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HAZLITT ON WORDSWORTH

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Jonathan Bate

It is a pleasure and an honour to be delivering this year's annual Hazlitt Lecture, doubly so since it is my first opportunity to address the Hazlitt Society since you so generously elected me to be your President. The latter honour is truly humbling, given that your first President was the immortal Michael Foot. One of my most treasured possessions is a book discovered by a former student in the inventory of the dealer who had the privilege of dispersing the great man's library. It is his heavily annotated copy, the basis of one of the most perceptive and generous reviews I have been lucky enough to receive, of my 1989 book *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830*, a large proportion of which was devoted to Hazlitt as a reader of Shakespeare in the theatre and on the page, in the essay form and in the lecture room, and by way of those copious incidental quotations that are such a distinctive feature of his style. On the first page, Foot has written in his fluent pencil hand, 'Reviewed April 1990 – A great Hazlittean achievement'. It is a greater achievement still to have been considered worthy to follow in Michael's Hazlittean footsteps, even though one suspects that, were he alive today, he might feel that the very word President now carries a certain taint. Hazlitt's essay on Trump is one that I am sure we all wish we could read.

In the circumstances, it will perhaps be fitting to say something of 'My First Acquaintance with Hazlitt'. I described it in the voice of a thinly veiled *persona* in my novel *The Cure for Love*, which was not so much a novel as a meditation on Hazlitt in general and the *Liber Amoris* in particular:

> I think that I would have been about fifteen years old. Among my set books at school was an anthology of essays which my teacher had put together himself. Somehow the texts were more immediate for being typewritten, cyclostyled and stapled, not printed and bound. I liked the clarity of an essay about shooting an elephant, but best of all I liked the one about the prize fight. And this moment, the moment when Mr Thomas Hickman, known in the ring as the Gas-man, stood like something preternatural and you didn't know which way he was going to fall, was the most memorable of all. It was one of the first times I had seen what good writing could do, how it could make a moment

> – an action, a feeling – that is long past, or that never happened, seem like something we have witnessed, something we have felt.
>
> As soon as I had swallowed the essay into the digestive system of my imagination, my instincts told me that I had been at the fight. I had not read about the Gas-man's fall, I had seen it. I had felt the ground shudder and participated in the crowd's collective intake of breath. And I had come under the intoxicating influence of a certain style: from that time on, my own thinking and writing would often be flavoured with pugilistic metaphor.[1]

Insofar as I can write halfway decent prose, or at the very least prose of a certain *gusto*, that is a gift I owe to Hazlitt. That part of me which is less an academic than a journalist – theatre aficionado, reviewer, essayist, popularizer – owes its origin to Hazlitt. And that catholicity, promiscuity, or dilettantism (delete as you consider appropriate) that has characterized my writing life, I also owe to Hazlitt. So thank you.

I think I also owe him my academic career. In my final undergraduate year at Cambridge, there was a new optional special paper on 'Shakespeare and his Influence'. The prescribed topic for its first year was 'Shakespeare and Romanticism'. I took it, and I saw that this was a rich field for graduate work. Although I did not know it at the time, this gave me an advantage during the dark days for higher education of the Thatcherite early 1980s, when jobs in English Literature were as rare as Hazlittean essays without a single Shakespearean quotation. In the year that I took my PhD there were, I seem to remember, two permanent posts advertised anywhere in the United Kingdom. Because I could teach both Shakespeare and Romanticism, I got one of them. And the doctorate duly became expanded into two books. As I have already said, apropos of Michael Foot's kind review, Hazlitt was central to *Shakespearean Constitutions*; he was equally central, in his capacity as both Coleridge's opposite in the lecture room and Keats's literary-theoretical mentor, to the other one, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. It was principally to repay in some small measure those early intellectual debts to Hazlitt that his was the sole life that I was keen to write for the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

If it was Hazlitt who made me a writer of sorts, it was Wordsworth who made me a Romantic. I trace that origin to a family holiday in the Lake District, when I was eleven. My favourite photograph in the family album is a faded Kodak snapshot in which I am grinning beside my brother and my father (sprightly, happy, and youthful looking, though nearly sixty) on top of Helvellyn, with the precipitous Striding Edge snaking below us. The next day we visited Dove Cottage and my mother bought me a selection of Wordsworth's poems, and I was hooked.

Given this history, and given that 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' is my favourite Hazlitt essay – or at least my favourite among his more strictly literary essays, with a special place preserved elsewhere in my affections for 'The Fight' and

1 Jonathan Bate, *The Cure for Love* (London: Picador, 1998), 57.

'The Indian Jugglers' – it seems fitting that in my lecture today I should share a few thoughts about Hazlitt on Wordsworth.

'Gusto', Hazlitt tells us, 'is power or passion defining any object' (iv, 77).[2] Gusto gives 'the truth of character from the truth of feeling' (iv, 77). The Hazlittean sensibility begins from the feeling evoked, the emotional response in the viewer of a painting or a landscape, the reader of a poem or a novel, the spectator of a Shakespeare play (or a fight or an Indian juggling act). This emphasis on *power* and on *feeling* must in some considerable measure be derived from Wordsworth's famous remark in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* about poetry being the spontaneous overflow of *powerful feeling*.[3]

'Power or passion defining any object'. There is always power in the clarity of Hazlitt's sentences. There is always passion in the manner in which he conveys enthusiasm (which includes the counter-enthusiasm of being a good hater). Defining *any* object: hence the range of Hazlitt's powers and passions, as philosopher, painter, art critic, theatre critic, literary critic, literary historian, biographer, political journalist, reviewer, public lecturer, sports writer, memoirist, anatomist of love. The *danger* of starting from gusto is that the passion, the power of feeling, may obstruct or contradict the critical and analytical function. Hence his problem with the later Wordsworth: personal animus undid the work of critical acclamation that came from astute comparative judgment.

