

# Introduction

William Hazlitt (1778–1830) came of an Irish Protestant stock, and of a branch of it transplanted in the reign of George I from the county of Antrim to Tipperary. His father migrated, at nineteen, to the University of Glasgow (where he was contemporary with Adam Smith), graduated in 1761 or thereabouts, embraced the principles of the Unitarians, joined their ministry, and crossed over to England; being successively pastor at Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, at Marshfield in Gloucestershire, and at Maidstone. At Wisbech he married Grace Loftus, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer. Of the many children granted to them but three survived infancy. William, the youngest of these, was born in Mitre Lane, Maidstone, on April 10, 1778. From Maidstone the family moved in 1780 to Bandon, Co. Cork; and from Bandon in 1783 to America, where Mr. Hazlitt preached before the new Assembly of the States-General of New Jersey, lectured at Philadelphia on the Evidences of Christianity, founded the First Unitarian Church at Boston, and declined a proffered diploma of D.D. In 1786–7 he returned to England and took up his abode at Wem, in Shropshire. His elder son, John, was now old enough to choose a vocation, and chose that of a miniature-painter. The second child, Peggy, had begun to paint also, amateurishly in oils. William, aged eight—a child out of whose recollection all memories of Bandon and of America (save the taste of barberries) soon faded—took his education at home and at a local school. His father designed him for the Unitarian ministry.

The above dry recital contains a number of facts not to be overlooked as predisposing causes in young Hazlitt's later career; as that he was Irish by blood, intellectual by geniture, born into dissent, and a minority of dissent, taught at home to value the things of the mind, in early childhood a nomad, in later childhood 'privately educated'—a process which (whatever its merits) is apt to develop the freak as against the citizen, the eccentric and lop-sided as against what is proportionate and disciplined. Young Hazlitt's cleverness and his passion for individual liberty were alike precocious. In 1791, at the age of thirteen, he composed and published in *The Shrewsbury Chronicle* a letter of protest against the calumniators of Dr. Priestley: a performance which, for the gravity of its thought as for the balance of its expression, would do credit to ninety-nine grown men in a hundred. At fifteen, his father designing that he should enter the ministry, he proceeded to the Unitarian College, Hackney; where his master, a Mr. Corrie, found him 'rather backward in many of the ordinary points of learning and, in general, of a dry, intractable understanding', the truth being that the lad had set his heart against the ministry, aspiring rather to be a philosopher—in particular a political philosopher. At fourteen he had conceived ('in consequence of a dispute one day, after coming out of Meeting, between my father and an old lady of the congregation, respecting the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts and the limits of religious toleration') the germ of his *Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation*, published in his maturer years (1828), but drafted and scribbled upon constantly in these days, to the neglect of his theological studies. His father, hearing of the project, forbade him to pursue it.

Thus four or five years at the Unitarian College were wasted, or, at least, had been spent without apparent profit; and in 1798 young Hazlitt, aged close upon twenty, unsettled in his plans as in his prospects, was at home again and (as the saying is) at a loose end; when of a sudden his life found its spiritual apocalypse. It came with the descent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge upon Shrewsbury, to take over the charge of a Unitarian Congregation there.

He did not come till late on the Saturday afternoon before he was to preach; and Mr. Rowe [the abdicating minister], who himself went down to the coach in a state of anxiety and expectation to look

for the arrival of his successor, could find no one at all answering the description, but a round-faced man, in a short black coat (like a shooting-jacket) which hardly seemed to have been made for him, but who seemed to be talking at a great rate to his fellow-passengers. Mr. Rowe had scarce returned to give an account of his disappointment when the round-faced man in black entered, and dissipated all doubts on the subject by beginning to talk. He did not cease while he stayed; nor has he since.

Of his meeting with Coleridge, and of the soul's awakening that followed, Hazlitt has left an account (My First Acquaintance with Poets) that will fascinate so long as English prose is read. 'Somehow that period [the time just after the French Revolution] was not a time when *nothing was given for nothing*. The mind opened, and a softness might be perceived coming over the heart of individuals beneath "the scales that fence" our self-interest.' As Wordsworth wrote:

“ Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very Heaven.

