



Hazlitt as a legendary criticizer

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Abstract

Hazlitt is an important descriptive critic of the Romantic Age. His criticism is just and judicious; his aim is nothing beyond analysis and judgment. Hazlitt defined his task as “to feel what is good, and give reasons for the faith that is in me”. So far as the volume of critical writing is concerned, he is undoubtedly the most eminent critic of his time. What distinguishes him from his contemporary critics is the fact that in spite of enunciating and explaining important aspects of the principles and theories, his main concern was to become a practical critic and to offer his judgment on the writers and dramatists he had read. Hazlitt was a Romantic but free from the vagaries and extravagances of Romanticism.

Keywords: hazlitt, romantic age, judgment

Introduction

Hazlitt was a romantic essayist and critic to the core, he did not subscribe to the view that the subjective treatment of feelings or passions is alone what constitutes great art. It is true that Hazlitt laid the foundations of an impressionistic type of criticism but like Goethe and Coleridge, and like Keats also who came after him, he emphasized the superiority of the objective treatment to a mere subjective outburst of sentiments and feelings. That is why many a time Hazlitt considers the poet to be the all-sympathizer, devoid of any individuality and absorbed in his objects.

A Distinguished Practical Critic

Hazlitt as a critic appears chiefly in the following works:

- (1) *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817)
- (2) *English Poets* (1818)
- (3) *English Comic Writers* (1819)
- (4) *The Dramatic Literature of the Reign of Elizabeth* (1820)
- (5) *The Spirit of the Age* (1825)

A few of his essays also contain much literary and dramatic criticism, both theoretical and practical. But it was mainly as a *practical* critic that Hazlitt distinguished himself. His Shakespearean criticism is rich in incisive vigor and freshness of imagination. His comments on the English poets and the English comic writers are caustic in wit yet have also the salt of true critical wisdom. His criticism reveals a fine catholicity of taste. It must be recognized that he has made memorable additions to English critical literature. Captious at times, his criticism nonetheless exhibits an astonishing vitality of thought, and a pungency of expression, unsurpassed even among the great names of English criticism. With a large measure of Dryden's freshness and acumen he combines the romantic fervor of Coleridge. As a critic of Elizabethan literature he is more reliable than Lamb, though less eclectic. His book, *The Spirit of Age*, is a brilliant work of literary

portraiture.

A Lineal Successor, in Literary Criticism, of Coleridge

Hazlitt was Coleridge's lineal successor in literary criticism because it was Coleridge who had first made use of the faculty of imagination for critical purposes. Coleridge had, indeed, made criticism a creative art, like poetry; and Hazlitt did very much the same thing. He was certainly less penetrating in critical insight, but he surpassed Coleridge in lucidity and incisive vigour. His catholicity of taste is really the chief thing about him as a critic. He takes equal delight in the vigorous, racy vernacular of Cobbett and in the splendid rhetoric of Burke. He can appraise, with fine discrimination, the wit of Congreve, without losing any appreciation for the subtler aroma of Cervantes's humor. He can admire the genius of Wordsworth without becoming blind to the merits of Alexander Pope. Of course, his waywardness of disposition shows itself in some of his estimates, and he is therefore not always a sure guide in matters of purely literary taste as, for instance, in his treatment of some of the Jacobean dramatists. Personal prejudices do sometimes confound his judgment when dealing with his contemporaries. But, on the whole, there is no finer critic of all that pertains to life and manners. He may miss the merits of a writer, but he never misses the merits of a man; and the inspiring enthusiasm, with which he writes, imparts an incomparable gusto to his writings.

George Sampson's comments on Hazlitt's Literary Criticism

Commenting on Hazlitt's Shakespearean criticism, George Sampson writes: “*Characters of Shakespeare's plays* are a book which possibly its own generation found more usefully enlightening than we do. He lived in a fortunate hour. He beheld the sunset splendor of Siddons and hailed the meridian brightness of Edmund Kean. Sampson further tells us that both Lamb and Hazlitt were on the side of the ancients. They are both safer guides to us when they write of the poets and

dramatists of older and more flavored times than on the rare occasions when they touch on the newer literature. Hazlitt does make some favorable references to Byron but, on the whole, his attitude towards his contemporaries is one of suspicion. Neither Lamb nor Hazlitt had any genuine liking for Keats; and their misunderstanding of Shelley was a glaring feature of their critical attitudes. On the other hand, Hazlitt's administration for Sir Walter Scott's novels was tremendous. His acquaintance with foreign literature, apart from a few works of Rousseau, was very small; and his references to the current music of his day indicate that the art were quite beyond his comprehension.

