

# William Hazlitt: An Empiricist Radical 108

Terry Eagleton

Hazlitt has had a fair amount of modern critical attention, but not enough of it has been concerned with rescuing him from the drab category of 'minor Regency prose' and establishing him where he belongs, as one of the most extraordinarily intelligent writers of his period. Perhaps the difficulty has been in part one of *genre*. One dominant definition of the English essay form, as a belletristic set-piece concerned to charm, composed of the casual meanderings of a liberal, off-beat, impressionist mind, fits a little of Hazlitt's work accurately enough; but there seem good reasons why critics who feel comfortably at home with Lamb, Stevenson and Belloc might feel less at ease with Hazlitt's writings as a whole. His liberalism is allied with a trenchancy which has been attacked as intemperate and bellicose; and this is perhaps one reason why a book like *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, to my mind an inferior product containing hardly a single disturbing judgment, has assumed predominance over works with a sharper edge—*Political Essays*, *Table Talk*, *The Plain Speaker*.

Hazlitt's trenchancy springs from his radicalism; and it is worth calling the abrasive force of that radicalism to mind, with its controlled combination of moral indictment and caustic irony. There are his comments on the *Quarterly Review*, for instance:

The intention is to poison the sources of public opinion and of individual fame—to pervert literature, from being the natural ally of freedom and humanity, into an engine of priestcraft and despotism, and to undermine the spirit of the English constitution and the independence of the English character. The Editor and his friends systematically explode every principle of liberty, laugh patriotism and public spirit to scorn, resent every pretence to integrity as a piece of singularity or insolence, and strike at the root of all free inquiry or discussion, by running down every writer as a vile scribbler and a bad member of society, who is not a hireling and a slave. . . . They wanted a publication impervious alike to truth and candour; that, hood-winked itself, should lead public opinion blindfold; that should stick at nothing to serve the turn of a party; that should be the exclusive organ of prejudice, the sordid tool of power. . . . The *Quarterly Review* was accordingly set up.

Attacks on reactionary political cant are common enough in Hazlitt, but it is important to see how his analysis transcends the restrictive limits of mere political liberalism by moving beyond this, into a shrewd dissection of the economic contradictions which the cant both ratified and concealed. The distortions of conservative

rhetoric reflect the falsehood of an exploitative society, as he makes clear enough in an essay on 'War and Taxes'. Taxes are a device to divert the wealth and industry of the people 'to pamper the extravagances, vices and artificial appetites of a single individual'; they are like 'those dews and showers drawn off the ground by artificial channels into private reservoirs and useless cisterns to stagnate and corrupt'. A tax which goes to pay for the feeding of a couple of curricule horses swallows up the subsistence of several families; a tax laid on for a dog-kennel or stable might have saved a whole village from going to ruin and decay.

Hazlitt wrote at a time when the ideological content of competing epistemologies was probably clearer than at any other period of English history. I mean by epistemologies not only the formal theories of knowledge writers held, but the ways such theories infiltrated their styles and sensibilities, shaping their mode of address to the literary object, moulding the relations between language and the matter in hand. Poetry itself is for him such an epistemological mode: by presenting objects in their variable relations with men, not as naked essences but as dynamic and contextual, it stands as a permanent phenomenological critique of that abstracting rationalism which Hazlitt rightly identifies as one powerful form of contemporary bourgeois ideology.

Poetry is a medium in which the concrete, shifting relations between men and their world may be delicately realized, salvaging such relations from the static permanency with which rationalism would invest them. What Hazlitt demonstrates, in fact, is a quite remarkable intuitive grasp of the internal relations between literary style, theories of knowledge, ideological consciousness and political practice; and it isn't an approach which can be simplified to some concern with the style as expressive of the man. The approach defines itself in a recurrent type of imagery which connects, sometimes with slightly parodic directness, stylistic patterns and forms of ideology. What interests him above all is to trace the structure of social consciousness in syntax, metaphor, literary taste:

(Gifford) is a retainer to the Muses; a door-keeper to learning; a lacquy in the state. He believes that modern literature should wear the fetters of classical antiquity; that truth is to be weighed in the scales of opinion and prejudice; that power is equivalent to right; that genius is dependent on rules; that taste and refinement in language consist in *word-catching*. . . . Flashes of thought, flights of fancy, idiomatic expressions, he sets down among the signs of the times—the extraordinary occurrences of the age we live in. They are marks of a restless and revolutionary spirit; they disturb his composure of mind, and threaten (by implication) the safety of the state. . . . The hazarding of a paradox is like letting off a pistol close to his ear; he is alarmed and offended. . . . He inclines, by a natural and deliberate bias, to the traditional in

laws and government; to the orthodox in religion; to the safe in opinion; to the trite in imagination; to the technical in style. . . . He patches up a rotten system as he would supply the chasms in a worm-eaten manuscript. . . .

There's nothing forced or fanciful about the traffic between literary and political comment in that passage: the connections between imaginative banality and political reaction are made so firmly that even their chief imagistic expression—simile—seems in the end excessively dualistic. In defining the political determinants of literary taste, Hazlitt's own fertile and adventurous style suggests a political allegiance quite opposed to Gifford's. It isn't a question of 'reducing' style to such determinants: Hazlitt's critical language, subtly responsive as it is to the textures of art and rhetoric, grants them their full autonomy but inwardly illuminates their meaning by exploring the social matrix which shapes them. He is in fact almost always less concerned with some extractable ideological content than with form—form as itself the bearer of political values which are secreted in linguistic tones and inflections, in the shape and feel of a passage as much as in its declared positions:

(Canning's speeches) have the look of exotics, of artificial, hot-house plants. Their glossiness, their luxuriance, and gorgeousness of colour are greater than their strength or *stamina*: they are forced, not lasting, nor will they bear transplanting from the rank and noxious soil in which they grow. Or rather, perhaps, they bear the same relation to eloquence that artificial flowers do to real ones—alike, yet not the same, without vital heat or the power of reproduction, printed, passionless, specious mockeries. They are, in fact, not the growth of truth, of nature, and feeling, but of state policy, of art, and practice.

That final political point isn't extraneous: Hazlitt's language refuses a distinction between the literary and the political, so that the relation between synthetic imagery and parliamentary manoeuvring appears as internal and organic. The same refusal of distinction is evident in his comments on the Lake school of poetry:

. . . capital letters were no more allowed in print, than letters-pot of nobility were permitted in real life; kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere; rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre abolished along with regular government.

A typographical shift from capitals to lower-case is properly grasped as a political act.

### *The Imagination as a Political Force*

One of Hazlitt's primary commitments is to preserve the imagination as a political force. This involves fighting simultaneously on two

opposite fronts: against those who would merely negate the imagination, and those who would fancifully inflate it. He is clear that poetry mustn't be conservatively constricted to the actual: poetry 'signifies the excess of the imagination beyond the actual or ordinary impression of any object or feeling', and in that creative excess it rehearses those values necessarily denied by the political state under which Hazlitt lived. He sees well enough the right-wing implications of an aesthetic which advocates 'subjecting the soul to external things' and makes a fetish of fact; but his revolt against fact is often enough naïvely idealist. He is too eager to endorse a poetry which 'throws a delicious veil over all actual objects'; too ready to delight in Restoration comedy as refreshingly escapist, or to denigrate prose itself as sordidly materialist. Equally, he is too quick to turn on Crabbe as a repulsive registrar of the meanly quotidian, or to write off Ben Jonson as 'cross-grained, mean and mechanical', clogged and tyrannized by the sense of reality. Yet his idealism is paradoxically fused with strong empiricism, to produce something which approximates to a dialectical concept of the imagination. He is allured by Spenserian harmony but in the same essay welcomes Chaucer as 'the most practical of all the great poets'; he thinks prose an inferior mode to poetry, but in *The English Comic Writers* praises the novel as revealing 'the very web and texture of society as it actually exists'. This isn't mere inconsistency: his ideal is a literature at once responsive to and transformative of its subject-matter, rooted in the very conditions it imaginatively transcends, as Bunyan's pilgrims 'walk above the earth, and yet are on it'. He sees the contemporary imagination as having been ripped apart between shrivelled literalism on the one hand and lavish fancy on the other; and his own position is revealed in a continual refusal of both alternatives. His blindness to the value of Crabbe's poetry, for example, needs to be measured against his perceptiveness about Moore's:

His verse droops and languishes under a load of beauty, like a bough laden with fruit. . . . Every stanza is transparent with light, perfumed with odours, floating with liquid harmony, melting in luxurious, evanescent delights. . . . There is no truth of representation, no strong internal feeling—but a continual flutter and display of affected airs and graces, like a finished coquette, who hides the want of symmetry by extravagance of dress, and the want of passion by flippant forwardness and unmeaning sentimentality.

Hazlitt's criticism of Moore's elaborately bodiless fictions has something in common with his exasperated response to Coleridge's later writings—exasperated not least because he was astute enough to see how the metaphysical mysteries of that work acted in practice as political mystifications. 'A matter of fact is abhorrent to his nature: the very *air* of truth repels him. . . . The consciousness of a single certainty would be an insupportable weight upon his mind. . . . All

his impulses are loose, airy, devious, casual. . . .’ Poetry and philosophy unrooted in the actual are castigated, but so also is an excessively empiricist art which can’t grasp imaginative possibilities beyond the concrete. Hogarth is such an artist in Hazlitt’s view: he has an intense command of immediate experience but little sense of that which exists only in conception. He is ‘conformed to this world, not transformed’, evoking the local and visible but not the abstract and intelligible. In this sense he contrasts with Raphael, in whose art, as in Bunyan’s, ‘godlike spirits and lofty shapes descend and walk visibly the earth, but as if their thoughts still lifted them above the earth. . . .’ But it is in Burke, above all, that Hazlitt finds this fashion of imaginative liberation and concrete truth. In Burke, ‘The most rigid fidelity and the most fanciful extravagance meet, and are reconciled in his pages’; he contrasts as such with Coleridge, whose swelling, turgid style encumbers itself like an overloaded camel with a train of metaphors which increase its stateliness but impede its march. Coleridge, fascinated by everything ‘foreign, far-fetched, irrelevant, laboured, unproductive’, won’t be satisfied with the simple truth; Burke combines shrewd solidity with dazzling poetic grace, proving that ‘the strength of a man’s understanding is not always to be estimated in exact proportion to his want of imagination’. His style isn’t gaudy, but one of the severest: ‘His words are the most like things: his style the most strictly suited to his subject’.

The empiricist notion of language lurking behind that last quotation is common in Hazlitt: he spurns florid writing as he dislikes vacuous idealism, seeing it as a ‘spangled veil to conceal the want of ideas’. In such a style, ‘Objects are not linked to feelings, words to things, but images revolve in splendid mockery, words represent themselves in their strange rhapsodies’. Johnson’s prose-style is rejected on these grounds: we can’t distinguish objects through it any more than we can a face through a painted mask. It’s a species of rhyming in prose: ‘each sentence, revolving round its centre of gravity, is contained within itself like a couplet, and each paragraph forms itself into a stanza’. But if Hazlitt’s empiricism deflates mystifying fantasy and manipulative speech, he is able conversely to transcend the narrowing limits of that empiricism, drawing on his idealist resources to delineate more subtle concepts of the relations between language and experience. ‘Words are a key to the affections. They not only excite feelings, they point to why and wherefore. Causes march before them, and consequences follow after them. They are links in the chain of the universe, and the grappling irons that bind us to it. They open the gates of Paradise, and reveal the abyss of human woe. . . . It is words which constitute all but the present moment, but the present object . . . they alone answer in any degree to the truth of things. . . (and) unravel the web of the human heart.’ In grasping language as constitutive of experience rather than mechanically reflective of it, Hazlitt sees how it liberates man from

enslavement to the actual, from the tyranny of the 'present object'. The ambivalence in his idea of language reflects a more deep-seated ambivalence active in all his writing—a need to bind consciousness to concrete life without thereby denying its transformative creativity.