Let me step back for a moment. It is fifteen years since I published my biography of another of my Romantic heroes, John Clare (who, as that other great Hazlittean, Tom Paulin reminds us on the Society's website, called Hazlitt 'a man of origional [sic] Genius' who died – as Clare believed geniuses habitually died and as he would die himself – 'neglected & forgotten').[4] During those fifteen years, while I have been off harvesting other fields, Shakespearean and Hughesian, we have lost any vestige of the idea that there is a canon of Romanticism with Wordsworth at its centre, any privileging of the gentlemen who used to be called 'the big six' (actually most of them were either of higher status than gentleman – Byron and Shelley – or lower, Keats and Blake). No one really believes any more in a unified phenomenon called Romanticism. The big change since the time when I studied the Romantics on Shakespeare in the late 1970s has been the dissolution of the canon and especially the recognition of women poets. We now embrace an alternative history of Romanticism that might begin with Wordsworth's discovery of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* instead of Coleridge's discovery of William Lisle Bowles's contemporaneous sonnets, or with Helen Maria Williams in the heat of the revolution in Paris rather than with Wordsworth meeting Beaupuy in a provincial French town,

2 All quotations from Hazlitt's work are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930–4). References are by volume and page.

3 William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Longman & Rees, 1800), xiv.

4 John Clare to J.A. Hessey, September 1830, referring to 'Hazlitt that I had met & whose writings I had read with so much gratification' – *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 517.

or with Mary Robinson's work as poetry editor of the *Morning Post* instead of Coleridge's role there, and her *Lyrical Tales* of 1800 instead of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 and 1800. We used to make lines such as these our touchstone:

> There was a boy ye knew him well, ye rocks
> And islands of Winander & ye green
> Peninsulas of Esthwaite many a time
> When the stars began
> To move along the edges of the hills
> Rising or setting would he stand alone
> Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lakes
> And through his fingers woven in one close knot
> Blow mimic hootings to the silent owls
> And bid them answer him. And they would shout
> Across the wat'ry vale & shout again
> Responsive to my call with tremulous sobs
> And long halloos & screams & echoes loud
> Redoubled & redoubled a wild scene
> Of mirth & jocund din. And when it chanced
> That pauses of deep silence mocked my skill
> Then, often, in that silence while I hung
> Listening a sudden shock of mild surprize
> Would carry far into my heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents: or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into my mind
> With all its solemn imagery its rocks
> Its woods & that uncertain heaven received
> Into the bosom of the steady lake […].[5]

Coleridge certainly did: 'had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should have instantly screamed out "Wordsworth!"'.[6] Now, though, we have learned to consider lines such as these:

> Does the night-bird greet me on my way?
> How much his hooting is in harmony
> With such a scene as this! I like it well.
> Oft when a boy, at the still twilight hour,
> I've leant my back against some knotted oak,
> And loudly mimick'd him, till to my call

5 Wordsworth MS JJ, the earliest fragmentary version of *The Prelude*; printed in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 87.

6 Coleridge to Wordsworth, from Ratzeburg, 10 December 1798; printed in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71), I, 453.

> He answer would return, and thro' the gloom
> We friendly converse held.[7]

That is the character of Rezenvelt speaking in a play by Joanna Baillie, published shortly before Wordsworth wrote his lines, suggesting her influence or at the very least a shared sensibility. Though, if we have to make a comparative judgment, which Hazlitt would have done had he considered the two passages, we would acknowledge the singular genius of Wordsworth's focus not on the 'friendly converse', the answering owl, but on that moment of hanging (at the line ending) in the 'deep silence' when there is no response.

Prior to the late twentieth-century dissolution of the canon and rediscovery of so many women writers, the traditional narrative of Romantic poetry in Britain – setting aside Blake, who has always seemed an outlier, *sui generis* – went like this: Burns as harbinger, Wordsworth–Coleridge–Southey (the 'Lake Poets') as generators, Scott and Byron as bestsellers, then, as Scott turned away from poetry to the novel, Byron's conjunction with Shelley to form the Satanic School and the emergence of the 'Cockney School' of Leigh Hunt, Keats, and the *London Magazine* crowd. With honourable mention, as tail-ender, to the Northamptonshire Peasant Poet. Where does Wordsworth's centrality to this narrative come from? He wasn't regarded as a 'central' poet at the time, in the way that Scott and Byron were. I want to suggest today that you probably know the answer, but perhaps don't fully realize that you know it. Hazlitt, I believe, did more than anyone else – even Coleridge, who can to some degree be discounted precisely because he was so very close to Wordsworth – to establish Wordsworth's position at the centre of the Romantic canon.

