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**ABSTRACT OF A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY, 1990.**

"The Political Ideas of William Hazlitt, 1778-1830"

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The purpose of the thesis was to examine William Hazlitt's political thought from the viewpoint of the history of ideas. Such a study should lead to a greater appreciation of his value as a political critic. The received notion that he was a radical provided a starting-point for investigation.

Hazlitt's theoretical work in philosophy and politics was found to be of interest, but his views on contemporary personalities and events are more revealing. He opposed hereditary despotism, but not all forms of monarchy, and he was ambivalent about the possibility and propriety of constitutional reform. His criticism of "progressive" thinkers such as Robert Owen was more destructive than his critique of the conservative Edmund Burke, despite the superficial hostility of the latter work. Emotionally, he sided with Whigs and reformers, but this was a half-hearted commitment, and his analysis reveals some sympathy for their opponents.

In order to properly judge Hazlitt's political position, a framework was devised by which ideological evidence may be appraised with maximum objectivity. Ideologies, it is argued, are ethical understandings of the world which arise from varying views of human nature. It was found that Hazlitt's view that human nature is a mixture of passion and reason was more pessimistic than that held by most contemporary liberals. His position is best described as conservative liberalism. It was not radicalism, which implies a rigid notion of the best form of human society.

This interpretation helps to explain some of Hazlitt's views which have puzzled previous commentators, such as his admiration for Napoleon. His ambivalence permitted him to respond to characters and events with unusual flexibility when his volatile temper allowed, although it made systematic work unlikely. He is a perceptive and often objective critic who deserves greater recognition outside literary studies.

**THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF WILLIAM HAZLITT (1778-1830)**

*"Let us think what we please of what we really find,  
but prejudge nothing" William Hazlitt, Notes of a  
Journey Through France and Italy.*

M.A GARNETT

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS

DURHAM UNIVERSITY, 1990.

A SUBMISSION FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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24 JUL 1991

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*During the three years of work on a thesis, obligations mount up to the point that the list of acknowledgements threatens to occupy the same space as a major chapter. I am conscious that the following paragraph does not include all the names that it should, and that it is impossible to give proper recognition to many of those are mentioned.*

*I should like to take this opportunity to thank the British Academy for their generous financial support, and the staff of the Department of Politics, Durham University, for their helpful and friendly conduct. Of the many individuals who have given up time to assist me, I must record my special gratitude to: Dr. Jeremy Black, Professor Marilyn Butler, Professor John Cannon, Dr. Geoffrey Carnall, Dr. Jonathan Clark, Dr. John Derry, Dr. David Jasper, Dr. Stanley Jones, Dr. David Manning, Professor Michael Oakeshott, Dr. Frank O'Gorman, The Rt. Hon. Mr. J. E Powell, Mr. Bill Ruddick, Professor J.R Watson and Dr. John Whale. I am very grateful to the members of the Politics Department Seminar Group (particularly to Professor and Mrs. Alan Milne for their hospitality to this group), and to the Shakespearians for a never-failing flow of good humour and eighty-shillings. There are some debts which must be acknowledged separately in order to mark my deepest gratitude; to Professor Harry Dickinson, whose patience rivals his knowledge; to the Rt. Hon. Sir Ian Gilmour (Bart.), for his generosity and stimulating talk; to Dr. David Sweet, whose support has never flagged over many years; to Miss Sally Cottam, who has held up remarkably well; to Nick and Susan Lamb, for their charming company and doubtful musical taste; to my supervisor, Mr. Henry Tudor, for his quiet wit and wisdom; and, finally, to my parents, Betty and Allan Garnett, who have supported me through everything and to whom, with all my love, this thesis is gratefully dedicated.*



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## INTRODUCTION

While William Hazlitt seems to have secured a chapter in most literary histories, he is a footnote at best in the history of political ideas. His views are regularly quoted in connection with such contemporaries as Burke, Godwin and Bentham, yet his own political thinking has not been made the subject of any full-length study. There are several good reasons why this should now be rectified. Firstly, Hazlitt has interested so many generations that he must be recognised as "essentially a great man - a master-mind",<sup>1</sup> worth tracing through all his diverse fields of interest. As Crane Brinton has noted, politics coloured most of his work, and Hazlitt felt confident that he had much of value to say on men and affairs.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, a proper study of Hazlitt's work may shed stronger light on his contemporaries. If we know the stand-point from which he discussed the Utilitarians, the Owenites and the anti-Jacobins, we may quote his words with renewed confidence - or with greater caution. Thirdly, it will be possible to examine Hazlitt's credentials as a chronicler of events. Hitherto it would be fair to say that historians have not recognised him as a trustworthy authority, except when they have required telling quotations about certain of his contemporaries. This seems to be inconsistent; surely, if unacceptable bias afflicts his interpretation of events, then his views on personalities should be equally inadmissible, since Hazlitt personalised politics to an unusual degree. It is certain that without a thorough investigation of his political position, judgements concerning his reliability would be premature. Once Hazlitt's bias has been identified, his readers will be able to allow for it. It is the primary purpose of this thesis, therefore, to establish Hazlitt's position in the ideological context of his time.

It would be wrong to deny that much of value has already been

written on Hazlitt's politics. In any work on his ideas, political concerns would be impossible to disentangle from the chosen material. Recent accounts, however, have concentrated heavily upon his contribution to literary criticism. It is understandable that these studies have not been directed towards a close scrutiny of his political ideas. But this is work that must be done, not only to establish Hazlitt's credentials in the field, but also because an element of caricature tends to creep in when political positions are accepted without criticism. Samuel Johnson, for example, was clearly a Tory in his political allegiance, and by most critics in the past this was interpreted to entail a position on many issues which Johnson himself would have rejected. A similar fate, I would argue, has befallen Hazlitt; he has been labelled a radical, and critics have imposed upon him a set of standards - some relevant to the historical context, but others wildly anachronistic - by which his consistency and value has been measured. In the case of Johnson, critics have at least begun to re-examine the validity of the traditional view.<sup>4</sup> It is time that the same compliment was granted to Hazlitt.

There are many pitfalls awaiting all students in the history of ideas, and in the case of Hazlitt some of these dangers are unusually acute. For instance, there is a great danger of being kidnapped by one's subject; since Hazlitt was a powerful political writer his views are peculiarly seductive. It is tempting to find as few faults as possible with his message, and even to join with him in battles which are long over. When we do find our hero in error, we are always ready with a plausible excuse. If he sounds "modern" we hail his achievement, but if his views are out-dated we argue that he should not be measured by the standards of the present. I hope that I have succeeded in confining my judgements to a comparison with the views of Hazlitt's contemporaries, only bringing in more recent interpretations when

these provide insights which Hazlitt seems not to have entertained through bias. This is a delicate exercise, but at least appears to be more promising than a slavish acceptance of the "Hazlitt line" in everything.

In composing a study in the history of ideas, one must always be conscious of shifting trends in the historical perspective of the period under review. Since Hazlitt's period is at present the subject of controversy, the problem of identifying an acceptable interpretation is particularly acute. The Marxist viewpoint found in Mr. E.P Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class, which has exerted great influence (not least among literary students), has been both assaulted directly and subtly undermined in recent  
5 years. It is proper to state at the outset that although Thompson's work is admirable in terms of the painstaking research involved, the overall interpretation is so coloured by ideological purpose that careful qualification is essential. Recently, Dr. Jonathan Clark has expressed a contrasting ideological interpretation, and his dogmatic presentation has devalued what is otherwise a timely reminder of the central role played by religion in the period.  
6 There is, however, a more balanced account of the  
7 British "Counter-Revolution" notably in the work of Mr. Clive Emsley. This argument rejects the notion of a Pittite "Terror", pointing out that although the legislation directed against domestic radicals was severe, it was not stringently applied. Furthermore, although political activism amongst the lower orders was probably increasing, there is no reason to pronounce this time as the nativity of a class-conscious workers movement. Most of the radicals and reformers were well-to-do, and the masses demonstrated against men like Paine more than in their support. It should not be argued that the friends of the "people" were mistaken in their fears of repression, or their hopes for the people. But such an interpretation implies that their assessment of the situation amounted to an ideological reading of events no less than the response of the government. It cannot be asserted with



confidence that this interpretation will never be supplanted, but I have adopted it because it does not seem to be designed in order to uphold a particular ideological position.

A rather different problem for the historian of ideas is whether to take a chronological or a thematic approach. In taking the latter option for the present work it might be suggested that I have pre-judged the important issue of Hazlitt's consistency. Although this question will be dealt with in the conclusion, it should be noted here that the thematic approach does allow for the discussion of inconsistency. Few writers are free from changes of mind and self-contradiction. Journalists like Hazlitt, responding to events as they occur, are particularly prone to these. Where Hazlitt seems to have self-consciously shifted his ground, or has done so without realizing the implications, it will be noted if it is judged to be important. A thematic approach may impose greater clarity on a thinker than exists in his own pages. A degree of this is unavoidable, but I do not believe that there is a standard of consistency below which an author is of no value, and so the creation of an artificial unity in Hazlitt's thought will be kept to a minimum.

Another difficulty which confronts a study of this kind is the question of influence. The problem is two-fold: which thinkers can be shown to have influenced Hazlitt, and upon whom did his own influence make itself apparent? There are many cases in which a thinker's ideas are obviously inherited from a predecessor, and often the writer in question will acknowledge his debt. We may find that later writers ascribe their own views to our subject, or that the echoes of his work are too evident for there to be a mistake about the origin of the idea. But it is more common for these relationships to be a matter of guesswork. In these cases there will be no direct evidence that the possible source was ever consulted, or even heard of.

It is rare for two thinkers to independently arrive at the same conclusions by identical routes, but we must accept that this is possible; it is even more likely that thinkers may reach similar conclusions in similar ways. In these cases, speculation about intellectual relationships may be an agreeable indulgence, but it can lead to an exaggerated impression of our subject's influence, or a conclusion that his capacity for independent thought was not as great as was truly the case. With these dangers in mind, I have kept the discussion of intellectual debt to a minimum. The problem of the subsequent influence of his political work seems easy to solve; there is little evidence that his work made a significant impact on any important writing after his death. We are left with the task of providing possible explanations of this fact, which will be attempted in the conclusion.

Hazlitt wrote on so many issues that I have been forced into selectivity. The themes examined here will be those which best illustrate the general tendency of his thought. Firstly, I have examined the theoretical foundations, his moral philosophy and his one essay in abstract political theory. Hazlitt claimed to have resisted Burke's influence by means of a "metaphysical clue"; it will be seen whether this claim is sustained through a close examination of this aspect of his work. After a methodological discussion of ideology which provides a framework for classifying Hazlitt's ideas, I will proceed to examine his work on the issues and personalities of the period. The issues selected here are the monarchy, political parties, patriotism and religion; the personalities are "Friends" (Godwin, Owen and Mackintosh) and "Foes" (Burke, the Lake Poets and Malthus). A whole chapter will be devoted to Hazlitt's writing on Napoleon Bonaparte, and its ideological implications. Finally I shall examine Hazlitt's view of human nature in a discussion of the view that he was a misanthrope.

Hazlitt is undoubtedly one of our great prose-stylists, but despite great efforts on his behalf since the last Wār, he still lacks proper recognition as a thinker and, perhaps more vitally, as a great personality. Obviously this conviction was the primary motivation for this study, and it is hoped that it presents an interpretation of his politics which may enhance his importance to historians as a contribution to this process. However, it is likely that no brief study can do full justice to his work. Hazlitt was thinking of Burke when he said that the only true specimen of his work is "all that he wrote", but this applies equally to himself.

8

#### NOTES

1. Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism, ed. L.H & C.W Houtchens, New York, 1956; p.277.
2. C. Brinton, The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists, Oxford, 1926; p.112.
3. Recent studies include: W. Albrecht, Hazlitt and the Creative Imagination, University of Kansas Press, 1965; R. Park, Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age, Oxford, 1971; J. Kinnaird, William Hazlitt: Critic of Power, New York, 1978; and D. Bromwich, Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic, Oxford, 1985 reprint.
4. D.J Greene, The Politics of Samuel Johnson, Yale University Press, 1960. There is, unfortunately, a certain amount of anachronism in Greene's attempt to "rehabilitate" Johnson; e.g p.53: "a large element of Johnson's Toryism is what some people today would regard as admirably modern liberalism." Historians of ideas should not be unduly concerned with what people think today, and should certainly not assume that their audience will all find modern liberalism admirable.
5. E.P Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican reprint, 1975. A recent example of an excellent piece of research dominated by a "Thompsonian" world-picture is N. Roe, Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years, Oxford, 1988.
6. J.C.D Clark, English Society, 1688-1832, Cambridge, 1985. Dr. Clark is a staunch admirer of the late Herbert Butterfield. It is surprising that he did not heed the words of his mentor in The Whig Interpretation of History Penguin ed., 1973, p.15; "it cannot be said that all faults of bias may be balanced by work that is deliberately written with the opposite bias; for we do not gain true history by merely adding the speech for the prosecution to the speech for the defence." Perhaps Dr. Clark has a clearer memory of Butterfield's advice that to write eye-catching history one must be "content with half the truth" (p.43, ibid.).
7. C. Emsley, British Society and the French Wars, Macmillan, 1979. See also, amongst numerous excellent articles by this writer, his "Repression,

"terror" and the rule of law in England during the decade of the French Revolution", in the English Historical Review (1985), pp. 801-22.

8. W. Hazlitt, Works, Centenary Edition, ed. P. P Howe, London, 1934 (cited as Works hereafter); Vol.VII, p.301.

*PART ONE: THEORETICAL*

## HAZLITT'S PHILOSOPHY

1

According to William Hazlitt's original tombstone, "He was

The first (unanswered) Metaphysician of the age  
A despiser of the merely Rich and Great:  
A lover of the People, Poor or Oppressed:  
A hater of the Pride and Power of the Few,  
as opposed to the happiness of the Many;  
A man of true moral courage,  
Who sacrificed Profit and present Fame  
    To Principle...  
...He lived and died  
The unconquered Champion  
    of  
Truth, Liberty and Humanity,  
"Dubitantes opera legite".

Yet although Hazlitt's death was not entirely ignored by his contemporaries, he should not be listed among the most celebrated authors of his age. It is by no means unusual to discover hyperbole in epitaphs. But the claims of this one are more than a little disingenuous. Hazlitt was indeed an "unanswered Metaphysician" - no-one thought it necessary to counter his philosophical arguments in print. Rather than sacrificing profit and fame to principle, it might be fairer to say that the moderate rewards he received in both these fields resulted from his defiant oppositionist stance. Presumably his prose-style would have suffered some loss of purity from a bout of literary prostitution, and while Hazlitt died in financial distress, a more prudent spender might have lived on his income fairly comfortably.

It is, however, of some interest that Hazlitt's epitaph was composed by a certain Charles Wells, who terminates the effusion by assuring the reader that his "heart is with him in the grave". Surprisingly, this man is not mentioned in any other context by Hazlitt's biographers. Evidently, the dead man could inspire fierce devotion, even if this was no nation-wide phenomenon; and his admirers chose to celebrate his philosophical works as

highly as the more occasional pieces by which he is remembered today.

Hazlitt's Essay on the Principles of Human Action, however, fell still-born from the press both in 1806, when it was first published, and when it was posthumously reprinted. It was not until quite recently that commentators began to chew over the "tough, dry, metaphysical choke-pear" in order to investigate its value for a proper understanding of the author's literary criticism. These writers have argued persuasively that the Essay can tell us much about his subsequent views, and they have also traced its sources and placed it within the philosophical context of Hazlitt's day. Their general verdict has been that the Essay is derivative, and of little value for its own sake in its brief moments of originality.

Some sort of apology for dragging Hazlitt's ethical theory back into view is therefore probably in order. First of all, the issue of originality should not deter us. If we were to rank works of philosophy on this standard, we would arrive at an unfamiliar league table; presumably Thales would be top, with everyone else tied for second. The issue is of special interest to us, since Hazlitt brought the charge of plagiarism against almost all of his contemporaries and many of his predecessors. We sense that such jibes were unfair, and that we should be more careful in treating either himself or his victims in this manner. Whatever the merit of Hazlitt's attacks, it is clear that he was confident of his own originality, and this confidence should at least be respected by a reservation of judgement in his case. While commentators have denied his claim to philosophical importance, there must be some suspicion that the unsuccessful history of the work has provided this conclusion for them. The Essay was most certainly a failure, but it is at least valid to look around for other possible reasons for its rejection by the reading public.

Secondly, although a reasonable consensus exists among literary

students of Hazlitt's work, there has been very little attention from historians of political theory. Such an investigation would inevitably emphasise different aspects of the material, even if it should reach the same verdict in the end. For instance, while Hazlitt's Lectures on English Philosophy of 1812 have not received prominent attention, his attitude to past writers such as Hobbes and Locke is of special interest from the political angle.

Hazlitt's work is also worthy of study as a reflection of the age in which he lived. As the work of a thoughtful and eloquent man, it should illuminate the climate of thought in the early nineteenth century, and possibly yield interesting questions for further study. It is hoped that this will assist in, and help to justify, the overall purpose of this chapter, which is to evaluate the importance of Hazlitt's philosophy to an understanding of his political ideas.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hazlitt's main reason for writing the Essay on the Principles of Human Action is clear. He believed that ethical theories based upon the primacy of self-love were dominant, and needed to be refuted. Such selfish doctrines, he believed, "could not have gained the assent of thinking men but for the force with which the idea of self habitually clings to the mind of every man." The prevalence of such a philosophy, Hazlitt believed, could be exploited by the wicked to serve their own ends, or to mislead those who might otherwise choose benevolent courses.

Against this kind of egotism, Hazlitt brought forward what he later called his "metaphysical clue", the product of frustrating years through which he struggled for words to clothe his thoughts. The basis of the theory was a new examination of human identity, which Locke and others had also



discussed. Hazlitt realised that while it was reasonable to speak of a uniform individual identity persisting from birth to death, there was a clear disjunction between one's past and future self. It is futile to wish the past undone, and such actions are no longer the objects of volition. If free will is possible, the present is a suitable opportunity for the exercise of choice. But the same cannot be said of our actions in the future. Although we can be fairly certain that our future being will represent the continuation of our present consciousness, we cannot be sure of the desires and aversions which may affect us then. In a sense, therefore, the past is more real than the future; and, when I act in accordance with what I take to be my probable future interest, I am projecting my existence forward in time by a leap of the imagination.

The next step of Hazlitt's argument was to compare this procedure with the origin of benevolent actions. Surely, the use of the imagination is common to both? We are generally ignorant of the precise feelings of others, but this is no less true of our future selves. Hence, although humans are by no means exclusively benevolent in their actions, there is something disinterested in all motivation, and benevolence is just as natural as self-interest.

Up to this point it may be agreed that Hazlitt's argument is quite an original contribution to the debate over self-love and benevolence. A similar thesis had, in fact, been advanced by Bishop Joseph Butler in the previous century, but only for the purpose of refutation. Butler could not accept such a notion, as it cast doubt upon the possibility of immortal life. Hazlitt did not feel these scruples. His problem, however, was to indicate how his discovery might be applied in practice. An advocate for self-love might confess that his theory over-simplified the internal working of the mind. But, granting that selfish behaviour might result from an imaginative

projection, Hazlitt's opponent might still argue that our sole motivation is what we take to be our own future benefit, and not that of others. In short, while Hazlitt may have shown how we come to behave morally, he has not provided a thorough account of particular moral actions, nor has he explained why we should prefer the interests of others to our own.

This problem exposes the weaknesses of Hazlitt's work, which we will discuss more fully later. Returning to his argument against egotistical theories, we find him borrowing Butler's argument that while all actions must relate to the self in some way, there is a distinction between actions motivated by a purely selfish concern, and those which are designed primarily to help others. Self-love is a natural attribute of humanity, but for the virtuous man it complements benevolence, rather than conflicting with it. Butler presented conscience as a presiding faculty of the mind, ensuring the co-operation of self-love and benevolence in most cases. But Hazlitt is much more vague about the manner in which benevolent actions are generated. On his account, for example, we tend to act in our own perceived interest most often, because we can form a better idea of such interests than those of our fellows. In the case of parents, the well-being of their own children will be preferred for similar reasons, we will benefit a neighbour rather than a stranger, a compatriot before a foreigner, and so on. Hazlitt clearly is realistic about the strength of benevolent motives, probably in part because he had noted the implausibility of the wide sphere allotted to them by William Godwin. But it is possible to suggest that his theory restricts benevolence more narrowly than he intended. For most of his contemporaries, with a restricted circle of close acquaintance, the exercise of benevolence would be severely limited. For the most part they would only be capable of recognising the most obvious interests of themselves, their family and their few friends; they could never give ear to the sufferings of an outsider. Indeed, Hazlitt himself had first-hand experience of his theory in action. He was driven from the Lake

Disrict in 1803 because, in a dispute with a local girl who was probably no better than she should be, the villagers quite naturally dissented from  
8  
Hazlitt's point of view. Obviously, Hazlitt wished to make wider claims for benevolence than this. In order to bolster the theory, he advances arguments common to many eighteenth-century theorists. He postulates an innate propensity in the mind to desire good for its own sake. We are not born fully-armed with a moral code; Hazlitt is too aware of Locke's legacy to embrace innate ideas. Rather, we acquire our moral ideas through association (although  
9  
Hazlitt qualifies his adherence to Hartley's theory). "There is", he writes, "something in the very idea of good, or evil, which naturally excites desire or aversion...which impels the mind to pursue the one and to avoid the other  
10  
by a true moral necessity." A baby, for example, can recognise good before it is aware of its self; it only prefers what turns out to be its own interest because it is more conscious of its own desires. Therefore, we choose the good irrespective of whether it is ours or another's.

Hazlitt's opponent, I believe, would be unimpressed by this. Granting that we learn to recognise the good through a process of association, he might suggest that this only provides the selfish man with a better understanding of what is good for him. The egotist might agree that we learn to choose the good by necessity, but his case, that this good is purely what relates to ourselves, remains unanswered. Hazlitt would reject such an assertion, although his case is not greatly clarified by his definitions. "[The] knowledge of various good must be accompanied with an intermediate, composite or indefinite idea of good, itself the object of desire" , he writes. "This idea will no doubt admit of endless degrees of indefiniteness according to the number of things, from which it is taken, or to which it is  
11  
applied, and will be refined at last into a mere word, or logical definition."

Our imaginary critic might shift his ground at this point, and

announce that he has unveiled Hazlitt's true position; he has not managed to refute the egotistical position because he is a Utilitarian. This idea of the good is not merely my own good, but that of the greatest possible number. Despite the mystical terminology, what Hazlitt means by "good" is really pleasure; we have seen that good and evil excite desire and aversion which impels us to choose the one and shun the other. This critic could also point to passages where Hazlitt appears to concede that "pleasure" is a synonym for "good". However, one such passage proceeds to undermine the Utilitarian theory in a manner reminiscent of John Stuart Mill; although, he writes, there may be a strong similarity between "all that is really good or pleasurable in any sensation, ...I cannot ...persuade myself that our sensations differ only as to more, or less, or that the pleasure derived from seeing a fine picture, ...that the gratification derived from doing a good action and that which accompanies the swallowing of an oyster are in reality and at bottom the same pleasure."<sup>12</sup>

"Why", he asks, "should there be only two sorts of feeling, pleasure and pain? I am convinced that any one who has reflected much on his own feelings must have found it impossible to refer them all to the same fixed invariable standard of good or evil, or by (sic) throwing the mere husk and without losing any thing essential to the feeling to arrive at some one simple principle."<sup>13</sup>

"Some sensations are like others; this is all we know of the matter, and all that is necessary to form a class, or genus."<sup>14</sup> It must also be remembered that while Hazlitt speaks of desire and aversion motivating our actions, these words are not synonymous with "pleasure" and "pain"; rather they are emotions which are strictly the cause or the effect of such sensations.

Hazlitt, therefore, adopts a more complex view of good than the Utilitarians; we shall return to this theme later. However, even if we should agree that he exhibits a more realistic attitude to the problem of the good, we must recognise that he has brought us no further to a complete moral

theory through his rejection of Utility. Hazlitt, in fact, seems to hold an intuitive theory of moral actions, with plenty of appeals to what goes on in the human breast, but not much ammunition against the owners of hardened hearts. The suggestion is that the fully-developed moral agent will choose the good of others whenever necessary, although at other times he will naturally prefer to benefit himself or his loved ones. However, this is left as little more than a suggestion. The illustrations of moral activity which he provides are not felicitous. The story of the child threatened by fire is a familiar one, showing how we might act, through sympathy, to prevent an injury; but this is a kind of negative benevolence, which most people can easily identify with. Hazlitt obviously intends to argue for the wider exercise of benevolence, and thus needs to demonstrate how it is that we prefer another man's good to our own in more typical situations; when, for example, we must choose between relieving the starving in a distant land and buying vin mousseux instead of champagne. Such examples are not forthcoming.

Another serious problem for Hazlitt arises from his assertion,<sup>15</sup> borrowed from Kant, that "The mind alone is formative". We do not merely receive impressions from outside, and respond blindly to them. These impressions are sifted, judged and moulded by the mind. Hence, the moral faculties are not merely built up by the association of ideas. The original disposition of the mind plays a major role in deciding the form which such an association will take. This is of central importance to Hazlitt's theory, revealing a careful, critical study of Hartley absent from the work of many contemporaries. But while others oversimplified the association theory in order to advocate environmental training, Hazlitt's qualifications make it difficult to see how the habitual wrong-doer can be reformed. He writes that "where the habitual connection of certain feelings with certain ideas does not arise from a predisposition in the mind to be affected by certain objects more than others, but from the particular direction which has been given to the

mind or a more frequent association between those feelings and ideas, a contrary habit may be produced by giving the mind a different direction and bestowing a greater share of attention on other subjects...The force of previous habit is and always must be on the side of selfish feelings, [therefore] it is of some consolation to think that the force of the habit we may oppose to this is seconded by reason, and the natural disposition of the mind." Here one can only conclude that Hazlitt is in a self-inflicted muddle.

16  
Firstly, his belief that habitual associations might not "arise from a pre-disposition in the mind" restores the hated Lockean tabula rasa in fact if not in name, unless of course such "neutral" minds are rare (in which case, why pay them so much attention?). But perhaps more seriously, later in the quoted section he contradicts his statement that "the original disposition of the mind, it's (sic) tendency to acquire or persevere in this or that habit is alone fixed and unvariable".  
17  
If this is so, and the original disposition of the mind "is, and always must be" selfish, then it is difficult to see how reasonable counter-arguments can bring it back to its "natural" state of disinterestedness. The problem arises, I think, because Hazlitt is unwilling to accept the limited consequences of his doctrine. In the Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius, which was appended to his Essay, he reveals that "I stand merely on the defensive. I have no positive inferences to make, nor any novelties to bring forward, and I love only to defend a  
18  
common-sense feeling against the refinements of a false philosophy." Whether intentional or not, this posture is also found in the Essay, and it is unsurprising that when he over-steps his self-imposed limits he loses his theoretical balance.

Although there are serious difficulties with Hazlitt's ethical philosophy, this is not an unusual situation, and as in many other cases the very difficulties are instructive. Firstly, it is interesting that Hazlitt felt compelled to attack materialism, self-love and sensationalism. For an

English philosopher of the period, these targets may appear strange at first sight. The materialistic selfishness of Hobbes had sustained much damage throughout the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury, Butler, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith were only a few of the writers who took up the cudgels against pure self-love, and in Hazlitt's own time Thomas Reid and Dougald Stewart returned to the charge. A notable critic in the present century has, in fact, claimed<sup>19</sup> that Butler's refutation of egotism killed off the controversy. However, Hazlitt's attitude was by no means unique to himself. Coleridge, for example, having presumably found Butler inadequate for his purposes, popularised the work of Kant on this subject. Sir James Mackintosh confided to a friend that his main purpose in writing the Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy was to shore up Butler's general position. The explanation for this renewed anxiety appears to be the influence of the French writers, such as Helvetius and Condillac, who had imbibed the teachings of the sensationalist school without, perhaps, fully appreciating the British thinkers who had subsequently attacked them. The influence of these theorists affected British writers in turn; and although men such as Priestley and Bentham intended to uphold the greatest happiness of the greatest number, their opponents saw the spectre of Hobbes looming over them. They believed that if the mind is regarded as wholly passive, the logical outcome would be apologies for untrammelled selfishness.

In this context it is proper to note Hazlitt's response to various earlier philosophers. It is clear that he regarded Hobbes as a profound and original author, despite the unfortunate message he conveyed. We find Hazlitt making awkward excuses for Hobbes' despotism; his theory clearly inspired the Social Contract,<sup>20</sup> Hazlitt tells us, but we never accuse Rousseau of pandering to tyranny! Similarly, he quotes Hobbes' own apology for writing about the man who locks up his doors and chests before he goes out. Hobbes had replied that the charge of misanthropy is misplaced; it is the man

locking his doors who is accusing mankind, not the reporter! Clearly, Hazlitt's respect for the power and clarity of Hobbes' arguments helps to explain why he feared their continuing influence.

By contrast, Hazlitt had no time at all for John Locke. His 1812 lecture on Hobbes is, in fact, an anticipation of an article published in 1816, entitled "Mr. Locke a Great Plagiarist".<sup>21</sup> In this piece he writes, "Mr. Locke has at this day all over Europe the character of one of the most profound and original thinkers that ever lived, and he is perhaps without any exception, the most barefaced, deliberate, and bungling plagiarist, that ever appeared in philosophy."<sup>22</sup> This hostility can, I believe, be explained because while Hobbes was either forgotten or reviled on religious grounds, Locke's work had been accepted by the establishment. The suspicion arises that if Hobbes had been generally acclaimed, Hazlitt would by no means have spared him. Furthermore, as we have seen, Locke's work influenced continental writers who were unaware that he had been pre-empted by Hobbes in many respects. Hence, Locke's bloated reputation earned such ideas prestige, and the salutary example of Hobbes' use of the same theories went unnoticed. Locke, therefore, stands condemned as perniciously wrong, unoriginal, and lucky. Hazlitt's belief that Hobbes was a far superior prose stylist might also have affected his judgement.

Of the eighteenth-century philosophers, Hazlitt is more respectful towards Hume and Adam Smith, who obviously influenced his account of the sympathetic imagination to some extent. Yet in his article on Locke he calls Smith "the tenth transmitter of a foolish creed", and claims that Hume had been over-rated in comparison to Hobbes.<sup>23</sup> "Nothing can be done towards a true theory of the mind", he writes, "till philosophers are convinced that all ideas are ideas of the understanding"; Hume and Smith fail this test. Hazlitt does express warm and unequivocal praise for Kant, whose



categorical imperative is "the only lever by which the modern philosophy can  
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be overturned." Yet it is not clear how well Hazlitt was acquainted with  
Kant's writings, which were brought to the public attention largely through  
25  
the verbal services of Coleridge.

The philosophers of Hazlitt's day impressed him very little. Godwin is dismissed with faint praise, probably because they were friends to some extent. But not only does the refutation of Utilitarianism apply to him, but Hazlitt's lecture on "Free Will and Necessity" is a flat contradiction of Godwin's famous creed. It is, Hazlitt believes, nonsensical to speak of free will in terms of an unmoved agent, but since man is not a creature of unthinking responses to external impulses, there is a sense in which we are responsible for our actions. While Godwin had claimed that the assassin is no more guilty than the knife he wields, Hazlitt is at pains to prove that punishment is justified. Explosions, for example, are caused not by the spark alone, but by the action of a spark on gunpowder. "So it is in the mind. Motives do not act upon it simply or absolutely, but according to the  
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dictates of the understanding or the bias of the will." Obviously Hazlitt was ready to admit a vital importance for the faculty of reason, but he does not make claims comparable to those of Godwin.

Hazlitt is more directly hostile to the Utilitarians, and has been praised as the first systematic critic of the school. While this may be an accurate verdict, it is quite clear that Hazlitt merely regarded Benthamism as a contemporary flowering of a weed which first took root in Hobbes' work. The doctrine of pleasure and pain had been borrowed from Locke, who had filched it without acknowledgement from the Sage of Malmesbury. It is also debatable whether the Utilitarians were regarded as important enough to merit attack until the late 1820's, when Macauley and Mackintosh both levelled their heavy guns against them. This issue aside, it is interesting to note the

apparent motives for Hazlitt's assault, and the ground he chose. First of all, he compares the Benthamites to a religious sect, a theme also found in Mackintosh and Macauley. Not only does this convey a sense of the group's isolation in intellectual society, but also it reminds the reader of the eighteenth century's dislike of "enthusiasm". Hazlitt, of course, does target Bentham's attitude to poetry for particular censure. But perhaps more insistent is the Malthusian theme. He asks, "Do they not wish to extend 'the greatest happiness to the greatest numbers', by putting a stop to population-  
to relieve distress by withholding charity, to remedy disease by shutting up  
27 hospitals?" He returns to this subject again later. But he is equally appalled by the over-optimism of the school regarding general benevolence. "Am I to screw myself up to feel as much for the Antipodes (or God knows who) as for my next-door neighbours, by such a forced intellectual scale? The last is impossible; and the result of the attempt will be to make the balance even by  
28 a diminution of our natural sensibility." His basic theoretical disagreement is that while the Utilitarians uphold the rational faculties, he places "the heart" at the centre of his moral system, and, for him, "the  
29 senses and the understanding are its two extremities."

The attack is powerful - and unfair - enough to merit wider recognition in the debate over Utility. But it is impossible not to notice the inconsistency which has re-emerged in Hazlitt's psychology. The heart, or sentiment, is placed at the centre of his moral system in this passage; and this does appear to be the most important element in the theory. Yet we have seen that he believed all ideas to be the product of "the understanding", and  
30 elsewhere he speaks of this as the "superintending faculty."

The problem here appears to be no more than a clumsy use of terminology. But the inconsistency is real enough, and seems intrinsic to this sort of position. Hazlitt believed that reason, passion, intuition and

sensation all have roles to play in the formation of character and the exercise of morality. But he felt induced to emphasise different faculties in different polemical contexts. One of his favourite maxims was "The web of our lives is as a mingled yarn", and he probably found it easier to express such an outlook in an epigram than a closely-argued treatise. Perhaps in recognition of this fact, from the 1812 lecture series onwards Hazlitt confined his philosophy to occasional journalism, when consistency could be safely regarded as secondary to the purposes of criticism.

Hazlitt's philosophical work, therefore, exhibits his critical ability more fully than any solid constructive powers. As elsewhere, he stands on the defensive, feeling that his position represents the common-sense view, but unable to erect this into a system. The purpose of this chapter, however, is to examine this aspect of his work for its political implications, and to this we must now turn.

