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Hazlitt's 'My First Acquaintance with Poets': The Autobiography of a Cultural Critic

The history of reception repeatedly shows that works of literature are put to use in ways unintended by their authors. This is the case with an essay that Michael Foot has called the finest in the English language, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', which recounts William Hazlitt's complex response to the radical poetics embodied initially in the charismatic young William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* and their later 'apostasy'. Perhaps the most compelling contemporary account of this narrative (which immediately and forever after becomes a commonplace of literary history), the essay has thrived in anthologies, biographies, and criticism as a portrait of the heroic poets-in-their-youth – elegiac portraits dyed in the colours of betrayal – and the self-representation of a neophyte enthusiast in philosophy and the arts seduced and abandoned by poetry as social idealism. But 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', written by an essayist in his maturity, by one who takes on the mantle of cultural critic in the most whole-souled manner, is in fact far more than elegy and nostalgia followed by scepticism; it lives, I argue, more in the year of its publication, 1823, than in 1798, the locus of memory.

In Tom Paulin's *The Day-Star of Liberty* the illustration section begins with Hazlitt's self-portrait at age twenty-four and ends with William Bewick's famous drawing of the essayist at forty-six. The caption under the first draws from the self-characterization of his youth in 'My First Acquaintance' (1823): 'dumb, inarticulate, helpless, like a worm by the way-side'; under Bewick's portrait is the artist's own assessment of Hazlitt: 'the Shakespeare prose-writer of our glorious country'.[1] The transformation from helpless silence to powerful articulateness, from voicelessness to the loquacity of his essays, coincides with the development of the vocation of cultural critic.

As much as 'My First Acquaintance' charts the essayist's *bildung*, it tries too to recover and transform the visionary poetics of the post-French-Revolution period for the iron time of Hazlitt's present. In this essay I chart

the emergence of the cultural critic as the exercise of a sympathetic critique of poets previously worshipped, at once a distancing from their more recently discovered weaknesses and an attempted saving of their virtues. Hazlitt layers his intellectual and emotional changes over time or, to shift the metaphor, presents the relevant events less as a chronology and more as a 'web' or 'field' or 'map'. Past, present, and – in a shadowy way – the future are thus mutually implicated, as are history and the self which Hazlitt 'raises anew'. Much of the following discussion examines the form of 'My First Acquaintance' as a function of Hazlitt's own stresses and convictions, while making the 'general case' of the possibility of such an essay.

Paulin's book associates with the Dissenting tradition some of Hazlitt's 'critical terms' for the best prose writing: motion, walking, bubbles, transparency, the cento (scraps of quotation in aggregate), the furnace (as in the poesis of Blake's Los).[2] All require and then release a fund of energy, as if that is what's needed to substitute for the vision of the end of the world one of its 'postponement'. For Hazlitt this new, stressful and demanding but fully pleasurable writing appears as stylistic stress: 'poetic prose', paratactic sentences, swollen appositional paragraphs, eccentrically measured essays. The best of Hazlitt's essays embody the oxymoron of a 'poetry' of 'feminine' sensibilities enmeshed in a truth-seeking and inevitably critical prose. That the results are usually 'rough' to the classically-trained or expectant ear attests to the social contradictions in Hazlitt's world—of the mixture of institutional and mass reading audiences with different expectations for Elysian possibilities, and of his own suspicion of the comic vision for an early nineteenth-century journalistic essayist. Such suspicion is manifest not as 'scepticism', as is often asserted, but on the contrary as the energies of a visionary realism.

'My First Acquaintance with Poets' begins when the nineteen-year-old Hazlitt meets Coleridge, a moment of conversion or, at the least, a monumental awakening:

> [Coleridge preaching] held the good town of Shrewsbury in delightful suspense for three weeks that he remained there, 'fluttering the *proud Salopians* like an eagle in a dove-cote'; and the Welch mountains that skirt the horizon with their tempestuous confusion, agree to have heard no such mystic sounds since the days of
>
> 'High-born Hoel's harp or soft Llewellyn's lay!'
>
> As we passed along between W-m and Shrewsbury, and I eyed their blue tops seen through the wintry branches, or the red rustling leaves of the sturdy oak-trees by the road-side, a sound was in my ears as of a Siren's song; I was stunned, startled with it, as from deep sleep; but I

> had no notion then that I should ever be able to express my admiration to others in motley imagery or quaint allusion, till the light of his genius shone into my soul, like the sun's rays glittering in the puddles of the road. (Howe, XVII, p. 107)