In preparing this lecture, I noticed something that I had never noticed before (I don't know if anybody else has noticed it). In terms of eminence, whether measured by sales, reviews, allusions or 'celebrity' broadly conceived, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson, and Joanna Baillie were considerable figures in the two decades before Hazlitt became a critic with the advent of the Regency. But during his active years as a literary critic – let us say 1811 to 1823 (after which he wrote very little about poetry, turning instead to general themes and the life of Napoleon) – I cannot think of *a single enduring volume of poetry published by a woman*.[8] The premature death of Mary Tighe in 1810 marked a watershed. Joanna Baillie was alive and admired, I grant, but the thirty-year gap between her Wordsworth-anticipating *Poems: Wherein it is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners* of 1790 and her Scott-influenced *Metrical Legends of Exalted Characters* of 1821 meant that she flew beneath Hazlitt's radar, save in her capacity as a dramatist.

What of Letitia Landon, you will ask? *The Improvisatrice and other Poems* was published in 1824. Felicia Hemans? *The Forest Sanctuary* was 1825. As I say, Hazlitt ceased to be a critical and reviewing mover and shaker in 1823 – *The Spirit of the*

7 Act 4, scene 1 of *De Monfort*, in Joanna Baillie, *Plays on the Passions (1798 edition)*, ed. Peter Duthie (Broadview: Peterborough [Ontario], 2001), 362.

8 A possible exception is Isabella Lickbarrow's Wordsworth-influenced *Poetical Effusions* of 1814, but that had only local impact.

Age, published two years later, was a kind of swansong, gathering material much of which had been published in earlier years.

Hazlitt, as several of his best modern readers have reminded us, was a Regency critic, his writing returning again and again not only to critique of the Regent but also to the major literary developments of that decade (Byron's fame, the apostasy of the Lakers, Leigh Hunt's imprisonment, the establishment of *The London Magazine*). He was always alert to new talent. But in the absence of a major new collection of verse by a woman in the Regency, he couldn't find any female poetic talent to extol. This lecture is not the place to ask why women poets such as Robinson and Tighe flourished before the Regency, Landon and Hemans after it, whilst none came to the fore during it. Was Caroline Lamb too busy swooning over Byron and stalking him to become the poet she might have been? How could a woman have made her mark in a decade when it was a rite of passage to express admiration for boxers? To be less flippant, the obvious answer is the turn to fiction: the great female works of the Regency are the entire canon of Jane Austen, Fanny Burney's late masterpiece *The Wanderer*, the later novels of Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel had for some time been becoming more and more a female form, Sir Walter excepted. Charlotte Smith and especially Mary Robinson had made more money from their novels than their poems; Lady Morgan's hugely successful *St Clair* of 1804 and *The Wild Irish Girl* of 1806 had led the way, playing an exemplary part in Scott's monumental decision to turn from narrative poetry to historical fiction.

There was a symbolic moment just as Hazlitt became a critic: Anna Barbauld was so shattered by the negative reception in 1812 of her anti-imperial, anti-patriotic poetic satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* that she fell silent as a poet. But in 1810 she had effectively become the first person to canonize the novel as a respectable literary form by publishing her 50 volumes of *The British Novelists; with an Essay; and Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, by Mrs Barbauld*. The accompanying 'Essay on the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing' was a seminal work in the consignment to history of the moralistic idea that novels were inherently mad, bad, and dangerous to know.[9]

Hazlitt recognized in his lecture 'On the English Novelists' that the novel was especially well suited to women: that was because, he said, 'Women, in general, have a quicker perception of any oddity or singularity of character than men, and are more alive to every absurdity which arises from a violation of the rules of society' (vi, 124). He believed that this partly arose 'from the restraints on their own behaviour', but that it was also because 'The surface of their minds, like that of their bodies, seems of a finer texture than ours' – women have 'intuitive perception' and exceptional powers of observation, which is what makes them better novelists than men (vi, 124). In this context, Hazlitt proclaimed that the three leading novelists of the day were Burney, Radcliffe, and Inchbald, though he did give honourable mention to Scott ('the author of Waverley') and Godwin

9 The view exemplified by James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, 2 vols (1767), I, 148: 'There seem to me very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety.'

(vi, 123–30). I assume that he had not read Austen, who of course published anonymously in her lifetime.

I would suggest, then, that Hazlitt's lectures *On the English Comic Writers* effectively established the canon of the English novel, just as those *On the English Poets* established the poetic canon, and that 'On the Living Poets' enshrined the contemporary poetic canon. If I am right, it would follow that the English Romantic canon became male primarily because there were no decent women poets publishing during Hazlitt's Regency prime. That was not Hazlitt's fault: we should not play a blame game here, in the way that certain modern readers look censoriously upon Hazlitt's writings because of the mess he made of his relationships with women in his personal life.

So much for the absence of women from the Hazlittean poetic canon. What about the presence of Wordsworth? Notoriously, Wordsworth's reputation in the years before and during Hazlitt's career as a literary critic was, to say the least, patchy. Think of Jeffrey's thunderbolts. *The Excursion* of 1814: 'This will never do'.[10] *The White Doe of Rylstone* a year later: 'This, we think, has the merit of being the very worst poem we ever saw imprinted in a quarto volume'.[11] Think, too, of Byron's excoriating attacks. Then read Hazlitt on Wordsworth, beginning with the three-part review of *The Excursion* published in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*, in August and October 1814. Hazlitt's 'Character of Mr Wordsworth's New Poem' begins: 'In power of intellect, in lofty conception, in the depth of feeling, at once simple and sublime, which pervades every part of it and which gives to every object an almost preternatural and preterhuman interest, this work has seldom been surpassed' (xix, 9).[12] If it had felt fully finished and properly selected, Hazlitt asserts, it would have been a national monument, but it has some of the nakedness and confusion of the Lakeland landscape – 'the rude chaos of aboriginal nature' (xix, 9).