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Students of Hazlitt's philosophy have normally been searching for the basis of his literary criticism. This is an established approach, and it is not my present purpose to argue that it is inappropriate in Hazlitt's case. However, a similar method does not lead to any firm conclusions in the field of political ideas. Although the various aspects of his thought cannot be cleanly disentangled, it would be a mistake to regard him as a systematic political thinker in the mould of Hobbes or Locke. Hazlitt would have regarded himself as a frustrated painter and philosopher, who supported himself by composing "abortive" essays and criticisms for the periodical press. There was no requirement for doctrinal rigidity in such a career, and outside the elite circle of the Edinburgh and its competitors, little enough scope for the clear exposition of philosophical politics.

An example of how philosophy, literature and politics interweave in Hazlitt's work can be found in his attack on the Utilitarians in "The New School of Reform".<sup>31</sup> Here we find a philosophical dispute fuelled by literary factors (Bentham's dislike of poetry) and political concerns (the impact of the Malthusian doctrine). Even personal grievances suggest themselves as motives; Bentham had evicted Hazlitt from his house, and the latter had an interest in striking at the Westminster Review which had been attacking his employers at the Edinburgh. It is open to us to look for solid evidence of Hazlitt's political position from such sources, but only with a good deal of caution.

Some tentative conclusions might be drawn from Hazlitt's attack on Helvetius, and, by implication, Godwin. In dismissing the view that the mind is merely the passive recipient of external stimuli, he is also questioning the possibility of environmental determinism. But we could not conclude that Hazlitt is a believer in the natural inequality of mankind from the Essay alone. Man has innate capacities, but it is nowhere urged that these differ widely from one person to the next. The underlying theme, of course, insists that men are at least equally capable of benevolence, and environmental determinism might be said to re-enter through the back door in Hazlitt's discussion of the development of benevolent character. All that can be firmly stated is that the Essay is pessimistic compared with the work of some contemporaries; but to be less optimistic than followers of Condorcet and Godwin is not to be submerged in preternatural gloom. One can merely conclude here that the Essay occupies a central position in the contemporary debate, with a leaning towards the liberal side.

Similarly, while it is noticeable that many of the sacred demons of contemporary radicalism were admired by Hazlitt, no definite conclusions arise from this fact. He may have revered the power of Hobbes' mind, (just as

he was impressed by Burke), and his relish for Mandeville is very unusual for the time. Also, his abusing of Locke, and instinctive hostility for the "New School of Reform" would not be expected from a radical. But the reasons for his philosophical tastes are complex. He seems to have regarded admiration for Locke as mere cant, and his antipathy to the Benthamites was shared by observers of many political persuasions. Mandeville was at least a fearless thinker, and both he and Hobbes might appeal to Hazlitt's love for the underdog. The idiosyncratic manner in which Hazlitt chose his heroes must form part of a proper assessment, but is conclusive neither one way nor the other.

The philosophy itself, as we have seen, echoes through many of Hazlitt's performances, often unexpectedly. For example, we discover that his emphasis upon innate characteristics re-surfaces in such phrases as "No man is ever wiser from experience or suffering, or can cast his thoughts or actions in any other mould than that which nature has assigned them." This comes from the Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, where the theory illuminates the behaviour of Lafayette, but can also explain Hazlitt's view of Louis XVI, whose fate was sealed on the day that he was born an absolute monarch. This is in line with his emphasis upon innate qualities, but flies in the face of his assertion in the Essay that men can be reasoned or conditioned out of their selfishness. Similarly, the Life and the Essay both contain gratuitous attacks on the French national character, which are neither consistent with each other, nor with the thrust of Hazlitt's philosophy, which implies that such generalisations are inadmissible in such contexts.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the Essay is the fine peroration, beginning "There are moments in the life of a solitary thinker which are to him what the evening of some great victory is to the conqueror and hero...". Even at the very outset of his career as an

author, Hazlitt saw himself as an isolated figure, attached to no school and unwilling to court one of his own. With an attitude like this, it is unsurprising that the prophecy was fulfilled. Ironically, the Essay contains a brisk attack on Sir James Mackintosh, who stood as close to Hazlitt's philosophical position as almost anyone; much later, this writer honoured Hazlitt's Essay with perhaps its most important contemporary recognition -  
34  
in a footnote.

Rather paradoxically, this fierce individualism helps to explain both the power of Hazlitt's criticism and the neglect he has suffered. He owed his allegiance to nothing other than the truth as he saw it, but he lived at a time when an isolated thinker such as Hobbes would have had great difficulty in capturing any public attention. The intellectual world of Hobbes' day was so closed that an unpublished paper could establish a Europe-wide reputation. But in Hazlitt's time, the rapid growth of the popular press and a simultaneous loss of public interest in ethical philosophy meant that without a suitable platform, a willing band of co-workers and, perhaps, an eye-catching reductivist principle such as Utility, oblivion was likely to follow.

Hazlitt's philosophical writings are of sufficient interest to reward his modern admirers, however neglected they have previously been. The central theme might not have been startling in its originality, but had he written no more he could still be regarded as an acute thinker and a careful reader. For the student of political ideas, more evidence is required to flesh out the essentially negative implications of the Essay. But one may clearly recognise the style and approach of Hazlitt's more celebrated productions. As a noted fives player, Hazlitt was well used to thinking on his feet, and would regard fluffed strokes, or tripping over himself, as no more than occupational hazards. The point of the game, in essay-writing as in fives, was to deal as many telling blows as possible, and, hopefully, to

wear his opponent into submission. Hazlitt, in short, always has something worth saying, and he delivers it in a fashion which makes study of him both entertaining and instructive. It could be argued that, like Hazlitt, we should occasionally exercise positive discrimination in our judgements, and favour unfashionable thinkers. After all, no modern philosopher has ever avoided errors, contradictions, or plagiarisms, and if the neglected writers have been forgotten because their faults were unspectacular, this does not rule them out as fit subjects for our study.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in C. Macdonald Maclean, Born Under Saturn, London, 1943, pp. 581-2.
2. "If you ask me where to look for those beautiful shining qualities of Prime Ministers and the great favourites of Princes that are so finely painted in dedications, epitaphs, funeral sermons and inscriptions, I answer there, and nowhere else." B. de Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees, ed. B. Kaye, Oxford, 1924 (2 Vols); Vol I, p.168.
3. "Tough, dry, metaphysical choke-pear" is Hazlitt's own description of the Essay, in Works, Vol.XI, p.102.
4. For a verdict of this kind, see K. Coburn, "Hazlitt on the Disinterested Imagination", in J.V Logan, J.E Jordan & N. Frye (ed.) Some British Romantics, Columbia, 1966; "The argument itself is trite, circular, ill-defined in its terms, wholly on a rationalist level, and without the psychological awareness already developing in the nineteenth century." This judgement seems to be unreasonably harsh; for a more favourable account, see J. Noxon, "Hazlitt as Moral Philosopher", Ethics, 1963, pp.279-83; The Essay is discussed passim in the recent monographs on Hazlitt listed in the Introduction to the present study (note 3); an interesting short discussion may be found in L. Lockridge, The Ethics of Romanticism, Cambridge, 1989, pp.353-62.
5. It must be remembered that contemporaries of Hazlitt noted a decline in the public demand for works of "metaphysics" at this time; see, for example, Francis, Lord Jeffrey, Contributions to the "Edinburgh Review", Philadelphia, 1852, pp. 504-5.
6. Works, Vol.I, p.6.
7. Works, Vol.VII, p. 271.
8. For Hazlitt's explicit recognition of this problem, see his review of Wordsworth's Excursion, Works, Vol.XIX, p.21; those "who are cut off by the mountains and valleys from an intercourse with mankind" tend to be self-interested and callous.
9. Hazlitt's views on Hartley were expounded in a lecture, printed in Works

Vol.I, pp. 50-91.

10. Works, Vol.I, p.12.
11. Works, Vol. I, p.13; Vol.I, p.14, note.
12. Works, Vol.I, p.14, note.
13. Works, Vol.I, p.14.
14. Ibid..
15. Quoted by Hazlitt on several occasions; see Works, Vol.XX, p.74.
16. Works, Vol.I, p.17.
17. Ibid..
18. Works, Vol.I, p.67.
19. See C. Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, p.55.
20. Works, Vol.I, p.145.
21. Works, Vol.XX, pp. 69-83.
22. Works, Vol.XX, p.69. See also Works, Vol.I, p.146; "The greatest defect with which the Essay on the Human Understanding is chargeable is, that there is not really a word about the nature of the understanding in it, nor any attempt to shew what it is or whether it is or not any thing, distinct from the faculty of simple perception."
23. Works, Vol.XX, p.406 (a quotation borrowed from Savage)
24. Works, Vol.XX, p.74.
25. Hazlittians and Coleridgians will no doubt have differing views as to the influence of the one upon the other. It is probable that Hazlitt would still have become a writer had he never met Coleridge, but it is debatable whether he would have retained his consuming interest in metaphysics for so long. Lovers of Hazlitt might think that Coleridge did Hazlitt a dis-service in this respect; see "My First Acquaintance with Poets"; Works, Vol.XVII, pp.106-122.
26. Works, Vol.I, p.269.
27. Works, Vol.XII, p.189.
28. Ibid., p.193.
29. Works, Vol.I, p.89.
30. Works, Vol.I, p.151.
31. Works, Vol.XII, pp.179-195. For Hazlitt's hostile treatment of his former landlord Bentham, see Works, Vol.XI, pp.5-16.



32. Works, Vol.XIII, p.119.

33. Works, Vol.I, p.46.

34. See Sir J. Mackintosh, Miscellaneous Works, Philadelphia 1852 ed., p.152, note. The accolade is somewhat impaired by the mis-spelling "Haslitt". More recently, Hazlitt was allotted a brief but respectful entry in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Macmillan, 1967 (Editor-in-Chief P. Edwards), pp.428-9.

## THEORY OF POLITICS

While Hazlitt's moral philosophy is of definite interest to the historian of ideas, therefore, it does not seem to provide any positive clues about his ideological position. In this chapter, I intend to examine the theoretical element of his political writing. Although it is likely that this work was even less influential than his philosophy, it is worth evaluating the coherence and plausibility of his ideas, even if we should conclude that it does not help towards an understanding of his thought as a whole. Hazlitt clearly believed that he might make a valuable contribution to the theory of government; if our investigation should lead us to deny this, it would still be informative. Finally, the doctrine must be placed within its historical context, and its most probable sources identified.

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Hazlitt's exercise in abstract political theory is to be found in his "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation". It was never published in his life-time. It is likely that Hazlitt's intention was to include it in a volume outlining topics such as law, philosophy and economics; this work never appeared, and it is possible that the "Project" in its present form is only a preliminary draft. Hazlitt explains that the essay originated in a school exercise written when he was fourteen. The theme had arisen from a dispute "between my father and an old lady of the congregation, respecting the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts and the limits of religious toleration."

The essay begins with Hazlitt's definition of a right. A right is "not simply that which is good or useful in itself, but that which is thought so by the individual, and which has the sanction of his will as such."

This is because there are endless disagreements about what is good in itself, and because a man is the best judge of his own interests, and a good is of no account without its capacity to excite the will of an agent. Once the will has chosen its object, nothing can interfere with its appropriation except the will of another.

The obvious question which arises from this account is "What happens when the wills of several agents conflict?" In the first instance, Hazlitt appeals to self-interest, or, perhaps more precisely, a prudential element within self-interest, which prevents us from coming to blows during such controversies. But this cannot always be relied upon, and the public peace requires the notion of "political justice" to enter at this point. Political justice "is that which assigns the limits of these individual rights or their compatibility or incompatibility with each other in society." Having brought up the phrase "political justice", Hazlitt seizes an opportunity of attacking William Godwin's belief that rights entail corresponding duties. This, he asserts, rests upon a mere confusion of terms. A man may have a duty to waive his rights on certain occasions, but "rights are seconded by force, duties are things of choice." "This is the import of the words in common speech." In fact, for Hazlitt the possession of a right implies little more than its common possession by others. "Right, in a word, is the duty which each man owes to himself; or it is that portion of the general good of which (as being principally interested) he is made the special judge, and which is put under his immediate keeping."

Hazlitt proceeds to examine the nature of law, and the grounds which justify government. He begins with a definition of terms: "Law is something to abridge, or, more properly speaking, to ascertain the bounds of the original rights, and to coerce the will of individuals in the community." The right to exercise this power arises from self-defence, the

requirement that equal rights are ensured for all against aggression. The rights of society are derived from the aggregate of individual rights; these are conferred on the government. However, Hazlitt denies that laws are the mere creation of any social compact. Rights are prior to government and social living. For example, the right to self-defence must exist regardless of institutions. There can be no right of society to interfere with the rights of its members under normal circumstances; government may only step in when an infringement of individual rights has taken place. Hazlitt, therefore, seems to be an unequivocal natural rights theorist. Natural rights are, for him, "those the infringement of which cannot on any supposition go  
8  
unpunished."

Hazlitt believes that several corollaries follow from this doctrine. Firstly, he believes that he has shown liberty and equality to be compatible. Rights are equal by nature, and the task of government is simply to ensure that they are not unduly circumscribed. Secondly, universal suffrage is a principle of "great importance" - to ignore the opinion of a single man is the first step towards a tyranny which ignores the whole community. It also follows that no man can be born a slave, that trade unions are just as legal as combinations among the masters, and that "one man has not a right to the produce of another's labour, but each man has a right to the benefit of his own exertions and the use of his natural and inalienable  
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powers."

The next step in the argument is to show what "a man may  
10  
especially call his own." These are listed under four headings; his person, his actions, his property, and his opinions. That a man has a special interest in his own person would seem to be already established. Apart from the more obvious cases which are covered by the principle of self-defence, what of offensive smells and noises? Do these constitute an illicit attack on

our bodies? Hazlitt believes that they do. He rejects the notion that these problems can be decided by an appeal to utilitarian criteria; "We want to know by given marks and rules what is best and useful", he writes, "and they assure us very wisely, that this is infallibly and clearly determined by what is best and useful." A different criterion must be used, and Hazlitt decides that the motive for the act is the decisive factor. If, for example, a man sets fire to some wood in his garden with the single intention of annoying his neighbours, he can be lawfully restrained or even punished. In the case of noises, a flautist practicing on a public staircase should not be molested, whereas a person banging a drum beneath someone's window is "altogether disagreeable", and the man should be made to move away. Factories are a nuisance, but necessary; they should be situated outside towns if possible.

For Hazlitt, "The object and principle of the laws of property, ...is this: 1. To supply individuals and the community with what they need. 2. To secure an equal share to each individual, other circumstances being the same. 3. To keep the peace and promote industry and plenty, by proportioning each man's share to his own exertions, or to the good-will and discretion of others." Identifying the state of nature with one of "solitary independence", Hazlitt asserts that here the individual has a right to possess everything. In society this right is limited by the claims of others. There are several methods of settling claims to property. Firstly, the goods can be divided equally; but this "applies only to the case of joint finding". Secondly, priority of possession is a just title, on the principle of "first come, first served", and because to deprive a long-term proprietor is to run against a law of human nature. A third right is established by labour, and a fourth by inheritance. Here Hazlitt takes issue with primogeniture, since he believes that a testator should be free in the dispersal of his goods. Finally, in the case of air or water, there can be no property as there is no competition for

these plentiful commodities. He comes very close to justifying poaching on the same principle. At worst, this is a "kind of honest thieving", and the injustice of the game laws threaten to provoke a revolution, as it had already<sup>14</sup> done in France.

As for opinion, Hazlitt does not think that points of view should be subject to punishment. No-one is forced to like another; indeed, the use of constraint is the likeliest way to produce hatred. In the case of libel, the practise of anonymous writing should be stopped, and the shame of public exposure should be enough to deter would-be calumniators. Society can exert its vengeance by shunning indecent or libellous scribblers. This is as far as it should go. The liberty of the press must be preserved, and its good name no longer sullied by cowardly abusers.

The liberty of action should "have no limit but the rights of persons or property aforesaid". "Everyone has a right to use his natural powers in the way most agreeable to himself...provided he does not<sup>15</sup> interfere with the corresponding rights and liberties of others." Laws impeding such activity should be as few as possible. For instance, morality cannot be enforced by law "because morals have to do with the will and<sup>16</sup> affections, and the law only puts a restraint on these." If the majority of the population disapprove of drunkenness, for example, this signifies nothing. The agent himself suffers the natural consequences of his insobriety. But, it might be argued, so do his wife and children. Hazlitt says that if the wife is ill-treated, she may apply to the Justice of the Peace for redress. The parish would be within their rights if they refused assistance to her. Similarly, a man should not be prosecuted for attempting to take his own life unless he does so in a manner which endangers others. Duelling is permissible or not under the same circumstances. All religions should be tolerated, and atheism too - the existence of unbelief does not

prevent others from church-going. "There should be no secular interference in sacred things; no laws to suppress or establish any church or sect in religion; no religious persecutions, tests, or disqualifications." In these words Hazlitt produces his view of the controversy which had inspired the original essay.

In short, Hazlitt believed that "a system of just and useful laws may be constructed nearly, if not wholly, on the principle of the right of self-defence, or the security for persons, liberty and property." A man is not bound to pay taxes to help government defend the community. However, it follows that government is not bound to support him in such a situation. Governments are always the servants of the public, and must be continually scrutinized. Because the extent of individual rights is not always clear, it is best to trust the "general voice" for "settling the boundaries of right and wrong", and, more importantly, keeping the authorities in their place.

Short as it is, the essay is not without serious ambiguities, and these need to be discussed before moving on to the implications of the work. Firstly, we must take a closer look at the discussion of rights which begins the essay. Hazlitt originally seems to identify natural rights with natural powers, dependent upon the individual will. Since such powers differ between persons, and conflict is almost sure to arise, governments are created in order to ensure fair play. There is a bare minimum of rights which government must ensure to all. Thus, although "coming into society... circumscribes my will and rights", it does so in a manner which makes rights more secure. Hence, Hazlitt believes that, like Rousseau, he has shown liberty to be compatible with equality, in the sense of equality in the eyes of the law.

There are many difficulties involved in this theory, and criticism is not assisted by Hazlitt's opaque prose. Hazlitt thinks that in

the common estimation, rights are "seconded by force", while duties are matters of choice. This is a strange position; if anything it is more common for these definitions to be reversed. The notion that the possession of a right by an individual implies an obligation upon others cannot be dismissed so easily as Hazlitt seems to believe. In his doctrine, government is designed to lend force to existing rights; it appears to follow that in doing so it enforces a duty in others to respect such rights. It might be possible to regard this as an irrelevant aside, were it not for the fact that a theory of obligation is lacking from the body of the text. Subjects in Hazlitt's state certainly have a prudential motive for obeying the government, but this is not made explicit. At the very best, this is an unnecessary confusion; the discussion of rights, which may well owe much to Hobbes, would have been reasonably straight-forward without this gratuitous attack on Godwin.

Hazlitt's essay also lacks a plausible account of the process by means of which the pre-social beings he portrays are brought to place their cherished rights under the power of a majority. Although Locke and Rousseau had given plausible solutions to this problem, Hazlitt seems to shy away from it. Hence, he has no coherent account about the formation of society; men apparently just come into it. As for the formation of government, it "is not necessarily founded on common consent." Although contemporary writers such as Jeremy Bentham dismissed the problem of origins, they were entitled to since for Utilitarians the question is of academic importance. Hazlitt, as a natural rights theorist, seems to have no such dispensation, and his neglect is a major reason for the failure of the essay.

The concept of the "general voice" seems reminiscent of Rousseau, who must be regarded as the major source for much of the argument. It is hardly necessary to say that Hazlitt does not address the difficulties which Rousseau wrestled with here. For example, Rousseau distinguished



"natural liberty, which is bounded only by the strength of the individual",  
and civil liberty, which is limited by the General Will".<sup>22</sup> Hazlitt seems  
unaware of differing spheres of liberty, which is the more surprising since  
his early teacher, Joseph Priestley, distinguished "political" from "civil"  
liberty. Rousseau believed that the general will should be regarded as more  
than a simple numerical majority, and at least attempted a solution to the  
difficulties involved with the concept. By contrast, Hazlitt never clearly  
defines the general voice, nor places restrictions upon its legitimate field  
of operation. Thus, the dangers which have been identified in Rousseau's  
theory are, if anything, accentuated in Hazlitt. A simple majority may elect  
to protect individual rights in the manner which he envisaged; however,  
it may determine on a contrary course. Obviously society and government  
are formed to protect certain inalienable rights; but if the appeal from a  
tyrannical government is heard by an equally tyrannical public, there is  
no further recourse for the lovers of liberty. In view of Hazlitt's other  
writings on this subject, the naivety of these pronouncements is little  
short of startling. Overall it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that  
Hazlitt's discussion of rights and the theory of government that arises from  
it is defeated at the outset by superficial analysis and incoherent  
exposition.

Despite this inescapable conclusion, it may be of some interest  
to examine the more detailed aspects of Hazlitt's theory, and for this  
purpose perhaps the section on property is the most interesting. As we have  
seen, the purposes of property are "1. To supply individuals with what they  
need. 2. To secure an equal share to each individual, other circumstances  
being the same. 3. To keep the peace and promote industry and plenty, by  
proportioning each man's share to his own exertions, or to the good-will and  
discretion of others."<sup>23</sup> At first glance, this appears to be something like the  
Marxian exhortation "To each according to his needs, from each according to

his abilities". But closer inspection reveals that these guidelines are far too vague to support any system of distribution. While it might be argued that "1" and "2" are compatible, they become meaningless in juxtaposition with "3". "Other circumstances being equal" in proposition "2" could be taken to tally with "1", since the unequal circumstances might refer to unequal needs; the more a man needs, the more he will be supplied with. But it is clear that "proportioning a man's share to his exertions, or to the good-will and discretion of others" conflicts with this. Good-will and discretion could lead to more productive workers sharing their surplus with the less fortunate or idle. But this charitable urge can only be self-imposed, since we have seen that for Hazlitt rights do not pre-suppose duties. He seems to be appealing to the sort of benevolence which he upheld in his Essay on the Principles of Human Action, but it should be noted that the individualism of this essay runs counter to the tone of the earlier treatise. It is more reasonable to assume that Hazlitt has merely cobbled together these propositions as a means of advocating a fairer order of society than that in which he lived. His general position on luxury and the Poor Laws can be taken as supporting this conclusion. It should be noted that in doing this Hazlitt has moved from a discussion of a whole new basis for human societies to urging piecemeal reforms of early nineteenth-century England, and that this is only one of several instances of the unexplained intrusion of the real into the ideal.

Once again, a comparison with Rousseau is illuminating, although it is likely that here the direct influence of the latter is less evident. Hazlitt certainly lacks Rousseau's moral antipathy towards the institution of property in general. What Hazlitt objects to is a situation in which the many starve while the few live in plenty. To ensure that this is not the plight of England, the Poor Laws must be retained. This is a perennial theme in Hazlitt's work, and his humanitarian fervour explains this

particular "intrusion" of reality. Yet, on his own principles, it is easy to defend the evasion of rate-paying. If a man can refuse his taxes to the government, as Hazlitt claims, then he can turn away the officials of the Parish. The only sanction in both cases is that the government may refuse him protection from aggression, or, one presumes, can deny him Parish relief if and when he requires it himself. But this solution to the problem is unclear. If the starving revolt against their superiors because the Poor Laws are widely evaded, it is likely that they will be indiscriminate in their revenge. Similarly, an invasion force would not single out for special tortures those enemies who have run down national defence by withholding their taxes. Clearly Hazlitt is confronted with a problem which must face all humanitarian individualists. "The greater part of a community ought not to be paupers or starving", he asserts, but, on his own principles, it is difficult to see why not. He would presumably rest his case on the underlying principle of self-defence. But we are then confronted by the problem of the "general voice"; if a majority of the public thinks that the poor should not be supported in this way, then clearly they will prevail.

The example of the drummer and the flautist also presents Hazlitt with difficulties. What we have here is Hazlitt's solution to the problem of self and other-regarding actions. Just as J.S Mill can be said to have permitted the magistrate to interfere extensively despite a theory which is intended to keep such activity to a minimum, it is difficult to see where government action is invalid on the basis of Hazlitt's principles. The case of the man who maliciously lights his fire seems tolerably clear. The motive is bad, and therefore the nuisance should be prevented. But when dealing with the drummer, Hazlitt shifts his ground. This man can be removed from the area of his choice unless he has an "extraordinary motive" to stay, despite the fact that only the relative difficulty of playing the flute distinguishes the cases. Therefore, Hazlitt has not really succeeded in distinguishing

nuisances which should be abated, and those which are permissible. All he has done is to show that the law can reach further into people's lives than he would like. For instance, while he denies that a drunkard should be restrained from sinking one pint too many, he would be liable to arrest if he left the pub singing.

While Hazlitt's magistrate has extensive powers once a "crime" like this has been committed, he seems to be impotent up to this point. For example, he believes that opinion is free, and that force is inappropriate in this area. Thus, if a man sends me a death-threat, and I alert the authorities, they will shrug their shoulders and hurry off to remove a noisy percussionist from outside my enemy's window. Yet Hazlitt actually asserts that "government is bound to prevent ...violations of liberty and justice". On his own theory they can only prevent recurrences.

The case of the flautist and the drummer is an example of the use Hazlitt makes of illustrations and analogies in the essay; almost without exception, they are poor. Hazlitt compares government to a clock, which must be repaired or replaced if it goes wrong. The replacement of the clock is the revolution, which is likely "whenever the interests of the many are regularly and outrageously sacrificed to those of the few." This is problematic in practice; it is difficult to see how the societal clock can be replaced, even on the most individualistic theory. But this is quibbling. The flaws in the analogy are relatively unimportant, since its purpose is to urge reformation on the existing government, not to advocate a revolution. Other examples are more unfortunate. He compares individuals to tiles in a mosaic, thus unintentionally implying that the whole of society is in some way more valuable than the parts (the same, of course, is true of the clock). Hazlitt's literary abilities and critical sense seem to have deserted him in the writing of this essay.

Hazlitt's belief in universal suffrage is not straight-forward either. It is clear that, like most theoretical democrats at the time, he begged the whole question at issue by assuming that the newly-enfranchised masses would follow the guidance of their superiors. To prove his case, he produces another poor analogy. There is a wide reading public, but the verdict of qualified critics is still largely adhered to. But in fact qualified judges disagreed violently, very often on political grounds. The persecution of John Keats is an obvious example of this, but Hazlitt's own objections to the work of Robert Southey are clearly more political than literary. Furthermore, while people normally do not read novels for selfish reasons, the conservative case partly rested upon the belief that the poor would use their votes to expropriate the wealthy. But, more seriously still, while the literate public might defer to qualified judges in such matters, opponents of universal suffrage were concerned about the attitude of the illiterate. Significantly, Hazlitt has nothing to say on the subject of public education, even though this was widely discussed at the time. In view of the weakness of Hazlitt's case here, it is unsurprising that elsewhere in his work we find him very lukewarm on this subject.

Overall, the essay is therefore a very baffling performance. We have seen that Hazlitt's moral philosophy is not of a kind which leads directly to political conclusions. His political theory is fully in line with this. The atomistic picture of society, and the lack of a theory of obligation, are difficult to square with the advocacy of benevolence which features in the Essay on the Principles of Human Action. There is no discussion of co-operative behaviour, just a vision of individuals successively irritating each other and complaining of their neighbours' aggressions. In the earlier essay, Hazlitt had demonstrated how the altruistic emotions develop. In this performance, the circle of benevolence seems to begin and to end with ourselves.

What appears to have happened is that Hazlitt has fallen between two stools. He has attempted to expound an abstract theory of government. But he cannot resist bringing in contemporary illustrations which marr his case rather than enhance it. As we have seen, some sort of argument for the Poor Laws could have been derived from the principle of self-preservation. But while Hazlitt does speak of "the right which society has to defend itself against all aggression", this kind of collective self-preservation is not argued for in the essay. Rather, Hazlitt treats society as an aggregation of individuals rather than what Rousseau described as a people. Without a collective feeling that no-one should be left to starve, or the corresponding conviction that society will dissolve unless action is taken, individuals will indeed opt out of their payments. The essay therefore rests on the assumption that governments will always be tempted to abuse their power, while the general voice will always be right in its verdicts. Neither assumption is supported, and they could hardly be convincing in the absence of any thorough investigation into the nature of either society or government.

Indeed, Hazlitt's essay is doomed from the outset. He candidly states that it is based upon a school exercise. It is clear that he makes a genuine attempt to recall the contents of this essay; but the reader can only anticipate that the result will be essentially incomplete. Even more surprising is the statement that the "Spirit of contradiction" will "rule over sublunary affairs, as the moon governs the tides", until "the unexpected stroke of a comet throws up a new breed of men." He reaches this conclusion from his interpretation of the recent repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828). This came about not from a sense of justice, or "the liberality of the age", but rather from a sense of indifference. Now this characteristic digression gives us a clue to the extent of Hazlitt's failure. The point of an abstract theory of government must be to give the reader a standard by which to measure contemporary institutions. It is not unusual for such a

society to be peopled with "a new breed of men", in order to present moral standards by which—our—own can be appraised. What Hazlitt has clearly done is to draw an ideal state for the present race of men. In this he is following Rousseau, who had avowedly taken "men as they are and laws as they might be".<sup>31</sup> It would appear that such an approach depends in part on a belief that men "as they are" might be capable of improvement. But clearly, the men in Hazlitt's society would still be governed by the "spirit of contradiction"; the government would never introduce or repeal legislation for moral reasons, and the people would go on living much as they already do, constantly worrying about infringements on their rights, and occasionally glancing to the skies in fearful anticipation of the approaching comet.

The suggestion, therefore, is that the "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation" is not so much a new theory as a proposal to remedy certain abuses which threaten the peaceful workings of an already flawed constitution. This explanation is born out by a brief examination of contemporary practice and thought. Obviously the initial reaction, that government interference bears no resemblance to that of today, would be an anachronism. The eighteenth-century obsession with arbitrary power was quite real, however flimsy we may count the evidence for such a threat. But it is true to point out that Hazlitt would have been far more original had he suggested a wider role for the state. Earlier writers such as Blackstone and De Lolme had noted that England was a little-governed nation; for Paine, the state was at best a necessary evil, and Godwin had urged that eventually we should discard it. On the conservative side, Burke may have made metaphysical pronouncements about its sacred nature, but he also said that "Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself."<sup>32</sup> During the Napoleonic Wars, the press-gang and the tax-collector represented an unpopular face of government, but these menaces were largely withdrawn with the coming of peace. There were a large number of punishable

offences, many of which carried the death penalty. But as Hazlitt himself pointed out, the number of prosecutions and convictions under these Acts was falling markedly. It is very likely that the original motive for Hazlitt's essay remains its most sensible justification; the attempt by government to interfere with religious and political beliefs. Clearly Hazlitt has a point when he asserts that opinion cannot be forced. In the case of religion, the government could be said to have interfered if it denied any man civil rights on the basis of his creed. But Hazlitt's views are not particularly relevant to the controversy; full toleration is likely to seem a self-evident proposition to a man upon whose shoulders religion sits lightly. His suggestions on libel are more interesting. Although he successfully sued Blackwood's magazine after it had described him as "pimpled Hazlitt", he clearly believed that press freedom could not flourish under such laws. However, here again the mixture of the real and the ideal cast doubt on his solution to a problem. Unlike J.S Mill, he believed that public ostracism could be appropriate at times; in this case, when a writer has offended against public morals. Hazlitt must have been aware that such an informal system of punishment could inflict worse penalties than the letter of the law. So, in order that such a sanction might be consistent with justice, the "general voice" would need to be infallible; the comet would have arrived already. This conflicts with the underlying assumption of the essay, and thus one of its more promising suggestions falls to the ground.

Although Hazlitt's excursion into abstract political theory must be counted a failure, it is in many ways an instructive one. The essay is that of a critic of his times who finds it impossible to overlook the faults of mankind by constructing his "Utopia" on anything but solid earth. Therefore, if we are to properly understand the value of Hazlitt's work in this field, we must turn away from such work to his engagements with men and events. In the remainder of this thesis we will find that, paradoxically,



apart from the masterpiece The Spirit of the Age, Hazlitt's most lasting achievement is to be found in his "occasional" work. It is probably fortunate for Hazlitt that despite his evident fondness for the "Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation", it was never reprinted during his lifetime.

Finally, it is of some interest to identify possible influences upon the essay, since it is likely that these influences may be discerned elsewhere. While it may be illicit to name one over-riding mentor in an incoherent essay, it seems that Rousseau played a major inspiring role, and the outstanding illustrations of this have been noted. Evidently Hazlitt's reading of Paine and Godwin was also important. The individualism based upon natural rights, the plea for toleration, the humanitarian concern for the poor coupled with suspicion of any governmental efforts to educate them can all be traced widely in the writings of the "Eighteenth-Century

Commonwealthsmen", especially the later representatives such as Priestley and

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Price. Perhaps most interesting of all is the similarity between Hazlitt's arguments and those of Sir James Mackintosh in his Vindiciae Gallicae.

There we find the natural rights, the desire for extensive reform, the hatred of arbitrary power, the belief that unequal property is natural but must not be accentuated by government abuses. Mackintosh also uses the analogy of the clock, and it is possibly to him that Hazlitt owes his echoing of Machiavelli - the belief that when a state has become too corrupted, it must return to first principles after a revolution. We find Mackintosh stating that "The multitude have natural and sufficient knowledge to value the superiority of enlightened men", through the benign influence of the press.

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The relationship between the two thinkers is discussed in greater detail below; here it is sufficient to suggest that Mackintosh's belief in the progressive nature of society is the most outstanding divergence in their beliefs; for him, the arrival of a comet would be cause for regret.

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Although the "Project" was Hazlitt's sole exercise in political theory, there is another short piece which it is appropriate to mention here. This is the concluding part of the "Speeches in Parliament on the Distresses of the Country", which Hazlitt mysteriously omitted from the Political Essays.<sup>36</sup> Originally written in August, 1816, it contains Hazlitt's proposed remedies for the problems which had arisen from the post-war dislocation of the English economy, and is presented as his alternative to Coleridge's recently-advertised Lay Sermon. Briefly, the suggestions are that a tax of twenty per-cent should be laid on the salaries of public officials which exceed one hundred pounds; that all sinecure posts, and undeserved pensions should be abolished; that a tax should be levied on landed property which yields over a hundred pounds per annum; that the taxes on consumption, labour and manufacturing should be removed, and the Poor Laws and tithes scrapped.