The older biographers (e.g. Birrell and Howe) simply incorporate the buoyant image of the awakening without reservation or complication and as the most salient biographical point of this essay: 'My First Acquaintance' simply *is* Hazlitt's life in 1798. Yet Hazlitt colours the prose with queries about the event's reverberant meaning. The moment is Arcadian—nature and Coleridge's genius live and act in his direction and for his benefit. The mountains, like Hazlitt, respond to the mystic sounds in consort. Coleridge's voice joins the tradition of (Gray's) bardic and vatic geniuses of the place; like Coriolanus, he makes his listeners 'flutter'. (Cf. the *OED*, 'to throw (a person) into confusion, agitation, or tremulous excitement; to alarm, or cause excited discussion among, quiet people'). This, one can imagine, would fit the powerful radical speech-making among groups of citizens in the 1790s. Another, later, usage from *Clarissa*, gives its romantic/erotic connotation, which Hazlitt – so recently bewildered and 'betrayed' by Sara Walker – might have layered onto the word: 'You flutter one so'. 'Confusion' is the mental state, for Hazlitt, of Arcadia which produces Siren songs of beauty and desire, songs that hold people in 'delightful suspense' (another definition of 'flutter'). And like Coriolanus, Coleridge may please and astonish for a price; is he a betrayer of his people and their tyrant? And, does sunlight glittering in a puddle change the puddle? The conversion, coming at the beginning of the essay and the outset of his conscious life, sets in motion its own troubles and challenges which this and other essays by Hazlitt take up in turbulence.

We can observe this turbulence enter 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' by following the successive published versions of his accounts of changes in Coleridge, and responsively in himself, between 1798 and the present – that is, 1823. On 12 January 1817 Hazlitt wrote a letter to the *Examiner* contrasting his experience of hearing Coleridge in January 1798 speak against war and its effects on the population with the later politically conservative *Lay Sermon* recently published. After the brief narrative of the earlier experience, he expresses his anger mixed with the sense of betrayal. Changes in the passage, between its appearance in *The Examiner* and the longer and more resonant essay of six years later, reflect the difference between an immediate and disturbed response to an event and a carefully modulated incident in a more expansive and detailed map of experience and feeling. For the essay Hazlitt removes the obvious markers of the letter

such as 'Sir' and 'Now, Sir', 'Mr. Examiner', and '*That* Sermon, like *this* Sermon'. The letter, embedded in a contentious present of journalistic opinion, distinguishes with irritation a Coleridge who in 1798 and in the spirit of Dissent preached the separation of church and state and the Coleridge who now argues for their conjunction. Hazlitt, after the highly poetic account of the 1798 introduction to Coleridge, turns for the remainder of the *Examiner* letter to a question, flamboyant in tone but sincere and deep in its self-concern, to query the nature of his awakening experience:

> Now, Sir, what I have to complain of is this, that from reading your account of the 'Lay-Sermon', I begin to suspect that my notions formerly must have been little better than a deception: that my faith in Mr. Coleridge's great powers must have been a vision of my youth, that, like other such visions, must pass away from me; and that all his genius and eloquence is *vox et preterea nihil*: for otherwise how is it so lost to all common sense upon paper?
> ... I am naturally, Sir, a man of a plain, dull, dry understanding, without flights or fancies, and can just contrive to plod on, if left to myself: what right, then has Mr. C., who is just going to ascend in a balloon, to offer me a seat in the parachute, only to throw me from the height of his career upon the ground, and dash me to pieces? Or again, what right has he to invite me to a feast of poets and philosophers, fruits and flowers intermixed, – immortal fruits and amaranthine flowers, – and then to tell me it is all vapour, and, like *Timon*, to throw his empty dishes in my face? (Howe, VII, pp. 128–29)

Hazlitt displays with startling clarity the issues that preoccupy him in 'My First Acquaintance', 'On Going a Journey', and in other essays: is poetry merely a siren song? is the aesthetic of Romanticism finally a destructive delusion? and does visionary hope and experience have any lasting meaning? Must flights or fancies be severely separated from 'plodding' prose? (Paulin observes that the 'plod' of Whig prose was, for Hazlitt, one of its strengths). Hazlitt's air-balloon image had become associated, both positively and negatively, with radical thought and practice; equally, his 'feast of poets' was surely a reminder of the congenial gathering of contemporary poetry and commentary in Leigh Hunt's *Feast of the Poets* (1814). These two references to the world of progressive politics and poetics anticipate Hunt's slight poem 'Fancy's Party' (published in Hunt's *Foliage*, 1818),[3] a jeu d'esprit that *Blackwood's Magazine* assumed was a 'debauch' of Hunt and Hazlitt, who, in his letter to the *Examiner*, wittily suggests that the invitation to fly and to feast among radical friends

descends from the Coleridge of 1798. The meaning of '1798' seems to have emerged for Hazlitt as an open question taken up in the longer essay – one that had implications for politics, poetry, the shape of his life, and the quality of his own, mature, prose.