Wordsworth, Hazlitt suggests, was not interested in Claude-like ruins. His mind 'is coeval with the primary forms of things, holds immediately from nature': his focal points were 'a stone, covered with lichens, which has slept in the same spot of ground from the creation of the world', or a thunder-cracked fissure between two mountains, or a 'cavern scooped out by the sea' (xix, 10). No one had written about stones before.

Hazlitt praises *The Excursion* as a 'philosophical pastoral poem' (xix, 10) – something different from, and superior to, the descriptive procession that was typical of earlier pastoral poems (Thomson's *The Seasons* was probably in his mind, much as he – like John Clare – admired it in his youth). Everything in Wordsworth, he argues, is the result of the poet's own reflections on the forms of nature: 'his thoughts are his real subjects' (xix, 10). Hence the solitude of his own heart, as he lives in the deep silence of thought. A seed is sown here for Keats's critique of the egotistical sublime and Byron's damning of Wordsworth's

10 Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review* 24 (November 1814), 1 (unsigned).

11 *Edinburgh Review* 25 (October 1815), 355 (also unsigned).

12 Hazlitt's review of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* was published in *The Examiner* on 21 August 1814, and continued in the issues of 28 August and 2 October 1814.

egotism in *Don Juan*. Similarly, the sequence of the review regarding the Solitary's disillusionment over the French Revolution, his 'loss of confidence in social man', sows the seed for Hazlitt's own critique of Wordsworth's apostasy (xix, 17). Hazlitt turns the 'Immortality Ode' back on Wordsworth by reanimating his own youthful joy at the revolution:

> But though we cannot weave over again the airy, unsubstantial dream, which reason and experience have dispelled –
>
> > What though the radiance, which was once so bright,
> > Be now for ever taken from our sight,
> > Though nothing can bring back the hour
> > Of glory in the grass, of splendour in the flower:—
>
> yet we will never cease, nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth; that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies; when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs, in celebration of a new and golden era; and when, to the retired and contemplative student, the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending, like the steps of Jacob's ladder, in bright and never-ending succession. (xix, 18)

The first two parts of the review, published in successive August issues of *The Examiner*, are rich in praise and measured in criticism. But in the third part, the review becomes distinctly unliterary: 'All country people hate each other. […] They hate all strangers […]. There is a perpetual round of mischief-making and backbiting for want of any better amusement' (xix, 21–2). What kind of criticism of a poetic epic can this be?

The turn to anti-rural prejudice must be a consequence of that very awkward incident which has led to Hazlitt being branded a rapist. Let me offer a quick biographical recap by way of context.

Hazlitt first met Wordsworth on the joyous visit to Nether Stowey in 1798, which he immortalized twenty-five years later in 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'. But then there was the disastrous visit to the Lakes in 1803. Wordsworth agreed to sit for Hazlitt: if the result was even half as good as Hazlitt's portrait of Charles Lamb, this has to be one of the great lost paintings! During the sittings, Wordsworth read from recent work but he and Hazlitt disagreed over politics, over Newton, Shakespeare, Milton … Things were getting a little tense. When they went boating together on Grasmere lake, Wordsworth was offended by Hazlitt's suggestion that the local inscriptions in the 'Poems on the Naming of Places' that immortalized favourite spots around the lake might have owed a debt to *Paul and Virginia*, the Rousseauistic French novel that had been translated by Helen Maria Williams, that poet whom Wordsworth so admired in his early years.

Then Hazlitt may have made the mistake of proposing to Dorothy. De Quincey records that 'Miss Wordsworth had several offers; amongst them, to my knowledge, one from Hazlitt; all of them she rejected decisively'. I find this a little unlikely, De Quincey not being the most reliable witness, though I know that Hazlitt's biographer Duncan Wu takes it at face value.[13]

The Wordsworths and Coleridge departed for a Scottish tour. Hazlitt went back to Manchester. He returned in October to finish his portraits of the two poets. This time he stayed with Coleridge at Greta Hall. Wordsworth arrived for dinner and they all debated the existence of God. Coleridge was frenzied by Hazlitt's atheism. Then came the incident.

Hazlitt escapes the bad atmosphere at Greta by going to a local tavern. A girl flirts with him. He misreads flirtation as desire for sex and makes an advance. She calls him a black-faced rascal and the entire pub starts laughing at him and making snide remarks. He makes the fatal error of taking the girl on his knee, lifting her petticoats, and spanking her on the bottom. We would probably now say: committing a sexual assault. They threaten to beat him up. He scarpers back to Greta Hall with an angry mob in pursuit, threatening to give him a ducking. The country people stick together: mischief-making, as he sees it. Coleridge smuggles him out the back and he escapes to Grasmere. Wordsworth shelters him for the rest of the night, gives him clothes and money, and he leaves for Ambleside at dawn, never to return to the Lakes.

The two parts of the review published in August began with high praise and ended with political disillusionment. The latter mood led Hazlitt to begin to think negatively about Wordsworth, with the result that when it came to the third part – published just over a month later, and reading more like a self-contained essay than a continuation of the earlier analysis – he could not resist dredging up the painful memory of his humiliation among the Lake folk. This was a prime example of what I have described as personal animus undoing the work of critical acclamation that comes from astute comparative judgment.