This is an interesting package of measures, which certainly appears to be radical at first sight. Hazlitt's hostility is directed against abuses which had been perceived by most opponents of government since the Civil Wars at least; standing armies, well-paid positions devoid of duties, taxation, and luxury. However, a comparison with Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, Part Two, which is invited by the tone and content of the essay, leads to a different conclusion. Paine's tract was a genuinely radical document, since it went beyond the traditional complaints about corruption and waste, and outlined a scheme which anticipates welfare benefits in many ways. Hazlitt, who was acquainted with Paine's work, has no plans for wealth distribution. His attitude seems to be that government should be paid for by the well-off, since they benefit disproportionately from its existence. The poor should be left in peace, to earn their own sustenance in their own way. They should be relieved from the taxation which is the major cause of their

troubles, but this in turn should relieve the wealthy of the Poor Rates which were a growing burden for them. In short, the essay represents a compromise solution to poverty and corruption, rather than an anti-aristocratic manifesto like the Rights of Man. The government envisaged by Hazlitt might have less patronage at its disposal, but Hazlitt's intention is merely to cut away the corrupt accretions of the post-Revolutionary period, not to re-construct the institutional system in any far-reaching manner. The impression of moderation is re-inforced when it is recalled that Hazlitt regarded his article in the light of an "experiment", seemingly thrown off as a basis for discussion. It appeared at a time when he was particularly embittered, and when the Whig opposition seemed to have the government in trouble on the question of expenditure. It might be suggested, therefore, that the occasion was ideal for Hazlitt to expound his most radical schemes; what we find, however, is a plan for major reform which falls short of radicalism. Indeed, apart from the proposal to tax land rather than consumer goods, the article would not have seemed out of place in the eighteenth-century Craftsman, mouth-piece of the conservative Viscount Bolingbroke.

Another notable aspect of this essay is its brevity. In fewer than seven pages of the collected Works, Hazlitt deals with complex aspects of economic and social policy, predicting the yield from his new taxes and the resulting benefits to society with a refreshing lack of supporting evidence. Indeed, we may be justified in regarding this essay as a moral exhortation rather than a blue-print for reform. As in the case of the "Project", there is a tendency to superficiality in his work which indicates that Hazlitt did not excel in this kind of writing. The fact that he took so long to work up the "Project" for publication suggests that Hazlitt was aware of this; such a recognition is also the probable explanation for the omission of the third instalment of the "Speeches in Parliament" from the Political Essays. He not be rejected as a political writer on this basis, however. It might be

argued, indeed, that students of political theory have a snobbishness which leads them to concentrate upon the most ambitious or obscure thinkers to the exclusion of the great minds who were modest enough to concentrate on current events. The demolition expert may not win the sort of admiration accorded to a great architect, but this is an analogy which should not apply to the history of ideas.

#### NOTES

1. Works, Vol.XIX, pp.302-20. This essay is treated at length by Crane Brinton in his essay on Hazlitt in The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists; more recently R. Lockridge has reflected upon it in his The Ethics of Romanticism, Cambridge, 1989, pp.360-2.
2. Works, Vol.XIX, p.302.
3. Ibid., p.303.
4. Ibid., p.304.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.305.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.306.
9. Ibid., p.309.
10. Ibid., p.302.
11. Ibid., p.312.
12. Ibid., p.313.
13. Ibid., p.318.
14. Ibid., p.318.
15. Ibid., p.315.
16. Ibid., pp.315-6.
17. Ibid., pp.316-7.
18. Ibid., p.319.
19. Ibid., p.320.
20. Ibid., p.307.

21. Ibid., p.320.
22. J.J. Rousseau, The Social Contract & Discourses, Everyman, 1954 ed., p.16. Priestley's views may be found in his Theological and Miscellaneous Works, 1823, Vol.XXII. Hazlitt's contemporary Benjamin Constant identified a similar distinction, between ancient liberty (where a slave-owning population enjoyed the leisure for political activity, but few civil rights), and modern liberty (which permitted people sufficient civil liberty to make a living in their own way, but placed political power in relatively few hands due to the general lack of leisure-time requisite for political liberty). Hazlitt's work appears in true perspective when compared to this level of sophistication; it must be remembered that besides his frequent intrusions into active politics, Constant wrote novels, and faced the handicap of a tortuous love-life. See his Political Writings, Trans. and ed. B. Fontana, Cambridge, 1988.
23. Works, Vol.XIX, p; .318.
24. Ibid., p.319.
25. Ibid., p.313.
26. Ibid., p.306.
27. Ibid., p.319.
28. Ibid., p.320.
29. Ibid., p.303.
30. Ibid.
31. Rousseau, op. cit., p.3.
32. E. Burke, quoted in M. Freeman, Edmund Burke and the Critique of Popular Radicalism, Oxford, 1970; p.149.
33. For a full discussion of Hazlitt's religious ideas, see below, Part 2, Chapter 3.
34. See C. Robbins, The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthsman, Harvard University Press, 1961. Robbins does not claim Hazlitt as a thinker in the "Commonwealth" tradition, but does describe him as a radical (p.358). As we shall see, this is highly debatable. The Commonwealthsman appealed to ancient forms of government (republican Rome and Sparta), looked back to the old liberties of England, and advocated special devices such as the Harringtonian "rota" as safeguards against despotism. Hazlitt does not fit into this tradition; but his political writings are informed by a similar critical spirit. This is not the place to argue the point, but it might be claimed that although Robbins' book is a masterpiece, particularly because of her refusal to exaggerate the importance of the Commonwealthsman, her book really surveys eighteenth century liberalism in general, rather than a more restricted tradition.
35. Sir J. Mackintosh, Miscellaneous Works, Philedelphia, 1852 ed., p.455.
36. Hazlitt, Works, Vol.XIX, pp.151-7.

## HAZLITT AND THE PROBLEM OF IDEOLOGY 1789-1830

The ideological protagonists of Hazlitt's period are classified under many different names. If they are men of the "left", they might be anarchists, socialists, liberals, revolutionaries, radicals or reformers. The groupings on the "right" are normally less diverse; they are either conservatives or reactionaries. Otherwise the opposing forces are drawn up under the party names of "Whig" and "Tory".

While historians have sometimes differed bitterly over who fits where in this scheme, the scheme itself has rarely received much attention. Hence, there is no universal agreement about what these terms denote. There is no consensus over the exact meaning of the word "ideology" itself. At first glance it seems surprising that this situation has continued for so long. But the issues involved are highly complex and controversial, and since students in the field of political theory have not reached agreement, it is pardonable that historians have flinched.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt, however, that without stable terms of reference, disputes over the ideological identity of historical characters cannot be satisfactorily solved. Each critic may come to his conclusion on impressionistic grounds, which means there is little room for argument with someone who has received a different impression. Since such approaches tend to be readings of a thinker's work in the light of contemporary circumstances, this process of thesis and antithesis may go on indefinitely. Interesting new light may be shed on the original text by this means, but it is likely that greater illumination will be shed on present-day concerns.

The problem of anachronism is closely related to that presented

by students who are themselves overtly ideological. The Marxist, liberal and conservative are convinced that ideology is confined to the other camps, while their own thought is either "scientific" or "common-sensical". The problem is not that these critics automatically come to erroneous conclusions. But they are likely to concentrate on different kinds of evidence, which makes constructive discussion very difficult. The Marxist, conservative and liberal may well agree that Locke contributed to the liberal tradition. But for one he is a bourgeois apologist, another sees him as a rationalist, and the last rejoices in his true picture of the world. However interesting this committed work might be, it will tell us as much about the present-day critic as the thought of Locke.

In contrast to the impressionistic and the ideological writer, the historian of ideas must attempt to gain a sympathetic understanding of the subject and his context. Although complete detachment is impossible, he should try to place himself and the reader in the position of a perceptive onlooker who knows the participants personally, and only votes for one side on the rare occasions when his principles are so threatened that he must intervene. Since a major task of this thesis is to place Hazlitt's political ideas within their ideological and historical context, we must now attempt to describe a methodology which might permit the maximum degree of objectivity.

### **1) The Concept of Ideology**

Many theories of ideology are little more than products of particular types of ideological thinking. For the Marxist, ideology is developed by a class in order to validate its own interests. The working class, however, chooses its goals by means of a scientific study of the historical process. Liberal theorists identify ideology with totalitarian beliefs; in doing so, they define "totalitarian" in a special way which excludes themselves.

Conservatives agree with this in part, but their particular animus is directed towards evidence of abstract, "rationalistic" theorising. Such accounts of ideology cannot all be right. Indeed, the suspicion arises that they are all wrong; that the use of each will simply result in ideological writing.

There is, however, a more promising theory, which does not appear to have a favourable account of any ideology built into it. This is based upon the argument that all ideological positions are underpinned by a theory of human nature.<sup>3</sup> These give rise to diverse ethical understandings of the world, and a belief in political and social arrangements best fitted for man. This approach to the subject is best expounded by noting its positive implications for the history of ideological ideas, together with any difficulties which immediately arise.

Perhaps the most revealing application of this theory is the light it sheds on political debate. Armed with contrasting views about the proper end of man's activity, convinced ideologists of different camps might agree on particular policy issues, but their reasons for doing so will rarely be the same. For example, a person convinced of man's basic depravity may welcome proposals for the extension of welfare benefits, even if these are brought forward by someone who sees all men as brothers. In the first case, the intention may be to interrupt the natural progression from poverty to theft; in the latter it is to reduce one of the gratuitous barriers between kindred souls. This latent clash of principle might be obscured for some time, and a coalition built up. But if the "pessimist" were to advocate the return of capital punishment in view of some spectacular crime, his ally would urge that punishment has purely reformatory purposes. It would become clear that the partnership was founded on transient grounds, and it would soon return to a state of "every man for himself, and God for all of us". The historian of ideology, therefore, must always look beyond the cause supported to the



reasons advanced. In this subject, words speak more loudly than deeds.

An effective spokesman for this view of ideology has noted how ideologists use "pseudo-descriptive" terms, which are in fact loaded with ethical pre-suppositions. Thus, although an ideologist may purport to give an objective account of a politically-significant event, he will present his "facts" in such a manner as to lead his listeners to the desired conclusion. This is a perennial feature of historical writing, and Hazlitt's period is particularly affected. There is a good illustration in the debate between Burke and Paine over the treatment of Louis XVI and his Queen at Versailles. In this case, more than the "facts" were in dispute. Even if the protagonists had concurred on every last detail of events, it would have seemed that they were writing about a different situation. Hence, fundamental disputes about human nature not only affect the motives for action, but also the manner in which the motives are explained.

As there is no theory of human nature which has received universal scientific acknowledgement, our ideological stand-point is normally determined by a-rational factors. Ideological conviction is in many ways similar to a religious faith. This explains why it is difficult for ideologists to find common ground for discussion, however rational they may appear to be in other aspects of life. As in the case of religion, it is not unknown for dramatic conversions to take place. In the period under review, ideological commitments were unusually volatile. While ideological theories of ideology tend to explain such conversions in terms of a move from the light to the dark or vice-versa, there is a possibility that this methodology may provide more constructive answers. An optimistic view of human nature may be shaken by exposure to evil; a pessimist may change his views in response to an act of benevolence. The conversions which took place among Hazlitt's contemporaries were more complicated than this. But the central importance of

theories of human nature will be a useful guide when we turn to examine his response to these changes of principle.

Another point that should be made here is that there is no degree of commitment which qualifies a person as an ideologist. It is often the case that an individual will have no opinion at all on matters of great concern to other members of his ideological "family". Although there are usually a few central issues which pre-dominate for each group, ideology does not exert such dictatorship in every case. To believe this is to make the liberal mistake of regarding all ideology as totalitarian; as Stalin said, unanimity is only conceivable in a graveyard and not even he could force agreement on all issues. Similarly, it would be wrong to reject those who hold self-contradictory views from our inquiries. There would be few subjects for ideological study if we were so selective. There are, of course, degrees of ideological commitment, and these should be taken into account.

Finally, where some students have looked for a logical structure to ideological beliefs, the assumption here is that such a search can only result in imposing artificial clarity onto the ideas of ideologists. Marxism and Christianity may have demanded purity at one time, but there are other creeds which are more flexible and still remain ideologies. We may discover certain tendencies in the way members of an ideological group respond to particular issues, but since circumstances vary these attitudes are no more than provisional. Liberals may generally advocate free speech, but one could demand the censureship of racists and remain a liberal. In short, the political measures normally advocated by members of an ideological family are indications of their position, but are far from being defining characteristics. They become useful when the figure under review has no recorded statements on human nature, but in these cases we must use the evidence with particular caution.

At this point it is proper to notice the objections which might be levelled against this theory. In his recent study of The British Political Tradition, Professor W.H Greenleaf has powerfully argued that all such attempts to locate the "essence" of ideologies are flawed. His view is that this involves excessive reductionism; in boiling down ideological statements to discover a common ingredient, the flavour will be lost. Now, historical reductionism is almost always to be avoided, on the grounds that it normally produces very one-sided history, and that even if the case for a common causal factor were proven, it would actually explain very little. But the methodology suggested here is not reductionism of the same kind as such statements as "history is determined by class-conflict". It is reductionism at one remove. Ideology is itself an abstraction, a tool which helps to explain political motivation. If we are to make use of this tool, it seems sensible to arrive at a consensus over the terminology involved, since, as we have seen, the continued use of different criteria leads only to confusion. The only possible method of reaching agreement would appear to be reductionism. Professor Greenleaf himself calls one volume of his study "The Ideological Heritage", a title which, had he followed his own prescription, would have no agreed meaning. In this volume he classifies thinkers into "collectivists", "individualists" and conservatives in a manner which suggests that there is indeed some element common to all. Although he does not use such wide general terms as the present study applies to a different period, it would be improper to argue that he has not indulged in reductionism. In short, the historian cannot do otherwise unless he is to abandon the idea of identifying traditions of thought entirely.

Another related objection urges that we cannot identify members of a tradition ourselves. This should only be done by people who feel that they are continuing the tradition. This approach seems to be an unnecessary abdication of responsibility, since on the theory of ideology

proposed above, self-conscious ideologists would be the very last people to trust. They will "claim" particular thinkers for themselves, presenting their own, ideologically-coloured account of each thinker's work. Clearly it is preferable to leave this procedure to those who have no particular axe to grind.

## 2) Terminology

For the purposes of this thesis, the most important ideological groupings will be termed "conservative" and "liberal". There is a problem of anachronism here, since the words were not widely used by Hazlitt's contemporaries. While there were self-conscious liberals during his life-time, the word "conservative" seems to have first appeared in this context after his death.<sup>6</sup> However, the usage may be justified because although the words did not exist throughout the period, the positions which they describe did. It is absurd to suggest that the founder of conservatism was not a conservative, and that Fox was not a liberal, simply because they did not live long enough to adopt the label themselves. Furthermore, these words are generally used by historians of the period, and may be used to avoid confusion.

A more serious difficulty is the fact that "conservatism" and "liberalism" have two meanings. The primary, or ideological meaning will be taken here to denote the agent's view of human nature; but there is a secondary meaning which indicates the stance towards present society and political institutions. A liberal in this sense is normally a humanitarian, while the conservative stands out against change. We shall return to this question a little later. For now, it suffices to say that this confusion, which bedevils much work on the subject, must be borne in mind at all times, but that it may be overcome.

Conservatism is taken here to denote a belief in the moral corruption of man, liberalism a faith in the progressive, rational nature of

humanity. As such, the conservative places most emphasis upon order, while the liberal believes that man thrives best without excessive interference from others. Now these are generalisations, strictly applicable in very few cases. For the most part, the historian of political ideas is dealing with attitudes which lie between these ideal types. A decision must normally be made on the balance of evidence; a prevalent tone of pessimism indicates the conservative, and a habitual feeling that man is capable of improvement is the hallmark of liberalism. In some cases, the thinker will be close enough to the generalised model for the term to stand on its own. But more often a qualifying term will be necessary to provide a more accurate picture.

In the period under review, the most common terms of qualification are "liberal" and "conservative" in their secondary senses. We have seen that this promises confusion, but traditional usage demands that they are not discarded. Indeed, there is a way in which confusion can be avoided. The ideological term, denoting the view of human nature, should always come last in our short-hand description. Therefore, if a thinker has a strong belief in the progressive nature of man under free institutions and considers that present arrangements allow this satisfactorily, he would best be described as a conservative liberal. Correspondingly, if the agent thinks that man is fatally flawed, but that governmental control is more likely to produce harm than good, it would be appropriate to call him a liberal conservative. In both these examples, the first term indicates the attitudes which have arisen from the ideological position which is shown in the second.

The other terms which are frequently used include "radical" and "reformer". These are not ideological positions, although they are sometimes used as if they are. They relate to the degree of change deemed necessary by the agent, not the desired outcome of these changes. When used in

conjunction with an ideological term, "radical" is taken here to mean the  
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desire to change government root-and-branch. "Reformer" implies that the  
remedy can be found by adjustments in the present arrangements. The terms,  
therefore, must be very carefully distinguished. Radicalism will be generally  
found in those who exhibit a relatively pure ideological commitment; it is  
unlikely that a thinker who is ambivalent about what is best for man would  
contemplate a complete overhaul of institutions.

The word "reactionary", however, is more problematic. Mao's  
assertion that all reactionaries are paper tigers is hardly the least precise  
definition that has been offered. Does a reactionary wish to turn the clock  
back? If so, how far? Does he only react against recent changes? Or does he  
stand in the way of change which is obviously needed? Who, then, is to decide  
on the necessity of any change? Clearly most commentators have used the word  
to show their hostility to conservatives. This is a little unfair, since many  
reformers appealed to the past to justify their demands. In fact, this tactic  
has been used by so many writers with such varied purposes that it would be  
better to do without the term entirely.

The terms "left" and "right" are also highly dubious when used  
in the history of ideology. They are standing temptations to anachronism.  
The political battlefield is not stationary over the centuries, but critics  
who employ these terms may easily commit the error of imagining that the men  
of the left in 1642 would fight alongside the revolutionists of 1789, to take  
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an obvious example. Also, if these terms are used in every period they lead  
one to expect a full spectrum of views at all times, and incite historians to  
seek out and distort the writings of marginal thinkers. This is not to imply  
that thinkers who were neglected in their day are not worthy of independent  
study, so long as the contemporary framework of debate is constantly kept in  
view.

Finally, it is quite valid to investigate more precise traditions of thought, such as the work of the "Commonwealthsmen" studied by Caroline Robbins, and those hierarchical thinkers portrayed by W.H Greenleaf in his Order, Empiricism, and Politics. However, it might be argued that these traditions fall respectively within the liberal and conservative categories, and this should not be forgotten. The problem of abstraction which Professor Greenleaf notes in connection with the broader ideological labels afflicts this endeavour to a similar degree - perhaps even more seriously, because these more restricted models are more likely to make us neglect aspects of a writer's thought which lie outside the boundary walls. In the cases named above, major contributions have been made to the history of ideas, and clearly the method is profitable when used with skill.

It may be objected that on the basis outlined above, impressionistic judgements will still play a role. This, indeed, is quite unavoidable. The boundary between reformism and radicalism, even pessimism and optimism, will be difficult to ascertain in practice. The advantage of this method lies in the fact that there is a clear distinction between ideological and dispositional factors, and that in the former case there is a clear body of evidence to which appeal can be made in disputes. Also, by its recognition that ideology affects all historians to some extent, it encourages the detection of students who write political manifestoes rather than history. The best work in the history of ideas is composed with awareness of personal bias, coupled with the desire to compensate for this as much as possible.

In order to illustrate this methodology further, two examples of ideological figures from Hazlitt's period have been selected for brief examination. They have been chosen because they are normally associated with a definite position. We shall then turn to Hazlitt's own views on political

principles, to discover whether he demonstrates an understanding of what we have called ideology.

A LIBERAL REFORMER: FRANCIS PLACE

Francis Place is often nick-named "the radical tailor of

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Charing Cross". The assumption behind this is that he was a radical liberal.

It would be reasonable to say that those men normally described as radicals believed that institutional discrimination should be ended, in both religious and more strictly political spheres. This position was generally based upon a belief that free participation was best suited to man's nature. As we have seen, radicalism is a belief that the present governmental structure is totally unfitted for fulfilling the purpose of man's existence, which gives rise to the conviction that institutions should be wholly reconstructed.

At times, Place gives strong indications of radical sympathies.

At the time of the first Reform Act, he wrote that this was the beginning of an inevitable process, "which from time to time will increase the power of the people and lessen that of government, until it has either totally destroyed it

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by a violent ebullition or quietly absorbed it." As a fervent disciple of Jeremy Bentham, he complained that government was conducted on an ad hoc basis quite opposed to the sound Utilitarian principles which should direct it. Bentham advocated Universal Suffrage on the grounds that in elections each man should count as one and no-one as more than one; the contrast between the application of this principle and the limited, customary franchises in English constituencies of the time is striking enough to consider this a demand for radical change.

However, a little closer examination reveals that this position should be qualified. Place was certainly not convinced that human nature was benevolent when allowed free play. He chastised Cobbett for being "too



ignorant to see that the common people must ever be imbecile...when not  
12  
encouraged and supported by others who have money and influence." In the same  
13  
mood he wrote to James Mill, "how very few are there who are not common men."  
14  
Mill himself "thought human life a poor thing at best", as his son testified.  
The evidence suggests that Bentham's followers were not the rigid liberals  
they are often portrayed as being. While they certainly thought that the  
people were to be trusted in electing the best governors, it is not clear  
that they were optimistic enough to believe that such men were equipped to  
take an active share in administration themselves.

This has definite implications for Place's radicalism, and it  
is unsurprising that there are limits to the amount of change envisaged by  
him. Certainly he was no social leveller. He looked on the masses as the  
"vulgarity", clearly distinguishing between them and "the people", who were  
15  
those "by whom the rest must be governed". The natural governors of society  
were always to be men of property. Place himself was not only reasonably  
prosperous, but he had also risen in status due to his activities in  
Westminster politics. He leant towards the aristocratic Hobhouse and Burdett  
in preference to "demagogues" such as William Cobbett and Henry Hunt. Hunt,  
he informed Mill in 1816, "is a pretty sample of an ignorant, turbulent,  
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mischief-making fellow, a highly dangerous one in turbulent times." Place's  
caution lent credence to the belief that he was a spy in government  
employment.

In short, it is preferable to classify Place as a reformer  
rather than a radical. But his liberalism clearly over-rides the occasional  
pessimistic outbursts. He placed great trust in the power of human  
rationality. He devoted a good deal of energy to the establishment of  
educational facilities for working men, and his initial solution to the  
Malthusian problem was "good teaching". While he did not entertain

glorious visions of the future in the manner of some contemporaries - he was rendered speechless by Robert Owen's Utopianism - he does show a strong conviction that progress in human affairs was likely.

CONSERVATISM: ARTHUR WELLESLEY, DUKE OF WELLINGTON

It is generally believed that the Duke of Wellington was more at home on the battlefield than in Parliament. He himself thought that political activity was largely an exercise in common sense. "There was much talk of "Whig principles, and Tory principles, and liberal principles, and Mr. Canning's principles;" but I confess that I have never seen a definition of any of them, and cannot make to myself a clear idea of what any of them mean." <sup>17</sup> This statement may be explained in various ways. His introduction of a distinction between Canning's principles and Tory principles is an obvious hit against that troublesome colleague; the claim of ignorance is partly a reflection of Wellington's disliking for partisan politics. But this does not mean that he lacked convictions himself. Indeed, the suggestion that party principles are irrelevant in relation to the national interest is a tell-tale sign of an ideologist at work. His definition of the national interest appears irrefutable to him, because he operates within a framework of ideas which prevent him from seeing any alternatives.

This interpretation is borne out by the continuation of the passage quoted above. He announced his intention to maintain "the prerogatives of the Crown, the rights and privileges of the Church and its union with the State; and these principles are not inconsistent with a determination to do everything in my power to secure the liberty and promote the prosperity and happiness of the people". The order of priorities given here is typical of the thinkers of the time who based their views upon a conservative view of human nature. This affords a clue to Wellington's

ideological identity, but we need more evidence.

Wellington did hold pessimistic ideas about human nature. His confession that his soldiers terrified him, and that they were the scum of the earth, are well-known. Furthermore, his correspondence is frequently enlivened by prophecies of doom. His favourite target for such opinions was John Wilson Croker, who was equally disenchanted with the trend of events.

"It is some consolation to us who are so near the end of our career that we shall be spared seeing the Consummation of the ruin that is gathering around

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us" is a typical pronouncement. Wellington believed that the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832 was effected by men who had forgotten that "all Gov't,

even that of Self is restraint, and that it is not safe to entrust the Powers of Restraint solely to the hands of those who ought to be restrained." The

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natural rulers of society were those he termed the "parti conservateur" -the Bishops and clergy, the aristocracy and the landed interest in general, plus

great merchants and bankers. He was uneasy about the educational reforms

proposed by liberals such as Brougham, believing that if the poor were to be

educated at all it should be under the influence of religious principles.

Wellington's misfortune was to shoulder the responsibility of governing the country when the trend was towards institutional changes he disliked. The threat of reform was one of the reasons which induced him to

stay in politics, but this fact has been lost on historians who see him as a reactionary who opposed obvious improvements in the interest of his class.

There is no need to claim that Wellington's views were equally persuasive as

those of his liberal opponents. It is quite sufficient to show that these principles were grounded upon a genuine fear for the likely consequences of

reform. It would have been quite consistent for Wellington to leave the management of these changes to others, but his attempts to carry them through

himself in the face of opposition from within his own ranks demonstrates his

conviction that national tranquility was of more importance than mere party advantage. A desire to see the problem of France quietly settled seems to have been Wellington's motive for acquiescence in the Bourbon Restorations of 1814 and 15.

Wellington's career, indeed, shows that the caricature of conservatism beloved by Whig and Marxist historians is shallow. When called upon to defend the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828, he argued that he was not in favour of adhering to measures which were necessary at one time, but were now redundant. This is a good illustration of the distinction between the two meanings of "conservatism". In the non-ideological sense, a conservative resists change; in the primary sense, he permits, and even encourages reform if this will bring about a state of affairs which will on balance discourage the base elements of human nature. Wellington's conservatism was clearly of this primary type. Those who describe him as a reactionary seem to be motivated by a desire that students should regard conservatives as one-dimensional characters.

We have seen that Wellington also held humanitarian views which indicate non-ideological liberalism. He wished to preserve the liberties of the people, and it appears that, unlike Place, he means the whole people. However, this element is not strong enough to merit the label "liberal conservative" for Wellington. It was so common-place for political thinkers of all descriptions to applaud the basic liberties of Englishmen that it sheds no light on their ideological identities. The conservative bias of Wellington's thought is so pronounced that the term may be allowed to stand alone in his case.

#### **4) Hazlitt and Ideology**

The word "ideology" was coined during Hazlitt's life-time,

although it carried a different connotation from that of today. Destutt de Tracy, who introduced it, wished to found a science of ideas which would free human thought from the accretions of prejudice. Hazlitt knew and disliked de Tracy's work; ideology and its champion were both denounced by Napoleon.<sup>20</sup> As a critic of political ideas, Hazlitt was partly concerned with ideology in its modern sense. However, he was also a keen participant in the debates of his time. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall examine his views on the subject in order to decide whether they merely convey evidence of his own ideological stance, or whether he was able to show a more objective and sympathetic understanding of other political beliefs.

In an essay written in 1830 - the last year of his life - Hazlitt examined "The Spirit of Controversy". Controversy, he asserts, is "a necessary evil or good (call it which you will) till all differences of opinion or interest are reconciled, and absolute certainty or perfect indifference" reign in its stead.<sup>21</sup> The spirit of controversy might be abhorred because it encourages dogmatism, and a willingness to think the worst of our antagonists. Despite our determination to see things in black and white, truth is many-sided. Indeed, we lash ourselves into a fury mainly because we suspect that there may be something in what the other side says. Hence, controversies expose some of the worst aspects of human nature, and help to ensure that the truth remains hidden from the combatants.

However, Hazlitt does not foresee an immediate end to the bickering, and suggests some reasons why this should not be a cause for dismay. Simply because truth is not simple, the clash of opinions can lead less partial observers to a proper understanding. Here Hazlitt's argument is reminiscent of the support for free speech advanced by Milton, and, later, by J.S Mill. These thinkers believed that truth will always emerge from a fair contest, however wrong-headed some of the participants may be. There is,

however, an important difference in Hazlitt's position. Milton and Mill believed that this truth, once established, would be evident to those who were not blinded by their passions. It might still be subjected to attacks, but it would always prevail. Hazlitt is less sure of this. "The world has never yet done, and will never be able to do without some apple of discord - some bone of contention - any more than courts of law can do without pleadings, or hospitals without the sick". This scepticism arises from the belief that truth is many-sided, not simple as Milton and Mill implied. The suggestion is that since the whole truth about anything can never be known the political arena will always be the scene of clashes between the purveyors of partial truth.

But are these sources of contention ideological, in our sense? Since Hazlitt believed that these arguments are sustained by the possibility of approaching a subject in different ways, it does appear that he was groping towards a similar concept. For instance, he acknowledges that while a novelty might be good in itself, antiquity "does not always turn out an old woman, either." This is an interesting reflection on the debate between Burke and Paine, on which Hazlitt appears to be reserving judgement here. Also, Hazlitt did not disapprove of such disagreements, in the manner that some ideological theorists have done. It is difficult to develop a sympathetic understanding of contrasting principles when we wish for them to be eradicated.

There is also strong evidence that Hazlitt comprehended the a-rational basis of these theories. In an early discussion of the Earl of Chatham's parliamentary career, he notes that "The business of an orator is not to convince, but persuade; not to inform, but to arouse the mind;" "Calm enquiry, sober truth, and speculative indifference, will never carry any point." Explaining the failure of Horne Tooke's oratory, he writes that the speaker "must make common cause with his hearers. To lead, he must follow the

general bias." In other words, debates are largely pre-determined by the emotional preferences of the audience. The orator's task is to exploit this bias, and he will not do so if he concentrates on rational argument. In the essay "Belief, Whether Voluntary?", Hazlitt also demonstrates that he understood the similar origin of religious quarrels; "Is there then a Papist and a Protestant understanding - one prepared to receive the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the other to reject it? No such thing; but in either case the ground of reason is pre-occupied by passion, habit, example - the  
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scales are falsified." Hazlitt was quite prepared to admit that his own

views were founded on prejudice. These insights into the motivation of political commitment cast an ironic light on Sir Leslie Stephen's jibe that  
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 "What Hazlitt called his opinions were really his feelings."

Hazlitt was also well aware of the way in which ideologists make use of facts to lend a rationalistic credibility to their position. The phrenologist, Dr. Spurzheim, is the particular target for this criticism, although the latter is associated with Robert Owen in the following passage:

"From the moment that we heard Dr. Spurzheim declare that his system was not a theory but a collection of facts, we immediately withdrew our confidence both from him and his theory, and began to entertain doubts, not merely of the paradoxical and extreme inferences he drew from his assumed  
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 facts, but of the truth of those facts themselves."

Like Owen and other ideologists, Spurzheim chose "facts" which illustrated his theory, rejecting all others which might place it in jeopardy. In doing so, he distorted the facts. This is highly reminiscent of the pseudo-descriptive use of facts we discussed earlier.

Moving from the theory of ideology to Hazlitt's reaction to the thinkers and politicians of his time, we find that he treats them primarily in terms of their principles, and their effect in practice. Although we shall

return to this matter in detail later, it is worthy of notice here that he does not attack Whig and Tory principles; rather, he does not regard them as possessing any. For the Tory, "Truth and falsehood are...something to buy and sell; principles and conscience, something to eat and drink." "He is not for empty speculations, but for full pockets." The Whig is "but the fag-end of a Tory." He is "what is called a Trimmer - that is, a coward to both sides of the question, who dare not be a knave nor an honest man, but is a sort of whiffling, shuffling, cunning, silly, contemptible, unmeaning negation of the two."

However, throughout this diatribe Hazlitt produces evidence that both Whig and Tory did in fact have principles, but that these were rejected by himself. This produces the peculiar self-contradiction in such remarks as "[The Tory] has no principles himself, nor does he profess to have any, but will cut your throat for differing with any of his bigotted dogmas." On his own theory, "bigotted dogmas" qualify as principles no less than the most reasonable and flexible ideas. Also, even if he is right in identifying hypocrisy and venality as the watch-words of party, it would still be worthwhile explaining why this had happened before abusing it.

However, although at times like this Hazlitt's own ideological commitment does throw his criticism off-balance, the overall conclusion should be that he is an unusually sympathetic observer. Not only his later work, which is reasonably obscure, but also the Spirit of the Age and his early "Character of Mr. Burke" demonstrate a more detached outlook. In the former work, it is interesting to find him congratulating Sir Walter Scott, who "does not enter into the distinction of hostile sects and parties, but treats of the strength or the infirmity of the human mind, of the virtues or vices of the human breast, as they are to be found blended in the whole race of mankind." Here we see not only a suggestion of Hazlitt's own notion of



human nature, but also his approval of a writer who strives for objectivity - at least in his fiction.

Despite this critical ideal, the theory of ideology used here indicates that no-one can be entirely free from bias. Hazlitt certainly recognised this, and saw the tendency to dogmatism in theories which appeared to be objective; "We may be intolerant even in advocating the cause

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of Toleration." This acute self-awareness is probably the key element in a proper treatment of political ideas. If Hazlitt did not follow his best instincts all of the time, it remains true that he was capable of writing sympathetically about political opponents, and that he was unusually aware of the sources of such disagreements.

#### NOTES

1. Of course, it is only recently, thanks largely to the efforts of historians such as H.T Dickinson and J.G.A Pocock, that ideas have been reinstated into the study of the eighteenth century. But the importance of some clarification in this field is shown by Professor Pocock's rather timid definition of ideology in his Virtue, Commerce and History (Cambridge, 1985, p.216 note); "a view of the world determined by the various factors that may be held to have determined it." T.P Schofield's recent discussion of conservative ideology at the time is based upon a Marxist view of ideology (whatever the author's personal convictions) which renders his interpretation very dubious; see his "Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution", Historical Journal, 29 (1986), pp. 601-21, esp. pp.620-1 where he concludes that "Adherence to any particular moral theory did not distinguish conservatives and radicals in the 1790's, but their attitude towards inequality of property, rank and power in civil society." This statement is tautological; if one defines ideological positions by means of their attitudes to property, rank and power, it is hardly astounding to find that they turn out to be definable in terms of attitudes to property, rank and power. It is equally wrong, however, to banish materialistic concerns from the purview of the history of ideas. The approach adopted here would merely relegate these to the status of indications of an ideological stance, rather than determining factors.
2. There is no intention here to prove that complete objectivity is possible; for who is to judge what the objective view of a problem is? It is assumed, however, that the ideal of scholarship in the history of ideas is to be aware of one's own bias, and to combat this as much as possible.
3. For a recent account of this interpretation, see I. Adams, The Logic of Political Belief, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989. T. B Macauley (Works, 12 Vols., London, 1898 ed., Vol.VII, p.365 et. seq.) denied that political science could be based upon theories of human nature, mainly on the ground

that no such theory could be found to hold good in all cases. This position by no means affects the theory advocated here, since even if it is invalid to draw up schemes of government on the basis of a theory of human nature, what we are discussing is not the validity of such an exercise, but the fact that this is what ideologists do. Ironically, Macauley's statement is an excellent example of an ideologist fantasising that he is free from the glaring ideological bias of his opponents; in this case, the Benthamites.