### *The Critique of Rationalism*

That need, throughout all Hazlitt's work, is a political one. Forms of eloquence which violate the concrete breed political deception, swaddling the facts in distracting fancy. The 'feeble, diffuse, showy, Asiatic redundancy' of Canning's speeches creates a specious light which 'gleams from the mouldering materials of corruption: the flowers that are seen there, gay and flaunting, bloom over the grave of humanity!' But at the same time, as we shall see, Hazlitt rejects those forms of pragmatism which cling cravenly to the 'real'; and it is in this dialectic that the true power of his radicalism lies. What renders his political case so forceful is its fusion of a reverence for the specific with an adherence to the necessarily abstract. He is an empiricist with an unswerving allegiance to principle, a man who rejects compromise yet displays a quite exceptional pluralism of sympathies.

In so far as Hazlitt endorses Burke's remark that 'there is nothing so true as habit' he is an historical empiricist, basing his moral and aesthetic judgments on an appeal to the texture of direct experience, disowning the rigidities of an *a priori* rationality. He works always from vivid complexes of emotionally unified sense-data, applauding common sense as 'the just results of the sum-total of such unconscious impressions in the ordinary occurrences of life, as they are treasured up by the memory, and called out by the occasion'. Common sense is the name we give to 'this body of unassuming but practical wisdom'; it is 'an impartial, instinctive result of truth and nature'. Reason can be used to interpret and perfect it, but reason employed in any other way is 'for the most part a building without a foundation'. 'Rules are applicable to abstractions, but expression is concrete and individual.' In emphasizing the concrete and individual, however, Hazlitt takes Burke's conservative historicism and uses it for radical ends—uses it, in fact, as a weapon with which to assault the reactionary bourgeois rationalism of his day, as Burke had used it to hammer the left wing of rationalist ideology. For Hazlitt, fidelity to the concrete means, for example, subverting the abstract violence of Malthus. If Malthus's schemes succeed,

... justice and humanity would flourish, they would be understood to signify that the poor have no right to live by their labour, and that the feelings of compassion and benevolence are best shewn by denying them charity; the poor would no longer be dependent on the rich . . . the struggle would be over, each class would fulfil the task assigned by heaven; the rich would oppress

the poor without remorse, the poor would submit to oppression with a pious gratitude and resignation; the greatest harmony would prevail between government and people; there would no longer be any seditions, tumults, complaints. . . .

Things, however, might go wrong. The poor, Hazlitt remarks, might tend to be governed by *feeling rather than by calculation* and might just begin to question why their families should starve when the squire's lady keeps half-a-dozen lap-dogs. If this feeling spread, and the poor realized that they should demand a fair proportion of the fruits of their labour rather than humbly craving charity and being refused on the grounds of justice and humanity, then Malthus himself, when questioned by the mass, might not produce his metaphysical cavillings in time and might instead be strung up from a lamp-post. To the extent that Hazlitt's attractive fantasy is based on the imperatives of actual feeling rather than abstract calculation, his empiricism, politically limited as it is, is in context a subversive force. If the appeal is to 'experience', then he is prepared to take advantage of the fact that such appeals in a class-society can lead to radical conclusions as much as to conservative ones, depending on whose experience is in question. Could there be any better judge of national grievances and their remedies, he asks in 'What is the People?', than the 'aggregate amount of the actual, dear-bought experience, the honest feelings, and heart-felt wishes of a whole people, informed and directed by the greatest power of understanding in the community, unbiassed by any sinister motive?' If Burke's empiricism consecrates the *status quo*, Hazlitt's connects directly with a radical republicanism.