'My First Acquaintance with Poets', as well as some of Hazlitt's other famous essays like 'The Indian Jugglers', 'The Fight', and 'On Going a Journey', is shaped eccentrically – with a surprisingly long ending that throws off expectations of classical, more symmetrical form – as if to suggest at once, for the cultural critic, the uncertainties of closure when writing about and in the midst of the bewildering present and the affective demands of standing wilfully very close to one's subject. After the brilliant portraits of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and in the midst of a four- or five-page paragraph, Hazlitt unceremoniously moves into a long account of a walk that he took with Coleridge and a 'native of Nether Stowey', John Chester (Howe, XVII, pp. 119–22). This section appears to have had little interest for readers: there is, as Hazlitt might say, no *face* to look upon; everything is in motion and seems at first glance tacked onto the main structure of the piece. The presence and significance of Chester allows the essay to ramble out to its close far from its presumed centre in the portraits and worship of path-breaking poets.

What he deems an 'acquaintance with poets' becomes an education from them, in several senses. The essay enumerates, through the mention and discussion of books and through moments of unmediated encounter with the poets, Hazlitt's many and finely noted observations on the nature and impact of a variety of utterances and genres; every text read and discussed modifies, tunes and leads to, in a *via negativa* of possible styles and intentions, the prose he is writing now. The 'walk', in this case a pedestrian instance of the journey archetype, is the vehicle and image of his e-ducation, the leading out and away from the nest of his origins of consciousness and adult speech in 1798. Education we might call the mind in motion, mingling the realms of fancy and of the matter-of-fact in new combinations but forever as purposive as it is revelatory.

Prose, unlike poetry, according to Hazlitt in 'On the Prose Style of Poets' (Howe, XII, pp. 5–17), needs to be neither just a wandering nor a straight line of thought but a journey towards the truth that gains power from encounters with chance and from the richness of fancy. A poet writing prose, on the other hand, typically is a bird that has trouble using its feet. Prose has more 'natural' 'rhythms and cadences' than poetry which relies upon abstract or previously determined metres and rhymes. In prose the rhythms and cadences ought to conform to the events – in Emerson's words for poetry – a metre-making argument. Thus a walking prose style, a

narrative permeated with walking, and the idea of an education merge powerfully in 'My First Acquaintance'. As Hazlitt says in 'On Going a Journey', '[w]ith change of place we change our ideas' (Howe, VIII, p. 187). Such changes of ideas require a prose that emits an energy far in excess of that needed merely to confirm ideas. This is another way of describing the walking style in Hazlitt: constantly in motion, constantly accumulating detail, it is syntactically restless like a mind in turmoil, a mind fluttering with agitation and excitement, a mind pushing for discovery and change.

The eccentricity of form at the end of 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' and other essays therefore mirrors the refusal to remain fixated before the objects of worship. John Chester on the walk, this most minor of characters, becomes the foil for Hazlitt's ambivalence about and struggles with Coleridge, for Chester really does worship the poet. Hazlitt presents this with a lovely mixture of humour and distaste: it's precisely worship that he seeks to convert into something that gives him the opportunity for free, mobile thinking and the perceiving of social and cultural truths. Coleridge is still marvellously there – but for him set free from pure, 'stunned' worship. Chester was 'one of those who were attracted to their idol's [Coleridge] discourse as flies are to honey, or bees in swarming-time to the sound of a brass pan' (Howe, XVII, p. 119). His next simile links personal to political idolatry: 'When he sat down at table with his idol, John's felicity was complete; Sir Walter Scott's or Mr Blackwood's, when they sat down at the same table with the King, was not more so'. And when Hazlitt manages to argue a philosophical point successfully with Coleridge, John Chester listens: 'not from any interest in the subject, but because he was astonished that I should be able to suggest any thing to Coleridge that he did not already know' (Howe, XVII, p. 121). Chester is 'stunned' in the way that Hazlitt was on first hearing Coleridge preach. But the essayist hasn't remained stunned; rather, he is continually pushing to speak, to answer back, to take the conversation further, to contribute. The essay literally mobilizes the mind rendered immobile by that Siren song, the 'chaunt' of poets. The eccentric, walking conclusion to the piece is Hazlitt's visualization of getting the mind in motion and of calling attention to the reader that the received history of Wordsworth and Coleridge – either full acceptance or full rejection – needs rethinking in the present, a kind of updating of their nourishing and vitalizing qualities in light of their retrograde politics.

What needs to be saved, or modified in order to be saved? Poetry – what Hazlitt discovered with Coleridge and Wordsworth – is a vision, out of time, of democratic happiness; the condition privileges enchantment (in 1798) and confusion (in 1802 during the Peace of Amiens when he 'set foot on the

laughing shores of France', 'Calais was peopled with novelty and delight. The confused, busy murmur of the place was like oil and wine poured into my ears; nor did the mariners' hymn, which was sung from the top of an old crazy vessel in the harbour as the sun went down, send an alien sound into my soul' Howe, VIII, p. 188). Early in his writing career, in the worship of poets, he longs for a poetic capacity which he sees as the conjoining of two domains in an instant: the capacity for thinking of two separate entities or facts simultaneously. In poetry this would be the capacity for metaphor and, more precisely, personification. Thus in 'On Going a Journey' he longs to be able, like Coleridge, to convert a landscape into a Pindaric Ode, to be able to walk and talk at the same time, or, as he says here, 'If I had the quaint Muse of Sir Philip Sidney to assist me, I would write a *Sonnet to the Road between W-m and Shrewsbury*, and immortalise every step of it by some fond enigmatical conceit. I would swear that the very milestones had ears, and that Harmer-Hill stooped with all its pines, to listen to a poet, as he passed!' (Howe, XVII, p. 114). For Hazlitt the power of personification in some sense becomes the poet's calling: it represents the power of the Dissenting poetic artist to animate the dead world, the world of objects. As essayist, he hungers – as did the poets – for this capacity to expand the subjectivities of the living world. The meaning of the poetic as personification is what the education by Coleridge in 1798 is all about.