4. Ibid., esp. pp.41-5.
5. W. H Greenleaf, The British Political Tradition; Vol.II The Ideological Heritage, Methuen, 1983, pp.11-13.
6. For the original usage of this word, see M. Brightfield, John Wilson Croker, p.405, note. Conservatism has not been treated consistently well, as seems to be the case with liberalism (see esp. D. Manning's Liberalism London, 1976, and G. de Ruggerio, The History of European Liberalism, Trans. R. Collingwood, Boston, 1959 ed.). The best work on conservatism is contained in Sir I. Gilmour, Inside Right, London, 1978 reprint, N. O'Sullivan, Conservatism, London, 1976, and W. Harbour, The Foundations of Conservative Thought, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982.
7. The confusion surrounding the word "radical" is demonstrated in a sentence from J. Boulton, The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963; "The radical Whigs were anxious to avoid sweeping political change because they were strongly connected with the system as a result of sentiment and hereditary wealth" (emphasis mine). Professor Boulton's book is an excellent contribution to the history of ideas from a literary angle; but there are several confusions here which need to be addressed. Another interest article published more recently claims that Parts One and Two of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man represent the "conflicting" ideologies of liberalism and radicalism respectively (G. Kates, "From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine's Rights of Man"; Journal of the History of Ideas 1989, pp.569-587). Since there is no discussion of ideology in the paper, one might conclude that the Second Part merely represents a more radical liberal vision of the future than the First; the First Part, after all, was a defensive tract, and when he wrote the Second Paine felt able to present a more positive programme to his admirers.
8. It must be added that the common penchant for evoking dead revolutionaries often has fascinating implications - for example, in the case of Wordsworth, who indicated his support for the English monarchy against republican France by calling up the shades of the regicides Milton and Sidney in his Sonnets of 1802. By 1808, however, Francis Jeffrey was mourning in the Edinburgh Review that those who praised the Sidneys and the Russells incurred the suspicion of the government. See B. Fontana, Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: The "Edinburgh Review" 1802-1832, Cambridge, 1985, p.12.
9. W. H Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism and Politics, Oxford University Press, 1964; Robbins, op. cit..
10. This brief study is based upon G. Wallas's excellent Life of Francis Place, Allen & Unwin, 1918 ed..
11. Ibid., p.322 quoted.

12. Ibid., p.117 quoted.
13. Ibid., p.84 quoted.
14. J.S Mill, Autobiography, quoted in Wallas, op. cit., p.90.
15. To J. Hobhouse, March 22nd 1830; quoted Wallas op. cit., p.15.
16. Ibid., p.119. See also his letter to the radical, William Lovett, ibid., pp. 362-3, in which a strong vein of pessimism, coupled with a determination to make the best of things (reminiscent of Candide) reveals itself.
17. N. Thompson, Wellington After Waterloo, Routledge & Kegan Paul, quoted, p. 80. This study owes much to the latter work, and also to E. Longford, Wellington: Pillar of State, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972 ed..
18. N. Thompson, op. cit., p.256.
19. Ibid., p.184, quoted.
20. See Works, Vol.XX, pp.170-1.
21. Works, Vol.XX, p.314.
22. Ibid., p.309.
23. Ibid., p.310.
24. Works, Vol.VII, p.298; c.f S. Ayling, The Elder Pitt, Collins, 1976; "I never cultivated the talent for making speeches but as an instrument of action" p.142 quoted.
25. Works, Vol.XI, pp.50-1.
26. Works, Vol.XX, pp.355-6.
27. Stephen, op. cit., p.84.
28. Works, Vol.XIX, p.159.
29. Works, Vol.VII, p.19.
30. Ibid., p.18.
31. Ibid., p.21.
32. Ibid., p.17.
33. Works, Vol.XI, p.65.
34. Works, Vol.XX, p.322.

***PART TWO: ISSUES***

## PART TWO: ISSUES

Hazlitt's work deals with so many aspects of politics and society that a process of selection is forced upon us. The issues treated here are not simply those which Hazlitt concentrated upon. Rather, they are controversial matters from which, it is hoped, the most striking conclusions about the character of his thought may be drawn. In this chapter we shall examine his ideas on the monarchy and patriotism.

### THE MONARCHY

"I have nowhere in anything I may have written declared myself to be a Republican; nor should I think it worthwhile to be a martyr and a confessor to any form or mode of government. But what I have staked health and wealth, name and fame upon, and am ready to do so again and to the last gasp, is this, that there is a power in the people to change its government and its governors. That is, I am a Revolutionist, for otherwise, I must allow that mankind is but a herd of slaves, the property of thrones, that no tyranny or insult can lawfully goad to a resistance to a particular family..."

1

Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, 1828.

At the outset of this discussion it is important to distinguish between three different aspects of monarchy to which Hazlitt might respond. Firstly there was the personality of the individual ruler. The long reign of George III occupied most of Hazlitt's life, but the figure of George IV as Prince of Wales, Prince Regent and finally king also looms large. Secondly, there is the monarchy as an institution. Although the character and activities of each king must have affected Hazlitt's reflections, it is necessary to decide what he felt about the British monarchy in general.

Finally, it is essential to distinguish what Hazlitt says about

the British monarchy from his views on its continental counterpart. Once again, this is no easy matter. It is not always clear whether his most abusive remarks are directed against monarchy abroad, or whether the institution as a whole was being condemned. But clearly there were differences between these institutions, and it will be of major importance to discover if Hazlitt regards the similarities as more striking.

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In 1823, Hazlitt contributed an essay "On the Spirit of  
2  
Monarchy" to The Liberal. It was a piece which he later recalled with mixed feelings, as he believed that it had provoked a great deal of hostility from the Tory press. It certainly is a bold essay, beginning with the impudent hope that Hazlitt will not be suspected of intending libel.

With the memory of George IV's coronation fresh in his mind, Hazlitt attempts to explain the popularity of monarchy. Since it is impossible for us all to be kings, we console ourselves by enthroning someone who will not challenge our self-esteem. "We make Gods of wood and stone and brass, but we make Kings of common men, and are proud of our own handy work." Even a slave can sympathise with a king, "because the last is, what the first would  
3  
be." While it might be thought that kings should be the best men in their countries, the chances are strongly against this. Their people will not wish to have their own failings underlined in a comparison with men of surpassing virtue.

Hereditary monarchy, indeed, has many advantages over an elective version. There can be few disputes over the hereditary succession, but if the position is filled on grounds of merit, there would be no end to the controversy. Similarly, under an elective monarchy our veneration for the institution would fluctuate according to our opinion of each ruler. Under

hereditary monarchy "it is the place and power we bow to, and not the man."

Hazlitt's intention, however, is to explain the popularity of monarchy, not to justify it. It appears that his real intention is to attack hereditary monarchy in general, not to advocate it against elective rule. At one point he does interject "Pshaw! we had forgot - Our British monarchy is a mixed, and the only perfect form of government; and therefore what is here said [in criticism] cannot properly apply to it".<sup>5</sup> Later he describes a constitutional monarch as "a servant of the public, a representative of the people's wants and wishes, dispensing justice and mercy according to law. Such a monarch is the King of England! Such was his late, and such is his present Majesty George the Fourth!"<sup>6</sup> The sarcasm which lies behind these remarks is unmistakable. It is significant that he describes the coronation of George IV to illustrate his hostility to monarchy in general. Such a spectacle, he writes, "debauches the understandings of the people, and makes them the slaves of sense and show."<sup>7</sup> Exposed to this kind of veneration, surrounded by sycophants and taught to look down on his subjects, only accident can prevent an hereditary monarch from becoming a tyrant unless the people resist his encroachments.

In Hazlitt's Political Essays (1819), there are two pieces which reveal that the later attack on monarchy was the result of no transient emotion. "What is the People?" and "On the Regal Character" contain very similar objections to monarchy in general. While hereditary kings can be no better than common mortals, their role can only be justified if they possess super-human powers. However, they only exercise their abilities on court etiquette. They are remarkable for remembering faces and dress, but this is because they are constantly watching for any signs of insubordination. They look down upon their subjects "as we do insects that cross our path."<sup>8</sup> In contrast to this, the "patriot King" is he who has enough imagination and

humanity to place himself in the situation of the people. Once again, he half-heartedly excepts the Hanoverians from these criticisms. At least George III was not an evil man. But private virtues are of little value to the subjects of a king; Charles II was a witty and amiable person, and no less of a tyrant for it. In England Parliament interposes between the king and any ideas of despotic rule. But in "What is the People?" such devices are dismissed as "insufficient checks and balances." If constitutional monarchs have an advantage, it lies in the increased personal safety of the ruler. Kings who ignore the people must live in constant fear of assassination from their attendants; the Prince Regent has nothing to fear from the speeches of his opponents, so long as the expression of public opinion is permitted. Yet this distinction seemed to be disappearing fast. The struggle against revolutionary France had encouraged the spread of Divine Right principles, even though the Hanoverians had benefitted from what Hazlitt regarded as their defeat in 1688.

According to Hazlitt, in short, kings had done nothing for the people. Any freedoms which the latter enjoyed were the result of their own endeavours. The notion of transferring power from father to son is ridiculous; we do not have hereditary actors, so why do we use this principle in a more important sphere? Common sense decrees that government should be directed by merit, not birth.

A final example may be drawn from the essay "Personal Politics", which was written just before the author's death. Here, Hazlitt speaks about the Hanoverians in more detail. George III was instilled with false notions of prerogative as a youth, and his rigid adherence to his coronation oath made him blind to the cause of the people. He had dangerous leanings towards arbitrary rule, which induced him to support the despotic Bourbons. George IV lacked even the private morality of his father, but his reputation for gentlemanly conduct obscured his vices from the public. William IV had made a



promising start because of his good humour, but once more this affability would be no indication of how he would behave in a crisis. He urges that if in future a king should intervene to prop up the Bourbons, he should be expelled without delay.

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Towards the end of his life, Hazlitt stated that he was "by education and conviction inclined to republicanism and puritanism". There is little doubt that he had a theoretical preference for republican government, but this does not prove so much as it might appear. The passage continues with the mournful acknowledgement that in the republican United States, no-one has "a head like one of Titian's Venetian nobles, nurtured on all the pride of aristocracy and all the blindness of popery." Hazlitt finds something fascinating in the institutions he had been brought up to abhor. A closer study of his ideas will help to explain this ambivalence towards monarchy.

While Hazlitt is sarcastic about the distinction between constitutional monarchy and despotism, he is certainly suggesting that ideally the English version is an improvement. His moral case against George III's intervention in France really depends upon such a distinction. For if the hereditary principle corrupts all monarchs, there should have been no question that George would support Louis. At times, indeed, he implies that the war was inevitable, but more often he represents it as a deviation from the principles of the Hanoverian regime. Equally, Hazlitt contrasts the theories of the House of Stuart with those of their successors. This would be inappropriate if he genuinely believed all monarchs shared the same tendencies at bottom. We should conclude that although he would prefer meritocratic rule, his immediate concern was that the Hanoverians should conform to the principles which brought them to the throne.

The advantages which Hazlitt identifies in hereditary rule were never refuted by him. It is true that a hereditary basis usually prevents arguments over the succession. A strict government of merit would be constantly changing even if it were possible that the very best man might be appointed. Hazlitt evidently found it easier to criticise hereditary monarchy than to suggest a more proper system. Furthermore, Napoleon had declared his throne hereditary, a fact which Hazlitt does not discuss at length in his biography. Most interesting of all is his comparison of the acting profession to that of kingship. Although we might agree that the cast of a play should not be decided upon purely hereditary grounds if we want to keep our patrons satisfied, it is not clear that there is an analogy here with monarchy. It is not necessary for the supporters of hereditary rule to claim that each king is necessarily the most gifted man available. Presumably most subjects would be satisfied if their monarch was able to read over his lines; under a working constitutional monarchy, of course, he would be assisted in this by prompters who represented the people. Hazlitt seems to be demanding a kind of theatrical flair from monarchs. This has fascinating implications, especially as it might help to explain his admiration for Napoleon. Whatever the validity of this point, Hazlitt ignores it in another essay, where he admits that his respect for the magistrate William Fielding was mainly inspired by the fact that his father had been a great novelist. Although Hazlitt actually believed that the younger Fielding was competent in his work, it is clear that he wanted to believe this, in much the same way that a monarchist anxious to refute him might have sought great qualities in the Bourbons.

13

This remarkable self-contradiction backs up Hazlitt's own belief that monarchy is suited to human nature. "It would be hard upon that great baby, the world," he writes, "to take any of its idols to pieces and shew that they are nothing but painted wood." He relates an anecdote of the historian

14

William Roscoe, expressing a preference for George III over Bonaparte,  
"because, in the former case, there was nothing to overcome the imagination  
but birth and situation; whereas he could not so easily brook the double  
superiority of the other, merited as well as adventitious." It is in the  
face of this kind of attitude that Hazlitt exclaims, "Oh, Reason! when will  
thy long minority expire?" Evidently once reason has entered upon its kingdom,  
a republican form of government would be ideal for Hazlitt. But the very  
frailties which make the people set up human idols are those which make a  
different system unacceptable at present. Napoleon was born in the wrong age.

Hazlitt, therefore, is by no means a worshipper of kings. But it  
would be incorrect to describe his attitude as that of a radical. It appears  
that his attitude towards the monarchy was determined primarily by his hatred  
of cant and hypocrisy. To his mind the flattery of kings could be nothing else  
when it was expressed by intelligent men such as the poet-laureate, Southey.  
He believed that if a man is constantly told he is divine, he will begin to  
act with the irresponsibility of a god, however lacking in abilities. His  
remarks were therefore intended to remind the public that their king was a  
flawed human being no better than themselves. To protect existing liberties he  
advocated reform to shore up the "insufficient checks and balances" in  
Britain, and in moral terms to restore the spirit of 1688. Indeed, his  
interpretation of this spirit is the liberal one, as opposed to the  
conservative version expounded by Burke in his Appeal from the Old to the  
New Whigs. The reign of George III had marked a regression from this spirit;  
the war against America, the moves to suppress "sedition" at home and the  
corresponding assistance to the Bourbons were worrying signs. If the  
Hanoverians were to adopt the maxims of the House of Stuart, they would share  
the same fate. Overall it would be better for everyone if they began to pay  
heed to the demands of the people, and, although Hazlitt doubts whether an  
hereditary monarch could be trusted to do so out of natural goodness, once he

saw that it was in his interests, and once better machinery for collecting the true will of the people was introduced, a constitutional monarch might be trusted as in the days of William III.

## PATRIOTISM

"The definition of a true patriot is a good hater"

17

On Good Nature (1816)

"[Liberty] is the indigenous growth of our temper and our clime; and woe to him who deprives us of the only amends for so many disadvantages and feelings!"

18

Aphorisms on Man (1830)

If, as Hazlitt wrote in 1806, "To love one's country is to wish well to it; to prefer its interest to our own; to oppose every measure inconsistent with its welfare; and to be ready to sacrifice ease, health, and life itself in its defence", then he was undoubtedly a patriot. Twenty-four years later he wrote, "I am not very patriotic in my notions, nor prejudiced in favour of my own countrymen." Yet he had not changed his mind during the intervening years. The explanation of this seeming paradox is that the word "patriotism" has different meanings in the two sentences. The matter deserves extended treatment here, since it reveals much about the character of Hazlitt's ideas.

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The 1806 quotation comes from a pamphlet Hazlitt published privately, entitled Free Thoughts on Public Affairs; or Advice to a Patriot; in a Letter Addressed to a Member of the Old Opposition. The intention of this work was to urge the Foxite Whigs to continue their opposition to the war against Napoleon - a war which Fox, for one, was pledged to bring to an end if this were possible on honourable terms. Hazlitt's advice was unheeded. Fox found negotiation with the Emperor impossible, and this second

Revolutionary War was unquestionably more popular than the first in the public estimation. The pamphlet, therefore, is not widely remembered. But it is high quality work from one so inexperienced in the craft. It certainly reveals much of Hazlitt's attitude to his country.

Early in the pamphlet, Hazlitt establishes his credentials for composing a patriotic appeal. He is a worshipper of the great names of English Literature, men like Shakespeare and Milton who were fired by "that virtue, that integrity, that genius" which makes England unique among nations. As a result of their spiritual qualities, Englishmen are endowed with a "patrimony of independence" which they must defend. However, "it is no part of the love of one's country to be blind to her errors, or to wish her to persist in them." The remainder of the work is devoted to pointing out the present mistakes in both the domestic and foreign policy of England.

In writing this tract, Hazlitt believed that he was demonstrating one of the virtues of his country, the right to speak freely as a member of the public, on matters of state. However, there is also a false kind of patriot, who would prefer to see such a right extinguished. Such men are:

"ever ready to usurp that name from others, as an honourable covering either for selfish designs or blind zeal...It has been called patriotism to flatter those in power at the expense of the people; to sail with the stream; to make a popular prejudice the stalking-horse of ambition, to mislead first and then betray; to enrich yourself out of the public treasure...to defend every act of a party, and to treat all those as enemies of their country who do not think the pride of a master and the work of a few of his creatures of more consequence than the safety and happiness of a free, brave, industrious, and honest people; to strike at the liberty of other countries, and through them at your own; to change the maxims of a state, to

degrade its spirit, to insult its feelings, and to tear from it its well-earned and provident distinctions; to soothe the follies of the multitude, to lull them in their sleep, to goad them on in their madness, and, under the terror of imaginary evils, to cheat them of their best privileges..."<sup>23</sup>

This, in short, is the type of patriotism that Hazlitt disclaimed in 1830. By then, he had come to believe that this definition of the word had supplanted the meaning which he had adopted so proudly.

The preceding quotation is well worthy of extensive transcription, not only because it is an excellent example of Hazlitt's breathless style, but also because it reveals much about his general principles. It demonstrates clearly the defensive posture which Hazlitt struck so often in his writings. The privileges of the people are under attack; the maxims of state have been altered; the enemies of freedom are even changing the meaning of patriotism. Once again we see Hazlitt's view of the libertarian spirit of the English constitution, which now stands in danger of being destroyed. Furthermore, Hazlitt is evidently alive to the situation which makes the liberal faith in Parliamentary reform so problematic; that the "people" were either prejudiced against liberty by choice, or capable of being goaded by designing men into such a position. However naive Hazlitt might have been in advocating peace, this is not the work of a visionary.

Hazlitt's case against the war with Napoleon was based upon its needlessness, and the likelihood of either defeat or a prolonged, expensive stalemate. Although some distaste for war itself is suggested, the piece is not generally pacifistic. He doubts whether the stated cause of the renewal of war, the fate of Malta, was anything other than a pretext. There was a determination to settle scores with France anyway. It was not that the danger of invasion "produced the taking up arms, but the determination to take up arms which produced the fear of invasion."<sup>24</sup> The real motive for war was a

desire to expand trade. Under the Younger Pitt, the commercial spirit began to undermine the spirit of liberty in the nation, and although Pitt had departed, the war against Napoleonic France was no more than a continuation of the crusade against the Revolution. The commercial classes make a sorry substitute for the sons of Shakespeare and Milton. "They would not give a hundred hogsheads of sugar or a half-years' income for all the posthumous fame that was ever acquired in the world." While men actuated solely by greed may be strong in attack, they have little reason to defend themselves. They have no fixed stake in the country, unlike the old stock of England. They also lack the classical education enjoyed by the genuine aristocrats, and without this they cannot love fame. The implication is that now we are faced with the danger of invasion, we cannot hope for an easy victory, since the national spirit is corrupt. History relates that "The causes of the ruin of states have been almost always laid in the relaxation of their moral habits and political prejudices." It is therefore time to put an end to a war which threatens to reveal the extent of decay, and under a Whig administration the healing might commence.

The patriotism of Free Thoughts on Public Affairs is

deliberately aimed at the patricians of the Whig party, imbued as it is with the spirit of republican Rome. As such, it would not do to take it as Hazlitt's last word on the subject. For instance, while the disparaging remarks about the lower orders and the "low and mechanical" commercial classes are reminiscent of Burke's Letters on a Regicide Peace, Hazlitt later took that pamphlet as evidence for a new claim - that the war against France was a crusade against an opinion. If the analysis in the pamphlet had included this ideological question, it would have reminded the Whigs of their internal quarrels, rather than their patriotic duties. It would seem that Hazlitt wrote the Free Thoughts under self-imposed constraints, and that it is necessary to examine his writings on patriotism from the later period when he

had abandoned hopes of Whig patronage, if we are to truly understand this aspect of his political thinking.

It is typical of Hazlitt that his attitude to his countrymen should be a mixture of fondness and hearty dislike. In the 1829 essay entitled "English Characteristics", he declares "The English are the only people to whom the term blackguard is peculiarly applicable - by which I understand a reference of everything to violence and a contempt for the feelings and

27

opinions of others." The English are only ever united by hatred - when at war with a foreigner they show great esprit de corps, but as soon as the conflict is over they will turn away from needy ex-servicemen with disdain. Patriotism for the Englishman resolves itself largely into a hatred for other countries; it is purely negative. Thus, most Englishmen will take the view that their nation can do no wrong in a crisis, and take its virtues for granted in quiet times. Obviously this is far removed from Hazlitt's idea (and, incidentally, Burke's), that in order to love our country she ought to be lovely.

The Englishman does not lose his prejudices by going abroad.

Indeed, this tends only to reinforce his prejudices. He hates foreigners instinctively, because "our self-love is annoyed by whatever creates a suspicion of our being in the wrong; and only recovers its level by setting  
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down all those who differ from us as thoroughly odious and contemptible."

Hence, we return to brood over the treatment we have received, and grow more discontended with either insults or civilities. An Englishman abroad is no

great advertisement for the country; he is silent because he has nothing to  
29  
say, and "he looks stupid, because he is so." He would rather be a slave

himself than see others enjoying the same benefits in different lands.

The English are at root a materialistic race, with no time for abstract speculations or refined principles. They "are certainly the most



uncomfortable of all people in themselves, and therefore it is that they  
stand in need of every kind of comfort and accomodation." They do not demand  
luxuries, but cannot do without the satisfaction of bodily needs. This  
unreflecting, physical nature makes them "the bravest nation on earth". They  
fight in order to show their mettle, not for an idea or out of cruelty. There  
is a danger in this attitude, as their thoughtlessness might lead them into  
unnecessary wars, from which they will not flinch until victorious.

The materialistic English are obsessed with property, "that is,  
something that our neighbours dare not touch, and that we have not the heart  
to enjoy." They are naturally gloomy people. But this does not mean that the  
phrase "Merry England" is a paradox. The national humour, indeed, has much to  
recommend it. "We are almost the only people left", Hazlitt believes, "who  
understand and relish nonsense." When they play the fool, they do so in real  
earnest. They cannot be argued into enjoying themselves; their spirit of  
independence was demonstrated by their rejection of James I's Book of  
Sports. "If our tastes are not epic, not our pretensions lofty, they are  
simple and our own."

Hazlitt, therefore, sees much good mixed with the unfortunate  
characteristics of Englishmen. Indeed, his definition of patriotism decreed  
that his portrait should include both the warts and the dimples. However,  
there are times when this "ideal" of patriotism deserts him, and he sets his  
notion of Englishness against an unfavourable view of foreigners. The essay  
"Merry England" is a defence of English humour against the French, "who are  
one eternal smile of self-complacency, tortured into affectation, or spun into  
languid indifference," and the Italians, who are "voluptuous and immersed in  
sensual indolence." The essay was composed abroad, on a visit which clearly  
did not enhance Hazlitt's attitude to foreigners. His Notes of this journey  
are dotted with generalised comments on the French especially. He obviously

held a grudge against them for deserting Napoleon instead of defending him with the same valour they showed when conquering others. Whatever the provocation, he does at times show the blanket hostility to foreigners which he loudly condemns in others. In fact, it is highly characteristic in him to define his attachment to a cause through rejecting an alternative; for example, "The love of liberty consists in the hatred of tyrants." <sup>36</sup> It is also an indication of his love for abstract generalisations. In France, he complained that he had adopted fifty different theories about the national character, which he had abandoned each time on finding a contradictory <sup>37</sup> tendency. He did not consider that such general explanations for the conduct of Frenchmen were unlikely to be universally true.

Hazlitt's patriotism was not the kind which thrives during periods of international conflict. Believing that the blessings which made his country worth fighting for should be preserved intact, he read the worst motives into the conduct of those who regarded peace-time liberties as an unaffordable luxury. This hostility was inevitable, since patriotism, for Hazlitt, is "little more than another name for the love of liberty, of independence, of peace, and social happiness", exemplified in language, <sup>38</sup> literature, and customs. As the home of liberty and peace, the nation should keep itself aloof from conflicts unless called upon to defend the liberty of others. This is an idea of patriotism which would be accepted by most of Hazlitt's predecessors in the liberal tradition, notably those whom Caroline Robbins identified as "Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthmen".

The opponents of Hazlitt's view believed that a victory for the French would undermine all the cherished liberties of Englishmen. It was therefore essential to intervene in a continental war which, for these men, was undoubtedly a war of liberation. Perhaps it is less creditable that these advocates were not oblivious to the material advantages of their country.

But it is not the task of the historian to act as an umpire in what is clearly an ideological squabble. Each side might interpret the events from 1789 - indeed, from 1688 - to the present in its own way, and each interpretation, fully equipped with "factual evidence" twisted to fit the requirements of debate, would be equally convincing in its own way. It is unsurprising that Hazlitt's attack on false patriotism sounds like the pleadings of a jealous suitor to a mistress who appears to be straying.

In fact, Hazlitt found his distinction between varieties of patriotism difficult to sustain. There was much pressure on him to change his views. A patriot is dismayed when he finds himself in disagreement with the majority of his countrymen, and as he points out in Free Thoughts, the temptation after the rupture over Malta for opponents of the first war to re-enter the fold was formidable. Hazlitt resisted, and the resulting feeling of alienation continued after Napoleon's defeat. He relates in 1826 that "To be a Reformer, the friend of a Reformer, or the friend's friend of a Reformer, is as much as a man's peace, reputation, or even life is worth." <sup>39</sup> He felt that love for one's country should not exclude respect for others in the world, but when his natural need for acceptance at home is combined with his disillusionment with the French, it is hardly surprising that he could not always sustain his high ideals.

Finally, it is instructive to note how far this feeling of isolation reflected a perceived discrepancy between his own character and those of his fellows. The Englishman, Hazlitt says, does not love ideas; yet he himself could not do without them. Englishmen are highly materialistic, yet Hazlitt had both a theoretical and practical indifference towards money and the goods it might purchase. Early in his career he was convinced that the love of liberty was a uniting factor, but his confidence lessened over time. Certainly, when he wrote about Englishmen he sounded like a detached observer,

suggesting that his own generalisations did not apply to himself. Indeed, it is fascinating to notice how closely the basic qualities of his Englishmen tallies with his portrait of the Tories. They, too, are grossly materialistic, they are not impeded by too much thinking, and they are bound together by the hatred of others. The only Reformers who seem English on Hazlitt's criteria are Cobbett and Burdett; the Whigs seem a crop of exotic plants. We shall return to this subject in more detail later. Here we can note that in comparison to his stated opinions about the English, his patriotic ideals seem to be unrealistic. Indeed, the burning love for his country which induced him to advise the Whigs at his own considerable cost in 1806 must have been another source of sad reflection to him in later days.

#### NOTES

1. Works, Vol.XIV, p.236. C.f the much later remarks of Hazlitt's fellow "radical", Leigh Hunt (Autobiography, London, 1885 ed., p.23); "Though not a Republican myself, I have been thought, in my time, to speak too severely of kings and princes." Hunt also believed that monarchies were best suited to human nature (see ibid., p.177).
2. Works, Vol.XIX, pp.255-267.
3. Ibid., pp.259-60; p.265.
4. Ibid., p.260.
5. Ibid., p.261.
6. Ibid., p.263.
7. Ibid., p.264. For a discussion of more orthodox views on regal pageantry, see L. Colley, "The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British nation 1760-1820"; Past & Present 102 (1984), pp.94-129.
8. Works, Vol.VII, p.285.
9. Ibid., p.262.
10. Works, Vol.XIX, pp.329-34.
11. Works, Vol.XI, p.283.
12. See his depiction of England after the intervention of William III established the basis for Hanoverian rule, in Works, Vol.VII, p.9; "At that time, England was a free, a proud, and happy country, when under a Whig King it had just broken the chains of tyranny that were prepared for it." Herschel Baker has excused Hazlitt's antipathy to the Hanoverians

because George III "was wrong about Wilkes, Ireland, America, and France; he systematically subverted the principles of constitutional monarchy; he resisted all efforts at fiscal or Parliamentary reform; he opposed the abolition of the slave trade; and he was implacably hostile to the repeal of the Dissenters' and Catholics' disabilities" (William Hazlitt, London 1962, p.333). The problem with this kind of distortion is that we can only understand Hazlitt's ideas when they are placed in a true context; the automatic nod of approval every time he attacks the English monarchy leads us to overlook the more ambivalent statements.

13. Works, Vol.XII, p.84.
14. Works, Vol.XIX, pp.256-7.
15. Ibid., pp.257-8.
16. Ibid., p.259.
17. Works, Vol.IV, p.103.
18. Works, Vol.XX, p.335.
19. Works, Vol.I, p.95.
20. Works, Vol.XX, pp.339-40.
21. Works, Vol.I, p.95.
22. Ibid., p.96. C.f the sentiments expressed by Richard Price in his famous sermon "On the Love of one's Country"; "our first concern, as lovers of our country, must be to enlighten it." See S. Maccoby (ed.), The English Radical Tradition, London, 1952, p.50.
23. Ibid., p.95.
24. Ibid., p.98.
25. Ibid., p.115.
26. Ibid., p.114.
27. Works, Vol.XX, p.247.
28. Works, Vol.X, p.138.
29. Works, Vol.X, p.243.
30. Works, Vol.XVII, p.162.
31. Works, Vol.XVII, p.154 note.
32. Works, Vol.XX, p.287.
33. Works, Vol.XVII, p.159.
34. Ibid., p.155.
35. Ibid., pp.157-9.

36. Works, Vol.VII, p.151.

37. Works, Vol.X, p.144.

38. Works, Vol.VII, p.68.

39. Works, Vol.X, p.247.

## SECTS AND PARTIES

### 1) PARTIES

"I am no politician, and still less can I be said to be a party-<sup>1</sup>man", Hazlitt announced in the Preface to his Political Essays (1819). He claimed independence from Whigs, Tories and Reformers alike, protesting that "The question with me is, whether I and all mankind are born slaves or free."<sup>2</sup> In this section we shall examine Hazlitt's critique of political parties in his time. Was he really as independent as he wanted his readers to think? Is his criticism genuinely detached, or was it inspired by a bias of his own? It is proper that we distinguish between his view of each party as a whole, and his response to individual politicians, since we have already noticed his love of generalisations.

### TORIES

In the Examiner of October 6th, 1816, Hazlitt published a long list of Tory characteristics. The Tory is wedded to pensions and sinecures, long pedigrees, the Bourbons, man-traps, and corporal punishment for soldiers; he despises philanthropists, reformers, "low-born fellows",<sup>3</sup> dissenters, and Napoleon Bonaparte. This theme is renewed in the preface to his Political Essays which appeared three years later. "A Tory", he writes, "is one who is governed by sense and habit alone. He considers not what is possible, but what is real; he gives might the preference over right."<sup>4</sup> As we have seen earlier, he accuses the Tory of lacking principles, calling his beliefs "bigotted dogmas". The Tory is sensual, corrupt and sycophantic. He takes the easy way out and follows the crowd. "He is styed in his prejudices -<sup>5</sup> he wallows in the mire of his senses."

The earlier reference to Napoleon reminds us that these

outbursts were written soon after the latter had fallen. By 1825, the initial trauma of this event had worn off. An essay composed that autumn, "On the Jealousy and Spleen of Party", briefly returns to the theme. The Tories are not selective when they hire writers to support their cause; provided they attain "a certain standard of dullness, impudence, and want of principle, nothing more is expected." They will employ the meanest scribbler, provided that he extolls the king and lampoons the reformers. "This shews a confidence in themselves, and is the way to assure others."

The last piece we shall glance at here is "Illustrations of Toryism: From the Writings of Sir Walter Scott" (Jan, 1828). Once again, Hazlitt's rage might be partly explained by the connection with Napoleon - his illustrations are derived from Scott's Life of Napoleon Bonaparte. But the themes are familiar. "The definition of Toryism is, that it is that feeling or turn of mind which refers everything to custom or habit, and mistakes the sense of power for the sense of right and wrong." The Tory can only reply to reasonable arguments with a barrage of abuse and nick-names. He is a blind worshipper of titles and family trees. Scott allows that Bonaparte showed "a mind worthy of the rank to which he had ascended"; Hazlitt reads this as a characteristic Tory insult. Bonaparte's greatness did not depend upon the titles he adopted. But a Tory would not see this, since everything tends towards "the aggrandisement of the individual" in his creed, irrespective of the individual's abilities. The essence of Toryism is that millions should be disregarded in favour of one. It arises from a failure of imagination; a multitude is less impressive to the eye than one man in regal splendour.