Hazlitt's empiricism also leads him to criticize the radical utopianism of men like Godwin and Owen, but on essentially progressive grounds: he wants to defend specific life against Godwin's cerebral idealism, and is devastatingly scornful of Owen's blandly unrealistic appraisal of the difficulties of social change. He is amused as well as irritated by Owen's polite middle-class rationalism, the dogged reasonableness with which he patiently courts respectable society to win a hearing for his views. He sees shrewdly that Owen's schemes are tolerated because they threaten no real interests: 'Our statesmen are not afraid of the perfect scheme of reform he talks of, and in the meantime his cant against reform in parliament, and against Buonaparte, serves as a practical diversion in their favour'. As long as Owen confines himself to general principles and safe abstractions, Hazlitt argues, nothing will be done; but if once his book makes as many converts as Godwin's, those respectable men who Owen claims have been unable to find a flaw in his reasoning will soon find one in his reputation. He will be hounded as a Jacobin and a leveller, and will find 'that it is not so safe and easy a task as he imagined to make fools wise, and knaves honest; in short, to make mankind understand their own interests, or those who govern them care for any interests

but their own'. When we see Owen in the pillory, he adds, we shall begin to think there is something in his scheme. Hazlitt objects to radical utopianists on the same grounds as he objects to sugary poeticisms or conservative metaphysics: the utopian reformer moves in a similar region of idle fantasy, lost in 'airy hopes and shifting schemes of progressive perfectibility', missing the substance for the shadow.

### *The Critique of Conservatism*

None of this, however, offers much comfort to the conservatives. If the idealist sacrifices the real to the possible, the conservative is 'governed by sense and habit alone'; he has no principles himself but will cut your throat if you challenge his bigoted dogmas. He 'wallows in the mire of his senses, cannot get beyond the trough of his sordid appetites'. If the reformer embodies speculative reason, the conservative incarnates speculative interest. Hazlitt hates those who have no notion of anything but generalities and 'naked propositions', but also those 'who can't for the soul of them arrive at an abstract idea'. Pitt is such a man in his view, lacking in general principles and comprehensive views; Cobbett is another, concerned only with the local and circumstantial, guided by pique, obstinacy and caprice rather than a principled adherence to truth. If Hazlitt's empiricism provides him with a base from which to assault rationalist abstraction, his commitment to principle equally licenses an attack on Tory opportunism. As a result, he can be flexible without deviousness, liberal but not temporizing. His commitment to general principle, in opposition to mere empirical self-interest, is clear enough in 'On Good-Nature':

Good-nature, or what is often considered as such, is the most selfish of all the virtues: it is nine times out of ten mere indolence of disposition. . . . A person of this character feels no emotions of anger or detestation, if you tell him of the devastation of a province, or the massacre of the inhabitants of a town, or the enslaving of a people; but if his dinner is spoiled by a lump of soot falling down the chimney, he is thrown into the utmost confusion, and can hardly recover a decent command of his temper for the whole day. . . . Knavery and injustice in the abstract are things that by no means ruffle his temper, or alter the serenity of his countenance, unless he is to be the sufferer by them. . . .

. . . If the truth were known, the most disagreeable people are the most amiable. They are the only persons who feel an interest in what does not concern them. They have as much regard for others as they have for themselves. . . . They have an unfortunate attachment to a set of abstract phrases, such as *liberty, truth, justice, humanity, honour*, which are continually abused by knaves, and misunderstood by fools, and they can hardly contain themselves for spleen. . . . In short, they have a passion for truth; they feel



the same attachment to the idea of what is right, that a knave does to his interest, or that a good-natured man does to his ease . . .  
 . . . Principle is a passion for truth; an incorrigible attachment to a general proposition. . . .

In harnessing passion and generality, Hazlitt undercuts both rationalist and empiricist forms of conservative ideology.