It was in January, 1798, that I was one morning before daylight, to walk ten miles in the mud, to hear this celebrated person preach. Never, the longest day I have to live, shall I have such another walk as this cold, raw, comfortless one in the winter of 1798. Il-y-a des impressions que ni le tems ni les circonstances peuvent effacer. Dusse-je vivre des siecles entiers, le doux tems de ma jeunesse ne peut renaître pour moi, ni s'effacer jamais dans ma memoire. When I got there the organ was playing the 100th Psalm, and when it was done Mr. Coleridge rose and gave out his text, 'And he went up into the mountain to pray, *himself, alone*.' As he gave out this text, his voice 'rose like a stream of distilled perfumes', and when he came to the two last words, which he pronounced loud, deep, and distinct, it seemed to me, who was then young, as if the sounds had echoed from the bottom of the human heart, and as if that prayer might have floated in solemn silence through the universe. . . . The preacher then launched into his subject, like an eagle dallying with the wind.

Coleridge visited Wem, walked and talked with young Hazlitt, and wound up by inviting the disciple to visit him at Nether Stowey in the Quantocks. Hazlitt went, made acquaintance with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and was drawn more deeply under the spell. In later years as the younger man grew cantankerous and the elder declined, through opium, into a 'battered seraph', there was an estrangement. But Hazlitt never forgot his obligation.

My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longings infinite and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language that expresses itself, I owe to Coleridge.

Coleridge, sympathizing with the young man's taste for philosophy and abetting it, encouraged him to work upon a treatise which saw the light in 1805, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action: Being an Argument in favour of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind*. Meantime, however,—the ministry having been renounced—the question of a vocation became more and more urgent, and after long indecision Hazlitt packed his portmanteau for London, resolved to learn painting under his brother John, who had begun to do prosperously. John taught him some rudiments, and packed him off to Paris, where he studied for some four months in the Louvre and learned to idolize Bonaparte. This

sojourn in Paris—writes his grandson and biographer—'was one long beau jour to him'. His allusions to it are constant. He returned to England in 1803, with formed tastes and predilections, very few of which he afterwards modified, much less forsook.

We next find him making a tour as a portrait-painter through the north of England, where (as was to be expected) he attempted a portrait of Wordsworth, among others. 'At his desire', says Wordsworth, 'I sat to him, but as he did not satisfy himself or my friends, the unfinished work was destroyed.' He was more successful with Charles Lamb, whom he painted (for a whim) in the dress of a Venetian Senator. As a friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth he had inevitably made acquaintance with the Lambs. He first met Lamb at one of the Godwins' strange evening parties and the two became intimate friends and fellow theatre-goers.

Hazlitt's touchy and difficult temper suspended this intimacy in later years, though to the last Lamb regarded him as 'one of the finest and wisest spirits breathing'; but for a while it was unclouded. At the Lambs', moreover, Hazlitt made acquaintance with a Dr. Stoddart, owner of some property at Winterslow near Salisbury, and his sister Sarah, a lady wearing past her first youth but yet addicted to keeping a number of beaux to her string. Hazlitt, attracted to her from the first,—he made a gloomy lover and his subsequent performances in that part were unedifying—for some years played walking gentleman behind the leading suitors with whom Miss Stoddart from time to time diversified her comedy. But Mary Lamb was on his side; the rivals on one excuse or another went their ways or were dismissed; and on May 1, 1808, the marriage took place at St. Andrew's Church, Holborn. Lamb attended, foreboding little happiness to the couple from his knowledge of their temperaments. Seven years after (August 9, 1815), he wrote to Southey. 'I was at Hazlitt's marriage, and had like to have been turned out several times during the ceremony. Anything awful makes me laugh.' The marriage was not a happy one.