Hazlitt's attitude to the Tories sounds quite straight-forward. But one or two points should be noted. As in the case of monarchy, Toryism appears peculiarly suited to human nature. Hazlitt's account implies that one must have special qualities in order to stand out against them. Obviously,



this reflects some glory upon him. But in placing himself above the common man in this manner, he makes those who succumb to Toryism understandable. It may be that the apologists for the party express themselves in "whining, hollow, designing cant, which echoes without feeling", but on Hazlitt's own evidence<sup>12</sup> it might be argued that they preach hypocrisy to a willing audience. Human nature being what it is, the Tories are able to co-operate better than their opponents; "How strong are the ties that bind men together for their own advantage, compared with those that bind them to the good of the country or their kind!"<sup>13</sup> Toryism, therefore, is the result of a human flaw that should always be guarded against, but may never be wholly suppressed. However savage his attacks might be, there seems to be a kind of horrified respect underlying his treatment of the Tories; perhaps this is an illustration of his own maxim that "abuse is an indirect species of homage."<sup>14</sup> Ironically, if read from this angle Hazlitt's criticism is too flattering. The Tories were hardly free from faction throughout this period; the Canning/Castlereagh duel of 1809 is only the most spectacular evidence of this.<sup>15</sup>

It also seems that Hazlitt's strictures are primarily aimed at the party's apologists. William Gifford, of the Quarterly Review, was a particular target for Hazlitt's invective, along with his colleague John Wilson Croker, and John Stoddart of the New Times (Hazlitt's brother-in-law). It is easy to see why Hazlitt attacked the party hacks first, apart from the obvious rivalry between journalists. Believing that Tory principles were no more than a crust of special pleading over the pie of corruption, he was certain to view those who expounded the party doctrines as hypocrites. In his eyes, Croker was a brazen adventurer, Stoddart an apostate, Gifford a libel-peddler of low birth and negligible talent. It is possible that these enemies contrived to reduce the sales of Hazlitt's books by ridiculing his grammar, his learning and even his complexion. But it is generally agreed that his Letter to William Gifford of 1819 secured him effective revenge.<sup>16</sup>

Spirited though his attacks are, it is more relevant

for our purpose to study his work on individual Tory politicians - the men who patronised the Giffords and the Stoddarts. Soon after the death of the Younger Pitt, Hazlitt wrote a "Character" of the war leader which he included in his Free Thoughts on Public Affairs and subsequently re-printed twice. Pitt, he felt, had risen to power and earned the respect of many "by a negation...of the common vices of human nature, and by the complete negation of every other talent" that might interfere with his one worthy attribute, his dexterity with words. Pitt had "no insight into human nature, no sympathy with the passions of men, or apprehension of their real designs." Lacking warmth himself, he concerned himself exclusively with the logical arrangement of an argument. His speeches, therefore, are remarkably correct for an extemporaneous speaker; but this is the only excellence he possessed. Even then, he said nothing memorable. This is not surprising given Hazlitt's theory of oratory, which rejected the use of cold logic in debate. Chatham, Pitt's father, had known better and achieved more.

Why, then, had Pitt succeeded in public life? Simply because "it was his business not to overcome others, but to avoid being overcome." He had a "lucky combination of strength and weakness" to attain this end. Pitt could be fêted as "The pilot who weathered the storm" because nothing ever disturbed the equanimity of such a temperament. Indeed, Pitt "always considered peace as an object perfectly indifferent in itself." As such, he was able to take the country into an unjust war against France without thinking of the consequences.

In the Free Thoughts on Public Affairs, Hazlitt proceeds to discuss the impact of Pitt on the history of his times. His intentions had been two-fold; to lessen "the free spirit of the country as much as he could", and to encourage commerce. Hazlitt believed that that "there ought to be as

little connection as possible between the measures of government and the

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maxims of the exchange." Pitt's policy in this regard was therefore a dangerous error. On the question of liberty, however, Hazlitt's sentiments are more complex. He writes,

"...perhaps we may suppose that the restrictions which he introduced in the liberty of the subject, and the spirit of passive obedience and non-resistance which was every where industriously diffused, the contempt and obloquy which were poured on the very name of liberty, might be required by the circumstances of the time, and necessary to prevent the contagion of a dangerous example, and the mischiefs of civil anarchy and confusion."

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Whatever the expedience of such measures, the Tories exploited the situation for their own advantage. They taught that "the forms of all government were alike indifferent, provided they secured the same servile obedience and death-like apathy in the state; they attempted to induce "A tame acquiescence in every encroachment of power or exertion of undue influence, a disposition to assert our own rights or those of others no further than fear or interest permit." While he repeats that this might be acceptable as a temporary measure, the Tories must not be allowed to make it into orthodoxy. Since the greatness of a state is built upon civic virtue, such principles could mark the beginning of England's ruin.

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While Pitt had unique peculiarities, Lord Eldon might be said to represent Hazlitt's stereotypical Tory. In The Spirit of the Age, he is presented as a "good-natured man" (a character-type disliked by Hazlitt). He is genial enough when he contemplates the misery of others, but when his own interests are concerned, he is eloquent and determined. The Chancellor is immovable in his principles; he "has been found uniformly and without a single exception on the side of prerogative and power, and against every proposal for the advancement of freedom." "He has gone the whole length of

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the most unpopular designs of Ministers". All he knows is where preferment lies. "As to abstract metaphysical calculations, the ox that stands staring at the corner of the street troubles his head as much about them as he does." Like the ox, Eldon is not evil by nature, but when goaded into action he must be avoided.

### WHIGS

In 1817, Hazlitt thought that the Whig party was a contemptible body. His reaction to the continued antagonism between Whig and Tory was well summed up in the rhyme:

"Strange that such difference should be  
 Twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

28

The Whigs, he believed, acted as valuable servants to the government rather than effective opponents. They acted as a cushion between the rulers and the ruled. Their object of filling the shoes of the Tories deterred them from all-out opposition; if they had attacked the office-holders, the offices might have suffered too. This was not in their long-term interests. Their own beliefs, originally unimpeachable, had yielded under the disappointments of years in opposition. Instead of placing all their hopes on the prospect of replacing Ministers, they prayed for a chance of forming a coalition with those they claimed to despise. "This is very pitiful work."

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Unlike the Tories, the Whigs were very selective in their choice of supporters. "The reputation of Whiggism, like that of women, is a delicate thing," so the present party cannot allow itself to mix with questionable company. Hence, when Lord Byron became involved with the Liberal magazine, in co-operation with Leigh Hunt and Shelley, the Whigs were horrified. When Hazlitt contributed his "On the Spirit of Monarchy" to the publication, they told Byron to withdraw. In the face of such evidence Hazlitt concluded in 1825

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that the Whigs had become "half-faced friends of liberty." His opinion of  
 1817, that a Whig "is but the fag-end of a Tory", had not altered.

These views are especially interesting in view of the fact that the Free Thoughts on Public Affairs had been written in support of the party. Also, Hazlitt had sent a prospectus for a history of English philosophy to the Whig M.P William Windham. He evidently hoped for patronage from this quarter, but was disappointed. It might be said that the Free Thoughts were written as a warning that the Whigs should maintain their principled stance on the war; but in 1807 Hazlitt composed a favourable assessment of Charles James Fox, even though the latter had broken off negotiations with Napoleon. Even if Hazlitt's enthusiasm for the Whigs at that time is exaggerated in this account, the impression remains that his wrath was inspired by their behaviour in opposition after 1807; the "Ministry of All the Talents", of which Fox had been a member, was evidently not the immediate cause of his disillusionment, despite the inclusion of the heavily-subsidised Grenville faction in the coalition.

While the essay on Fox dwells chiefly upon his success as a debator, Hazlitt does not disguise his admiration for the late leader's character and opinions. Fox possessed "one of the most excellent natures that ever fell to the lot of any of God's creatures." He could not present a starker contrast to Eldon; "He had an innate love of truth, of justice, of probity, of whatever was generous and liberal." Fox was not an impressive thinker like Burke, nor even a brilliant speaker. But he had a good heart, and this more than compensated for his failings. He was "the true friend of his country, as far as it is possible for a statesman to be so." Hazlitt's opinion of statesmen in general was bad enough, but the qualification does not really detract from this accolade.

The Whig party of the 1820's lacked a dominating figure like Fox, but Henry Brougham may be selected as an example of Hazlitt's later criticism of individual Whigs. The Spirit of the Age contains a short  
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essay which is surprisingly cordial. Brougham is an example of Scottish eloquence, which in Hazlitt's view was a contradiction in terms. He has insufficient imagination with which to move an audience, notwithstanding his tendency to speak "in a loud and unmitigated tone of voice, sometimes almost  
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approaching to a scream." After this, it is rather odd for Hazlitt to say that Brougham's prose is almost as good as his oratory! He is too improvident for  
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a leader, and "too petulant for a partisan". Overall, however, Brougham "is, no doubt, a very accomplished, active-minded, and admirable person"- a lukewarm compliment, but nonetheless somewhat more than we might expect from  
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a bitter opponent of the party as a whole.

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As a useful source of historical information on parties, Hazlitt leaves much to be desired. His balance deserts him, and there is too much evidence of spleen. He hated the Tories because they presided over the years of war against Revolutionary France, and seemed intent on crushing liberty at home. But perhaps a more important factor was Hazlitt's detestation of cant and hypocrisy. Since he did not share the principles of the Tories, he could only assume that they were not sincere - rather, that they were not principles at all. Hence he feels no need to refute Tory arguments. He merely uses the tactics of the Quarterly Review against them.

This inability or reluctance to understand the Tory position detracts from the value of his criticism. But even as an ideological assault, his work has its problems. He was too fascinated by individual characteristics to neglect a more detailed discussion of Tory leaders. While his portraits of Canning and Eldon fit neatly with his generalised view, more complicated

personalities such as Pitt and Wilberforce do not. Eldon epitomises the hated "good-natured man", but what of that cold fish, Pitt? Wilberforce is obviously a man of principle - why, then, does he collaborate with the Tory to destroy English liberties, while working for the freedom of the negro? Sir Walter Scott's novels reveal a profound knowledge of and respect for humanity; how, then, do we explain his siding with the court in politics? These individual case-studies both call attention to the generalisations, and undermine them. Hazlitt's affinity for a sweeping epigram conflicts with his love for particulars once again.

The grudging respect which can be detected in Hazlitt's work on the Tories is missing when he addresses the Whigs. A distinction must be made between his youthful and mature writing here. As a relatively inexperienced author in 1806-7, he attempted to catch the eye of the party leaders. But his later disillusionment is not a sign that he had shifted his principles one way or the other. During the second decade of the century he saw the champion of liberty dethroned and legitimacy restored over Europe. The Whigs were utterly ineffectual when they denounced these events, and for the most part they were reluctant to do so much. For Hazlitt this was sufficient to prove that they had abandoned their old principles, while his own had been maintained.

Overall Hazlitt's quarrel with Whiggism, which is a compound of ideological and tactical factors, is even more unsatisfactory than his treatment of the Tories. The difference between his generalisations and his more detailed criticism is equally damaging. A note written in 1819, in which he severely qualified his admiration of Fox, is either a case of a leader being retrospectively punished for the sins of his followers, or a candid confession from Hazlitt that he had seriously misjudged a character whose whole public life was open to his scrutiny. Either solution is a blow to

Hazlitt's critical acumen. He has no appreciation of the genuine Whig dilemma over reform. They were faced by the opposition of the king and most of their influential countrymen, but, more seriously, the majority were afflicted with serious doubts which, as we shall see, Hazlitt shared himself. He makes full use of his critical licence in order to rebuke the Whigs for their timidity, but without concrete proposals of his own the critic himself is open to the censure of others. Hazlitt is almost entirely destructive in his work on political parties, and as a result provides little more than a handful of useful quotations for the historian.

#### REFORM AND THE REFORMERS

Throughout Hazlitt's adult life, parliamentary reform was a  
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live political issue. Its supporters in parliament itself may have been few for much of the time, but there was always someone advocating the extension of the franchise as a solution to public ills. Reform and the reformers are often discussed by Hazlitt, and it is most important for an understanding of his thought that we confront his scattered and often ambiguous remarks.

We have already noticed Hazlitt expressing support for Universal Suffrage in the essay "A New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation." There he had asserted that the newly-enfranchised would follow the lead of their social superiors, in line with their behaviour in matters of literary taste. The essay "What is the People?" is another, more extended treatment of the same issue, and it is from this "great manifesto" that we  
43  
shall take Hazlitt's mature views on reform.

The opening paragraph features a sentence of over four hundred words, in which Hazlitt lashes the "detestable fiction" of Divine Right, or "legitimacy". He also appeals to his readership, presuming them to be numbered among the "people" themselves. They would not wish their opinions to





be disregarded, as they would be under despotic government; therefore they

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"would not have the people nothing!" At this point it would be natural to ask what Hazlitt precisely means by "the people". We learn that they are "Millions

of men, like you, with hearts beating in their bosoms, with thoughts stirring

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in their minds, with the blood circulating in their veins..." But Hazlitt

seems to regard this definition as imprecise, promising to return to the

problem by showing what the people is not. However, it turns out not to be

legitimacy, which does not clarify matters much. In fact, Hazlitt never

really manages to define what he means by the people at all, despite the title

of the essay. This is a vital omission, in view of the importance attached by

reformers to the qualifications for voting. It would be fair to say that he is

identifying the people as at least the vast majority of the population. These

men have the right to a say in government by virtue of their humanity. But

Hazlitt's evasion of details induces a suspicion that he is less certain of

his ground than the rhetoric would imply.

The essay proceeds with a discussion of the need for reform.

This has arisen, Hazlitt believes, because there are insufficient

constitutional "checks and balances" to protect the people against the power

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of the monarch. Men of rank possess too much influence, and this should be

curbed by providing the people with more rights. Privileges and rights are

contradictory; if a man has privileges, it means that others are deprived of

rights. If rulers hold their position as a privilege and not through the

choice of the people, they will inevitably regard their subjects with

contempt.

Hazlitt acknowledges that the people may act with "a certain

degree of folly, or rashness, or indecision, or even violence in attaining an

object", but this "is surely less to be dreaded than a malignant, deliberate,

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mercenary intention in others to deprive [them] of it." When they rise up

against the government, they are provoked beyond endurance. They are, if anything, too generous in assessing the abilities and motives of their rulers. Hazlitt agrees with Burke that rebellion arises from "a necessity that is not chosen, but chooses - a necessity paramount to deliberation", but regards this as a truism. If the people did not resist when their patience was finally worn through, the "drunken, besotted, mad pride, selfishness, and caprice" of arbitrary government would never be checked. One must remember that "of all dynasties, anarchy is the shortest-lived." When the people are foolish, their folly is second-hand; "It is better to trust to ignorance than to malice." Entrusting power to the people, therefore, is clearly the lesser of two evils.

This advocacy of the people is rather ambivalent. The tone of these remarks is negative; Hazlitt demonstrates his fears rather than any hope. There is a necessity for him to introduce a more positive note if his audience is to be satisfied. He attempts this by discussing great historical figures who have "belonged" to the people. Indeed, we discover that "all the intellect that ever was was theirs...all the greatest poets, sages, heroes, are ours originally, and by right." The supporters of the status quo demand evidence that the people can govern themselves, but they should be more concerned to show that hereditary rulers are necessarily best.

Hazlitt also introduces the familiar safety-clause - the people will follow the lead given to them by "the impartial reason and enlightened intellect of the community." Thus informed, they will always choose the "general good as its end." For the most part, a man may be trusted to choose what is best for himself; in more complicated matters truth will prevail in a fair fight. If the public will is allowed free play, a "perfect Commonwealth" will arise, as the direct antithesis of despotism.

"What is the People?", therefore, is a powerful, angry piece

which would appear to place Hazlitt close to a writer such as Thomas Paine, who rejected aristocratic government in favour of a system based on natural rights. However, this conclusion would be premature. Firstly, the fact that the essay stands out so clearly amongst Hazlitt's writings should give us pause. Parliamentary reform was so widely canvassed among the liberals of the time that it is significant how rarely Hazlitt discusses it. Also, for all the extreme rhetoric against hereditary rule in general, he does make the distinction between constitutional and arbitrary monarchy which we noted earlier. This does seem to distance him from the more extreme reformers like Paine.

Furthermore, Hazlitt is not so convinced of the virtues of a wider franchise that he is prepared to envisage a revolution in order to bring them about. "Timely reforms are the best preventatives of violent Revolutions" he writes, once more echoing Burke ("A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation").<sup>52</sup> Clearly, there are times when a resort to arms will become necessary, but the implication is that they will always be defensive. The present regime is not working, but it is not beyond all hope of reform. Measures are needed to allow the people a greater voice in government, but it is impossible to rank Hazlitt with whole-hearted advocates of universal manhood suffrage such as Paine, Bentham and John Cartwright. When discussing the wisdom of the people, he appeals to the "Great Kings, great law-givers, great founders and reformers of religion"<sup>53</sup> who have sprung from them. If we are to take this argument seriously, the people in Hazlitt's sense does not need to exceed the 400,000 identified by Burke as the political nation. Certainly, since the people will defer to the opinions of the most enlightened members of the community, there is no necessity for the franchise to be granted on the basis of a common humanity. Natural rights appear in the essay only as an auxiliary to what is basically a utilitarian argument.

The scattered comments in Hazlitt's other works tend to support this impression of reformism rather than radicalism. "The common people in civilised countries are a kind of domesticated savages", he wrote<sup>54</sup> in a Round Table essay. Although it was not unusual for reformers to take a dim view of the lower orders, Hazlitt's remarks are indicative of an aristocratic disdain. In an essay "On the Conversation of Authors" (1823), he suggests that people "in an inferior station in life" are poor companions. "You may talk to them on matters of business, and what they have to do for you...but out of that narrow sphere, to any general topic, you cannot lead<sup>55</sup> them." In the posthumously-published Aphorisms on Man, he protests that the<sup>56</sup> rich should not look upon the poor as all "naturally thieves and beggars." But it is equally wrong for the poor to associate wealth with hardness of heart. If a beggar were to receive a thousand pounds, he would probably refuse assistance to his quondam fellows. He speaks of the ill-nature of rural peasants, and links the decline of states with the growth of cities. If the National Gallery should be opened to all, he assumes that while the rabble will not be interested, the respectable poor will dress in their best<sup>57</sup> clothes in order to avoid being pointed at. In none of these examples does Hazlitt reveal genuine antipathy towards the lower orders, yet his coolness is marked enough to suggest that he had little desire to see them entrusted with real power. His attitude is probably expressed most clearly in the Table<sup>58</sup> Talk essay, "On Vulgarity and Affectation". Here, he speaks of the<sup>59</sup> existence of "a well-dressed and an ill-dressed mob, both which I hate". He would always sympathise with the people, whose faults were those of ignorance and therefore pardonable. But this was clearly not an enthusiastic preference.

Elsewhere in his later work, Hazlitt is even more explicit about his misgivings. One of his Aphorisms on Man expresses the view that "If reform were to gain the day, reform would become as vulgar as cant of any other kind." Indeed, "It is essential to the triumph of reform that it should

never succeed." Once particular grievances have been remedied, liberty will be taken for granted, corruption will re-appear, and the whole struggle will begin again - a course of events he also prophesies for America. These views appear to be deliberately paradoxical, but they reinforce the overall impression that Hazlitt was most concerned for a moral reformation of society. The key to this attitude is that institutional reform is not enough. Hazlitt once wrote that "The service we have proposed to do is this; to neutralize the servile intellect of the country." Parliamentary reform may indeed be a means to this end, but the end itself - to uphold liberty against all its foes - is of far more importance. The political nation, however it is comprised, must be constantly on the watch against abuses, and, since power will corrupt human beings under any system of government, this task will probably be perpetual. Once again, the motivation of these views seems to owe more to the classical republicans and their eighteenth-century disciples than to the contemporary reform movement.

Hazlitt, then, was a negative thinker by conviction. This does not mean that his thoughts are of any less interest or importance than the more visionary activists of his time. Indeed, since it tends to uphold his assertion that he was no party-man, it lends particular interest to his account of the political grouping with whom his links were closest: the reformers.

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"Reformers are naturally speculative people; and speculative people are effeminate and inactive. They brood over ideas till realities become almost indifferent to them. They talk when they should act, and are distracted with nice doubts and distinctions, while the enemy is thundering at the gates, and the bomb-shells are bursting at their feet...They are cowards, too, at bottom,

and dare not strike a decisive blow, lest it should be retaliated...They are not like their opponents, whose all is at stake, and who are urged on by instinctive fury and habitual cunning to defend it; the common good is too remote a speculation to call forth any violent passions or personal sacrifices..."

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Hazlitt wrote those lines at a time when he was particularly disgusted with the friends of reform. The trial of Queen Caroline had seen a host of radicals clamouring to kiss her hand. This spectacle, he felt, "gave a deathblow to the hopes of all reflecting persons with respect to the springs and issues of public spirit and opinion." It was not simply that her case was at best doubtful. What really galled him were the motives of her supporters.

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Ostensibly it was an excuse to attack the crown; but part of the Queen's attraction was her regality. In view of the unpromising context of these remarks, it is worth investigating the matter in greater detail.

In the preface to the Political Essays, Hazlitt opens the

theme of the natural disunity of reformers. "Speculative opinion leads men

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different ways, each according to his particular fancy." Speculation breeds

disagreement over the most petty details. Since the ideas we reach are

personal to ourselves, we resent a counter-argument as an affront. The

outcome of this is that while "Tory sticks to Tory; Whig sticks to Whig; the

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Reformer sticks neither to himself nor to any body else." Men of speculation

are naturally vain, and cannot bear the thought of merit in others. If someone

of their party appears to be particularly gifted, they will find their

capacity for united action in driving him from their ranks. The reformer

dreams of Utopia, and will reject anything short of the greatest possible

good. But who is to determine when this situation has been reached? One man's

greatest good is a miserable compromise to another. Reformers, therefore,

cannot be wholly satisfied with any gain.

Although Hazlitt composed this preface soon after Waterloo, when he had a large stock of bitterness to pour upon those who had not saved Napoleon, he does not seem to alter his tone elsewhere. The very fact that he does not see the reformers as a homogenous group, however, should lead us to examine his reactions to individual activists.

We have already glanced at Hazlitt's hostility to one group of reformers, the Utilitarians or Philosophic Radicals. This group is compared by Hazlitt to a bigotted religious sect. They also debase the value of art, and reduce complex moral issues to a "dry calculation of consequences." But he also disagreed with their political position. They leave nothing "between the Ultra-Toryism of the courtly scribes and their own Ultra-Radicalism - between the extremes of practical wrong and impracticable right." They stand foremost in denouncing political abuses, but say nothing about corruption in the East India company which employs their leaders. Hazlitt, therefore, not only differs from the Utilitarians in his assessment of the necessary scope of reform, but also questions their sincerity. Certainly his dispute with this group was more profound than a petty squabble over the small print of reform.

Another group of reformers discussed by Hazlitt are those who advocated reform from within the Whig party. Those who remained close to Fox after the Whig schism of the 1790's, such as Grey and Sheridan, formed the Society of the Friends of the People, and introduced reform legislation into the Commons on several occasions. Their interest had fallen off during the Napoleonic period, but a handful supported the continued efforts of Sir Francis Burdett. We have seen that Hazlitt denounced the Whigs for their "half-faced" support of freedom; he had a great admiration for Sheridan (a rather eccentric choice for an example of "political firmness"), and he was cordial towards Brougham. But he did not believe that the Whigs were likely to press for reform, and the Act of 1832 would have surprised him.

A final group of reformers might be distinguished, although they were more disparate than the Foxites or the Utilitarians. These men based their desire for change upon natural rights arguments, a belief in the "ancient constitution", or a mixture of these plus other factors. They might be described as less rigidly doctrinaire than the Utilitarians, yet lacking the practical considerations of the Whigs.

Sir Francis Burdett was never closely allied to the Whigs, although he was a fervent admirer of Charles James Fox. As the M.P for Westminster he was a prominent figure, and he became something of a hero when he was arrested for upholding the right to report the proceedings of the House of Commons. Hazlitt devoted a section of the Spirit of the Age to Burdett.<sup>68</sup> Even this short piece makes clear his approval of the wealthy baronet. He is "one of the few remaining examples of the old English understanding and old English character." "There is no honest cause which he does not avow; no oppressed individual that he is not forward to succour."<sup>69</sup> He is a very pleasing speaker, but no rabble-rouser. Indeed, he is careful to rebuke the people when they are in a fury. His only fault is a leaning towards a belief in the old constitution of England, which he has presumably caught from that "man of one idea", John Cartwright.

This affection for Burdett is highly revealing. It is true that he supported parliamentary reform, even when he found himself in a minority of one for doing so. He also favoured Catholic Emancipation, liberal movements abroad, and (less fervently than Hazlitt) Napoleon. But he was convinced that there should be a qualification for the vote (although he occasionally supported universal manhood suffrage for tactical reasons), he went hunting with the Prince Regent, and overall his aristocratic bearing and inflexible personality did little to help the reformers towards unity. In later years Burdett became a Tory, a move which some commentators have found quite



predictable on the basis of his early beliefs. Hazlitt obviously did not anticipate it, and he can hardly be accused of closet Tory sympathies on this basis. But Burdett made it clear that he supported the true prerogative of the crown; in other words, he was never a radical since he believed that in spirit, if not the letter, the constitution was sound. This is close to the position we have associated with Hazlitt. Burdett also identified himself with the "patriotic" opposition to Walpole; like Hazlitt, his thought was rooted in the eighteenth-century, and he was clearly influenced by the ideas of the "Commonwealthsmen".

William Cobbett was another reformer whom Hazlitt found worthy of extensive treatment. They only met on one occasion, and Hazlitt was most impressed despite the fact that Cobbett cursed him. He clearly did not suffer fools, and spoke his mind. Unfortunately this did not help one predict what he might say next, for his mind was constantly changing. In his Table Talk essay on Cobbett, Hazlitt describes him as "a very honest man with a total want of principle."<sup>70</sup> He was not easily driven from a position by others; rather, his own self-will made him succumb to "the first whim which he takes in his head."<sup>71</sup> As an independent thinker, he felt no regret when he renounced his old principles. "He is like a young and lusty bridegroom that divorces a favourite speculation every morning, and marries a new one every night."<sup>72</sup> He was the most effective supporter of reform just as he had been its most powerful assailant.

While excessive flexibility of opinion was normally enough to damn a writer in Hazlitt's eyes, he regarded Cobbett with great affection. This mood prevails despite the unfortunate effects of Cobbett's temperament. He loved a fight so much that he transformed friend and foe alike into lifeless corpses. If he had concentrated his blows on the Ministry, he would have achieved much; "no unpopular Minister could live before him."<sup>73</sup> But he did

not care for his own reputation, nor of those who support him. He simply struck out whenever he pleased.

Cobbett was a natural oppositionist. Once his aims had become established or widely popular, he would immediately turn against them. "If he could bring about a Reform in Parliament, the odds are that he would instantly fall foul of and try to mar his own handy-work." Not only did he reject his ideas when others began to accept them, but he reacted angrily when a notion convinced himself. In England he opposed the monarchy; in American exile he had soon grown weary of republicanism.

Hazlitt's admiration for Cobbett may partly be set down to the score of style. Cobbett was refreshingly anecdotal; his egotism was not feigned, and did not deflect the attention of the reader. He was a vigorous polemicist, and a lover of nature. Hazlitt's approval of Cobbett's egotism is significant, since it was this aspect of his character which encouraged his cussedness. Remove Cobbett's awkwardness, and both his flexibility and effectiveness might have disappeared. Hazlitt, in short, admired Cobbett for his individuality, the very factor which rendered him an impossible ally.

A close study of Hazlitt's account reveals some interesting parallels between the two men. We have seen him insist that reform would simply become another subject for cant if it were to become established. By turning against any successful opinion, Cobbett seemed to be inspired by a similar concern. Cobbett was not selective enough when he picked a quarrel; Hazlitt, who rebuked himself for his excessive candour towards Burke, was aware how counter-productive this indiscriminate approach could be, but never entirely rid himself of it. We have quoted Leslie Stephen's accusation that Hazlitt's opinions were unduly influenced by his feelings, and this is a point the latter makes against Cobbett. Both men were masters of political invective, and wielded a club more often than the rapier. Above all, perhaps,

Hazlitt is a delightful egoist in the same mould as Cobbett, who "does not put himself before [his subject], and say - 'admire me first' - but places us in the same situation with himself, and makes us see all that he does."<sup>75</sup>

There are, of course, differences. However inconsistent Hazlitt may have been, he never denounced radicals with the fury of the original Cobbett, nor did he eulogise monarchs at any time. But Hazlitt exaggerates Cobbett's flexibility; there was no essential shift of ground after his initial conversion to reform. Their major difference is one of temperament and education. Cobbett was self-taught, and perhaps this accounts for his incautious utterances. Cobbett threw himself into political campaigns while Hazlitt stood aloof, apart from casting one "unavailing vote" for the Radical John Cam Hobhouse.

Hazlitt's affinity with Cobbett is perhaps best explained by their shared love for the underdog - their inveterate oppositionism. They are both far stronger in attack than defence. Cobbett's failure to stick to a position may have been frustrating, but at least it meant that he would always oppose despotism. His example was a contribution to the spiritual renovation which Hazlitt believed essential for his country. Like Burdett, he was an old-fashioned Englishman for whom liberty was more than a cant word. These factors over-rode any disagreement over particular issues, and gained Hazlitt's approval.

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Hazlitt called himself a "reformer" in a conversation with James Northcote, and proceeded to complain that this seemed to give tradesmen the excuse to treat him in an off-hand manner. In some ways this passage illustrates his position very neatly. He sympathised with the people, but did not love them. Hence he was with the reformers, but not quite of them. While

it is wrong to disqualify all those with an ambivalent attitude to the people from the class of reformers, in Hazlitt's case it was sufficient to prevent whole-hearted commitment. For all his claims about first principles, he was not the type to force the facts as he saw them into a pre-conceived mould. By upbringing a republican, by conviction a worshipper of liberty, he found himself supporting the cause of parliamentary reform as a tactical move in an overall strategy of destroying despotism. He saw it as a promising means to an end, and not an end in itself.

If there is a fault in Hazlitt's work on active politicians, it is the excessive use of abstract generalisations. In most cases his detailed criticism is more revealing, both in order to understand his thought and his period. The discussion of reformers is perhaps the most valuable, with a tone of exasperated fondness which is less destructive than the unqualified hostility towards the abstract Whig and Tory. While relating the problems that they faced, he also explained how the difficulties had arisen. With the exception of the Utilitarians, they were agreed on only one tenet: the right to disagree. He denounced the Utilitarians for apparently denying that right, and in exercising it on others he demonstrated the unlikelihood of cohesion around such a principle. When he identified the spirit of contradiction which motivated the reformers, it may be a case of the pot calling the kettle black. But in such situations we do tend to learn a good deal about both the pot and the kettle. As Hazlitt said himself, we tend to see in others only so much as we see in ourselves.

#### NOTES

1. Works, Vol.VII, p.7.
2. Ibid., p.9.
3. Ibid., p.17.
4. Ibid., p.18.

5. Ibid..
6. Works, Vol.XII, pp.365-82.
7. Ibid., p.376.
8. Ibid., p.377.
9. Works, Vol.XIX, pp.288-91.
10. Ibid., p.288.
11. Ibid., p.290; ibid., p.291.
12. Works, Vol.XX, p.102.
13. Works, Vol.VII, p.18.
14. Works, Vol.XX, p.124.
15. See M. Brightfield, John Wilson Croker, pp.163-205, for a fascinating insight into the squabbles of the Tories.
16. See Works, Vol.IX, pp.11-58.
17. Works, Vol.VII, p.322.
18. Ibid., p.323.
19. Works, Vol.I, p.112.
20. Ibid..
21. Ibid..
22. Ibid., p.118.
23. Ibid., pp.112-3. Emphasis mine.
24. Ibid., p.113.
25. Works, Vol.XI, p.141.
26. Ibid., p.146; ibid., p.145.
27. Ibid., pp.146-7.
28. Works, Vol.VII, p.20.
29. Ibid., p.22.
30. Works, Vol.XII, p.378.
31. Ibid., p.377.
32. Works, Vol.VII, p.19.
33. This fascinating letter is discussed below, "Concluding Remarks", note 3.

34. See Works, Vol.VII, pp.313-22.
35. Ibid., p.321.
36. Ibid..
37. Ibid., p.322.
38. Works, Vol.Xi, pp.134-140.
39. Ibid., p.138.
40. Ibid., p.138.
41. Ibid., p.140.
42. For the struggle over reform, see esp. J. Cannon, Parliamentary Reform 1640-1832. Cambridge, 1973.
43. Bromwich, op. cit., p.373.
44. Works, Vol.VII, p.259.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p.262.
47. Ibid., p.267.
48. Ibid., p.279.
49. Ibid., p.267.
50. Ibid., p.269.
51. Ibid., p.267.
52. Ibid., p.280; c.f E. Burke, Works & Correspondence, (8 Vols. ed. Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir R. Bourke), London 1852, Vol.IV, p.168.
53. Hazlitt, Works, Vol.VII, p.269.
54. Works, Vol.IV, p.124.
55. Works, Vol.XII, p.31.
56. Works, Vol.XX, p.331.
57. Ibid., p.330.
58. Works, Vol.VIII, pp.156-168.
59. Ibid., p.163.
60. Works, Vol.XX, pp.353-4. This passage contains some of the most fascinating of Hazlitt's hints, which makes one regret that he did not build them into something more than the aphoristic form he took to late in life. "We only shew a spirit of independence and resistance to power,

as long as power is against us. As soon as the cause of opposition prevails, its essence and character are gone out of it; and the most flagrant radicalism degenerates into the tamest servility...This may point out how little chance there is of any great improvement in the affairs of the world. Virtue ceases with difficulty; honesty is militant."

61. Works, Vol.VII, p.189.
62. Works, Vol.XX, p.139.
63. Ibid., pp.136-8.
64. Works, Vol.VII, p.15.
65. Ibid., p.14.
66. Works, Vol.XII, p.183.
67. For Hazlitt's views on the consistency and uprightness of Sheridan, see esp. Works, Vol.XX, p.262.
68. See Works, Vol.XI, pp.140-1.
69. Ibid., p.140; p.141.
70. Works, Vol.VIII, p.55.
71. Ibid., p.56.
72. Ibid., p.57.
73. Ibid., p.54.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., pp.52-3.

## HAZLITT AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT

"Hazlitt was a dissenter to his back-bone"

1

Leslie Stephen, Hours in a Library

It has always been known that the relationship between the Church and the political establishment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries was intimate. It was a common belief that a single fate would attend the altar and the throne, and it is unsurprising that the defenders of monarchy against the theorists of the French Revolution were also concerned to support the Anglican Church. While no-one has denied this fact, in a secular century it has been common for the centrality of religious thought in politics to be overlooked or deprecated. A recent attempt to produce a more balanced picture has resulted in some interesting work, and it is hoped that religion will receive proper attention in the future.

2

While scholars have underlined the mutual support of the Church and the Crown, the relationship between religious and political non-conformity has also received attention. Once more, it has always been accepted that religious dissent provided many prominent advocates of political reform. It is accepted that the rejection of the Feather's Tavern petition in 1772, for example, drove many "advanced" clergymen out of the Church and encouraged the adoption of liberal views. But while the impact of dissent has usually been regarded as a middle-class phenomenon which was gradually over-shadowed by the development of class-consciousness among the industrial proletariat, a recent historian has claimed that "all radical thinking had a religious origin." (emphasis mine) William Hazlitt was brought up a non-conformist, educated at the famous dissenting academy at Hackney, and it was intended that he should follow his father, who was a prominent Unitarian Minister. It will therefore be useful to study his religious ideas, in order to trace any

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relationship between this aspect of his thought and his politics. This, in turn, may shed some further light on the more general question of dissent and radicalism in England.