The epistemological basis of this position is laid in his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*. The bias of this work is associationist, but Hazlitt also wants to hold to a principle of benevolent disinterestedness which is independent of empirical habit. He denies that benevolence can be reduced to self-interest by arguing that, on the contrary, self-love is fundamentally a case of disinterested benevolence: since I can't empirically experience my own future self when I act for some future good, I must be acting by some principle which transcends such empirical considerations. Within a traditional form of empiricist argument, in other words, Hazlitt introduces a principle which (reputably or not) reaches beyond such argument; and this principle is significantly akin to the imagination, the power by which I am carried out of myself into the feelings of others and into my own future. He adopts a similar position in his *Remarks on the System of Hartley and Helvetius*, where he accepts Hartley's associationism up to a point but claims that it can make sense only if a certain unifying principle of consciousness is allowed. 'If association were everything . . . there could be no comparison of one idea with another . . . no wisdom, no general sense of right and wrong, no sympathy, no foresight of anything, in short nothing that is essential, or honourable to the human mind would be left to it.'

Hazlitt wants to defend the mind's disinterested independence against a mechanistic determinism which binds it passively to the actual; yet there is a paradox about the meaning of 'disinterestedness' in his work which leads us back to the ambivalences I have previously discussed. Disinterestedness means seeing the situation as it truly is, free from the prejudices and sinister interests; but Hazlitt needs to distinguish it carefully both from the falsely naturalistic viewpoint of the rationalists and from that apparent independence of mind which is mere capricious singularity. These two positions are in fact closer than they seem: rationalist speculation is for Hazlitt as much a form of self-indulgent egoism as are the politics of Pitt or the poetry of Moore. Disinterestedness must oppose such false subjectivism, but it mustn't be confused either with some kind of naked, contextless rationality divorced from an emotional relation with the object; it isn't an Arnoldian absolution from the pressure of particular commitments. When he praises his friend Fawcett as a critic of 'disinterested taste and liberal feeling', he means that he judged only from what he felt: 'there was no flaw or mist in the clear mirror of his mind'. The opposite of disinterestedness for Hazlitt is not conviction but ideological prejudice; and although he can give no

satisfactory philosophical answer to the question of how ideological prejudice is to be distinguished from honest conviction, there are few men more adept than he is in actually demonstrating that distinction in the detailed analysis of a literary text. The sense of disinterestedness he adopts is one which allows him to reject the twin errors of naturalism and egoism, and so to unify in his own writing a generous responsiveness to actual things with the sharpest personal convictions.

It is, one should emphasize, unity and not compromise. Hazlitt's antithetical style ('The one is the slave of habit, the other is the sport of caprice') expresses a dialectical rather than a vacillating mind. If he continually assaults extreme positions, it is not because he believes the truth of which they are distortions is in the least tame. So much is clear from his comments on the *Common-place Critics*:

He considers all enthusiasm as a degree of madness, particularly to be guarded against by young minds; and believes that truth lies in the middle, between the extremes of right and wrong. He thinks that the object of poetry is to please; and that astronomy is a very pleasing and useful study. He thinks all this, and a great deal more, that amounts to nothing.

## Morality is Marxism—II

by Denys Turner

### II

The challenge which faced all Greek intellectuals alike, can be reconstructed in the form of a dilemma. Either some way of fixing a descriptive meaning for the language of moral evaluation had to be found, or, in the absence of any such method, moral and political virtue would have to be taught as a way of living well in a world where prescription was the basis of morality. In either case the fact remained that virtue would have to be taught.

Those who, like Plato and Aristotle, opted for the first alternative were faced with the problem generated by their adherence to the old assumption: namely that the descriptive meaning of moral evaluation was discoverable only in terms of some social order, some *polis*, to be a good member of which was to be a good man. But the very fact that it was now problematic what one's *polis* was, meant that the search for moral knowledge had to be seen as the proper object of some specialized form of enquiry into the question, that is, of what those social roles and relationships are, to understand which is to understand how the good man acts. Thus it is that if political virtue can be taught it also needs to be taught. It *can* be taught because everyone knows what the universal virtues of the political life are, and that they are virtues—for, as Thucydides had emphasized, even bad men justify their vices in the language of