Portrait-painting had been abandoned long before this. The *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) had fallen, as the saying is, stillborn from the press: *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs* (1806) had earned for the author many enemies but few readers: and a treatise attacking Malthus's theory of population (1807) had allured the public as little. A piece of hack-work, *The Eloquence of the British Senate*, also belongs to 1807: *A New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue for the use of Schools* to 1810. The nutriment to be derived from these works, again, was not of the sort that replenishes the family table, and in 1812 Hazlitt left Winterslow (where he had been quarrelling with his brother-in-law), settled in London in 19 York Street, Westminster—once the home of John Milton—and applied himself strenuously to lecturing and journalism. His lectures, on the English Philosophers, were delivered at the Russell Institution: his most notable journalistic work, on politics and the drama, was done for *The Morning Chronicle*, then edited by Mr. Perry. From an obituary notice of Hazlitt contributed many years later (October 1830) to an old magazine I cull the following:

He obtained an introduction, about 1809 or 1810, to the late Mr. Perry, of *The Morning Chronicle*, by whom he was engaged to report Parliamentary debates, write original articles, etc. He also furnished a number of theatrical articles on the acting of Kean. As a political writer he was apt to be too violent; though in general he was not a man of violent temper. He was also apt to conceive strong and rooted prejudices against individuals on very slight grounds. But he was a good-hearted man.... Private circumstances, it is said, contributed to sour his temper and to produce a peculiar excitement which too frequently held its sway over him. Mr. Hazlitt and Mr. Perry did not agree. Upon one occasion, to the great annoyance of some of his colleagues, he preferred his wine with a few friends to taking his share in reporting an important discussion in the House of Commons. Added to this, he either did not

understand the art of reporting, or would not take the trouble to master it.... His original articles required to be carefully looked after, to weed them of strong expressions.

Hazlitt's reputation grew, notwithstanding. In 1814 Jeffrey enlisted him to write for *The Edinburgh Review*, and in 1815 he began to contribute to Leigh Hunt's paper *The Examiner*. In February 1816 he reviewed Schlegel's 'Lectures on Dramatic Literature' for the *Edinburgh*, and this would seem to have started him on his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*. Throughout 1816 he wrote at it sedulously.

The MS., when completed, was accepted by Mr. C. H. Reynell, of 21, Piccadilly, the head of a printing establishment of old and high standing; and it was agreed that 100 pounds should be paid to the author for the entire copyright.... The volume was published by Mr. Hunter of St. Paul's Churchyard; and the author was gratified by the prompt insertion of a complimentary notice in the *Edinburgh Review*. The whole edition went off in six weeks; and yet it was a half-guinea book.<sup>1</sup>

The reader, who comes to it through this Introduction, will note two points to qualify his appreciation of the book as a specimen of Hazlitt's critical writing, and a third that helps to account for its fortune in 1817. It was the work of a man in his thirty-eighth year, and to that extent has maturity. But it was also his first serious essay, after many false starts, in an art and in a style which, later on, he brilliantly mastered. The subject is most pleasantly handled, and with an infectious enthusiasm: the reader feels all the while that his sympathy with Shakespeare is being stimulated and his understanding promoted: but it scarcely yields either the light or the music which Hazlitt communicates in his later and more famous essays.

For the third point, Hazlitt had made enemies nor had ever been cautious of making them: and these enemies were now the 'upper dog'. Indeed, they always had been: but the fall of Napoleon, which almost broke his heart, had set them in full cry, and they were not clement in their triumph. It is not easy, even on the evidence before us, to realize that a number of the finest spirits in this country, nursed in the hopes of the French Revolution, kept their admiration of Napoleon, the hammer of old bad monarchies, down to the end and beyond it: that Napier, for example, historian of the war in the Peninsula and as gallant a soldier as ever fought under Wellington, when—late in life, as he lay on his sofa tortured by an old wound—news was brought him of Napoleon's death, burst into a storm of weeping that would not be controlled. On Hazlitt, bound up heart and soul in what he regarded as the cause of French and European liberty and enlightenment, Waterloo, the fall of the Emperor, the restoration of the Bourbons, fell as blows almost stupefying, and his indignant temper charged Heaven with them as wrongs not only public but personal to himself.

In the writing of the *Characters* he had found a partial drug for despair. But his enemies, as soon as might be, took hold of the anodyne. Like the Bourbons, they had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing.

The *Quarterly Review* moved—for a quarterly—with something like agility. A second edition of the book had been prepared, and was selling briskly, when this *Review* launched one of its diatribes against the work and its author.