We cannot be sure why Hazlitt defied parental pressure, and rejected a career in his father's profession. His son tells us simply that he "manifested an extreme distaste" for the idea; it is interesting to note that Hazlitt later told James Northcote that he would have liked to have sent that son to Charterhouse, rather than a dissenting academy. Politics seem to have replaced religion as his primary concern during his time at Hackney, where he was taught by such eminent figures as Joseph Priestley and Andrew Kippis. Late in life, Hazlitt admitted that he lacked "much natural piety",<sup>5</sup> and clearly he felt that any scruples should bar his entry into the church. We have seen that his "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation" was originally inspired by a discussion about the Test and Corporation Acts.<sup>6</sup> But however much attention was paid to this religious issue in the first draft of the essay, it is not a prominent feature of the published version. As a corollary of the right to hold opinions freely, he states that "There should be no secular interference in sacred things; no religious persecuting tests or disqualifications." He rather cynically adds that "the different sects should be left to inveigle and hate each other as much as they please."<sup>7</sup> By the time that this essay was re-drafted he was clearly highly disillusioned with the forms of religious worship. Toleration, for him, seems to be a product of indifference.

We should not conclude on this evidence that he was an atheist. In conversation with James Northcote he expressed the view that "sceptics and philosophic unbelievers [such as Byron and Paine] appear to have just as little liberality or enlargement of view as the most bigotted fanatic."<sup>8</sup> In proselytising, free-thinkers would be as dogmatic as anyone, and deny the

right of others to reach their own judgements. These remarks are a hit at bigotry in general, and so far no indication of belief on his own part. The implication is that men of all creeds and none have a tendency to close their minds to opposed viewpoints. This trait seems to emerge whenever the dogma is backed by any form of organisation. For instance, while Hazlitt reveals a liberal's hatred for the inquisition, he is quite able to sympathise with the motivation of Guy Fawkes. The latter showed that he was capable of laying down his life for his principles, and this is a very worthy characteristic.

Hazlitt's religious ideas remain obscure largely because his approach is that of the sociologist rather than the theologian. He is primarily concerned to trace the effects of belief on a man's character and actions than to discuss his own beliefs. However, since he assented to the notion that man is naturally a religious animal, it would be reasonable to suggest that Hazlitt retained an ill-defined faith in a god. Otherwise, indeed, it is unlikely that his work on religion would have been as interesting as it is.

The remainder of this section, therefore, will concentrate upon Hazlitt's response to religious institutions and the relationship between these views and his political opinions. It would be appropriate to begin with the Anglican Church, which he discusses at length in the essay, "On the Clerical Character."

The spirit in which this piece is written is clear from the outset. Hazlitt allows that the clerical character might have a good deal of merit; however, he will only be concerned with its faults. Firstly, he takes exception to the clerical dress. This is a claim on our good opinion which has nothing to do with the qualities of the man. As such, it is a standing invitation to hypocritical behaviour, and a temptation for clergymen to relax whatever principles they might possess. "Those who make their dress a

principal part of themselves, will, in general, become of no more value than  
11  
their dress." If they really were men of distinction, they would wish to  
appear in their uniform as rarely as possible. As it is, they cannot be seen  
without it. This suggests that without it they would not be respected at all.

The clerical obsession with dress is merely a symptom of their  
stickling for external forms and ceremonies in other things. This  
predeliction Hazlitt finds easily comprehensible; "It was, of course, much  
easier to conform to these, or to manifest a reverence for them, than to  
12  
practise the virtues or understand the doctrines of true religion." By these  
13  
means, "The form of religion has superseded the substance." In conforming to  
established forms the cleric loses all independence of thought and action. In  
return he receives an assured income and automatic respect, so he might well  
consider it a tolerable bargain.

Whatever the pretensions symbolised by the cloth, the  
clergyman is a sensual being. Not being allowed to sin on the grand scale  
merely forces him to find outlets for his appetites elsewhere. It is normal  
for him to be a glutton, and dinner is the most important event of his day.  
Although he cannot cause scandal in his parish, he takes a prurient interest  
in sins of the flesh. He is a moral spy, and must be well acquainted with the  
frailties of his flock. Being a clergyman is "like living next door to a  
brothel, a situation which produces a great degree of irritation against vice,  
but is not equally favourable to the growth and cultivation of sentiments of  
14  
virtue."

Hazlitt cannot believe that a man may honestly subscribe to all  
thirty-nine articles. Either the successful candidate lacks the intelligence or  
the diligence to master the subject, or he is a downright knave. He knows that  
the reward for conformity might be a bishopric or a place at court, whereas  
if he allows his scruples a hearing he is facing penury. The Anglican has a

"critical bonus for finding out that all the books he cannot understand are  
15  
written against the Christian religion." Tests, therefore, not only encourage  
the recruitment of hypocrites, but teach more honest men the convenience of a  
flexible conscience. Hazlitt cites the example of William Paley, who reversed  
his thesis "That the eternity of Hell torments is contradictory to the  
goodness of God" on the advice of a bishop. It is hardly surprising that  
Paley's work on moral philosophy, which was so popular at the time, "is a  
somewhat ingenious and amusing apology for existing abuses of every  
16  
description, by which any thing is to be got." Paley's real text is "That men  
should not quarrel with their bread and butter" - no wonder he found  
advancement in the Church. Clergymen of this stamp earned Hazlitt's lasting  
17  
scorn; "the greatest hypocrites in the world are religious hypocrites."

Hazlitt next moves on to the alliance between Church and State.  
Once the cleric has insulted God by surrendering his conscience in religious  
matters, it is easy for him to become a political prostitute. Throughout  
history, therefore, "Priestcraft and despotism have gone hand in hand - have  
18  
stood and fallen together." The greatest mischief which arises from the  
alliance is its "tacit and covert" nature. The church pretends to be neutral  
in politics, but this is a pretence designed to make the advice of clergymen  
more effective. Priests annoint kings, and kings give them lands in return;  
the clergy can hardly be impartial politicians. "They are servants of God by  
19  
profession, sycophants of power from necessity." The priest is happy to make  
a king into his god, because he does not fear him as he would a genuine deity.  
However, it is not an equal partnership. The church is subordinate to the  
crown. But it is not concerned about this since the crown is a liberal pay-  
master.

While the Church of England suffers at Hazlitt's hands,  
Methodism arguably comes off even worse. The Methodists are altogether "a

most pitiful sect". "It is a bastard kind of popery", a revival of enthusiasm which "at once absolves the understanding from the rules of reasoning and the conscience from the restraints of morality." Its members are incapable of living without sin, and hope that a show of faith will save them from eternal punishment. The Methodist creed consists of "faith without works, and words without meaning." Hazlitt's hostility to the sect seems to be based upon his conviction that it was both a symptom and a probable cause of moral decay in England. He believed that it was particularly suitable to the "rabble", along with those who suffered from "an uncomfortable mind in an uncomfortable body." It was a common-place amongst Whigs and reformers to attack Methodism - one of Leigh Hunt's earliest publications was a swingeing attack, and the Edinburgh Review was hostile. Hazlitt's attitude, however, is peculiarly venomous even by the standards of this debate and his own polemical style. While he does not comment on the Anglican evangelical revival in general terms, his hostility may be gathered from his treatment of William Wilberforce. The latter is not exactly a hypocrite, but he is another who makes sure that his faith and his interests do not conflict. His "humanity will go all lengths that it can with safety and discretion; but it is not to be supposed that it should lose him his seat for Yorkshire, the smile of Majesty, or the countenance of the loyal and prosperous. He is anxious to do all the good he can without hurting himself or his fair fame." Like Cobbett, Hazlitt thought that Wilberforce was at best inconsistent in working for the benefit of "savages" while ignoring abuses at home; also, he attributes the successful campaign against the slave trade to Thomas Clarkson rather than Wilberforce. Although there is a suggestion that Hazlitt disliked the "enthusiasm" of the evangelical movement, his main concern lies with its political and social implications.

A companion-piece to the essay "On the Clerical Character" is

"On Court Influence", in which Hazlitt pays tribute to the dissenting clergy. It is appropriate that renegade Tories such as Robert Southey should attack the dissenters, he writes, because the latter are "but half Englishmen". This means that "they are not professed slaves - that they are disaffected to the Constitution in Church and State, because they are not prepared to go all the lengths of despotism and intolerance under a Protestant hierarchy and Constitutional King." Dissenting churches are "nurseries of public spirit, and independence, and sincerity of opinion in all other respects." Dissenters are not fair-weather friends of freedom like their opponents. Instead of receiving rich rewards for their versatility, they have stuck to their principles regardless of the consequences. They "are, or have been, the steadiest supporters of...liberties and laws: they are checks and barriers against the insidious or avowed encroachments of arbitrary power, as effectual and indispensable as any others in the Constitution: they are depositaries of a principle as sacred and somewhat rarer than a devotion to court-influence - we mean the love of truth."

Hazlitt believed that "It is hard for any one to be an honest politician who is not born and bred a Dissenter." Just as there is an alliance between Church and State, so civil and religious liberty are cherished together in the dissenting tradition. Protestantism gave birth to liberty, and non-conformists must now carry the torch in the face of a new bigotry. They have not relinquished the spirit of free enquiry which inspired Luther. Because their stated convictions are not hypocritical, "Dissenters are the safest partizans, and the steadiest friends."

Much of this supports the view that religious and civil dissent grew from the same seed in Hazlitt's case. But we must tread carefully here. Towards the end of "On Court Influence," it becomes clear that nostalgia greatly colours his account. He is speaking primarily of his father; of a

type of character which "has worn itself out." He is also dealing with court influence, a subject which always made him exaggerate the virtues of any other phenomenon.

Looking elsewhere in his writings, we do in fact discover a very different attitude towards dissent. For example, although William Godwin in some respects reminded him of a dissenting minister, these characteristics were not endearing; "There was a dictatorial, captious, quibbling pettiness of

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manner." Dissenters fall under the same anathema as sects of all kinds in

Hazlitt's eyes. Reformers in general remind Hazlitt of the "rational"

dissenters, who consider that "because they alone profess the title, they

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alone possess the thing. All rational dissenters are with them wise and good."

The stubborn adherence to principle which Hazlitt acclaims in "On Court

Influence" becomes unnecessary rigidity in other contexts. Rather than being

the "safest partizans, and the steadiest friends", the dissenters can be

irritating allies, utterly opposed to the most trifling compromises. Also,

while their pre-occupation with another world makes them less corruptible

than their Anglican counterparts, it is unlikely to encourage a realistic

approach to secular questions. Burke had pointed out that this estrangement

from the world made the "meddling" of Dissenters dangerous; Hazlitt's belief

that their interventions were generally futile is less hostile but perhaps

equally damning.

In his later work, Hazlitt takes his criticisms further. He

predicts that with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts the dissenters

will stop attending chapel. This is typical of human cussedness, which ensures

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that "A thing is supposed to be worth nothing that costs nothing." He can now

reflect that although the Church of England mistreated the dissenters, the

latter returned the compliment when their chance came under Cromwell. If they

could replace the thirty-nine articles with a creed of their own - which,

given their tendency to quarrel, is unlikely - they would probably enforce it with equal illiberality. "Like a muzzled mastiff", the tendency to persecute is present in all of us, whatever our convictions.

37

The clerical and dissenting characters, therefore, are contrasting examples of the foibles of human nature. The one is but an ordinary mortal with ordinary failings, except for his hypocritical pretence that he is free from them. The dissenter is not an hypocrite, but this only gives him a licence to exercise his squabbling disposition, which the Anglican must keep in check. Hazlitt's sympathies are clearly with the dissenter; it cannot be said to be a choice between evils. But it would be most accurate to say that Hazlitt's belief in private judgement is taken to an extreme here. A man's religion is for him a personal matter, which should be subject to the interference neither of the state nor of the other individuals in a sect.

Since this thorough-going individualism is the key-note of his essay on "Civil and Criminal Legislation", it might appear that in Hazlitt's case religious beliefs did play a central role in shaping his politics. But, as we have seen, that work does not closely reflect the complexity of his thought in general. Most probably the background of dissent was the factor which made Hazlitt's political thought so ambivalent and self-contradictory. Taught from a tender age to accept nothing at face value, to reject authority automatically and to hate hypocrisy above all else, Hazlitt was ill-equipped to build a rigid system in a world which refused to resolve itself into black and white alternatives. This means that while he often strikes a note of pessimism which the rational dissenters would have abhorred, he also lashes abuses in the approved manner. He expects the reader to share his indignation at the frailties of humanity, despite the fact that his mature writings, at least, indicate that such imperfections are ineradicable.



His work on religion exemplifies this well, and a few more examples can be brought forward to illustrate this tendency. Writing about the preacher Edward Irving, he denies that religion is the only possible bastion of morality. The preacher may be an hypocrite just as easily as a secular moralist. Religion has been with us a long time, he writes, and there is little sign that it is about to eradicate vice from the world. His attack on Coleridge's Lay Sermon has a similar basis. But elsewhere he suggests that religion is not only compatible with man's nature, but that some form of worship is necessary to him. Religion is "another name for fear"; man is "naturally a worshipper of idols." These are splenetic remarks, but elsewhere he reveals a genuine understanding of the cravings for something to believe in. He argues that those who have attempted to reconcile science with religion are misguided, since "there is no faith so firm as that which has never been called into question". We have seen his admiration for the character of Guy Fawkes, which goes further than his habitual respect for the underdog. Hazlitt, therefore, must be regarded as superior to critics such as Paine, whose Age of Reason is premised upon scorn for those who slide from the most rational forms of religious belief. This is because he is not only a sociological student of religion, but also, and perhaps primarily, a moralist.

In the case of Hazlitt, therefore, there is support for the view that political and religious beliefs were closely connected at this time. But his work also reveals that generalisations like this are apt to be too neat. While it is likely that Hazlitt's demand for religious liberty pre-dated his love of civil liberty, it is clear that the latter principle rapidly became dominant in his mind, while religion dwindled to something of an after-thought. If this is still held up as evidence that "all radical thought had a religious origin" the statement is becoming something like a mere truism. One can point to symptoms of religious heterodoxy in most important

contemporary politicians, whether they "conformed" to the accepted norms in  
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Church and State or not. If the historian then wishes to confine his  
attention to certain forms of dissent, the statement will be made true by  
definition or his search will fail. It is a fact that pious men who could not  
accept the thirty-nine articles were faced with a choice between an  
hypocritical acceptance or a life of dissent. They would presumably be men of  
learning and conviction, who would hope to be permitted the same civil  
rights as others. When parliament showed itself unready to allow this, it  
would be logical for them to hope for its reform. In this respect, the  
relationship between religious and civil dissent is almost true by definition,  
and as such is neither a profound discovery nor capable of explaining much.

But Hazlitt's career reveals that a dissenting background was  
by no means a sufficient cause of radicalism, even if it was a necessary one.  
Even if we accept that his staunch liberalism was a legacy of his youth, we  
have to explain why he began his career with a philosophical tract aimed  
against "radical" metaphysicians (owing much to the Anglican Bishop Butler),  
followed closely by a eulogy of Burke which he learned to regret years later,  
at a time when the influence of old dissent had waned sufficiently for him to  
speak of his quondam fellows in a critical spirit. It is, of course, possible  
to construct a model of "radicalism" which Hazlitt might fit, but this, in  
his words, is "pitiful work". The likely solution is that despite the neat  
logic of such historical explanation, human beings are able to shape their  
own way to an extent which makes a generalisation without an exception a  
rarity outside the realms of tautology.

#### NOTES

1. L. Stephen, Hours in a Library, I, p.69.
2. See esp. J.C.D Clark op. cit..
3. Clark, op. cit., p.277. In the essay "On the Conduct of Life", Hazlitt  
admitted to his son; "It was my misfortune (perhaps) to be bred up among

Dissenters, who look with too jaundiced an eye at others, and set too high a value on their own peculiar pretensions. From being proscribed themselves, they learn to proscribe others; and come in the end to reduce all integrity of principle and soundness of opinion within the pale of their own little communion." Works, Vol.XVII, p.88.

4. Works, Vol.XI, p.237.
5. Quoted in S. Jones, Hazlitt: A Life from Winterslow to Frith Street, Oxford 1988, p. 20. Hazlitt's "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation" appears in Works, pp.302-320, and is discussed in Chapter II, above.
6. Works, Vol.XIX, p.317. He points out that he is not hindered from embracing a religion by the existence of atheists.
7. Ibid.
8. Works, Vol.XI, p.245.
9. For essay on Guy Fawkes, see Works, Vol.XX, pp.96-113.
10. See Works, Vol.VII, pp.242-57.
11. Ibid., p.242.
12. Ibid., p.246.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p.249.
15. Ibid., p.251.
16. Ibid., p.252; pp.252-3.
17. Works, Vol.IV, pp.128-31.
18. Works, Vol.VII, p.253.
19. Ibid., p.258.
20. Works, Vol.IV, p.58.
21. Ibid.; Works, Vol.XII, p.351. It was fairly common for hostile observers to draw comparisons between Methodism and Catholicism; see D. Hempton, Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850, London, 1984, pp.31-2.
22. Works, Vol.IV, p.58.
23. Ibid.; Works, Vol.VII, p.216. According to E.P Thompson, Hazlitt denied that the Methodists made "a positive contribution to the working-class movement." In contrast to this, it would appear that Hazlitt showed his ambivalence towards the "rabble" in his treatment of Methodism. See Thompson, op.cit., p.45.
24. Works, Vol.VII, pp.230-42.

25. See Works, Vol.XI, ppp.147-50.
26. Ibid., p.148.
27. Ibid., ppp.149-50.
28. Ibid., p.239.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p.240.
33. Ibid.
34. Works, Vol.XI, p.28.
35. Works, Vol.XX, p.266.
36. Works, Vol.XX, p.309.
37. Ibid., p.323.
38. Works, Vol.XI, p.120.
39. Works, Vol.XIV, p.150; p.148. Despite the growing popularity of the Dissenting sects, the Methodists and the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, Hazlitt thought that religion was declining in England. His proof of this was that theatre audiences were applauding religious sentiments more loudly than they did in his youth! See Works, Vol.IX, p.205.
40. Works, Vol.XI, p.116.
41. The application of Dr. Clark's theory to individuals of the time could be the basis for a highly-entertaining exercise in ingenuity. For example, William Pitt could not be described as a convinced Christian during his period in office. This seems to fit in well with his reforming activities of the 1780's, but not with his later opposition to any major change in the constitution. Dr. Clark could claim that at this period he suddenly underwent a religious experience, but evidence for this is lacking. The most important argument against Clark's theory is that it is quite possible for people to support a religious organisation for purely secular reasons (just as the reverse is true). So we are left with the task of explaining why different unbelievers took different lines on the Church. Unfortunately, this is where the economic reductionist seems to have a better case than Dr. Clark. We are left with the theory that those who supported the ancien regime supported the ancien regime - hardly a great step forward in historiography.

*PART THREE: FRIENDS AND FOES*

### PART 3 : FRIENDS AND FOES

"I hate a lie, a piece of injustice touches me to the quick, though nothing but the report of it reach me...I have made many enemies and few friends; for the public know nothing of well-wishers, and keep a wary eye on those that would reform them."

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On Depth and Superficiality (Early 1826)

It would not be possible to assess Hazlitt's politics without a survey of his work on the outstanding individuals of the day. He was acquainted with several leading figures, but it is characteristic of him to mix personalities with his politics, even if he had not actually met his subject. Whatever the drawbacks of this approach, it produced a masterpiece in his Spirit of the Age when coupled with his favourite essay format.

In this section the primary intention is to evaluate Hazlitt's criticism of several controversial characters. It is assumed that a truly great critic should be perceptive and as even-handed as possible; one may possess one of these qualities in great measure, and the result will normally still be ephemeral work. We should bear this in mind as we discuss Hazlitt's views on contemporary figures. It may be possible to decide whether he satisfies both the necessary qualities, and we may also derive a greater understanding of the principles upon which his criticism was based.

#### FRIENDS

Hazlitt described himself once as "The Fool of Love", and it is normally assumed that he was equally inept in friendships. This and the following chapter are concerned with his personal relationships to some extent. But the fact that rather more attention is to be devoted to his

foes than to his friends is no indication that he was an unaimable creature. The "Friends" and "Foes" in our sense are those who are usually taken to have leaned to his side in politics, and those whom he took upon himself to combat. Whether the matter is as clear-cut as the title suggests will emerge in the course of discussion.

#### WILLIAM GODWIN

Hazlitt knew Godwin very well, but was unimpressed by his appearance and conversation. Although his expression denoted "placid temper and recondite thought", he was not tall or graceful. He had, indeed, "less of the appearance of a man of genius, than any one who has given such decided and ample proofs." These proofs, however, were the result of application rather than of native brilliance. This rather dour impression is reflected in Hazlitt's assessment of his verbal powers; "He has neither acuteness of remark, nor a flow of language." Hazlitt told James Northcote that he had not recorded Godwin's conversation since it has nothing to interest the public. In ordinary conversation, in fact, Godwin "either goes to sleep himself, or sets others to sleep." It seems as though there was something of a personality clash between the two men. In particular, Hazlitt was irritated by Godwin's habit of snubbing his friends and courting his enemies. Perhaps some of this might be attributed to Hazlitt's conviction that Godwin had plagiarised his own work on Malthus without acknowledgement; it does appear, in fact, that Godwin did not assist Hazlitt in his career as much as he might have done.

The essay on Godwin in The Spirit of the Age is dominated by a discussion of The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, the author's most renowned non-fictional work. Hazlitt's account of its original reception is well-known:

"No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophic mind of the country as the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Thomas Paine was

considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him; Paley an old woman; Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up her abode; and these were the oracles of thought."

However, Hazlitt says elsewhere that "I always found something wanting in Mr. Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice". He had "hoped, from its title and its vast reputation, to get entire satisfaction from it", but had been disappointed. Godwin's "sultry and unwholesome fame" did not last, and now he "has sunk below the horizon, and enjoys the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality."

Despite his own quibbles, Hazlitt was concerned to defend Godwin from the distortions of his opponents. It was not true that the latter wished to destroy old prejudices without having alternatives to offer. Rather, his work is unquestionably positive; it gives mankind an ideal standard to inspire them which is fully consistent with scripture. However, he is quite clear that the ideal is unrealistic - Godwin "raised the standard of morality above the reach of humanity". He made exceptional heroism into a rule of everyday conduct; he over-rated the power of abstract reason; "he absolves man from the gross and narrow ties of sense, custom, authority, private and local attachment." By creating over-ambitious models of behaviour Godwin was plotting his own downfall - "there is nothing that annoys our self-love so much as being complimented on imaginary achievements, to which we are wholly unequal." This made his decline from public favour inevitable, although of course the French Revolution speeded up the process. The standards of utility and benevolence, which Godwin promoted to encourage virtuous behaviour, might be used instead to justify the grossest selfishness, while his appeal to the right of private judgement could be merely a way of defending unreasonable prejudices. The theory was therefore over-ambitious and potentially dangerous.



While Godwin had erred in placing too much emphasis upon reason, Hazlitt was anxious that this should not be used as justification for a contrary error. Although reason is unlikely to reach Godwin's standard, it is still "that which raises the individual above his mere animal instincts, appetites, and passions." Quoting his own Illustrations of Vetus, Hazlitt called reason "the queen of the moral world, the soul of the universe, the lamp of human life." Since it is to reason that we owe our advancement from barbarism, we must attempt to cultivate it as far as our faculties will allow. Godwin had performed a useful service in advancing the extreme case for reason and benevolence. By this means we can attain a more realistic view of human potential, and virtue may be placed on a secure footing.

This rather back-handed compliment reveals that Hazlitt's criticism of Godwin is based on a different view of human nature. Godwin himself was not an advocate of revolutionary change. He believed that the path to a rational world would be long, but that eventually the truth would prevail. Hazlitt, therefore, was not rebuking Godwin for being over-confident about the immediate prospects for a perfect state. He was expressing doubts about the long-term future. Hazlitt and Godwin were agreed that one must work with the available materials, but disagreed about their quality.

As we have seen, such contrasting views of human nature are the sources of ideological conflict. Hazlitt and the Godwin of the Political Justice could never have agreed over the precise meaning of such words as "reason", "progress", and "freedom", let alone the proper goals of human life. Godwin had, however, grown "wiser with opportunity and reflection; he changes his opinions, and changes them for the better." He had always been a conservative (in the secondary sense), and at one time supported the Rockingham Whigs. The later part of his life saw a retreat to more moderate views, and he dropped some of his more controversial ideas on such topics as

marriage.

Although the division between the two men is made apparent in the Spirit of the Age, Hazlitt's tone in this essay is undoubtedly cordial when it is compared with the manner in which he treated other contemporaries who changed their views. Overall it is a quiet criticism, not a polemical attack. It is this mood which makes the essay a notable achievement. At the time, and for many years later, most writers found it difficult to approach Godwin without either losing their tempers or composing a eulogy. Obviously Hazlitt had a bias of his own, but it is not of a kind which induces a loss of balance. Godwin had erred on the side of optimism, and for this he can be forgiven.

It may be proper to examine other differences between the two writers here, which further illuminate their ideological incompatibility and represent Hazlitt's views on major topics which we cannot examine at full length. The question of punishment, for example, was dealt with in some detail by both. Godwin urged the necessity for far-reaching reform of the penal system, arguing that the present situation was designed to encourage vice rather than to eradicate it. Grounding his case on utility and his theory of necessity, Godwin rejected the notion of retribution and reformation through coercion. The aim of punishment should not only be to protect society, but to restore offenders to a useful role in society. In an ideal state there would be no need for punishment in our sense of the world; neighbours and friends would undertake the process of reformation through reasonable persuasion.

Hazlitt agreed that there were many problems with the penal  
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system. Like Godwin, he considered that the use of excessive punishment was counter-productive, as it merely deterred a jury from convicting. However, the case for reform is based on very different principles here, indicating a pronounced disagreement over the nature of man. Instead of appealing to

utility, Hazlitt suggested that punishment should reflect the collective moral sense of the community. Society should not only be secured against the offender, but should also feel that he has been justly punished. The just fate of the law-breaker would deter potential criminals from following the same course. He believed that the large number of capital offences threatened to defeat the object of a penal system. Transportation would be a much more suitable punishment in most cases. An attempt should also be made at reforming culprits "under prison-discipline". But Hazlitt argued that the laws of rationality do not apply to criminals; "It is the nature of passion to be blind to mere consequences; nay, more, it is the nature of passion, when its purpose is once fixed, to justify itself, and to resist and harden itself against consequences." Hence, Hazlitt assumed that there will always be a need for coercion, and had grave doubts about the efficacy of any attempt at reformation through reasoned argument. Similarly, although he admitted that environmental factors have an effect on the incidence of crime, he dismissed the Godwinian idea that people are not responsible for their actions. While Godwin's necessitarianism led him to claim that the murderer is no more responsible than the knife he wields, Hazlitt laid it down as a firm principle that "No punishment...will in the end be found to be wise or humane, or just or effectual, that is not the natural reaction of a man's own conduct on his own head, or the making him feel, in his own person, the consequences of the injury he has meditated against others." There is more than a hint here of the retributive theory of justice which Godwin abhorred; the difference between them arises because of their contrasting faiths in the power of reason over human behaviour.

Another revealing illustration of the gulf between Godwin and Hazlitt is the question of progress in art. Hazlitt had no doubt that the notion of progress applied to the sciences, since their procedure permitted one invention to inspire another. In the 1790's, however, Godwin was confident

that great improvements in the arts might be expected on similar grounds. His case depended upon his belief that "Genius is wisdom; the possessing a great store of ideas, together with a faculty for calling them up; and a peculiar discernment in their selection or rejection." But there is no reason why this discernment should remain "peculiar", since "every child...is susceptible of the communication of wisdom, and consequently, if the above definition be just, of genius." As human nature improves, so will the various portrayals of society advance towards perfection.

For Hazlitt, however, there was no such vision of united advancement by the artist and his materials. His first point in the fragment "Why the Arts are not Progressive?" was to deny any analogy between the methods of art and science. Art depends upon "genius, taste and feeling"; it is not "mechanical, reducible to rule, or capable of demonstration". The great models from the past, such as Homer, Titian or Shakespeare, studied nature as they found it. The masterpieces of the past may inspire others, but they will interpose themselves between the artist and nature, thus producing work which is partly imitation. Hazlitt believed that the arts leaped to their greatest perfection at the outset, and "have in general declined ever after". There is no question of gradual improvement based upon wisdom. Indeed Hazlitt thought that the contemporary improvement in manners had arisen out of the exhibition of folly on the stage; hence, comedy had in a great measure laughed its own materials out of existence and was now faced with extinction. Although he did not directly refer to the Godwinian notion of progress in his essay, it is very likely that he would have regarded the growth of reason as tending towards the same outcome. Godwin himself had produced his masterpiece, Caleb Williams, as a result of his observations of "Things as they are"; had his protagonists Falkland and Williams behaved as fully rational beings it is difficult to envisage how this gripping adventure, or indeed any other plot of great dramatic interest, might have been produced.

Hazlitt's views on Godwin are revealing for a study of his thought as a whole. Political Justice, which was the text exclusively referred to in his criticism, is an example of almost pure liberalism. The hatred of dependancy, the corresponding denigration of government, and the faith in reason, benevolence and truth are all central to the liberal view of human nature and how it can fulfil its destiny. Hazlitt clearly leaned towards liberalism himself, but in his case there are definite qualifications. The differences between the two men are so marked that it must be doubted whether Hazlitt ever endorsed the more extreme positions in the early editions of Godwin's treatise, and he simply ignored the subsequent softenings of the doctrine. The critics who have called him a Godwinian have assumed that he was a radical because he opposed the governments of his day, and provided him with a list of doctrinal preferences which they assume all radicals agreed upon. Neither of these assumptions bear serious inspection. Godwin's refusal to endorse agitation for parliamentary reform alienated him from many genuine radicals, such as John Thelwall. Although we have seen that it would be inappropriate to describe Hazlitt's writings as radical, there may have been a time before his career opened when such a labelling could be endorsed. But we have his own statement that the Political Justice disappointed him to support the impression left by the coolly dismissive tone of the Spirit of the Age essay to support the impression that Hazlitt was at the most an admirer, rather than a disciple, of Godwin's. Most probably even this favourable view diminished once he had met the uninspiring philosopher. It must be concluded that Godwin exerted a marginal positive influence upon Hazlitt's political ideas, and that the phrases quoted so often from the Spirit of the Age do not imply that Hazlitt regretted the later obscurity of the philosopher.

According to Hazlitt, Robert Owen was "a man of one idea", a  
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class of person discussed in a Table Talk essay. A man of one idea is so  
completely eaten up by it that his conversation can never dwell for a moment  
on another topic. In Owen's case, if he is told that your state of health is  
poor, he will explain how all such problems would be remedied under his  
scheme for the improvement of mankind. The rest of the discussion will be  
devoted to an elaboration of this plan. If you should politely mention anyone  
who has supported or deprecated his idea, "he looks at you with a smile of  
pity at the futility of all opposition and the idleness of all encouragement",  
20  
takes his hat and marches away in triumph.

A man of one idea is generally a harmless fanatic; but he is  
a very irritating companion. He resembles a lunatic, but does not enjoy the  
lucid intervals of the latter. "If you see a visionary of this class going  
along the street, you can tell as well what he is thinking of and will say  
21  
next as the man that fancies himself a teapot or the Czar of Muscovy." This  
portrait is humorous rather than hostile, but one can readily understand why,  
years later, Owen felt compelled to respond to this imputation of "sober  
madness". However, his objection only reinforces Hazlitt's argument, since it  
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is merely a defence of his idea.

"On People with one Idea" was composed in 1822, when Owen had  
lost many of his powerful advocates. Hazlitt therefore felt able to bracket  
him with old Major Cartwright as a well-meaning failure. However, in 1816  
when he reviewed Owen's New View of Society for the Examiner, his emotions  
were very different. Owen had attracted the support of well-placed admirers, a  
list which eventually included Southey, Viscount Sidmouth (the former Prime  
Minister and current Home Secretary), and the Duke of Kent. He did not manage  
to obtain the whole-hearted countenance of William Wilberforce and the Prince

Regent, although flattering dedications indicated his desire to interest them. At this point, therefore, Hazlitt took the "New View" very seriously.

The first intention of Hazlitt's review was to criticise the use of the word "New" in Owen's title. He doubted whether New Lanark differed in any way from "Old Utopia". "It is as old as the "Political Justice" of Mr. Godwin, as the "Oceana" of Harrington, as the "Utopia" of Sir Thomas More, as the "Republic" of Plato." It represented an over-optimistic vision of the future, "by which fools and honest men have been sometimes deceived, but which has never yet taken in the knaves and knowing ones." Why, then, bother to revive these doctrines, which may not have been refuted, but have been found unrealistic in practice?

Hazlitt's reaction to Owen's pamphlet was a mixture of incredulity, derision, and suspicion. He was amazed at the confidence with which Owen advocated his "paradoxes", in the presence of the men whose privileges were undermined by the doctrine. To illustrate his belief in environmental determinism, Owen had argued that the characters of judge and convict would be reversed had the circumstances of their birth been exchanged. Hazlitt must have rubbed his eyes when he read this argument. "Here's a levelling rogue for you!" he wrote, "The world turned inside out, with a vengeance!" And yet Owen had not been arrested. Instead, he was patronized by the great. Hazlitt could only assume that Owen's views were not taken seriously, or that because New Lanark was small and distant, they felt that it was safe to patronise him. Meanwhile, Owen agreed with their opposition to parliamentary reform and Napoleon, which was comforting. Hazlitt himself could quietly dismiss the New View, but might have changed his mind if he had seen Owen "brought up for judgment before Lord Ellenborough, or standing in the pillory."

But Hazlitt had more weighty arguments against Owen's work. His

refutation "is contained in this sentence:-'If to do were as easy as to teach others what were good to be done, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces.'" Although Owen claimed that he alone understood human nature, he was far too sanguine about the hopes of improvement. Hazlitt wrote, "The improvement of men we do not think an impossibility, but we do think it almost the next thing to an impossibility, and not, as Mr. Owen does, a certainty." It seemed that "things will most probably go on as they have

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done." He found the idea of a low-born Prince Regent "at the head of a gang of bravoos and assassins" very entertaining, but his light-hearted banter implies strongly that he rejected such thorough-going environmental determinism on the grounds of over-simplification. Owen treated his assumptions as facts, in a manner which reminded Hazlitt of the phrenologist Spurzheim; both men used "facts" in a manner which only succeeded in making the reader deeply suspicious. In short, "This puff will not take with us: we are old birds, not to be caught with chaff."

