casual shaft of wit “an Horatian ease and elegance—a slippered negligence, a cushioned effeminacy—it would take years of careless study and languid enjoyment to strike out so quant and ingenious a conceit” (“Brumelliana” 160). Or consider this comment on the painter Van Dyke:

Van Dyke’s flesh-colour, though it has great truth and purity, wants gusto. It has not the internal character, the living principle in it. It is a smooth surface, not a warm, moving mass . . . The impression slides off from the eye, and does not, like the tones of Titian’s pencil, leave a sting behind in the mind of the spectator. The eye does not acquire a taste or appetite for what it sees (“On Gusto” 267).

Wordsworth’s poetry he finds too puritanically hostile to lavishness:

The decencies of costume, the decorations of vanity are stripped off without mercy as barbarous, idle, and Gothic. The jewels in the crisped hair, the diadem on the polished brow, are thought meretricious, theatrical, vulgar; and nothing contents his fastidious taste beyond a simple garland of flowers . . . by internal evidence one might almost be sure that [his poetry] was written in a mountainous country, from its bareness, its simplicity, its loftiness, and its depth! (“Mr. Wordsworth” 351).

From his attempts to stay out of a debtors’ prison to his tempestuous love life, Hazlitt’s life was as turbulent as his political wrangling. A friend described him and his wife Sarah as “a worthy couple—they quarrel, fight, make it up over the gin bottle, and get drunk together” (quoted in Wu 193). His reputation has been revived in England of late by a series of editions and critical studies. A Hazlitt Society has been established, and money has been raised for the restoration of the critic’s tomb in Soho. Hazlitt was not, as Duncan Wu’s subtitle claims, the first modern man. Historians tend to date the modern period from the early seventeenth century, in which case Descartes, Shakespeare or

Copernicus have a far stronger claim to the title. He was, even so, one of the giants of English letters, as well as one of those rare political figures who start out on the left and end up there as well. While others around him turned their coats, feathered their nests and came obsequiously to terms with the insolence of power, he himself never wavered in his faith in the people and his rage at injustice. He died pretty much as hard-up as when he set out. With its usual eye for agreeable coincidences, history ordained that Hazlitt should live for a while in the London house of John Milton, regicide and republican, his great English predecessor in the defense of liberty.

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