LECTURES ON THE ENGLISH POETS. THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE: OR CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS

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INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

It is part of the secret of the vitality of Hazlitt's writing that he never remained long enough at one type of work to become stale. His mind had rich resources. From the end of 1813, when his article on *The Beggar's Opera* brought him into sudden favour, to 1817, he had earned most of his livelihood as a journalist. Early in 1818 he gave up most of this work for lecturing on English literature. Between January 1818 and Christmas 1819 he delivered at the Surrey Institution, near Blackfriars Bridge, three courses of lectures, for which it has been claimed that 'there had been no such body of vital comment since the prefaces of Dryden.'

When Hazlitt began to lecture on English literature he was just rising into fame. He was known as a literary critic of singular penetration, as a dramatic critic whose word could make or mar the fortunes of an actor, as a redoubtable critic of art, as a formidable political commentator and as an Essayist of great originality. It is therefore not surprising that those who were drawn to his lectures should be as varied as the themes on which he had touched. On the evening of Tuesday, 13th January 1818, he faced an audience composed partly of Dissenters, who approved of his advocacy of religious freedom but had no sympathy with his love of the theatre; of pious Quakers, who supported his pleas for social justice but had no sympathy with his passionate concern for the arts; of 'well-dressed' and 'respectable' citizens bent on improving their minds; of some of the painters, poets and writers of the day; of a few enemies who came to jeer; a few half-friends who came to carp; and a few genuine friends who thought his conversation matchless, and who looked forward to hearing it range over English poetry. John Keats, arriving so late for the second lecture that he met the lecturer coming out, was 'pounced upon'—he said—by a group of the friends surrounding Hazlitt, including John Hunt and his son Henry, John Landseer and his sons Thomas and Edwin, young William Bewick, who thought Hazlitt 'the Shakespeare prose writer' of the age, Charles Wells, 'aye and more.'

The most experienced lecturer in the world might have found some difficulty in welding such a mixed audience into a unity, but Hazlitt succeeded in commanding its attention as if it were one man. Here the experience of his journalistic years helped him. He had learned that the uninterrupted movement of thought wearied the reader, and so he punctuated it with lighter matter, 'like the blue and red flowers in corn, pleasing to those who care only for amusement.' He had learned also the art of attracting by repelling, or of stimulating attention by flicking at the prejudices of his readers. He made such use of this stimulus in his first course of lectures that he sometimes provoked angry scenes. He had a regular battle of wills with the pious among his audience when he read aloud almost thirty of Gay's ribald lines on Blackmore. When he dismissed Hannah More with the remark: 'She has written a great deal that I have never read,' one of her admirers called out indignantly: 'More pity for you!' Even Crabb Robinson, much to his own astonishment, was betrayed into hissing when Wordsworth came under the lecturer's fire. All these things are witnesses to Hazlitt's power of holding his audience. Crabb Robinson, when he had attended Coleridge's lectures, had sometimes found himself inclined to doze. No one dozed at Hazlitt's. And even the pious whom at times he antagonized had their turn of being delighted. When he read from Cowper's *Truth* the lines comparing Voltaire to his disadvantage with the poor cottager who

> Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true—

they burst into what Talfourd calls 'a joyous shout' of approval.

Hazlitt's lectures were above all stimulating. When read, they have no less power to stimulate than when they filled the hall of the Surrey Institution—as one hostile critic complained—with 'the uproar of a one-shilling gallery.' Their great merit was what has been finely called their 'catholic enjoying spirit.' Literature had been a lifelong passion with Hazlitt. His aim in lecturing was to share with others what he had enjoyed himself. Although at his first lecture he was 'pallid as death'—as William Bewick has recorded—and suffering from extreme nervousness, once he launched into his subject it was a delight to him to give expression to 'that uneasy, exquisite sense of beauty or power' which certain poets awakened in him. It was his consciousness of this delight which made