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This critique, unfair as it is to both Owen and his admirers, is nevertheless highly revealing. Hazlitt was genuinely confused about the whole matter; he could not bring himself to recognise humanitarian motives in Owen's patrons. He correctly predicted that these influential backers would fall away. However, this was not so much because of a sudden realisation on their part that they were committed to a scheme which would actually do something for the poor; they were alienated by Owen's aggressive views on religious instruction. Similarly, Hazlitt ignored Owen's real achievement at New Lanark. It was by no means so insignificant as Hazlitt claimed, however much Owen exaggerated its importance. This practical success attracted men like Southey, who had been disappointed by the results of Godwinianism but had never lost their philanthropy. As such, it revealed a considerable amount of good-will which a more balanced critic might have applauded. Hazlitt's critique is reminiscent of his review of Coleridge's Lay Sermon, which we



shall briefly discuss in the following chapter. In this approach a few leading principles are subjected to ridicule, and the reader is left to suppose that the remainder of the argument is equally specious. In neither review is there a serious attempt to examine the motivation behind the work.

Possibly the clearest indication of Hazlitt's distance from the beliefs of Owen may be found in their respective thoughts on education. Owen was convinced that a proper system of education was essential to the production of his perfect society; indeed, his entire theory appears to depend upon this. <sup>31</sup> Although he did believe that children were born with certain innate propensities, they might be formed into any human character through the proper methods. He thought it was scandalous that Britain lacked a government-supported education system, and gave financial help to the contemporary educational reformers, Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell, even though he found fault with the plans of both (especially the latter, who advocated the inculcation of Anglican principles).

Hazlitt not only thought the plans of Bell and Lancaster inadequate; he did not look upon the idea of any kind of national education with enthusiasm. His early teachers, notably Joseph Priestley, were generally opposed to teaching which would uphold one form of belief over another - in spite of the sectarian nature of their own academies. Hazlitt shared this suspicion, but there is a more important reason for his antipathy to the national schemes. His ideal was a classical education. <sup>32</sup> While those who were not advantaged in this way could cope with the mundane problems of life quite adequately, only those who had been exposed to the thoughts, or read about the noble deeds of great men could genuinely recognise and admire excellence in others. Whether one might properly describe Hazlitt as an educational elitist or not is an open question. But it is certainly not implied that this kind of training should be available to everyone. In essays on "The Ignorance

of the Learned" and "The Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority", Hazlitt argued that drinking at the Pierian spring did not bring unmixed benefits; it is likely that he felt such a course was unsuitable for many more than the few who embarked upon it in his own day. As we have seen, Hazlitt had grave doubts about the supremacy of reason in human affairs; like Godwin, Owen was also guilty of over-estimating the potential for improvement through environmental factors. Holding these views, Hazlitt could not be as optimistic about the likely benefits of rationally-planned education as Owen was.

This divergence of view over a central issue in the debate over human nature is indicative of a marked ideological disagreement between the two men. Owen's belief that once his ideas had been fairly stated they would be accepted by all rational men could not have impressed him much either. His subsequent development might bring him within the Socialist tradition, but the New View is best regarded as the work of an extreme liberal, closer to William Godwin than to Karl Marx. Like Godwin, he was not an enthusiastic supporter of the campaign for parliamentary reform; if he had been less extreme in his optimism, he might have acted differently. He did believe in a hierarchical society; he thought that happier, better-nourished workers would ensure larger profits for the masters, and that both groups would experience an upward-levelling of living standards. Whether this should lead us to describe him as a conservative (in non-ideological terms) is debatable and beyond our present purpose. The important point to make here that it was not Owen's cautious attitude to social change that Hazlitt objected to, but his optimistic view of man.

#### SIR JAMES MACKINTOSH

Although Hazlitt had relatively little to say about Sir James Mackintosh, the parallels between the two men are extremely interesting and

therefore he is a worthy figure with whom to close this section. As a young and promising lawyer, Mackintosh wrote a defence of the French Revolution, Vindicae Gallicae, which won renown as perhaps the most effective reply to Burke's Reflections. However, the course of events in France induced him to moderate his views. Announcing that he now detested and abhorred the principles of the French, he made a public "recantation" in a series of Lectures on the Law of Nature and of Nations, delivered in 1799. He settled down to a career in law and politics, also writing on philosophy and history for the Edinburgh Review. Before his death he was able to assist the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, showing that he had returned to something like his early advocacy of liberal causes.

It has been suggested recently that Mackintosh's disagreement with Burke was not so profound as the rhetorical stance of the Vindicae Gallicae would imply. <sup>33</sup> Although there is not space here to argue this point fully, it would appear to be highly suspect. Mackintosh and Burke both appealed to events in France to sustain their contrasting cases, and occasionally Mackintosh was able to convict Burke of factual error. But what was really at issue was not the facts, but their interpretation. While Burke was anxious to place the blame for events on the Third Estate and their philosophical mentors, Mackintosh was equally keen to demonstrate that the country was pushed into revolution by corrupt government. Similarly, when Mackintosh contested Burke's interpretation of the 1688 Revolution in England - probably the underlying object of the whole discussion - he made the valid point that the Revolution was made to appear more conservative than it was by the "Old Whigs". But Burke might have simply replied that the reason why the Old Whigs had done this was because they intended it to be a once-for-all event. In short, both Burke and Mackintosh found what they sought in the pages of history and the accounts arriving from France. There could be no winner in this debate; all that is established by the texts is that Burke was a

conservative and Mackintosh a liberal.

In the Vindicae Gallicae, Mackintosh justified Revolution on principles very similar to those of Machiavelli. States must return to their first principles periodically, as corruption will otherwise become too firmly established. Mild reforms are unavailing in such circumstances, since "pruning" of this kind will only stimulate further development of abuses. But when he came to review Burke's Letters on a Regicide Peace, he had changed his mind. He now wrote that "the only question that can be at issue between Mr. Burke and ourselves, is whether a war was a just, effectual and safe mode of averting the danger with which the French Revolution might threaten the established governments of Europe." Mackintosh's ideological conversion is

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further illustrated by his asking the rhetorical question, "Who are you that presume to frame laws for men without taking human passions into account - to regulate the actions of mankind without regarding the source and principle of those actions?" In the Vindicae Gallicae, Mackintosh had been "presumptuous" enough to submit all contemporary institutions to the test of reason, and found most of them sadly wanting. After reading Burke under the influence of the events in France, he realised that old institutions might be allowed to survive if they fulfilled other human needs. His liberal view of human nature, therefore, had changed to one very close to Burke's conservatism.

Hazlitt was very hostile to those who joined the "winning" side,

and did not let the circumstances of Mackintosh's conversion escape his scrutiny. Burke had invited Mackintosh for a visit after reading the cordial review of the Regicide Peace, and during his stay Mackintosh had become "a convert not merely to the grace of Mr. Burke's style, but to the liberality of his views, and the solidity of his opinions."

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Hazlitt probably attended the lecture course of 1799, and reported William Godwin's shock at the desertion of an old friend. Hazlitt himself was not impressed; the lectures were "very

tolerable, dull, commonplace declamations - a little bordering on fustian."

Since Hazlitt does note that on his return from a legal position in India Mackintosh returned to his former liberalism, the familiar explanation of apostasy cannot be the only reason for the critical tone of this essay, from The Spirit of the Age.<sup>38</sup> Hazlitt regarded Sir James as a poor parliamentary speaker, a man who originally expected his auditors to be convinced by philosophy, rather than their emotions. His theory that Scotsmen are too dry in their oratory was applied to Mackintosh as it was to Henry Brougham. Mackintosh also had no original opinions; he reminded Hazlitt of a dispensing chemist, able to pluck the right chemicals from his drawers, but unable to manufacture them himself. He had a prodigious memory, but this is not the same as genius.

A more interesting reason for Hazlitt's disapproval was another tactical weakness beside Mackintosh's poor oratory. He was unaware of the distinction between friend and foe. In the House of Commons, "He gave a handle to his enemies; threw stumbling-blocks in the way of his friends."<sup>39</sup> When attacking Lord Castlereagh, he found so many objections to his own position that he was easily overthrown; yet when he had attacked Godwin, he had been irresistible. In other words, Mackintosh's love of truth made him more anxious to present both sides of a question fairly than to lead his audience to the preferred conclusion. Now, this characteristic will be noted again, in connection with Hazlitt's own 1806 essay on Burke. Here, Hazlitt subsequently thought, he had given "a handle to his enemies" through his excessive candour. It is unlikely that the coincidence would have struck Hazlitt in 1825, by which time he had learned not to repeat such "mistakes." But it is interesting that the epigraph of The Spirit of the Age is "To know another well were to know one's self."<sup>40</sup>

This common characteristic is only one of many striking parallels between Hazlitt and Mackintosh. We have noted that Mackintosh was almost the only contemporary thinker of note to recognise Hazlitt's philosophical ability. They both regarded Utilitarianism as inadequate because it under-valued the moral sentiments. Mackintosh was attacked by James Mill for this, and John Stuart regarded Hazlitt as unreliable on the same grounds. There are great similarities in their political creeds. The following quotations may give some idea of how their views coincided:

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Mackintosh: "[The Press] is the true control over the Ministers and Parliaments, who might else, with impunity, trample on the impotent formalities that form the pretended bulwark of our freedom"

Hazlitt: "It is the press that has done every thing for the people, and even for Governments."

Mackintosh(2): "We desire to avert revolution by reform - subversion by correction."

Hazlitt(2): "Timely reforms, therefore, are the best preventatives of revolutions."

Mackintosh(3): "It is not because we have been free, but because we have a right to be free, that we ought to demand freedom."

Hazlitt(3): "[The people have] a desire of happiness, and a right to freedom, and a will to be free."

Mackintosh(4): "The multitude have attained sufficient knowledge to value the superiority of enlightened men; and they retain a sufficient consciousness of ignorance to preclude rebellion against their dictates."

Hazlitt(4): "Literature is at present pretty nearly on the footing of universal suffrage, yet the public defer sufficiently to the critics."

Mackintosh(5): "Men may be so brutalised as to be proud of their chains."

Hazlitt(5): "The slave, who has no other hope or consolation, clings to the apparition of royal magnificence, which insults his misery and his despair... and hugs his chains the closer, because he has nothing else left."

Mackintosh (6): "The evils of anarchy must be short-lived, while those of despotism are fatally permanent."

Hazlitt(6): "Of all dynasties, anarchy is the shortest lived."

When this evidence is considered, it is revealing that Mackintosh, like his friends Madame de Stael and Benjamin Constant, would be best described as a

conservative liberal. Mackintosh was also close, politically and socially, to Francis Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review - a man whom Hazlitt called "The Prince of Critics", and applauded as someone who only deserted a central path in politics to fight for liberty when it was endangered.

In view of all this, it is rather difficult to explain the unquestionably cool tone of Hazlitt's remarks on Mackintosh. Of course, they moved in different circles, and a meeting may have brought about a friendship. But this is nearly as unlikely as the idea that Hazlitt could have befriended Lord Byron. The main problem, of course, was that Mackintosh had renounced his faith in the French Revolution, in a manner which amounted to a propaganda coup for the government. His subsequent return to the liberal fold could never efface the memory of the Lincoln's Inn lectures. Also, he was a parliamentarian without possessing the necessary ability to sway an audience; this probably tarnished Hazlitt's view of his undoubted qualities in other fields.

This chapter on Hazlitt's "Friends" reveals that he was a very difficult man to please. Apart from the obvious fact that Hazlitt was a critic, who would be reluctant to overlook faults in a political platform or in a dramatic production, his ideological stance helped to ensure this. His ambivalent view of human nature allowed him great versatility in his attacks. Faced with an optimistic writer, the pessimistic strand in his thought was activated, and when his subject showed hostility to mankind, the hope for happier days which never wholly left him would rise up to deliver a rebuke. It would seem inappropriate, therefore, to speak of Hazlitt's intellectual friends and foes; it can be said, more plausibly for him than for most other critics, that he showed no favouritism in selecting his targets. If Napoleon Bonaparte, the subject of the following chapter, is an exception to this, then the reason for this inconsistency simply becomes more fascinating.

## NOTES

1. Works, Vol.XII, p.347.
2. Works, Vol.XI, p.28.
3. Ibid., p.29.
4. Ibid., p.317.
5. Ibid., p.17.
6. Works, Vol.VII, p.304.
7. Works, Vol.XI, p.16.
8. Ibid., pp.18-19.
9. Ibid., p.11
10. Works, Vol.VII, pp.66-7.
11. Ibid., p.28.
12. For Hazlitt's views on this subject, see Works, Vol.XIX, pp.324-329, and Ibid., pp.216-255.
13. Works, Vol.XIX, p.244.
14. Ibid., p.247.
15. W. Godwin, The Enquirer, New York, 1965 reprint, p.24.
16. Ibid., p.25 (emphasis mine).
17. Works, Vol.XVIII, pp.5-6. There is an interesting echo of Hazlitt's views in T. B Macaulay, Works, London, 1898 ed., Vol.VII pp.5; "as civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines." It is not known whether Macauley saw his own poetry as a symptom of this process.
18. Ibid., p.6.
19. Works, Vol.VIII, pp.59-69.
20. Ibid., pp.66-7.
21. Ibid., pp.61-2.
22. R. Owen, A Life of Robert Owen: Written by Himself, London, 1971 ed., p.76; "It was this habit of my mind that induced Hazlitt...to say in his writings that I was "a man of one idea". Had he said that I was a man of one fundamental principle and its practical consequences, - he would have been nearer the truth. For instead of the knowledge that "the character of man is formed for and not by him" being "one idea" - it will be found to be, like the little grain of mustard seed, competent to fill the mind with new and true ideas, and to overwhelm in its consequences all other ideas opposed to it."



23. Works, Vol.VIII, pp.97-103.
24. Ibid., p.98.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p.101. Hazlitt's views on the importance of environmental factors in the formation of character are ambiguous, not to say contradictory. In his Life of Thomas Holcroft, he wrote "we should be tempted to assert, that men do not become what by nature they are meant to be, but what society makes them"; in a Plain Speaker essay, "On Personal Character", he suggests "No one ever changes his character from the time he is two years old; nay, I might say, from the time he is two hours old." I do not think that this is a case of Hazlitt changing his mind so much as two distorted versions of his real belief that man is a creature of innate tendencies as well as conditioning. See Works, Vol.III, p.155, and Vol.XII p.230.
27. Ibid., p.102.
28. Ibid., p.100.
29. Ibid., p.103.
30. Ibid., p.99.
31. See G.D.H Cole, Robert Owen, London, 1925, pp.96-111.
32. See Works, Vol.IV, pp.4-6.
33. For a discussion of this issue, see W.Christian, "James Mackintosh, Burke, and the Cause of Reform", Eighteenth Century Studies, 1973-4, pp.193-206, and L. Mackenzie, "Mackintosh and the Vindiciae Gallicae", Eighteenth Century Studies, 1980-1, pp.264-282. Burke himself did not think that Mackintosh's views had really changed; see C. Cone, Burke and The Nature of Politics, University of Kentucky Press, 1957; II, pp.504-5.
34. Sir J. Mackintosh, Miscellaneous Works, Philedelphia, 1852 ed., p.462.
35. Ibid., p.463.
36. Works, Vol.XI, p.100.
37. Works, Vol.VII, p.62. But Hazlitt did think highly of the Vindiciae Gallicae; see Works, Vol.XI, p.102.
38. Works, Vol.XI, pp.95-103.
39. Ibid., p.97. Interestingly, as a child Mackintosh often would advocate both sides of a question before an audience; see P. O'Leary, Sir James Mackintosh: The Whig Cicero, Aberdeen, 1989.
40. This quotation from Hamlet was the epigraph to the 2nd (1825) edition of The Spirit of the Age. For a discussion of Hazlitt's response to Burke, see pp.148-54, below.
41. Mackintosh quotations: (1) op. cit., p.455; (2) p.456; (3) p.450; (4) p.459; (5) p.465; (6) p.432. Hazlitt quotations: (1) Works, Vol.VII,

p.269; (2) Ibid., p.280; (3) Ibid., p.289; (4) Works, Vol.XIX, p.308;  
(5) Works, Vol.VII, p.148; (6) Works, Vol.VII, p.279.

42. C.f Charles James Fox; "Anarchy, if it would be introduced into other nations, was in its nature temporary - despotism, we knew by sad experience to be lasting." Speeches During the Revolutionary War Period; Everyman, n.d.
43. See Benjamin Constant: Political Writings, Trans. and ed. B. Fontana, Cambridge, 1988, and G. Dodge, Benjamin Constant's Philosophy of Liberalism, University of North Carolina Press, 1980.
44. For Hazlitt on Jeffrey, see Works, Vol.XI, pp.126-134. An interesting survey of the Edinburgh's politics may be found in B. Fontana, Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: The "Edinburgh Review" 1802-32, Cambridge, 1985.

## FOES

It is well known that Hazlitt regarded himself as a good hater. At a time when political and literary camps were unusually polarised, it is not surprising that his polemical qualities were regularly called upon. Some of the most memorable invectives were hurled at his brother-in-law John Stoddart, William Gifford of the Quarterly Review, and Edward Sterling, father of the poet and author of the "Letters of Vetus" in the Times. But his targets were not only journalists. Poets, philosophers, politicians, preachers and phrenologists all felt the weight of his displeasure. If, as we have suggested, Hazlitt was at his best when exercising his critical powers upon the work of others, it may be hoped that some important evidence may emerge as we study in detail his response to the most important of his intellectual opponents.

### I

#### EDMUND BURKE

It has been truly said that "Burke was the great soul whose echo returned constantly to Hazlitt's thoughts, and summoned his prose to its keener intensities." At least a glancing reference to the great Whig may be detected in many of Hazlitt's essays. A wholly satisfactory review of his complex reactions to Burke would require a lengthy dissertation; it is necessary, therefore, to restrict the present discussion to what are apparently the salient points.

Hazlitt's first piece on Burke was composed for his Eloquence of the British Senate (1807), and later reprinted in the Political Essays. It was, he later asserted, "written in a fit of extravagant candour, at a time when I thought I could do justice, or more than justice, to an enemy,

without betraying a cause." In 1807 he had felt that it must be "a test of the sense and candour of any one belonging to the opposite party, whether he allowed Burke to be a great man." While the radicals mocked Burke as "a wild enthusiast, or a hollow sophist", Hazlitt was almost alone in believing him to have been "an admirable reasoner, a close observer of human nature", besides being one whose prose combined "the two extremes of refinement and strength".

It will be noted, however, that Hazlitt regarded himself as belonging to an "opposite party" from Burke. Indeed, Hazlitt recorded his agreement with those who urged that "the consequences of [Burke's] writings as instruments of political power have been tremendous, fatal, such as no exertion of wit or knowledge or genius can ever counteract or atone for." Burke's message had lent succour to the enemies of freedom at home and abroad; the ammunition he had provided against Revolutionary principles was capable of damaging the more moderate opponents of despotism. For Hazlitt, the unrelenting assailant of Divine Right theories, this was unforgiveable.

This position seems difficult to square with the earlier cordiality. But Hazlitt is speaking here of the effects of Burke's writings in the hands of others. When he examines Burke's philosophy in isolation from these effects, his attitude softens markedly. The "order of things" advocated by Burke may be only one possible arrangement of society, but his presentation is fair; "the advantages he points out as connected with the mixed form of government are really and necessarily inherent in it." The old institutions of society have a genuine "tendency to enlarge and raise the mind, to keep alive the memory of past greatness...because it is natural to think highly of that which inspires us with high thoughts." These remarks, indeed, are consistent with the favourable account of the old aristocracy which Hazlitt had published in his Free Thoughts on Public Affairs the

previous year; here he had concluded that since noblemen had a lasting stake in the country, a pride in their ancestry and a liberal education, they might be entrusted with more power than their mere numerical strength might justify. In short, Hazlitt admitted that Burke was an advocate for a "mixed" system of government which had much to be said for it (although he is careful to point out that different systems might be equally attractive in other ways); his primary intention was not to write an apology for Louis XVI's "despotism". It is difficult to make a clear distinction between the true message of a work and the effect it has upon the conduct of its readers, but the only sensible explanation of Hazlitt's ambivalence in this essay seems to be that he tacitly drew such a distinction in the case of the Reflections.

Further support for this conclusion may be drawn from Hazlitt's acknowledgement later in the essay that Burke truly understood "the nature of man, and his capacity of being affected by certain things from habit, from imagination, and sentiment, as well as from reason." Burke thought more highly of man than to regard him as a mere calculating machine; he realised that parents loved their own children before all others, irrespective of their merits; he also denied that "that mode of government is necessarily the best which is the cheapest." While Burke's opponents deprecated the power of prejudice and urged instead that men should follow abstract reason, Hazlitt urged the value of the prejudice in many cases. We have seen that ideological positions may be best understood as originating in conceptions of human nature; here we find that Hazlitt not only found merit in Burke's political creed, but could also agree with him on the fundamental issues of human emotions, knowledge, and conduct. There is a marked contrast between his treatment of this "foe" and his response to such supposed political allies as Godwin; in the first case, an outward hostility is tempered by the existence of underlying areas of agreement, whereas we have seen that his apparent fellow-feeling with Godwin was undermined by disagreements over

vital principles.

Ten years later, Hazlitt composed a second article on Burke for the Political Essays. A changed tone is unmistakable from the outset of this piece. Although Hazlitt does not deny the unusual quality of Burke's prose, the essay mostly consists of a compendium of short-comings. Burke renounced his principles for a pension, his vanity outweighed his reason, he distorted facts to fit his theory. He was not a great philosopher, yet his ventures into practical politics were foredoomed by his metaphysical bent. In the previous essay, Hazlitt had allowed that Burke presented a valid case for a tenable cause. Here he is depicted as a man of "false refinement", who simply constructed an apology for prevailing abuses. To borrow a phrase from another essay, "he strewed the flowers of his style over the rotten carcass of corruption."<sup>9</sup>

It would seem that Hazlitt had completely changed his mind about Burke in the intervening ten years. Yet this verdict is much too simplistic. Although there is no mistaking Hazlitt's bitterness, some hesitation is also apparent. Firstly, we should recall that in a footnote appended to the earlier essay at this time, he noted that his attitude was the result of "extravagant candour". This is an unusual choice of words, if not an unfortunate one. If he was too candid in 1807, what was he in 1817? The clear suggestion is that while he was able to discuss Burke's writings on their real merits in the first essay, when he composed the second he felt it necessary to obscure his true position. It appears that he changed his tone because "the poison of high example has by far the widest range of destruction", and that "however much it may be defended upon other grounds, the political career of that eminent individual has no title to the<sup>10</sup> praise of consistency." Burke had stood forward as the champion of liberty during the American War, but in writing his Reflections he had light-

heartedly changed sides - possibly, Hazlitt asserts, because he was jealous of Rousseau's success on the other side. While this innovative insult might suggest that Hazlitt was warming to a task which he had commenced with the words, "It is not without reluctance that we speak of the vices and infirmities of such a mind as Burke's", his discomfort soon re-emerges. 11

It was a common-place among Burke's detractors to accuse him of inconsistency, but it was more unusual to admit immediately afterwards that his career could "be defended upon other grounds". The remainder of the piece, which had originally appeared as the coda to an Edinburgh Review article on Coleridge, reads like the work of a man trying to convince himself of the validity of his own argument. Certainly it cannot compare to the earlier essay in terms of prose-style, although this may be partly attributed to its brevity.

Hazlitt could be far more abusive where Burke was concerned, but even at his most hostile there are indications that he regretted his stance. The original version of his Round Table paper "On Beauty" contained a footnote which announced that "[Burke] was at once a liar, a coward, and a slave". 12 It is revealing that, although Burke was long dead and there was no question of libel action, Hazlitt chose to omit this when the essay was taken from the Examiner newspaper for reprinting. It would appear that, on reflection, Hazlitt concluded that he would rather not allow such remarks to feature in his more lasting work.

Despite such hesitancy, clearly by 1817 Hazlitt's opposition to Burke's legacy had deepened. In 1807 he had been buoyed by his belief in Napoleon as a bulwark against despotism; this consolation had disappeared ten years later. Burke's reputation as the greatest spokesman of the counter-revolution had grown, and as the memory of his stand over America faded, it became easier to exaggerate the discrepancy between this and his later position. Hazlitt's sensitivity on this issue had probably increased; the

estrangement between himself and the Lake Poets, for example, had become permanent by 1817. Although it would be wrong to describe the author of the second "Character of Mr. Burke" as a man with a persecution complex, he certainly leaves the impression that he can no longer afford his earlier "candour", as he has been betrayed and deserted.

Ironically, it appears that the main source of Hazlitt's later attitude is a mistake common to both Burke and himself. The former had exaggerated the influence of Rousseau and other French writers on the French Revolution. Hazlitt followed him by attributing the "legitimate reaction" to Burke. The pen could be mightier than the sword, but in alliance they were almost unstoppable. It was therefore the duty of all those who rejected despotism to fight with every tool at their disposal, even if this meant distorting the truth a little. Therefore, although we have seen that Hazlitt was originally capable of discussing Burke as a supporter of the existing system of English government, he was unable to sustain this opinion for long. He eventually came to believe that Burke not only wished to see the ancien regime restored in France, but he also had given tacit encouragement to the friends of despotism at home. This type of criticism finds little sympathy among modern authorities on Burke, but it should be remembered that Burke ignored warnings that he would be seen as an apologist for arbitrary government. If a recent biographer is correct in claiming that Burke's preferred solution of creating a Constitutional monarchy in France could not have succeeded without a revolution, then the misunderstanding between Burke and his opponents becomes even more ironic in hindsight. The fact that Burke's Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents had been premised upon an equally unlikely threat of despotism from the young George III should also permit a more sympathetic understanding of Hazlitt's error.

One must conclude, however, that just as a balanced account of



the French Revolution should not be sought in Burke's pages, Hazlitt is not the man to consult if we seek an impartial account of Burke's career and writings. It is a pity that such a verdict is inescapable, because there are some fine insights to be gleaned from his criticism, and it might be said that Hazlitt understood Burke's mind as well as any of his contemporaries. Temperamentally they had much in common; they were highly emotional men, yet both sacrificed friendship for the sake of their principles. Emotionally, their allegiances were divided over the French Revolution. This, however, should not be allowed to disguise the broad areas of ideological agreement which Hazlitt betrays when the polemical approach is dropped. When it is remembered that the lasting friendship between Fox and Burke was changed to bitter enmity by the events in France, it becomes possible to understand that marginal differences of principle can have the same effect as a yawning gulf at times of political crisis.

## II

### THE LAKE POETS

"That conversion will always be suspected that apparently concurs with interest. He that never finds his error till it hinders his progress towards wealth and honour, will not be thought to love truth only for herself."

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Samuel Johnson, Lives of the Poets: John Dryden.

Despite their loud protests, there is no doubt that the Lake Poets - William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge - underwent ideological conversion during the wars against France. They greeted the fall of the Bastille as a vital advance along the road to man's millenium, yet when Napoleon fell they were increasingly haunted by the likely results of radical thought. As teenage liberals, they were enchanted by the visions of freedom conjured by Godwin; as adult conservatives, they learned to appreciate

the cautions of Burke. Although what others saw as change was regarded by themselves as natural development, they actually provide a common, and wholly credible, motive for ideological disenchantment. When they were young, they gave themselves "credit for qualities which [they] did not possess", and measured others by this standard. Later, they became aware of their own weaknesses, and those of their fellows. Hence, their burning desire for a more free and equal ordering of society was tempered into a conviction that distinctions of wealth and rank ensured social harmony, and that radical reform would involve unnecessary risks.

Although there is insufficient space here for a full examination of the subject, the course of each man's metamorphosis should be sketched before discussing Hazlitt's criticisms. Wordsworth, as is well known, was in France during some of the early months of the Revolution. He made a Royalist girl pregnant, but inclined in other matters to the Girondin faction. He admired Paine and Rousseau - influences which are evident in his youthful pamphlet (never published), A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff - and a subsequent reading of Godwin's Political Justice captivated him. At this time he told a friend that "I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall forever continue." The pamphlet certainly places him among the more radical thinkers of the day; he advocated universal manhood suffrage, short parliaments, rotation in office, and no unmerited titles. His hatred for the aristocracy, fuelled by constant legal battles with the first Lord Lowther, is particularly extreme.

Obviously George III's declaration of war against the French was a serious blow to Wordsworth. It began the process which ended with Wordsworth as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland. Although his sympathies lay originally with the French, his opinions were even more shaken when

"...become oppressors in their turn

Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence

For one of conquest, lost sight of all

17

Which they had struggled for..."

After a tour of Germany with Coleridge and his sister Dorothy (1798), and the French invasion of Switzerland (1802), he decided that his loyalty lay with England. This rejection of the French did not automatically entail an alienation from the cause which they had abused. But in Wordsworth's case the two were closely linked. He disliked the feeling that he was adrift from his compatriots. He developed strong nationalistic principles, which inspired his sonnets on Independence and Liberty (1802), and his most famous political work, The Convention of Cintra (1808), which saw the best chance of defeating Napoleon in a patriotic movement in the Peninsular. The sonnets still contain references to Milton and Sidney, but it is debatable whether they would have approved of the cause for which their aim was invoked. Equally, the Cintra pamphlet might be called the work of a rebel, but a rebel with a conservative cause. He worried that its publication would raise the old accusation of Jacobinism against him, but he was now criticising the government from a position of safety. In 1816 he published odes on Waterloo in the belief that victory over France was more important than conquering misery at home - a telling reversal of earlier priorities.

The Letters to the Freeholders of Westmorland (1817) perhaps best indicate Wordsworth's later position. They were designed to persuade the county electorate not to vote for the Whig, Henry Brougham, who was standing against Lord Lowther's nominees. The ideological conversion he had undergone is demonstrated in his eulogies of Burke, a man whom he had previously denounced. The second Lord Lowther, who had paid his father's debt to the Wordsworth family, is complimented as "a tried enemy to dangerous

innovators - a condemner of fantastic theories - one who understands mankind and knows the heights and levels of human nature...who despises...the shows, and pretences, and all the false arts by which the plaudits of the multitude are won, and the people flattered to the common ruin of themselves and their deceivers." Wordsworth was convinced that parliamentary reform would be the harbinger of anarchy. The "ignorant" populace were "not fit to govern themselves - not yet, certainly", and since he did not think it right that a child should learn more than his father had done, the day when they were fit to govern themselves could only be a long time off.

Some critics have defended Wordsworth's consistency, urging that "The story of Wordsworth's political development is one of growth but not one of decline or apostasy", and that he maintained his "humanitarian sympathy". This account (by F.M Todd) is not satisfactory. It appears to be based on a confusion of the two types of liberalism discussed earlier. One may have "humanitarian sympathies" even after an ideological conversion from liberalism to conservatism, and the statement sheds no light on the question of consistency. But when Todd claims that Wordsworth's political faith "looked hopefully forward and was based essentially on a belief in inevitable progress towards an ideal state of human liberty and dignity", he seems to be indulging in wishful thinking. This would indeed signify ideological consistency, but flies in the face of the pessimistic view of human nature evinced by Wordsworth in his later writings.

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Robert Southey was brought up on lines laid down in Rousseau's Emile, and after this did not take well to the discipline of Westminster School. Expelled for denouncing the practice of flogging, Southey read Godwin and became a radical liberal. The Pantisocratic scheme which he devised with Coleridge and another friend was not rigorously Godwinian in spirit or letter,

since Southey wanted to take a servant and married Edith Fricker with unnecessary enthusiasm for one who followed the creed of Political Justice. Nevertheless, Southey was clearly fired with enthusiasm for liberal causes as a young man, and had great hopes for the future of humanity.

At this time Southey was writing radical poetry about the Peasant's Revolt and Joan of Arc. After the death of Robespierre he and Coleridge collaborated on a play about the Jacobin leader, whom Southey had described as a benefactor of mankind. By 1797, however, trips abroad and the French war induced him to renounce his visions of "man-mending". He settled down to support a growing family (together with that of Coleridge), and became a contributor to the Quarterly Review which had been set up to oppose the moderately-liberal Edinburgh. He adopted a view of history which reflected his conservative outlook; "Great and sudden changes are evil in themselves and in their consequences," he wrote. "The Constitution is our Ark of the Covenant. Woe to the sacriligious hand that would profane it." <sup>23</sup>

Like Wordsworth, Southey became convinced that only an immediate suspension of the freedom of the press could save the country from a bellum servile during the post-war distresses. But, as Crane Brinton has suggested, Southey never entirely lost his desire to see man's lot improved. His hatred for Malthusian doctrine was hardly unique in the conservative ranks, except perhaps for its intensity. He believed that taxation should be levied to support the poor by public works whenever necessary. He was an enthusiast for the ideas of Robert Owen, even though he realised that the latter was an enemy to established religions. His notions on taxation and industrial developments provoked the ridicule of Macaulay, but Southey emerges from their ideological battle with great credit. Macaulay's confidence that moral conclusions may be drawn from statistics is not as convincing as Southey's anger as a witness of suffering.

Southey's main dilemma was that he became a paternalist at a time when the Tory party was falling under the influence of laissez-faire. After reading evidence of the factory system's abuses he told a friend that he was surprised "that more of these cotton and worsted and flax kings have not yet hanged themselves...that none of their factories have been destroyed; that the very pavement of the streets has not risen and stoned them." This moral outrage was echoed by some amongst the Tory party, but for the most part the political economists were looked upon as oracles because of their theoretical "expertise". Never entirely at home among the Tories, he was the object of bitter invective from the Whigs and reformers. In 1817 William Smith stood up in parliament with a copy of Southey's Wat Tyler in one hand, and an issue of the Quarterly Review in which the former radical had denounced the freedom of the press in the other, and ironically urged that Southey should be arrested for sedition. Southey could not resist defending himself, and probably made matters worse by doing so; Coleridge argued that a man should not be condemned for having thought too well of his fellows at one time, but this did Southey little good either. Although Coleridge's statement confirms that Southey had undergone an ideological conversion, the latter thought that there had been no more change in his opinions than "the ordinary process of beer and wine - of fermenting."

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Coleridge's own complex personality and opinions can scarcely be fully dealt with here. Having absconded from Cambridge and enrolled in the dragoons under the name of Silas Titus Comberback, Coleridge found a more congenial outlet for his spirits in Jacobinism. His "Moral and Political Lectures", delivered in Bristol during 1795, certainly sounded radical in denouncing the status quo. Yet even here, he was pleading for the lower orders, not to them, a method which he held fast to throughout his life.

Whereas Wordsworth and Southey experienced religious doubts after being exposed to the doctrines of Paine and Godwin, Coleridge told his Bristol audience, "Go, preach the Gospel to the poor." It was necessary, he declared, to teach them their duties in order to make them deserving of their rights. He warned against the possible consequences of revolution; since "the Temple of Despotism is built of human skulls", we should beware "lest when we erect the edifice of freedom we but vary the stile (sic) of architecture, not change the materials." The lecturer was concerned with the well-being of the poor as much as with their need for a voice in political matters. The poor could not be free members of society because the system prevented them from developing human affections. The worker returns from his hard day's toil to be greeted by a family who are competitors for his bread, not the soothers of his weary soul. Therefore Coleridge did hold some views which are normally associated with conservatism at this early stage of his development. However, he blamed the excesses of the Revolution on the allied powers, and hoped that the war would soon be brought to an end.