As far as the critical reputation of *The Excursion* was concerned, the attack on country people was a mere distraction. First impressions are what matter most in a review, so 'this work has seldom been surpassed' is the memorable thing, the polar opposite of Jeffrey's 'this will never do' published the month after the final part of Hazlitt's account. But on the personal front there was more trouble ahead. Mary Wordsworth wrote to Dorothy at the end of October, saying that the review would surely benefit the sales of the book, but that the attack on 'the Mountaineers' (a lovely phrase for the local people) was, she implied, the result of the incident with the girl, and that Hazlitt was being ungrateful, given that Wordsworth had protected him that night.[14]

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13 Thomas De Quincey, 'William Wordsworth', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* VI (1839), 251; Wu's account of both the supposed proposal and the Keswick incident in *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93–4, 98–9, offers a slightly heady mix of fact and inference.

14 Mary Wordsworth, *Letters*, ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 24.

Hazlitt in turn felt that Wordsworth was ungrateful for 'the first favourable account that had ever appeared of any work he had ever written'.[15] Benjamin Robert Haydon saw this as the reason for Hazlitt's subsequent negative comments about Wordsworth: 'Wordsworth's utter contempt for his character induced him to take no notice of' Hazlitt's 'fine puffing criticism on the Excursion', with the result that 'Hazlitt now became amazed and, stung at Wordsworth's neglect, thundered forth those attacks on the whole Lake School'.[16]

Hazlitt himself gave an account, at second-hand, of Wordsworth's reaction to the review. It was in his 'Reply to "Z"', written by September 1818, but unpublished in Hazlitt's lifetime. It is a marvellous passage, all too little known and therefore more than worthy of lengthy quotation:

> Some time in the latter end of the year 1814 Mr Wordsworth received an *Examiner* by the post, which annoyed him exceedingly both on account of the expence and the paper. 'Why did they send that rascally paper to him, and make him pay for it?' Mr Wordsworth is tenacious of his principles and not less so of his purse. 'Oh,' said Wilson, 'let us see what there is in it. I dare say they have not sent it you for nothing. Why here, there's a criticism upon the Excursion in it.' This made the poet (*par excellence*) rage and fret the more. 'What did they know about his poetry? What could they know about it? It was presumption in the highest degree for these cockney writers to pretend to criticise a Lake poet.' 'Well,' says the other, 'at any rate let us read it.' So he began. The article was much in favour of the poet and the poem. As the reading proceeded, 'Ha,' said Mr Wordsworth, somewhat appeased, 'there's some sense in this fellow too: the Dog writes strong.' Upon which Mr Wilson was encouraged to proceed still farther with the encomium, and Mr Wordsworth continued his approbation; 'Upon my word very judicious, very well indeed.' At length, growing vain with his own and the *Examiner*'s applause, he suddenly seized the paper into his own hands, and saying 'Let me read it, Mr Wilson,' did so with an audible voice and appropriate gesture to the end, when he exclaimed, 'Very well written indeed, Sir, I did not expect a thing of this kind,' and strutting up and down the room in high good humour kept every now and then wondering who could be the author, 'he had no idea, and should like very much to know to whom he was indebted for such pointed and judicious praise' – when Mr Wilson interrupting him with saying, 'Oh don't you know; it's Hazlitt, to be sure, there are his initials to it,' threw our poor philosopher into a greater rage than ever, and a fit of outrageous incredulity to think that he should be indebted for the first favourable account that had ever appeared of any work he had ever written to a person on whom he had conferred such great and unmerited obligations. (ix, 6)[17]

15 'Reply to "Z"', quoted below.

16 Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Diary*, ed. W.B. Pope, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–3), II, 494-5 (September 1824).

'I think', Hazlitt concludes, 'this statement will shew that there is very little love lost between me and my benefactor. If farther proofs are called, I have them at hand, and in a sufficient number' (xix, 6).

The relationship was on a downward trajectory. When Hazlitt reprinted his review in *The Round Table*, he left out much of the praise, including that key first paragraph. Before that, there was a passing remark in an *Examiner* piece of June 1815 in which the consistency of Milton's radical politics was contrasted with the apostasy of Wordsworth in writing 'paltry sonnets upon the royal fortitude' and dropping 'The Female Vagrant' from his *Poems* of 1815 on the grounds that it described 'the miseries of war sustained by the poor' (it was actually a partial omission, but the poem's radical material was indeed excised) (v, 233n.). This piece led Wordsworth to blacken Hazlitt's name around town by sharing the story of the Keswick girl with the gossipy Henry Crabb Robinson.

Quite apart from the personal matter, there was also the fact that Wordsworth had moved from the kind of pantheism suggested by 'Tintern Abbey' to Christian orthodoxy. In a piece published in the *Yellow Dwarf* in January 1818, Hazlitt attacked Wordsworth and his 'brother Kit' – Christopher Wordsworth, orthodox theologian and future Master of Trinity College, Cambridge – because he had been stung by Christopher Wordsworth's negative review in the *British Critic* of Hazlitt's philosophical *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*. The ecclesiastical Wordsworth brother had accused it of undermining the Christian religion and being 'flat Spinozism', its author 'seeming to hold the ancient and impious doctrine of pantheism'.[17] So there were religious-philosophical differences in addition to the political ones.