him claim: 'If I did not write these Lectures to please myself, I . . . am sure I should please nobody else.' He knew exactly what he wanted to do. 'I conceive,' he wrote, 'that what I have undertaken to do . . . is merely to read over a set of works with the audience, as I would do with a friend, to point out a favourite passage, to explain an objection; or if a remark or a theory occurs, to state it in illustration of the subject, but neither to tire him nor puzzle myself with pedantic rules and pragmatical formulas of criticism that can do no good to any body.' His lectures fulfil to the letter this conception of his task. He not only read long extracts from the Poets to his audience, but two entire narrative poems, *Tam o' Shanter* and *Hartleap Well*; in pointing out his favourite passages he brought to light excellences that had been obscured, like the intensity of certain passages in Chaucer and their 'deep pathos'; he brushed aside impatiently the trivialities of critical discussion that obscured rather than illumined the quality of the poetry, and 'the mechanical and instrumental part' of criticism; where he advanced a theory in illustration of his subject he gave examples of its operation some of which show extraordinary delicacy of insight and sensibility, as when he supported his claim that poetry shows up the mirror to Nature, 'seen through the fine medium of passion,' by reference to certain lines of the soliloquy of Iachimo watching the sleeping Imogen:

> The flame o' th' taper
> Bows towards her, and would under-peep her lids
> To see the enclosed lights.

His audience kept steadily increasing throughout his lectures. In the last, delivered on the first Tuesday of March, the hall was 'crowded to the very ceiling.' In this, 'On the Living Poets,' as in his first great opening lecture, 'On Poetry in General,' he fairly swept his listeners 'within the estuary of the passions.' Crabb Robinson censured the descant on Coleridge with which it concluded as 'outrageous eulogy.' But by this time Coleridge was amongst those whom Hazlitt himself saw only 'through the fine medium of passion.'

Early in 1824 Hazlitt began to contribute to *The New Monthly Magazine* studies of his famed contemporaries, under the general title *The Spirit of the Age*. In January his 'Jeremy Bentham' appeared; in February his very amusing, grim-grotesque 'Edward Irving'; in March his 'Horne Tooke,'

which Charles Lamb pronounced 'a matchless portrait'; in April his 'Sir Walter Scott'; in July his 'Lord Eldon.' By this time, as the impulse underlying his work gradually became clear to him, his original plan of contributing a number of separate sketches to *The New Monthly Magazine* became somewhat modified. He conceived the idea of supplementing these articles with a series of studies of his contemporaries, linked together by the point of view from which each was considered, the extent of their response to or reaction against what he considered to be the Spirit of the Age, the hope for the betterment of the lot of mankind which had come in with 'the grand whirling movements of the French Revolution.' In this way, what had begun as occasional writing took on the character of work that was organic, and the book developed from this occasional writing, *The Spirit of the Age*, became a piece of history written not from the closet but by one who had shared to the full in the repercussions of the movements of feeling and the reactions against them which were recorded. The book is amazing in the immediacy of its impact. It takes the reader right into the heart of these stormy times. To read it is to realize, despite the impression Hazlitt sometimes gives that he had dreamed or loitered his life away, how deeply he had shared in the hopes, and the despairs too, of the times, and how full and varied his life had been. 'Much had he seen and known!'

Shortly after its publication Hazlitt wrote to Landor: 'You can hardly suppose the depression of body and mind under which I wrote some of these articles.' No one, enjoying the wit and sparkle of the book, could guess at this depression. *The Spirit of the Age* is the most brilliant and colourful of all Hazlitt's books. It is the effect of the fusion of all his gifts, in their maturity. The Metaphysician, the Critic, the political Commentator and the Essayist—all had their share in it. All Hazlitt had succeeded in doing as a writer had enriched it. Perhaps I should add that all he had failed to do as a painter enriched it even more. In his youth Hazlitt had tried to earn his living as a portrait-painter, and had given up the attempt because he had lost hope of ever becoming a great painter. Surely, in *The Spirit of the Age* the portrait-painter *manqué* did something which might have consoled him for his failure to express himself on canvas, and which might have assured him that he too had his place among the true historical painters. Using words instead of colours, he succeeded through their