Taylor and Hessey [the booksellers] told him subsequently that they had sold nearly two editions in about three months, but after the *Quarterly* review of them came out they never sold another copy. 'My book,' he said, 'sold well—the first edition had gone off in six weeks—till that review came out. I had just prepared a second edition—such was called for—but then the *Quarterly* told the public that I was a

fool and a dunce, and more, that I was an evil disposed person: and the public, supposing Gifford to know best, confessed that it had been a great ass to be pleased where it ought not to be, and the sale completely stopped.

The review, when examined, is seen to be a smart essay in detraction with its arguments ad invidiam very deftly inserted. But as a piece of criticism it misses even such points as might fairly have been made against the book; as, for example, that it harps too monotonously upon the tense string of enthusiasm. Hazlitt could not have applied to this work the motto—'For I am nothing if not critical'—which he chose for his *View of the English Stage* in 1818; the Characters being anything but 'critical' in the sense there connoted. Jeffrey noted this in the forefront of a sympathetic article in the *Edinburgh*.

It is, in truth, rather an encomium on Shakespeare than a commentary or a critique on him—and it is written more to show extraordinary love than extraordinary knowledge of his productions.... The author is not merely an admirer of our great dramatist, but an Idolater of him; and openly professes his idolatry. We have ourselves too great a leaning to the same superstition to blame him very much for his error: and though we think, of course, that our own admiration is, on the whole, more discriminating and judicious, there are not many points on which, especially after reading his eloquent exposition of them, we should be much inclined to disagree with him.

The book, as we have already intimated, is written less to tell the reader what Mr. H. *knows* about Shakespeare or his writings than what he *feels* about them—and *why* he feels so—and thinks that all who profess to love poetry should feel so likewise. . . . He seems pretty generally, indeed, in a state of happy intoxication—and has borrowed from his great original, not indeed the force or brilliancy of his fancy, but something of its playfulness, and a large share of his apparent joyousness and self-indulgence in its exercise. It is evidently a great pleasure to him to be fully possessed with the beauties of his author, and to follow the impulse of his unrestrained eagerness to impress them upon his readers.

Upon this, Hazlitt, no doubt, would have commented, 'Well, and why not? I choose to understand drama through my *feelings*.' To surrender to great art was, for him, and definitely, a part of the critic's function—'A genuine criticism should, as I take it, repeat the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work.' This contention, for which Hazlitt fought all his life and fought brilliantly, is familiar to us by this time as the gage flung to didactic criticism by the 'impressionist', and in our day, in the generation just closed or closing, with a Walter Pater or a Jules Lemaitre for challenger, the betting has run on the impressionist. But in 1817 Hazlitt had all the odds against him when he stood up and accused the great Dr. Johnson of having made criticism 'a kind of Procrustes' bed of genius, where he might cut down imagination to matter-of-fact, regulate the passions according to reason, and translate the whole into logical diagrams and rhetorical declamation'.

Thus he says of Shakespeare's characters, in contradiction to what Pope had observed, and to what every one else feels, that each character is a species, instead of being an individual. He in fact found the general species or *didactic* form in Shakespeare's characters, which was all he sought or cared for; he did not find the individual traits, or the *dramatic* distinctions which Shakespeare has engrafted on this general nature, because he felt no interest in them.

Nothing is easier to prove than that in this world nobody ever invented anything. So it may be proved that, Johnson having written 'Great thoughts are always general', Blake had countered him by affirming (long before Hazlitt) that 'To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the great

distinction of merit': even as it may be demonstrable that Charles Lamb, in his charming personal chat about the Elizabethan dramatists and his predilections among them, was already putting into practice what he did not trouble to theorize. But when it comes to setting out the theory, grasping the worth of the principle, stating it and fighting for it, I think Hazlitt may fairly claim first share in the credit.

He did not, when he wrote the following pages, know very much, even about his subject. As his biographer says:

My grandfather came to town with very little book-knowledge. . . . He had a fair stock of ideas. . . . But of the volumes which form the furniture of a gentleman's library he was egregiously ignorant . . . Mr. Hazlitt's resources were emphatically internal; from his own mind he drew sufficient for himself.