But, for all this, Hazlitt never attacked Wordsworth outright. In August 1815 in *The Examiner* he dissented on political grounds from Wordsworth's distaste for gypsies, arguing that the value of gypsies was that 'they are an everlasting source of thought and reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of the progress of civilisation' (iv, 46n.). Wordsworth in *The Excursion* described cotton factories as 'a grotesque ornament to the civil order' – for Hazlitt, gypsies were a valuable affront to civil order (iv, 46n.). But then a few months later, again in *The Examiner*, Hazlitt praised the 'sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused' lines of 'Tintern Abbey' as the finest ever expression of the doctrine of philosophical necessity (though it is more like the doctrine of pantheism from which Wordsworth was by that time trying to detach himself). Hazlitt further said that it was lines like those that made Wordsworth immortal.[18]

He was, then, eminently capable of arguing against Wordsworth without abusing him. In a fascinating passage in the essay on *Romeo and Juliet* in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, he suggested that the platonic idea of a pre-

17 Quoted in Robert Woof (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage: Volume 1: 1793–1820* (London: Routledge, 2001), 368.

18 Relevant extracts, including the quotations and paraphrased points in this and my previous two paragraphs, are helpfully gathered in the magnificent Woof (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage: Volume 1: 1793–1820*, No. 256: 'William Hazlitt, from his writings, 1815–1818', 879–95.

life in the 'Intimations of Immortality' ode, and Wordsworth's idealization of childhood, came from his lack of interest in the experience of sexual love. Indirectly, this was another defence of his own sexual conduct in the Lakes: 'Desire and imagination are inmates of the human breast' – boyhood and youth are all desire, imagination and freedom, but experience brings us down to the harsh world of reality – we long for a first kiss, but the moment we experience it we begin to feel disillusioned (iv, 250). The sequence reads like a foretaste of *Liber Amoris*: 'The heart revels in the luxury of its own thoughts, and is unable to sustain the weight of hope and love that presses upon it.—The effects of the passion of love alone might have dissipated Mr Wordsworth's theory' (iv, 250). Hazlitt was not to know that this shying away from the matter of romantic love was bound up with Wordsworth's suppression of public knowledge of the Annette Vallon affair. It is ironic that the context of this accusation is Hazlitt's reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, given that Wordsworth had had his own Romeo and Juliet experience, and used the play as a template when he transformed it into poetry in 'Vaudracour and Julia'.

In 1817, Hazlitt astutely compared Rousseau and Wordsworth as the great prose writer and the great poet of feeling, but also of egotism. Egotism was also the bone of contention in an unsigned 'Literary Notice' in the *Examiner* of 22 December 1816, which was quickly identified by Crabb Robinson as being by Hazlitt. He saw him at Basil Montagu's that very day and refused to shake his hand.[19] Here is the passage in question:

> The spirit of Jacobin poetry is rank egotism. We know an instance. It is of a person who founded a school of poetry on sheer humanity, on ideot boys and mad mothers, and on Simon Lee, the old huntsman. The secret of the Jacobin poetry and the anti-jacobin politics of this writer is the same. His lyrical poetry was a cant of humanity about the commonest people to level the great with the small; and his political poetry is a cant of loyalty to level Bonaparte with kings and hereditary imbecility […]. This person admires nothing that is admirable, feels no interest in anything interesting, no grandeur in anything grand, no beauty in anything beautiful. He tolerates nothing but what he himself creates; he sympathizes only with what can enter into no competition with him, with 'the bare earth and mountains bare, and grass in the green field.' He sees nothing but himself and the universe […]. His egotism is in this respect a madness. (vii, 144)

This was the assault on the Lake Poets that Hazlitt incorporated into his 1818 lecture 'On the Living Poets' – famously, the occasion that gave Keats the idea of distinguishing between Shakespearean negative capability and the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime.

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19 Edith J. Morley (ed.) *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1938), I, 201.

And yet the principles laid out in 'On Poetry in General', the first of Hazlitt's 1818 Surrey Institution lectures *On the English Poets*, were profoundly Wordsworthian. Poetry is

> the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it […]. Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself […] wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in a motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower [here Hazlitt quotes a passage of *Romeo and Juliet* from memory] […] *there* is poetry, in its birth. (v, 1)

Mere description, the argument goes, is not poetry; poetic language needs 'the heightenings of the imagination' (v, 3):

> It is strictly the language of the imagination; and the imagination is that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power […]. [True poetic language] conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind. (v, 4)

This is pure Wordsworth and Coleridge, inflected by the theory of the sympathetic imagination outlined in Hazlitt's early philosophical essay.

Equally, although 'On the Living Poets' ends with a lightly revised version of the *Examiner* piece attacking Wordsworthian egotism, it should also be seen as the first of Hazlitt's two major attempts to place Wordsworth squarely at the centre of the English poetic canon. Let me turn to that key lecture. Where does Hazlitt begin? 'I am a great admirer of the female writers of the present day; they appear to me like so many modern Muses' (v, 146). The initial expectation is that the contemporary poetic canon will be female. Hazlitt then begins to name names. He praises Burney, Inchbald and Radcliffe: 'but they are novel-writers' (v, 146). Then, partly in the spirit of friendship, he launches into an encomium of Mary Lamb's *Mrs Leicester's School*: it embodies the school of humanity and 'No one can think too highly of the work, or highly enough of the author' (v, 147). Then he turns to a 'trio of female poets'. He begins with Mrs Barbauld, telling of his admiration when young for her 'Ode to Spring': 'I wish I could repay my childish debt of gratitude in terms of appropriate praise' (v, 147). But he can't: he judges her merely 'a very pretty poetess', I suspect because he hadn't read *Eighteenth Hundred and Eleven*, which fitted his politics exactly (v, 147). Then there is Mrs Hannah More: 'another celebrated poetess, and I believe still living. She has written a great deal which I have never read' (v, 147). It is a good thing a lecture is not an examination essay! But why has Hazlitt not read More's poetry? Because he hates her anti-Jacobin cheap repository tracts, which sold in literally millions. If you wanted a textbook example of the kind of work that Hazlitt loathed, it could be her *Shepherd of Salisbury Plain*, which advocated

piety, patriotism, deference and the acceptance of poverty alleviated only by condescending philanthropy.