And yet Hazlitt clearly associates the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth with seduction and betrayal; as Chris Jones has argued,[4] the spirit of sensibility and disinterestedness, Dissenting virtues figured as 'feminine', have during Hazlitt's career become in his mind ineffectual in terms of the practical world of real Tories and growing readerships. Thus I suggest that the value of Romantic poetics needs to redirect itself into one of the forms of visionary poetics: parataxis and apposition, which redefine that value as expansion and inclusion of the real (a different *dimension* of the infinite, a definition of the Fancy that does not seduce and betray) for discursive and narrative argument. A nearly tragic example of the expansive dimensions of parataxis in 'My First Acquaintance' is the summary of Hazlitt Senior's 30-year study of the commentaries on the Bible:

> Here were 'no figures nor no fantasies', – neither poetry nor philosophy – nothing to dazzle, nothing to excite modern curiosity; but to his lack-lustre eyes there appeared, within the pages of the ponderous, unwieldy, neglected tomes, the sacred name of JEHOVAH in Hebrew capitals: pressed down by the weight of the style, worn to the last fading thinness of the understanding, there were glimpses, glimmering notions of the patriarchal wanderings, with palm-trees hovering in

> the horizon, and processions of camels at the distance of three thousand years; there was Moses with the Burning Bush, the number of the Twelve Tribes, types, shadows, glosses on the law and the prophets; there were discussions (dull enough) on the age of Methuselah, a mighty speculation! there were outlines, rude guesses at the shape of Noah's Ark and of the riches of Solomon's Temple; questions as to the date of the creation, predictions of the end of all things; the great lapses of time, the strange mutations of the globe were unfolded with the voluminous leaf, as it turned over; and though the soul might slumber with an hieroglyphic veil of inscrutable mysteries drawn over it, yet it was in a slumber ill-exchanged for all the sharpened realities of sense, wit, fancy, or reason. My father's life was comparatively a dream; but it was a dream of infinity and eternity, of death, the resurrection, and a judgment to come! (Howe, XVII, p. 110)

Parataxis builds magnificently the vastness of his father's dwelling in a world of archetypes and texts not fitted to the world and to human faculties of sense, wit, fancy, or reason. His work summons Biblical power and effect, precisely what he lacks. In other words, he evokes the 'end of the world' but, tragically, not, like the great poets or his son in this essay, the 'postponement of the end of the world' by evoking the real one. The humble lyric or humbler essay may in this regard have more power. Parataxis and apposition, versions of *enumeratio*, serve a writer like Hazlitt who wants to mark the fundamental connectedness between the self and the world, the relatedness among persons and phenomena, rather than their distinction. Indeed, connectedness in general, the idea that identity is described and confirmed through a network of relations, seems central to parataxis and to Hazlitt's conception of the essay form.[5]

Hazlitt has been criticized for those moments when he slips into what can feel like cheap Romantic poeticisms and sentimentality. Earlier readers, like Charles Lamb (who praises Hazlitt's books 'in those places where no cloudy passion intervenes'[6]), Robert Louis Stevenson and Virginia Woolf, complained of excessive essayistic leaping and jumping, which, I believe, meant the unpredictable and, from the point of view of argument, unnecessary slips from cool or cold reasoning to warm nostalgia or, less sympathetically, self-pity. It may also mean the visionary, even avant-garde excesses of parataxis. Paratactic and appositional writing (a 'walking' in prose) subverts the clean linearity of skeletal subject-verb-object sentences and the topic sentence-followed-by-development paragraphs. Not only does it apparently undermine the classical tradition of the English essay as rounded and contained, but it could imply self-indulgence and loss of

control. Excess in sentence and paragraph structure and excess of emotions can be mutually reinforcing. But to accuse Hazlitt here is to accuse the makers of Werther and Jacopo Ortis and St. Preux and Frankenstein, to say nothing of the Keats who writes letters to Fanny Brawne, and the theorist of passion-love (and Hazlitt's friendly acquaintance from the time of our essay) Stendhal. (Paulin does not speak of paratactic and appositional style in particular, nor of Hazlitt's novel *Liber Amoris*, but in Hazlitt's hands it seems very much of a piece with the high-energy prose coming out of the Dissenting tradition.)