medium in doing what he had failed to do in oils. Bentham's lack-lustre eye, the quivering lip of Charles Fox, Moore's *mignon* figure, the falcon glance of Southey, the 'comfortable double-chin' of Benjamin Franklin, Lamb's 'fine Titian head, full of dumb eloquence'—all these have been pictured. Even the language in which the ideas are released is a series of word-pictures. For none of his writings could Hazlitt claim more justly that they were 'the thoughts of a metaphysician expressed by a painter.'

Brilliant though the portraiture is in this book, it is never metallic. *The Spirit of the Age* is the work of one who had experienced much, but it is also the work of one in whom experience had brought about some softening of feeling towards his fellow mortals, as compared with the inveteracy or recklessness of earlier years. This is specially noticeable in his study of Southey, in the exquisite criticism of Campbell's poetry, and in the tone of what Hazlitt wrote of Wordsworth. He went out of his way to apologize for the attack on Wordsworth's limitations, in his lecture 'On the Living Poets,' confessing that the substance of it had been 'mere epigrams and *jeux-d'esprit*.' At the same time he claimed that these, if 'far from truth,' were also 'free from malice.' This claim, that they were 'free from malice,' may be made even for the harsher portraits, of Malthus, Eldon and Gifford, because all that Hazlitt said was referable to principle. The harshest study of all, that of Gifford, was the effect not of malice, but of the contempt felt by one who always took 'high ground' in his literary criticism for the subserviency which lent itself to the degradation of literary criticism into a political tool. Measureless contempt is not malice.

What has done more than any of these biting character-sketches to expose Hazlitt to the charge of writing with malice, even with wanton malice, is the attack appended to his delightful estimate of Sir Walter Scott as a writer. Various critics have professed themselves unable to understand the tone of this attack or to point to any provocation which could justify it. To Hazlitt's contemporaries the provocation was all too clear. The political weapon he was known to despise above all others was slander, which he judged most contemptible when it took the form of anonymous calumny. Like many another, he had received a great shock when it had become known, in the autumn of 1821, that Scott was among those who financed a disreputable sheet called *The Beacon*, which directed 'an

organized system of blackguardism' against the opponents of Toryism. Scott was at the time challenged by one whose reputation 'had been struck at' by 'a secret and envenomed blow,' but friends had bestirred themselves to safeguard him from the chances of a duel. *The Beacon* had been discontinued, but had been succeeded by a similar sheet called *The Sentinel*, said to be the work of the same 'junto of secret libellers.' James Stuart of Dunearn, the leader of the Opposition in Fife, on discovering that Sir Alexander Boswell had been his most persistent calumniator in its pages, had challenged Boswell, and killed him in a duel, in March 1822. When Hazlitt had been in Edinburgh in June 1822, the trial for murder of Stuart—whose acquittal owed much to Jeffrey's eloquence—had been the all-engrossing subject of conversation.

Until the exposure of Scott's association with *The Beacon* Hazlitt's criticism of him had been unflawed in its admiration. After this exposure he was careful to dissociate his admiration of the author of the novels from his scorn of the politician who had any connection with *The Beacon* or *The Sentinel*. From this time henceforth his attacks on Scott's political character were constant.

It is only just to add that his praise of the beloved writer was equally constant; and his compliments were 'divine.' In the year following the publication of *The Spirit of the Age* he described the author of *Waverley* as one who had 'five hundred hearts beating in his bosom.' This is perhaps the finest tribute ever paid to the genius of Scott. Indeed, the noblest praise in that age of bitter political faction was given to Scott, as to Burke, by the man who was implacable in his political hostility to both.

CATHERINE MACDONALD MACLEAN.

1959.