The one poet in the female trio whom Hazlitt really admired was the Joanna Baillie of her verse dramas. He expressed the reservation that in her characters she sought to illustrate each of the passions separately from the rest, which he considered to be a heresy in the dramatic art, since drama is always about the mingled yarn of the web of passions. But he saw the strength of *De Montfort*, much preferring the short-lived 1800 Drury Lane production of that play to Coleridge's *Remorse* and Maturin's *Bertram* – he found in the central character 'a nerve, a continued unity of interest, a setness of purpose and precision of outline which John Kemble alone was capable of giving' (v, 147).

Having begun with the women, Hazlitt turned to the living male poets. Rogers: feeble. Campbell: 'the decomposition of prose is substituted for the composition of poetry […]. He offers the Muses no violence' (v, 149). Tom Moore: better, but too facile, 'an exuberance of involuntary power' (perhaps an Irish characteristic, he hazards) (v, 151). Then to Byron: his poetry 'is as morbid as Mr Moore's is careless and dissipated' (this was, of course, Byron before the anything-but-morbid *Don Juan*) (v, 153). Then Scott: the most popular poet of the day, but without depth, with no breadth, no height – 'neither uncommon strength, nor uncommon refinement of thought, sentiment, or language. It has no originality' (v, 155). So that leaves only one truly great living poet:

> Mr Wordsworth is the most original poet now living. He is the reverse of Walter Scott in his defects and excellences. He has nearly all that the other wants, and wants all that the other possesses. His poetry is not external, but internal; it does not depend upon tradition, or story, or old song; he furnishes it from his own mind, and is his own subject. He is the poet of mere sentiment. Of many of the Lyrical Ballads, it is not possible to speak in terms of too high praise, such as Hart-leap Well, the Banks of the Wye, Poor Susan, parts of the Leech-gatherer, the lines to a Cuckoo, to a Daisy, the Complaint, several of the Sonnets, and a hundred others of inconceivable beauty, of perfect originality and pathos. They open a finer and deeper vein of thought and feeling than any poet in modern times has done, or attempted. He has produced a deeper impression, and on a smaller circle, than any other of his contemporaries. His powers have been mistaken by the age, nor does he exactly understand them himself. (v, 156)

Hazlitt grants the failure of *The Excursion* taken as a whole, but tells his audience that they should not judge this poet by his failures. The failure is of the public: 'Mr Wordsworth's poems have been little known to the public, or chiefly through garbled extracts from them'. To compensate for this, Hazlitt quotes the whole of 'Hart-leap Well' to demonstrate Wordsworth's 'beauty and force' (v, 156–61).

Then, however, he offers his reading of the Lake School in general. It is clear, as Haydon discerned, that in attacking the whole school he was primarily wrestling with his attitude to Wordsworth. He regards Southey's epics as 'mechanical and

extravagant, heavy and superficial'; as for Coleridge, he says that the only poem he truly admires is 'The Ancient Mariner' (v, 164, 166). By including in the lecture the critique of the Lake School that had first been aired in an ephemeral review, Hazlitt is once again undoing the work of praise in the earlier part of lecture as a result of the personal and political animus he feels towards Wordsworth.

By 1823, he had mellowed. Golden memory overcomes the bitterness of disillusioned experience (overcomes even the pangs of disprized love provoked by the Sarah Walker affair). 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' was published in *The Liberal* that year:

> That morning, as soon as breakfast was over, we strolled out into the park, and seating ourselves on the trunk of an old ash tree that stretched along the ground, Coleridge read aloud, with a sonorous and musical voice the ballad of *Betty Foy*. I was not critically or sceptically inclined. I saw touches of truth and nature, and took the rest for granted. But in the *Thorn*, the *Mad Mother*, and the *Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman*, I felt that deeper power and pathos which have been since acknowledged […] as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to me something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of Spring. (xvii, 117)

More than anyone else, it had been Hazlitt who first acknowledged the unprecedented 'power and pathos' of Wordsworth, who first recognized that the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* inaugurated an epoch in English poetry. In 'My First Acquaintance', thanks to the memory of Nether Stowey, the personal is reconciled with the literary critical.

The work of the lecture 'On the Living Poets' in establishing a contemporary poetic canon with Wordsworth at its centre was furthered in *The Spirit of the Age*, which might be described as an attempt to establish a broader contemporary cultural canon, in which there was also a place for thinkers such as Bentham and Cobbett, political activists such as Wilberforce and Brougham, and critics such as Jeffrey and Hazlitt's great antagonist Gifford. Scott is the only novelist to be included since, seven years on from the 1818 lecture in which the women novelists held the palm, he has come to dominate the field, being 'the only amanuensis of truth and history' (Godwin is there as a political philosopher, not for his novels) (xi, 63). Byron and Scott are by this time generally regarded as 'the greatest geniuses of the age' (xi, 69). But it is Scott in prose – his verse is now barely mentioned.