Curiously, one of these indulgences occurs after an account of talking with Coleridge and Wordsworth about the popular French sentimental novel *Paul and Virginia* and then later stopping, by himself, at an inn at Bridgewater to read *Camilla*. 'So have I loitered my life away, reading books, looking at pictures, going to plays, hearing, thinking, writing on what pleased me best. I have wanted only one thing to make me happy; but wanting that, have wanted everything!' (Howe, XVII, p. 116). The self-deprecation in describing his life as a 'loitering' (but from another point of view a sign of one who *stops to think with mind and body*) and the reference to the recently failed experience of passion-love (a veritable Spirit of the Age) with Sara Walker registers less the failure of control over his writing and more the personal fragility and risk concomitant with genuine cultural insight. The male lovers in these sentimental novels are inspired by need for and love of a woman, along with a hunger for social progress, to pass beyond the conventional limits of social decorum. They look crazy and weak but act, along with their paranoiac excesses, with perceptions out of which emerge strong convictions and true insights. The essayist – like the best poets and like the lovers in these novels – acknowledges the condition of disease, of world brokenness, not idiosyncratic but representative, that could authenticate the insights of writers of criticism.

Hazlitt did not settle simply for passionate and quotidian 'prose' over 'poetry'. He is, like a visionary poet, concerned with the expansion of human perception: the long sentence and the long paratactic paragraph may correspond to the very long poetic line, indicating an effort (as he said of Wordsworth) to establish 'a personal relationship to the universe' (Howe, XI, p. 89). Hazlitt says in 'On Going a Journey', '[w]e measure the universe by ourselves', but '[i]n this way... we remember an infinity of things and places. The mind is like a mechanical instrument that plays a variety of tunes, but it must play them in succession' (Howe, VIII, p. 187), alluding, as poets do, to the centrality of the infinite, but locating it as a property of mind suitable to a thinking person, a person found in the social as well as the poetic or collective scale.

For Hazlitt the word 'infinite' accords with 'the multiple'. Like Blake, Hazlitt does not believe in the reconciliation of the many into 'the one' that blurs distinctions among individuals. 'It is said', Hazlitt observes in the 'Character of Mr Burke', 'that truth is *one*; but to this I cannot subscribe, for it appears to me that truth is *many*. There are as many truths as there are things and causes of action and contradictory principles at work in society' (Howe, VII, p. 308). It's as if Hazlitt – and many who write in the mode of correspondences, combinations, and (in prose) parataxis – believes that the world is basically a place of difference and variety: nothing needs reconciliation; everything needs acknowledgment. There's a place in the world of Hazlitt and Coleridge for a John Chester: indeed, their walk as I and, much more extensively, Robin Jarvis have shown[7], is – like parataxis – a democratic happening, an event for people of possibly unlike minds.

For example, the paragraph in which John Chester figures is, in my World's Classics edition, nearly six pages long and expands to include: listening to Wordsworth read his poetry, Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth as too matter-of-fact except in his philosophical poems, Hazlitt's portrait of Wordsworth's countenance, his recollection of Wordsworth's discussion of Monk Lewis's *Castle Spectre* with discussion of the poet's refusal to court popular effect, Hazlitt's grateful response to Wordsworth's poetic exclamation: 'How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank!', Wordsworth's reading of *Peter Bell* 'in prophetic tones' in relation to its more recent criticism by Reynolds and Shelley and Hazlitt's speculation about the poet's *chaunt* as something that 'disarms the judgment', the differences between Coleridge's and Wordsworth's methods of composition, a 'metaphysical discussion' with Wordsworth, and the long episode of the walk with John Chester.

With parataxis and apposition Hazlitt may have intuited the prose syntax of late Regency historicism, not as the search for a dominant cause of events but as the expression of a field of forces (cf. James Chandler, *England in 1819*[8]). The endless sentence of coordinate linkages and the endless paragraph, with its dwarfing of a dominating subject and verb makes waves, as it were, of social power. For Hazlitt parataxis points to a levelling or democratizing of power from the one to the many, from the King to the multiplicity of personhoods.[9]

The *spatial* characteristic of Hazlitt's prose (and his images for it) corresponds to the contemporary American notion of poetics described by Charles Olson and Robert Duncan as 'composition by field'.[10] Even in more linear metaphors for the poem and the essay, such as that of the walk, the straight line wanders, that is, traverses an area, which, in visionary poetics, can be seen as an expansion of the concept of the line. A paratactic

sentence or an appositional paragraph becomes the image of a collectivity that privileges inclusion rather than exclusion. This, in spite of Hazlitt's conviction that great persuasive prose doesn't, in any final or purposive sense, wander from its goal of 'truth'.