Now while it may be argued with plausibility, and even with truth, that the first qualification of a critic—at any rate of a critic of poetry—is, as Jeffrey puts the antithesis, to *feel* rather than to *know*; while to be delicately sensitive and sympathetic counts more than to be well-informed; nevertheless learning remains respectable. He who can assimilate it without pedantry (which is another word for intellectual indigestion) actually improves and refines his feelings while enlarging their scope and at the same time enlarging his resources of comparison and illustration. Hazlitt, who had something like a genius for felicitous, apposite quotation, and steadily bettered it as he grew older, would certainly have said 'Yes' to this. At all events learning impresses; it carries weight: and therefore it has always seemed to me that he showed small tact, if some modesty, by heaping whole pages of Schlegel into his own preface.

For Schlegel<sup>2</sup> was not only a learned critic but a great one: and this mass of him—cast with seeming carelessness, just here, into the scales—does give the reader, as with a jerk, the sensation that Hazlitt has, of his rashness, invited that which suddenly throws him up in the air to kick the beam: that he has provoked a comparison which exhibits his own performance as clever but flimsy.

Nor is this impression removed by his admirer the late Mr. Ireland, who claims for the *Characters* that, 'although it professes to be dramatic criticism, it is in reality a discourse on the philosophy of life and human nature, more suggestive than many approved treatises expressly devoted to that subject'. Well, for the second half of this pronouncement—constat. 'You see, my friend,' writes Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, 'there is nothing so ridiculous that it has not at some time been said by some philosopher.' But for the first part, while a priori Mr. Ireland ought to be right—since Hazlitt, as we have seen, came to literary criticism by the road of philosophical writing—I confess to finding very little philosophy in this book.

Over and above the gusto of the writing, which is infectious enough, and the music of certain passages in which we foretaste the masterly prose of Hazlitt's later *Essays*, I find in the book three merits which, as I study it, more and more efface that first impression of flimsiness.

(1) To begin with, Hazlitt had hold of the right end of the stick. He really understood that Shakespeare was a dramatic craftsman, studied him as such, worshipped him for his incomparable skill in doing what he tried, all his life and all the time, to do. In these days much merit must be allowed to a Shakespearian critic who takes his author steadily as a dramatist and not as a philosopher, or a propagandist, or a lawyer's clerk, or a disappointed lover, or for his acquaintance with botany, politics, cyphers, Christian Science, any of the thousand and one things that with their rival degrees of intrinsic

importance agree in being, for Shakespeare, nihil ad rem.

(2) Secondly, Hazlitt always treats Shakespeare as, in my opinion, he deserves to be treated; that is, absolutely and as 'patrone and not compare' among the Elizabethans. I harbour an ungracious doubt that he may have done so in 1816-17 for the simple and sufficient reason that he had less than a bowing acquaintance with the other Elizabethan dramatists. But he made their acquaintance in due course, and discussed them, yet never (so far as I recall) committed the error of ranking them alongside Shakespeare. With all love for the memory of Lamb, and with all respect for the memory of Swinburne, I hold that these two in their generations, both soaked in enjoyment of the Elizabethan style—an enjoyment derivative from Shakespeare—did some disservice to criticism by classing them with him in the light they borrow; whenas truly he differs from them in kind and beyond any reach of degrees. One can no more estimate Shakespeare's genius in comparison with this, that, or the other man's of the sixteenth century, than Milton's in comparison with any one's of the seventeenth. Some few men are absolute and can only be judged absolutely.

(3) For the third merit—if the Characters be considered historically—what seems flimsy in them is often a promise of what has since been substantiated; what seems light and almost juvenile in the composition of this man, aged thirty-nine, gives the scent on which nowadays the main pack of students is pursuing. No one not a fool can read Johnson's notes on Shakespeare without respect or fail to turn to them again with an increased trust in his common-sense, as no one not a fool can read Hazlitt without an equal sense that he has the root of the matter, or of the spirit which is the matter.

Arthur Quiller-Couch  
1916

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1. Memoirs of William Hazlitt, by W. Carew Hazlitt, 1887. Vol. i, p. 228.
  2. Whose work, by the way, cries aloud for a new and better English translation.

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