The poetic canon in *The Spirit of the Age* consists of Wordsworth, Southey, Byron and Coleridge, together with the lesser figures of Campbell, Crabbe, Tom Moore, and Leigh Hunt. Coleridge is praised for his conversation – in that great serpentine sentence reanimating the Coleridgean voice in full flow – but he is lambasted for his intellectual confusion: 'If our author's poetry is inferior to his conversation, his prose is utterly abortive' (xi, 35). Southey is excoriated for his political apostasy, though Hazlitt grants that he is a superb prose writer. His best poem is said to be the early radical *Joan of Arc*, 'in which the love of Liberty is

exhaled like the breath of spring' – a resurgence here of the language of the 1798 visit to Coleridge and Wordsworth (xi, 82). Byron is bashed for his aristocratic vanity but then famously forgiven in the postscript written when Hazlitt heard news of his death (xi, 69n.). Crabbe is comprehensively dissed, his work said to be repulsive, sickly, querulous, uniformly dissatisfying (xi, 166–7). It will, says Hazlitt, be a thorn in the side of poetry for a hundred years (xi, 169). The best-known contemporary poet of nature is clearly being knocked off his perch so that another, Wordsworth, can be elevated instead.

Having firmly put the rest of the assembled poetic company in their place, Hazlitt is left with none but his flawed hero: 'Mr Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age', the essay begins, 'Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of' (xi, 86). His 'levelling muse' speaks better than any other to the levelling age of revolution (xi, 87). His work is seen to be supremely answerable to Hazlitt's definition of poetry, which is as it should be since, as we have seen, that definition was itself shaped by Wordsworth: each object of nature is 'connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fibre of his own heart'; each object is, furthermore, linked to the poet's birthplace or to the key moments in his life:

> But to the author of the *Lyrical Ballads*, nature is a kind of home; and he may be said to take a personal interest in the universe. There is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years. –
>
> > 'To him the meanest flower that blows can give
> > Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'
>
> The daisy looks up to him with sparkling eye as an old acquaintance: the cuckoo haunts him with sounds of early youth not to be expressed: a linnet's nest startles him with boyish delight: an old withered thorn is weighed down with a heap of recollections: a grey cloak, seen on some wild moor, torn by the wind, or drenched in the rain, afterwards becomes an object of imagination to him: even the lichens on the rock have a life and being in his thoughts. He has described all these objects in a way and with an intensity of feeling that no one else had done before him, and has given a new view or aspect of nature. He is in this sense the most original poet now living, and the one whose writings could the least be spared: for they have no substitute elsewhere. The vulgar do not read them, the learned, who see all things through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them: but the author has created himself an interest in the heart of the retired and lonely student of nature, which can never die. (xi, 89)

In that last sentence, the critic becomes a prophet. Hazlitt recognizes that Wordsworth's true reputation has yet to be established. But he predicts that his genius will never die. The poems are there, waiting to create, as Coleridge put it, the taste by which they will be enjoyed.

Of course Coleridge was crucial to the canonization of Wordsworth. And De Quincey played an important role, especially at the level of biographical myth-making and in the intuition that came from his being one of the few people other than Coleridge and Wordsworth's family to have read *The Prelude* when it was fresh. But in the literary critical and historical process of *placing* the poet, of shaping taste and offering judgements that would influence the taste of posterity, it was above all Hazlitt who began to shift the canon of English Romantic verse and to give Wordsworth his privileged place as the purest poetic emanation of the spirit of the age.

When Hazlitt was in his critical prime, the seven canonical poets were probably the following: Scott, whose narrative poems sold nearly 120,000 copies; pre-*Don* Byron, whose *Childe Harold* and Turkish tales sold about 100,000; Campbell, whose *Pleasures of Hope & Gertrude of Wyoming* sold about 45,000; Rogers, whose *Pleasures of Memory* and other poems achieved a comparable figure; Southey, over 30,000 sales, and the award of the Laureateship in 1813; Tom Moore, *Lalla Rookh* and *Loves of the Angels* just under 30,000; Crabbe, about 25,000. In addition to these figures, each of whom had a significant body of poetic work over a period of many years, there were the 'nine days' wonder' poets – Bloomfield's 100,000 and Kirke White's 20,000. Hazlitt's takedown in *The Spirit of the Age* of Scott's poetry, Byron, Campbell, Rogers, Crabbe, Southey, and Moore was intended to empty the canon, to clear the space for Wordsworth, who, as he said, was barely known – as may be seen from his paltry sales figures (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798: 500 mostly unsold; second edition: 1000; third edition: 500; *Poems in Two Volumes*, 1807: 1000 of which 230 remaindered by 1814; *The Excursion*, 1814: an edition of 500, 291 of which sold immediately, a further 114 by 1820, and a further 8 in the next thirteen years).[20]

It took time for Hazlitt's faith in Wordsworth to fructify into the claim that he was the only modern poet worthy to stand beside Shakespeare and Milton. That only came with Mill, Arnold, Ruskin, George Eliot, Sidgwick, Leslie Stephen, F.W.H. Myers, and other Victorian intellectuals, not to mention John Muir in America and the Frenchman Emile Legouis, who was the first, in the 1890s, to perceive the greatness and centrality of the posthumously published *Prelude*. That is another story, but one that could not have taken place without its beginning in the extraordinary critical power and the impassioned prose of William Hazlitt.

Worcester College, Oxford

20 All sales figures from William St Clair's remarkable *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).