In 'A Farewell to Essay Writing' Hazlitt prides himself on never having *coerced* a reader into a point of view, just as Keats observed in reference to Wordsworth's poem, 'we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us'. When, in 'My First Acquaintance', he applies the pressure of cultural criticism to the situation, Hazlitt doesn't force a position; yet the mode of expansiveness just described allows the critique of the poets the fullest possible sway. And what about the growth of the cultural critic's mind? Coleridge, first of all, appears to Hazlitt less as a poet and more as a philosophical and critical thinker with a poetic temperament. Most of their conversations are about ideas and books, the assessing of the ideas of others as well as of their own: the poet mentors Hazlitt in critical thought. And Hazlitt bravely and creatively responds. 'Coleridge', he says, 'in truth met me half-way on the ground of philosophy, or I should not have been won over to his imaginative creed' (Howe, XVII, p. 115).

A trial of the essay and, one is tempted to say, of a major strand in Hazlitt's career for the next two and a half decades, is to learn to *speak his mind* in relation to the siren song of Romantic poetry that has filled his ears. Coleridge, he says, taught him – 'dumb and brutish' – how to speak with the understanding. But it's hard at first. He (like many others) 'listened for a long time without uttering a word'. Later when the poet invites him to Nether Stowey, he '*stammered out* [his] acknowledgments'. Nor does, he in describing his work on the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind, 'succeed in making [himself] understood'. Similarly, he has trouble, in a 'metaphysical argument' with Wordsworth, making himself 'perfectly clear and intelligible'. He hasn't yet integrated the poetic – that is, parataxis and apposition as the expression in prose of infinity, vision, critique and contradiction – into his demonstrations; and he hasn't yet discovered his subject. Engaging him in assessing literature, Coleridge helps Hazlitt discover his voice, as a thinker about culture and as a sympathetic critic of poetry.

Although the essay begins with 1798 and ends with 1823, the autobiography does not work precisely in linear fashion. The sense of earlier and later emerges in a more fluid and syntactically tighter chronology. For example, 'I did not at that time connect it with any instability of purpose or involuntary change of principle, as I have done since'. 'The comment made upon it by his face and voice was very different from that of some later critics!' '[Coleridge] launched into a three-hours' description of the third

heaven, of which he had had a dream, very different from Mr Southey's *Vision of Judgment*, and also from that other Vision of Judgment, which Mr Murray, the Secretary of the Bridge-street Junto, has taken into his especial keeping!' The essayist portrays his life more through areas and depths (as the field and web metaphors suggest); the past is murkily entwined in the present so that the essayist must unravel it while maintaining its essential shape. Hazlitt gives another metaphor for considering the shape of a sentence, a paragraph, or the whole essay in terms of spatial, temporal, and personal relatedness; he remarks that recently, over twenty years after the event, he returned to a hill at Taunton overlooking Nether Stowey: 'How was the map of my life spread out before me, as the map of the country lay at my feet!' (Howe, XVII, p. 116).

A case in point is Hazlitt's brilliant portrait of Wordsworth, an overlay of past with present, with memory and received views and reconsiderations. Indeed this, and by extension the entire essay, accord with Adorno's definition of 'imminent criticism': 'A successful work, from the perspective of imminent criticism, is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure'.[11] We are introduced to Wordsworth as Hazlitt was – slowly. First Hazlitt walked with Coleridge to Alfoxden; the spirit of the French Revolution is described; they look at the manuscript of *Lyrical Ballads* after which Hazlitt recalls going to bed in a room with portraits of Georges I and II on the walls. Then comes a paragraph, inserted as reflective commentary into the narrative, on the dream-like, thoughtless fullness of youth and its aftermath in disappointment. Coleridge reads from Wordsworth's poems, in which Hazlitt recalls 'the sense of a new style and new spirit in poetry came over me'. They walk back to Nether Stowey with the poet giving his critical evaluation of Wordsworth's work. The next morning they visit Wordsworth himself, and only at this point does his *countenance* emerge, for the reader and Hazlitt at the same time: 'I think I see him now'. Perhaps for the first time? Home, poems, judgment on his works, his sister and her 'frugal repast', the 'novice' Hazlitt treading back and forth from one poet's house to another – in short the atmosphere of the poet – precede encounter with the actual man. The *aura* is established and throughout the portrait it never vanishes; Hazlitt's relationship with the poet never comes forward into the light unmediated, 'all at once'. To see Wordsworth 'now' is neither to see him precisely as Hazlitt did 25 years earlier, nor to normalize him as does the sculptor Chantry who was, says Hazlitt, 'teazed into making [a bust of Wordsworth] regular and heavy'. We follow the critic into recovering, which is a remaking of, the poet's appearance.