George Watson's Derogatory Assessment of Hazlitt's Literary Criticism

To tell the truth, Hazlitt as a literary critic has been disparaged as much as he has been admired. George Watson gives us what may be regarded as an almost derogatory assessment of Hazlitt as a literary critic. Watson admits that Hazlitt's contribution to English literary criticism cannot be regarded as minor. Hazlitt, says Watson, is the first English writer to make a major career out of descriptive criticism. Hazlitt had failed as a professional painter and then as a philosopher. He had also failed to follow his father into the ecclesiastical profession. But as a literary critic, he did achieve notable success. His concern in this sphere was uniquely with the English poets of the past and the present. His criticism is purely descriptive, with no motive beyond analysis and judgment; or rather judgment and then analysis, because he understood perfectly that an evaluation was rather the starting point of criticism than its aim and object. A reader must *begin with an opinion*; it is nonsense to talk of *arriving at an opinion*. Hazlitt defined his task in the following words: "to feel what is good, and give reasons for the faith that is in me". This was a sound principle. Hazlitt had the capacity to do both the things; to form an opinion and then to analyze the reasons for that opinion. He had a wide and delicate sensitivity; and he seemed to possess the gift of analysis. And yet Watson comes to a disparaging conclusion about Hazlitt, saying: "Hazlitt's criticism has enjoyed a sizeable reputation for more than century, but it is doubtful if it will bear examination on either count.

Cazamian's View of Hazlitt as a legendary critic

Each of his portraits is a divination; with one quick movement he places himself at the centre of a personality, and re-creates it through a sympathy which closely grasps the contours of its characteristics. This plastic comprehension of a human being partakes somewhat of dramatic invention, and indeed resembles it. It is guided by the whole substance of a work, of a moral and physical individuality, of a temperament; and the keen impressionism of Hazlitt, nurtured by the study of moods, is rather similar to the method of Sainte-Beuve; less supple and minute, less enveloping, it has often more of an untamed vigour. So frequently is his attention focused upon the hidden side of souls that one feels it is governed by a constant intuition of the subconscious; and his methods of investigation, with the emphasis they lay upon the semi-deceptions of the mind by itself, and the involuntary revenge of sinful nature, examples of which are to be seen at all

moments in literature and society, are practically equivalent to the psychoanalytical studies of the present day".

"Hazlitt is not infallible. He errs through his preconceptions, or through some mental incompatibility; he is not open to all kinds of mental characteristics with the same broad-mindedness, nor is he free from prejudice. Among all writers he has not done justice to Shelley. But, if his work is judged as a whole, he has a breadth of outlook, a catholicity of taste, which is remarkable. He has spoken in a better way than any one before him of many a Shakespearean figure; he is familiar with the Renaissance, and is in close sympathy with it; while, on the other hand, he loves and understands the comedy-writers of the Restoration; and further, he allots to Pope and his school a place among the active influences of the past. Indeed, he is not bound to any set programme or to a party. His interpretations of the writers of his time are striking in their finesse and felicity of perception. He it was who traced the first roads, marked out the vantage points, and gauged the heights on the virgin soil of Romanticism; and almost in every case his literary judgment remains that of today; he anticipates the future, and sees with the eyes of posterity".

Another Comment on Hazlitt's Literary Criticism

He often introduces us to authors and to books by telling us the story of his own acquaintance with them, recalling with infinite verve the sensations which they gave them. Of *Tom Jones* he tells us: 'It came down in numbers once a fortnight, in Cooke's pocket edition, embellished with cuts. I had hitherto read only in school-books, but this had a different relish with it-sweet in the mouth, though not bitter in the belly. My heart had palpitated at the thoughts of a boarding-school ball, or a gala-day at midsummer or Christmas; but the world I had found out in Cooke's edition of the *British Novelists* was to me a dance through life, a perceptual gala-day'. There is something spontaneous and contagious about such criticism; the reader is led on by the mood of the writer. It is in this impressionistic attitude toward literature that Hazlitt anticipates critics of a later generation, especially Stevenson".

Conclusion

Hazlitt's language has at times certain splendor but splendor flyblown and empty of significance like school boy in a hurry with his homework anxious to impress a master with a taste for rhetoric. Conversely, he praised Dryden's prose as a model of 'simplicity, strength and perspicuity', describe its occasional looseness and 'caprice' he liked Leigh Hunt's for its tone of lively sensible conversation. But if he be less savory, he is also more solid, and he gives you phrases, conclusions, splendors of insight and expression, high-piled and golden essays in appreciation". We should not go to Hazlitt for knowledge but for pleasure and delight of criticism.

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