Placed in the following passage in relation to 'Peter Bell' and 'The Idiot Boy' (in '*burr*') to Chantry and Haydon, Wordsworth's portrait from memory reveals a 'mixture' of traits that seem today very faithful to the 1798 Wordsworth:

> He answered in some degree to his friend's description of him, but was more gaunt and Don Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed (according to the *costume* of that unconstrained period) in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons. There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell. There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye (as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance), an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face. Chantry's bust wants the marking traits; but he was teazed into making it regular and heavy: Haydon's head of him, introduced into the *Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem*, is the most like his drooping weight of thought and expression. He sat down and talked very naturally and freely, with a mixture of clear gushing accents in his voice, a deep gutteral intonation, and a strong tincture of the northern *burr*, like the crust on wine. (Howe, XVII, p. 118)

Hazlitt's paratactic prose creates a portrait of a fundamentally complex person, and in so doing conflicts with the view of Coleridge and the *normalizing* interpretation of Chantry. The essayist in retrospect sees him as burdened ('gaunt', 'severe', with a 'drooping weight of thought and expression') but equally open and energetic and full of Hazlitt's praiseworthy term, gusto. The 1798 Wordsworth, unlike the 1823 one, is – as David Bromwich has recently argued[12] – full of guilt and loss and pressures coming from his unsettling experiences during and following the Revolution; all of this is coupled with a vision of poetry that attempts a response to his deep anxieties, as the 'spirit and pulse of good'. Hazlitt, I think, honours the profundity of Wordsworth's conception of poetry when he associates his burdened, worn look and the fire in his eye with his seeing 'something in objects more than the outward appearance'. To see more of an object, to extend the scale of perspective, requires an output of energies that takes its toll, but such transformations of the ordinary domain of existence are the poet's task.

This mixture of reverential respect and scepticism marks the next delicate but highly charged segment of the portrait. Having noted – echoing

an earlier word in the passage – the 'severe principles of the new school' of poetry, inclined to 'reject rather than court popular effect', Hazlitt continues:

> Wordsworth, looking out of the low, latticed window, said, 'How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank!' I thought within myself, 'With what eyes these poets see nature!' and ever after, when I saw the sun-set stream upon the objects facing it, conceived I had made a discovery, or thanked Mr. Wordsworth for having made one for me! We went over to All-Foxden again the day following, and Wordsworth read us the story of Peter Bell in the open air; and the comment made upon it by his face and voice was very different from that of some later critics! Whatever might be thought of the poem, 'his face was as a book where men might read strange matters', and he announced the fate of his hero in prophetic tones. There is a *chaunt* in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgment. Perhaps they have deceived themselves by making habitual use of this ambiguous accompaniment. (Howe, XVII, p. 118)

Does the voice, as Hazlitt suggests elsewhere, cover up clichés and banalities? or does it guide one, in the case of poems, beyond the quotidian and social to the collective? Does 'How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank!' state pretentiously the obvious – or does it open the eyes of someone who hasn't previously noted the wonder of sunlight on a natural object? Does the 'new school' of poets unconsciously mock itself, as Hazlitt is mocked by his unconditional worship of the line? Yet he catches precisely one of Wordsworth's innovative strengths: to call attention to 'the life of things' residing in nature: the verb, 'sets', is characteristic of this poet who unobtrusively (with the pun on 'sunset', and its implication of an ending) animates the sun and the receiving bank making reciprocal the two elements of nature. To make the ordinary extraordinary, the dead alive – surely this is a major task for *Lyrical Ballads*. That this high poetic calling should turn out to 'disarm the judgment' may be Hazlitt's major *critical* task to answer.

Similarly, his recollections of Coleridge's literary observations convey to some extent his worship but more typically his uncertainties and quarrels with the philosopher/poet/critic. Coleridge is, but is not, an idealized figure – one that (at least in retrospect) stimulates Hazlitt to define himself, to begin to establish his voice as distinct and critical. Significantly a number of memories call up the relationship between poetic language and conversational speech on the one hand, and on the other, the capacity

to make good arguments. Coleridge praised Burke, for example, because he 'reasoned in figures' (Howe, XVII, p. 111). In speaking of Wollstonecraft interacting with Godwin, Hazlitt noted that he had watched her refute an objection of Godwin's 'with quite a playful, easy air'. To which Coleridge replied that it was an 'instance of the ascendency of the imagination over mere intellect'. And after the younger man tried to describe first in speech and then on paper his *Essay upon the Principles of Human Action*, he longed for the poetic capacity as he longs to be able to write a *Sonnet to the Road between W-m and Shrewsbury.* Coleridge stimulated his sense of the visionary – and therefore more compelling – power of poetic prose. But listening to Wordsworth read his poems, he sensed its power and the danger of its visionary prospects. Wordsworth in this essay appears as the truer poet of the two, manifesting a complex of unarranged convictions and perceptions and becoming most himself when reading his own poetry, producing the effect of 'wholeness', of the vaster scale of poetic possibility. Wordsworth delivers in 'prophetic tones' – and invokes 'strange matters'.

Even John Chester figures in Hazlitt's education, albeit in a rather contradictory manner to the visionary poets. On their walk Chester alone of the three can identify by its country name a 'curious sea-weed' (Howe, XVII, p. 121). Earlier Hazlitt observed that 'Coleridge somehow always contrived to prefer the *unknown* to the *known*' (Howe, XVII, p. 113), surely a poet's prerogative. Chester's worshipful mind can nonetheless do what the philosopher/poet's cannot: make sense out of what lies before his feet, a capacity most useful to the cultural critic. I suspect that John Chester's absence from most discussions of this essay may result from Hazlitt's insistence in observing Chester's awareness of the concrete.

Given Hazlitt's absorption in the energies of prose as a response, over two decades, to the culture of poets, it isn't at all surprising to find the essay ending with reference not to his acquaintance with poets but to his friendship with the other great prose writer of the period, Charles Lamb. Worship of the 'aristocratic' and somewhat tyrannical, indeed monumental, figure of the Romantic lyricist yields to friendship with the witty and imaginative essayist. 1798 is a particularly 'hot' or dense year of literary and cultural significance. But what of 1823? The present in this essay has almost no specificity, other than its being an atmosphere emanating from the essayist's voice. The references to Lamb and Wordsworth at the very end of the essay suggest that for the cultural critic past and present (in this case the poem and the essay) necessarily mingle and define each other: the dense past of 1798 becomes an alloy of itself and 1823 and all intervening years:

> It was at Godwin's that I met [Lamb] with Holcroft and Coleridge, where they were disputing fiercely which was the best – *Man as he was, or man as he is to be*. 'Give me', says Lamb, 'man as he is *not* to be'. This saying was the beginning of a friendship between us, which I believe still continues. – Enough of this for the present.
>
> 'But there is matter for another rhyme,
> And I to this may add a second tale'.
>
> (Howe, XVII, p. 122)

History, part fact and part the mobile consciousness of the essayist, turns from ecstatic poetry and philosophy located in 'retirement' to the urbane world of table talk: the domestic commune is released into the politically progressive city conversation in Godwin's apartment. The words in this last passage propose a present and future beginning far in the past when the two future masters of the essay met, not too far from the time when Hazlitt became acquainted with the poet of the lines quoted from Hart-Leap Well': 'still continues', 'another rhyme', 'add a second tale'. Not locked into the monumental past, the essayist, full of usable poetry, moves forward with friendship and vital commentary and conversation 'for the present', in the magazines, where to Hazlitt the most vital encounter with culture was residing.

1823 – really 1822 to 1825 – was for Hazlitt a time of generic as well as emotional turbulence. While his politics (he would note approvingly) remained consistent, his personal life was wracked by the death of his father and, roughly concurrent with the writing of this essay, the end of the Sara Walker affair. It's extraordinary to find during this period an essay of such expansive and meditative buoyancy. Generically it occurs roughly at the same time as his *mischgedicht* of passion-love, *Liber Amoris*; his collection of aphorisms (the form of quick transcendence) *Characteristics*; his long conduct letter to his son; his brilliant essays on Picture-Galleries in England, his long-contemplated and and controversial anthology of *Select British Poets*; and the contemporary essayistic portraits of *The Spirit of the Age*. A further study of 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' ought to recognize with the fullness they merit the rich and turbulent affiliations of these works. We can think of this essay as prefiguring *The Spirit of the Age* in the way that James Chandler (in *England in 1819*) means: a rethinking of the notion of the dominant historical figure and his rejection and replacement with that of a set or constellation of 'cases' or representative figures who make sense of the present in relationship to one another. 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' tries less to reduce the meaning of Coleridge and Wordsworth as dominant presences to worship than to redistribute

their powers among other figures, histories, and events. It more and more appears as a small epic, labouring strenuously to discover, through many associations, domains, formal risks, and his dogged adversarial position, and through his own and others' recent histories, the ongoing spirit of his age. ℜ

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NOTES

1. Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), hereafter Paulin. For 'dumb, inarticulate' Hazlitt, see 'My First Acquaintance with Poets,' *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P.P. Howe (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1930–4), XVII, p. 107, hereafter 'Howe'. For a recent view that 'My First Acquaintance' and other contemporary biographical works by Hazlitt exhibit pessimism about the state of culture and the decline of genius in the 1820s, see Annette Wheeler Cafarelli's interesting chapter on Hazlitt in her *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).
2. See Paulin, *passim*.
3. Leigh Hunt, *Foliage; or Poems Original and Translated* (London: C. & J. Ollier, 1818), p. xxxix.
4. Chris Jones, 'Hazlitt's Termagant Wife: Gendering the French Revolution', in *Prose Studies*, 18, 6 (April 1995), pp. 59–73.
5. Stephen Fredman in a valuable study, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (Cambridge University Press, 1983; 2nd. edn. 1990), observes the urgency felt by certain American poets (e.g. Stein, Williams, Ashbery, Hijinian, and Howe) to discover in prose a more visionary potential than in poetry itself.
6. Charles Lamb, from 'Letter to Robert Southey, Esq.', in the *London Magazine* (October, 1823). See Stevenson's essay 'Walking Tours' and Virginia Woolf's 'William Hazlitt'.
7. Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), and Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 52.
8. James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
9. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 66. The dynamic recalls Keats's beautiful society-as-spiderweb world described in his letter to Reynolds (19 February 1818).
10. See, for example, Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 16.
11. 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 32.
12. David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).