Within a year of this lecture, Coleridge could write that he had "snapped his squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition", even though he had recently composed the poem "Fire, Famine and Slaughter" which asserted that Pitt would burn in Hell. His religious sentiments must have played a part in this conversion. In The Plot Discovered of the previous year, he had denounced the view that the English constitution was the best possible as blasphemous; "An omnipotent devil in a good humour would give a much better extreme of possible good." But it had become clear that the cause of religion was no safer with the French. The invasion of Switzerland seems to have been the immediate factor which reconciled him to supporting the English. At the same time, he was coming to reject the materialistic philosophy of Hartley, and to trace all the woes of his day to the influence of Hobbes and Locke, who in their turn had infected Helvetius and the French.

Coleridge's political canon is perhaps marred by the fact that he was working for the newspapers during the Peace of Amiens. At this time his hatred for Napoleon confirmed the change in his outlook. In October, 1802, he wrote an interesting piece entitled "Once a Jacobin, always a Jacobin". The latter word, he explains, is attached to a person "whose affections have been warmly and deeply interested in the cause of general freedom, who has hoped all good and honourable things, both of and for mankind." "Even when he  
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despairs of the cause, he will yet wish that it had been successful." The Jacobin believes that government can only be good if it flows directly from the governed. This creed was "dazzling at first sight to the young" - and, to those who "judging of man in general, from their own uncorrupted hearts,  
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judge erroneously and expect unwisely." The opponents of Jacobinism have acted throughout the crisis as if the doctrine could only be countered by force. They condemn all who ever held such optimistic views of mankind as incorrigible. Instead, the ex-Jacobins should be accepted as loyal citizens who have been led astray by idealism, not through evil.

Coleridge maintained a critical stance to the end of his life. But caution crept in to some of his later works, at a time when he opposed Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill, on the grounds that the time for such measures had not yet arrived. But, like Southey, he never lost his old enthusiasm entirely. In 1815, he found himself haranguing an audience of butchers on the subject of the Corn Laws, and his attacks on the Malthusians and political economists are bitter. Like Southey, he would not be closely associated with a political party, although he did send Lord Liverpool his advice on one famous occasion. The Christian Socialist F.D Maurice wrote of Coleridge's work; "The mere conservative is indignant, because it will not assume existing rules and opinions as an ultimate basis, but aims at  
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discovering their meaning and their foundation." Another distinguished critic has argued that Coleridge's Idealism "was the source of a radicalism,



more radical than that of the Philosophe of that ilk, a criticism more profound and more constructive than that of any of his contemporaries."

Whatever the justice of this claim, it would still be inappropriate to deny the conservative orientation of Coleridge's thought. At the time that he lost his faith in the rational progress of man, he became more cautious about the necessity for reforms. This is not a necessary outcome of a conservative view of human nature, but it is a position more common amongst conservatives than a refusal to countenance any change at all, which after all carries grave risks to the social tranquility which such thinkers value most. Coleridge was indeed a conservative, and his notions of "progression" and "permanence" and the "National Church" demonstrate a concern for the proper workings of a constitution which places him in the front rank of the tradition. As John Stuart Mill later said, he clearly was a seminal thinker of the century.

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We must now turn to an investigation of Hazlitt's reactions to these three men. He was acquainted with all of them, and this personal contact inevitably coloured his criticism. In 1798 he heard Coleridge preach, and was enchanted by both the matter of his sermon, and the manner of its delivery. Coleridge was at this time intending to join the Unitarian Ministry, a course which Hazlitt had already rejected. It was while staying with the Hazlitts that Coleridge received the offer of patronage from the Wedgewoods which deflected him from his original plan. The mood evoked in the essay "My First Acquaintance with Poets" is one of affection tinged with regret. By the time he wrote the essay, Hazlitt had decided that the preacher had possessed great powers, but that these had been wasted through drug addiction, lack of will and apostasy. Wordsworth emerges from the piece as a distant figure, without a trace of his friend's warmth and brilliance. Southey does not appear in the essay at all, which symbolises their slighter acquaintance.

Hazlitt was a very early admirer of Wordsworth's poetry. He believed the Lyrical Ballads to be the product of a "levelling muse"; the same inspiration which had guided the poet to Revolutionary France. It is not possible to discuss the matter fully here, but it might be ventured that this is neither an accurate, nor perhaps a serious reflection. By the time this comment appeared in The Spirit of the Age, Wordsworth had long forsaken his liberal past, and any mention of levelling tendencies would certainly have embarrassed him. Certainly the context makes it likely that Hazlitt was digging up Wordsworth's past to draw attention to the changes in his opinions. The Lyrical Ballads did represent a continuation of the new trend in writing poetry in the language of common men, and dealing with humble subjects. But the existing order of society is scarcely threatened with "levelling" in the poems. "Hart-Leap Well", for example shows that nature takes revenge for abuses by the wealthy; the assumption is that the destruction of Sir Walter's handiwork is just, but that the people themselves need not intervene against such men. Obviously, had Sir Walter not been so cruel no harm would have come to his land. The poor narrator of the poem can do little more than guess at the cause of nature's vengeance. It is left to the poet to draw the moral from the tale. The precept,

"Never to bind our pleasure or our pride

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With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels,"

is quite compatible with the paternalism Wordsworth adopted in later life. The poor must not be treated harshly, indeed they should be regarded as having emotions and physical needs. But men like Sir Walter should merely ensure that they know their duties as well as the rights of their position. In many respects, the poet's stand-point is reminiscent of Gray (a poet Wordsworth despised) in his "Elegy". It is the task of the educated man to speak for the "mute inglorious Miltons" of a low station. In other poems, such as "Simon Lee", Wordsworth's message is at least similar to that of many

contemporary apologists for the status quo. This line of argument suggested that the poor should be envied, as they were not enticed by the false charms of luxury.

Elsewhere, indeed, Hazlitt does suggest that he is not in earnest when he speaks of Wordsworth's levelling muse. He describes the lyrical poetry as the "cant of humanity", and his political poems as the "cant of loyalty to level Buonaparte with Kings and hereditary imbecility." 39 He was also insistent upon what he regarded as Wordsworth's major weakness as a poet and as a man; his consuming egotism. This is not egotism of Cobbett's variety, which does not monopolise the reader's attention. "[Wordsworth] is glad that Buonaparte is sent to St. Helena", Hazlitt writes, "and that the Louvre is dispersed for the same reason - to get rid of the idea of anything greater, or thought greater than himself. The Bourbons...give no disturbance 40 to his vanity; and therefore he gives them none." This egotism, which other less hostile observers also reported, casts further serious doubts upon Wordsworth's "humanitarianism".

Hazlitt has little to say about Wordsworth's direct involvement in politics, except when he jeers at the employment of the latter as stamp distributor for the government. The accusation of apostasy is not so common in Wordsworth's case as it is for the other two Lake Poets. This suggests that Hazlitt had less respect for Wordsworth than for Coleridge, and that since Southey was poet laureate - and very outspoken - he was a more promising target for criticism. The Spirit of the Age essay on Wordsworth concentrates upon the poetry, which Hazlitt never ceased to admire.

Hazlitt's treatment of Southey is significantly different. He did not have a high regard for the laureate's poetical talents, and this allowed him a free rein for an assault on his politics. "We have nothing to do with Mr. Southey 'the man', or even with Mr. Southey 'the apostate', but we

have something to do with Mr. Southey the spy and informer", he writes in his  
review of Southey's Letter to William Smith. In this publication, Southey  
had rebuked the man who had dragged the Wat Tyler into the public domain  
once again. Hazlitt's main concern at the time was with the freedom of the  
press, and he was outraged by Southey's position. He could not restrain  
himself from striking at Coleridge, who had defended his fellow Lakist.  
Coleridge had said that Southey could be excused his youthful ideals; Hazlitt  
retorts,

"...being a child, he felt as a child, and thought slavery,  
superstition, war, famine, bloodshed, taxes, bribery and corruption, rotten  
boroughs, places and pensions shocking things; but now that he is become a  
man, he has put away childish things and thinks there is nothing so delightful  
as slavery, superstition, war, famine, bloodshed, taxes, bribery and  
corruption, rotten boroughs, places and pensions; and particularly his own."

He accepted the explanation that Southey was appalled by the Napoleonic  
expansion, but now that this threat has passed away, why does he not revert to  
his old liberalism? The answer, for Hazlitt, was simple. "His engagement to  
his first love, the Republic, was upon liking; his marriage to legitimacy is  
for better, for worse, and nothing but death shall part them." His new motto

is, "Be to her faults a little blind/ Be to her virtues very kind." Southey  
had accused his opponents of having watched the sun rising in the east, and  
fixing their gaze there while it moved westwards. Hazlitt parries the thrust  
ably; the sun, he says, will rise in the east again, "Yet Mr. Southey is still  
looking in the West - for his pension." Here Hazlitt strikes a weak point in

Southey's defence; he loved the Iberian peninsular, and his hatred of the  
Napoleonic regime was consistent with this feeling. But when the Bourbons were  
restored they brought back the inquisition with them, and for all Southey's  
bigotry against Catholicism, he was ominously silent on the subject.

Hazlitt regarded Southey as a living contradiction of Coleridge's

message in "Once a Jacobin, Always a Jacobin." The revolutionary in Southey was not dead by any means. For example, Southey had compared Napoleon with Hatto, the Bishop who was eaten alive by rats. Hazlitt retorts that "The levelling rogue cares neither for Bishops nor emperors!" "Poets are naturally Jacobins", he declares, "they are with us while they are worth keeping" at any rate. Southey's old temperament even showed through in the odes he has written as poet laureate. He seemed to be preaching morality at kings and princesses, as if he were the village parson addressing his humble flock. We have noticed above that Southey certainly retained much of his hatred of oppression; but Hazlitt's attack does not square with some of his other writings. In an article on Coriolanus he expressed the view that poets are naturally attracted to power, and that even the best need the praise of the mighty to spur them on. Also, his definition of a Jacobin changes to suit his polemical needs. When the epithet is applied to himself, he can write that "The true Jacobin hates the enemies of liberty as they hate liberty, with all his strength and all his might." But in Southey's case a Jacobin is "one who would have his single opinion govern the world, and overturn everything in it." Hazlitt's real case is that his political course has stuck to a central path, while Southey has been always in extremes. But this is buried in the flood of invective. In assaulting Southey's ideas on taxation, and applauding Macaulay's ridicule, he merely reveals how much his feelings can betray his normal critical sense. When he recites the standard opposition creed that taxes would only enrich pensioners and money-men, he makes no attempt to deal with Southey's view that taxation might be put towards constructive ends such as public works - a view he endorses himself elsewhere. "Constructive" is not the appropriate word to describe Hazlitt's criticism of the man who "missed his way in Utopia [and] found it at Old Sarum." Once more there is a closer approach to balance in The Spirit of the Age, where he concedes that Southey "cannot bear to give up the thought of happiness, his confidence in

his fellow-man, when all else despair." But such an insight is rare. Overall it is not easy to argue with Marilyn Butler's characterisation of Hazlitt's attitude as "nasty".

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Hazlitt's assessment of Coleridge's later work is also marred by bitterness, although this is softened a little by his sorrow at the talent "the damaged archangel" had supposedly wasted. He reviewed Coleridge's Lay Sermon before it was published, on the basis of his past opinions. Although he was able to show that Coleridge's attempt to demonstrate the relevance of biblical teaching to contemporary politics was open to serious objections, he failed to appreciate that in lecturing the higher classes Coleridge was hoping to effect a peaceful reformation of acknowledged abuses. When Hazlitt heard that Coleridge had described Caliban as the prototype of a modern Jacobin, he could not disguise his triumph: "for Caliban is strictly the legitimate sovereign of his isle", and has been supplanted by the superior qualities of Prospero. Once again, literary criticism is dragged on to the political battlefield. But in his calmer moments, Hazlitt has clearer insights. In words which curiously echo those of Maurice, quoted earlier, he writes,

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"Would the Whigs patronise him? - he is too straightened in antiquated notions and traditional prejudices. Would the Tories take him in? - he is too liberal, enlightened and transcendental for them."

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Indeed, Coleridge is a man whose ideas have left him "no place of refuge" in the present political situation. In some respects this anticipates the work of Mill on Coleridge, although Hazlitt's purpose is not so friendly. He can also concede that The Friend contains some "noble passages and fine trains of thought", though it is too abstruse for common readers. At least Coleridge's

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"discursive reason would not let him turn himself into a Poet Laureate or stamp distributor." Charles Lamb is not the only critic who has detected "a kind of respect [which] shines thro' the disrespect" of Hazlitt's review of

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the Lay Sermon. Indeed, sadness is the key emotion in Hazlitt's criticism of Coleridge. After the passage on Caliban, he protests, "Why does Mr. Coleridge provoke us to write as great nonsense as he talks?" The Spirit of the Age essay on Coleridge best exemplifies this theme - "Alas! 'Frailty, thy name is Genius!' What is become of all this mighty heap of hope, of thought, of learning, and humanity? It has ended in swallowing doses of oblivion and in writing paragraphs in the Courier - such, and so little, is the mind of man!"

Hazlitt summed up his debate with the Lakists as follows:

"And we saw three poets in a dream walking up and down the face of the earth, and holding in their hands a human heart, which as they raised their eyes to heaven, they kissed and worshipped...And not long after, we saw the same three poets, the one with a receipt stamp in his hand, the other with a laurel on his head, and the third with a symbol which we could make nothing of, for it was neither literal nor allegorical, following in the train of the Pope and the Inquisition and the Bourbons...with the emblem of the human heart thrown beneath their feet, which they trampled and spat upon!"

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Hazlitt's commentators often explain that the difference between the Lake Poets and himself was due to his belonging to a later generation. While the poets witnessed the fall of the Bastille and reign of terror, Hazlitt was only a schoolboy then. Before dealing with this possibility, it is important to notice the biographical coincidences between them. All four men were groomed for a religious life at some point, and their several decisions not to take orders on conscientious grounds were acts of youthful rebellion which it took them some time to live down. Their social backgrounds were very similar - Hazlitt may not have attended a university, but Hackney Academy provided perhaps an even better education. All, of course, were great literary

men who were fascinated by politics, and all four were concerned to prove their consistency. The Lakists attributed their maturing views to a belief that they had hoped too much for their fellows. It is interesting to find that their bitter critic, William Hazlitt, occasionally echoed this sentiment. At the end of the great essay "On the Pleasure of Hating", he declared that he had been disappointed in both his private and his public ideals, "calculating others from myself, and calculating wrong."<sup>64</sup>

The notion that the answer lies in biographical details is probably correct, but must be carefully explained. Hazlitt did not live through the early stages of the Revolution as an adult. But we have seen that the views of the poets changed in the late 1790's, when Hazlitt was as old as they had been at the height of their radicalism. It was not the terror that finally alienated them - more likely, it was Napoleon. The one pre-eminent man to guide the Revolution, pleaded for by Wordsworth in his early writings, had arrived, and the older men rejected him. Hazlitt did not, and an explanation for this must be attempted here.

The state of mind which believes that it is wrong to read our own good intentions into the motives of others is more compatible with the authoritarian than the democratic spirit. It is an aristocratic disposition which appears to contradict the belief of the true democrat that the opinions of others are of equal value (or close enough to make no important difference). The fact that Hazlitt betrays such a spirit is of great significance; that he shared it with the Lake Poets suggests that contrary to the familiar interpretation, areas of ideological agreement remained between them even after their quarrels. It seems that this difference between their positions was, ironically, the result of the extreme liberalism of the poets in their youth. Their support for the French had not stopped a long way short of treason, and from this position their conversion was almost bound to be



violent. Hazlitt was never actively seditious, was never induced to write recanting verses like "France: an ode", and was therefore able to maintain a critical stance to the end. For example, the Lake Poets seem to have regarded Napoleon as a monster of their own creation; Hazlitt could view him without the distorting spectacles of anxiety.

But Hazlitt was almost alone in his detached position. The poets, whom he admired as men and as writers, accepted government pensions or wrote articles for the press on the "Corsican upstart". They needed to live, and they needed to make their conversions public in order to assuage their guilt. But Hazlitt could not understand the complexities of their situation, and wrote it all down to an exercise in snivelling apostasy. Their continued commitment to the cause of just government went unacknowledged except for the odd reluctant after-thought. Perhaps the history of political abuse has been enriched by this failure of sympathetic understanding on Hazlitt's part, but it has disguised broad areas of agreement which exist despite the fact that their squabble was an ideological one at root.

### III

#### MALTHUS

Hazlitt's part in the debate over population, which was fuelled by the publication of Thomas Robert Malthus's Essay on the Principle of Population (1798 and subsequent editions), has already been made the subject of an excellent full-length study by W.P. Albrecht. However, Malthus was such a persistent irritant to Hazlitt that a full picture of Hazlitt's thought demands a few remarks here. The main purpose of this section is to examine the ideological implications of Hazlitt's vehement and consistent opposition to the Malthusian doctrine.

Malthus's Essay was the outcome of conversations with his

father over the future progress of mankind. Malthus senior, who had known Rousseau, was an optimist who failed to convince his son in spite of an education directed by liberals. Robert could not accept the more sanguine visions of Godwin and Condorcet, who had gone so far as to suggest that perfect rationality would eradicate illness and mortality, thus removing the need for more children. Instead of this, the young clergyman saw the sex instinct as natural to man, and believed that in a state of society free from wars and famines which would otherwise keep the population down, the number of people would increase in a geometrical proportion (1:2:4:8:16:32 etc.). The means of subsistence could never keep pace with this; at the very best it might increase in an arithmetical series (1:2:3:4:5:6, etc.). The result of this growing discrepancy would be that the wonderful state envisaged by Godwin would soon disintegrate. War and famine would re-emerge, and population would therefore fall back to a more 'natural' level.

This blow was serious enough to Godwin and his followers. But more moderate optimists, already reeling from the untoward results of the French Revolution, were equally perturbed by the implications of the essay. It is difficult to see how the conditions of the poor could be markedly improved if the theory holds. Population, Malthus says, is checked by the intervention of "misery and vice" whenever it presses upon the means of subsistence. But at the time that he wrote, the poor were suffering particular hardships, and the Poor Rates levied in their support were rising. Reformers hoped that conditions might be improved by institutional or agricultural improvements, beside the rise in living standards that might be expected from the industrial developments at the time. But it is clear that even modest movements in this direction could afford at best a temporary succour. Released from the prison-house of misery and vice, the lower orders would begin to breed, their children would survive longer, and before long the old troubles would re-emerge. There would be no question of increased

leisure for the poor, who would thus never manage to raise their rational faculties. Thus, readers of the Essay would gather that the poor have always been with us, and ever will remain on the margins of existence.

In some quarters, this doctrine was greeted with howls of protest. William Cobbett informed him,

"I have, during my life, detested many men; but never any one so much as you...no assemblage of words can give an appropriate designation of you; and therefore, as being the single word which best suits the character of such a man, I call you Parson, which amongst other meanings, includes that of Borough-monger Tool."<sup>66</sup>

Karl Marx was later to repeat this "conspiracist" view:

"The people were...confronted not with a man of science but with a bought advocate, a pleader on behalf of their enemies, a shameless sycophant of the ruling classes."<sup>67</sup>

However, conservatives of the time were equally angry. Southey wrote in 1812,

"The rich are to be called upon for no sacrifices; nothing more is required of them that they should harden their hearts. They have found a place at the table of nature, and why should they be disturbed at the feast?"<sup>68</sup>

Coleridge was also concerned with the moral effects of the theory;

"You say to a man, 'You have no claim upon me; you have your allotted part to perform in the world, so have I...you came into the world when it could not sustain you.' What would be this man's answer? He would say 'You disclaim all connection with me; I have no claims upon you? I can then have no duties towards you, and this pistol shall put me in possession of your wealth.'"<sup>69</sup>

It might be useful to characterise the response of Cobbett and Marx as a "radical" one, while that of Southey and Coleridge is "conservative" (in the ideological sense). This may be justified by the fact

that Cobbett (whatever his ideological position) agrees with Marx in seeing Malthus as an apologist for the status quo, the implication being that something is drastically wrong with present arrangements. Coleridge and Southey, by contrast, see him as endangering the status quo. At present, the poor are looked after and (in theory, at least) hold a respectable place in an organic society. If Malthus's creed should take root, however, they will be left to themselves and, human nature being as it is, revolution will be the consequence. Malthus regards charity to the undeserving as a mistake; Coleridge and Southey, by contrast, did not believe that the poor should be punished in this manner, both on religious and pragmatic grounds. In briefly discussing Hazlitt's response to the Essay, we shall be particularly concerned to discover to which general class of critic he belonged.

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Hazlitt's Reply to Malthus was published in 1807, under the auspices of William Cobbett. This would seem to indicate the nature of the piece, but far more evidence is required. First of all, it may be pointed out that Hazlitt's primary concern was not to defend Godwin, but to justify the Poor Laws. He writes, "Perhaps if the truth were known, I am as little sanguine in my expectations of any great improvement to be made in the condition of human life either by the visions of philosophy, or by downright, practical, parliamentary projects, as Mr. Malthus himself can be." Hazlitt therefore regards Malthus as both pessimist and innovator; "It is astonishing, what a propensity Mr. Malthus has to try experiments, if there is any mischief to be done by them." Indeed, the publication of Hazlitt's piece in the Political Register coincided with Samuel Whitbread's attempt to amend the Poor Laws, partly under the influence of Malthus. In 1817, when a committee of parliament was appointed to look into the question, Hazlitt instantly published a summary of his earlier work. Hence, as usual, Hazlitt was

compelled to adopt a negative stance in the debate.

One of Hazlitt's most insistent points is that the Essay was unoriginal. Robert Wallace had dealt with the problem of population in a very similar way earlier in the eighteenth century. In fact, all the originality in Malthus's work was false. The ratios were an ingenious technique for duping the public; they gave an impression of scientific sanctity to what was really an exercise in propaganda. There is an infinite source of food in one grain of wheat, which will duplicate itself many times provided it has the space to do so. There will come a time when the whole earth is cultivated, and then we can speak of the limits of subsistence.

While the supply of food is only checked by the limitations of space, the population is checked by "moral restraint" in addition to the admitted impact of vice and misery. People are not simply breeding machines. Many live contented with celibacy. Malthus obviously had a strange view of human nature; Hazlitt makes great sport with the notion of the parson as a sensualist. Malthus had allowed Godwin his ideal state of rationality, and then showed how this would be undermined by the most irrational behaviour possible. He had subsequently admitted that moral restraint may have some effect, but Hazlitt believed that his desire to paint the world black prevented him from allowing the full force of this new check to population. Although he does not dream of a perfect state, he is clear that modest increases in rationality may stave off the perpetual misery envisaged by Malthus.

Malthus's treatment of the poor also arouses Hazlitt's indignation. The writer of the Essay will only preach his gospel to the poor; the rich may maintain their horses and their game laws, but the lower orders must give up their few humble pleasures and live under his direction. While this implies that rich and poor are somehow a different species, "The

only difference in the vices of the rich and the poor is, that the rich can afford theirs better." If a high standard of living increases breeding, why is the planet not submerged under the off-spring of the rich? In fact experience suggests that better conditions lower the birth-rate; that a man is more careful if he has something to lose. Malthus announces that the "Laws of God" have condemned profligate paupers to starve, oblivious to the fact that the laws of God have been infringed for centuries by man, who tries to ensure that no-one should perish in want. Who has blasphemed? - philanthropic man or "misanthropic" Malthus? What the latter has done, in fact, is to call on God as a witness in his private prosecution of the poor without realising that in doing so he has libelled God.

Hazlitt is on weaker ground whenever he hints at a more positive alternative to the visions of his opponent. He seems to regard population as a good, rather than an evil. In a manner which seems almost Utilitarian, he argues that if an island such as Britain was to suddenly appear out of the ocean, the increased number of people would have a corresponding effect upon the sum of human happiness. This position is not argued out, but seems to require some explanatory support. Similarly, he does not contest Malthus's point that a rise in wages would be disastrous without an increase of productivity. He claims that he is only bringing common-sense to bear on the question, which is the normal apology of someone who is really carrying in ideological baggage of his own. When he refutes Malthus on his own terms his claims seem justified, but his evident belief that luxury (rather than wealth in general) corrupts mankind indicates a view of human nature different from that of Malthus. Whatever the ideological position Hazlitt held, it appears to be a moderate one, capable of being pillaged by the anarchist Godwin and the conservative De Quincey without much amendment. It seems most accurate to describe it as the same cautious liberalism which has been identified as his ideological stance in other writings.

Malthus himself was a liberal. Although he makes a suspicious show of reluctance when he attacks Godwin, it is probable that his "discovery" did cause him unease; his stubborn adherence to the theory may in fact indicate an unconscious desire to find his prophecies refuted. By all accounts he was a man of some benevolence; like Goldsmith's "Man in Black" he did not altogether follow the letter of his views on charity. He was horrified by the suggestion that his theory supported the Slave Trade, although strictly the Africans left behind by the traders should have blessed such men as benefactors. He advocated public works in times of distress, and has been hailed by Keynes as a great economist.

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This is not to say, of course, that despite the wrong-headedness of the Essay Malthus was "really" on the side of the angels. Rather, it is a clear indication that however much his views might have chimed in with the prevailing wisdom of the age, he was not a conservative in the ideological sense. The liberal arguments of the classical economists dominated their field to such an extent that the dominant ideology of this period might be characterised as liberal conservatism. The government of Lord Liverpool, which included such figures as Canning and Huskisson, lends support to this view, although a full discussion of the issue requires more scope than is permitted here. The suggestion is, however, that Malthus was a representative of the spirit of the age, while Hazlitt's thought seemed increasingly dated. Eventually even the Tory Quarterly Review followed the Whig Edinburgh in applauding the work of Malthus, and critics such as Hazlitt and Coleridge, whatever the cogency of their objections, became more and more deafened in the hubbub of praise.

#### NOTES

1. Bromwich, op.cit., p.288. I have examined Hazlitt's response to Burke in more detail in "Hazlitt against Burke: Radical Versus Conservative?", Durham University Journal, June 1989, pp.229-239.

2. Works, Vol.VII, p.301.
3. Ibid., p.304. Hazlitt was not the only liberal to appreciate Burke at this time, however. His friend Joseph Fawcett kept a copy of the Reflections bound with Paine's Rights of Man; Hazlitt looked on this as "a singular proof of good taste, good sense, and liberal thinking"; see M. Ray Adams, "Joseph Fawcett and Wordsworth's Solitary", Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 48 (1933), pp.508-528.
4. Ibid., pp.308-9.
5. Ibid., p.307.
6. Ibid., p.307; Works, Vol.I, p.115. Hazlitt's attitude to the aristocracy is possibly best summarised by his remarks in the Life of Thomas Holcroft; "However necessary it may be that the vulgar should respect rank for its own sake, it is desirable that the great themselves should respect virtue more, and endeavour to make the theory, in which nobility is founded, correspond with the practice - private worth with public esteem." Works Vol.III, p.121.
7. Works, Vol.VII, p.307. Hazlitt's views on prejudice seem particularly close to those of Burke at times, especially when he writes, "We are only justified in rejecting prejudices, when we can explain the grounds of them"; Works, Vol.IX, p.189. The only hints of disagreement arise when he distorts Burke's doctrine, which, he claimed, decreed that we should always act from prejudices, simply because they are prejudices.
8. Ibid., p.308. It is an interesting in reference to this last point that one of Hazlitt's arguments for trusting the "people" with power is their ability to recognise the cheapest form of government; see Works, Vol.VII, p.276.
9. Works, Vol.XIX, p.271.
10. Works, Vol.VII, p.226.
11. Ibid..
12. Works, Vol.XX, p.405. See also Works, Vol.XIX, p.274; "Burke was not an honest man."
13. See C. Cone, op. cit., II, pp.378-9. C.f the passage in Reflections (E. Burke, Works and Correspondence, London, 1852, Vol.IV, p.179); "you had the elements of a constitution very nearly as good as could be wished..." For Burke's refusal to accomodate the objections of "foppery" raised in respect of his treatment of Marie-Antoinette by Philip Francis, see his Correspondence, ed. Cobban and Smith, Cambridge University Press, esp. pp.85-92 and 150-5.
14. S. Johnson, Lives of the Poets, London, n.d, p.153. C.f Hazlitt, Works, Vol.XIX, pp.277-8; "An apostate is a name that all men abhor, that no man ever willingly acknowledges; and the tergiversation which it denotes is not likely to come into much request, till it is no longer observed that a man seldom changes his principles except for his interest!"
15. A.S Byatt, Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time, Nelson, 1970, p.153.



16. P.A Brown, The French Revolution in English History, Lockwood & Son, 1918, p.209 quoted: Wordsworth to his friend Matthews, May 23rd, 1794.
17. W.Wordsworth, The Prelude, ed. J. Maxwell, Penguin ed., 1972, Book XI, Lines 205-8.
18. Wordsworth, Prose Works, ed. A.Grosart, Vol.I, p.217.
19. F.M Todd, Politics and the Poet, London, 1957, p.203 quoted.
20. Ibid., p.215.
21. Ibid.
22. For an excellent study of Southey, see G.Carnall, Robert Southey and his Age, Oxford, 1960.
23. Southey quoted in J. Mendilov, The Romantic Tradition in British Political Thought, Croom Helm, 1986, p.72.
24. See T. Macaulay, review of Southey's Colloquies in Works, Vol. VII, London 1898 ed., pp.450-503.
25. Brinton, op.cit., p.92 quoted.
26. J. Simmons, Southey, Collins, 1945, p.121.
27. S. Coleridge, Lectures 1795 in Politics and Religion, ed. L. Patton and F. Mann, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, Complete Works, Vol.I.
28. Ibid., p.44.
29. Ibid., p.48.
30. Ibid., p.45.
31. Ibid., p.295.
32. S. Coleridge, Essays on his own Times, ed. D. Erdman, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, Vol.III of Works, p.308.
33. Ibid., p.372.
34. F. D Maurice, quoted in The Friend, ed. with an introduction by B. Rooke, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, Vol.4 of Complete Works; Introduction, pp. ciii-civ.
35. R.J White, in his Introduction to the Political Thought of Coleridge, Jonathan Cape, 1970 reprint, p.15.
36. Works, Vol.XVII, pp.106-122.
37. The quotation is to be found in Works, Vol.XI, p.87.
38. W. Wordsworth, "Hart-Leap Well" in Lyrical Ballads, ed. D.Roper, London, 1976 ed..
39. Works, Vol.VII, p.144.

40. Ibid., p.145. Hazlitt had a very low opinion of The Convention of Cintra; a work which "has nothing remarkable in it but the profound egotism of the style and some lofty abuse of Lord Wellington." Works, Vol.XIX, p.161.
41. Ibid., p.177.
42. Ibid., p.181. Original quotation entirely in italics.
43. Ibid., p.193.
44. Ibid., pp.203-4.
45. Ibid., p.197.
46. Ibid., p.182.
47. For this important piece, see Works, Vol.IV, pp.214-21.
48. Works, Vol.VII, p.151.
49. Ibid., p.86.
50. Professor Bromwich (op. cit., p.180), believes that Hazlitt was "a very imperfect prophet" who did not anticipate the evils of the factory system, and therefore could side with Macaulay against Southey. This is a remarkable example of the kind of error brought about by the intrusion of ideology. It might be said that Hazlitt pays too little attention to the problems of the factory system, but it is not the critic's task to rebuke historical figures for not sharing our own pre-occupations. Besides, while Hazlitt does appear to endorse Macaulay's attack on the Colloquies in a letter to Macvey Napier (Letters, p.372), his approaches to the Edinburgh were always tactful; it should also be remembered that his hostility to Southey may well have caused him to think badly of a work which he might have enjoyed from another hand - Scott's, for instance.
51. See Works, Vol.XIX, p.296; "...if the public agree upon some magnificent public work, that is another question; it is voluntary and calculated to gratify the public eye and taste and not to pamper the pride and egotism of an individual."
52. Works, Vol.VII, p.79.
53. Ibid.
54. M. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, Oxford, 1982, p.145.
55. Works, Vol.XIX, p.207.
56. Ibid., p.210.
57. Works, Vol.XI, p.38.
58. Ibid., p.35.
59. Ibid., p.34. Coleridge described himself as "a Man of Letters, friendless because of no faction," quoted in White, op. cit., p.12. There is a fascinating discussion of his political writing in T. de Quincey, Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets, Penguin ed., 1972 reprint,

pp.101-111. De Quincey defends Coleridge from charges of apostasy, and reaches the conclusion that he was above the party strife of his day.

60. S. Jones, op. cit., p.253 quoted.
61. Works, Vol.XIX, p.207.
62. Works, Vol.XI, p.34.
63. Works, Vol.VII, p.152.
64. Works, Vol.XII, p.136.
65. See W.P Albrecht, William Hazlitt and the Malthusian Controversy, Kennikat Press, 1969 ed.. Albrecht's study, however, is based upon the "radical" view of Hazlitt which I believe to be seriously flawed; see, for e.g., his conclusion that Hazlitt's opposition to Malthus was based upon his "revolutionary philosophy, as both modified and supported by his explanation of human behaviour", p.114.
66. W. Cobbett quoted in K. Smith, The Malthusian Controversy, London, 1951, p.120.
67. K. Marx, quoted in A. Flew's introduction to Malthus's Essay on the Principle of Population, Penguin ed., 1979, p.52.
68. R. Southey, "On the State of the Poor", 1812, quoted in R. Harris, Romanticism and the Social Order, London, 1968, p.285.
69. S. Coleridge, Table Talk, quoted in Harris, op.cit., pp.226-7. Proudhon provided perhaps the wittiest response when he said that "There is only one person too many in the world, and that is Malthus," quoted in W. Peterson, Malthus (London, 1979), p.78.
70. Works, Vol.I, p.214.
71. Ibid., p.344.
72. Ibid., p.339.
73. Works, Vol.VII, pp.335-6.
74. See D. Winch, Malthus, p.49, for evidence of Malthus's support for the liberal wing of the Whig party.
75. See J.M. Keynes, Essays in Biography, ed. G. Keynes, London, 1961, pp. 81-124. Hazlitt might not have agreed with Keynes' judgement that Malthus was a member of a tradition of thinkers "marked by a love of truth and a most noble lucidity, by a prosaic sanity free from sentiment or metaphysic, and by an immense disinterestedness and public spirit"; p.101.

## THE NAPOLEONIST

Hazlitt's admiration for the Emperor Napoleon I was such an important factor in his writing career that a separate chapter is required in order to treat the subject properly. Critics of the essayist have always experienced difficulty in dealing with his fervent and lasting "hero-worship"- a notable exception being Crane Brinton, who cunningly ignored it. A bolder line must be taken here, and an attempt will be made to explain Hazlitt's attachment, and to demonstrate how it is quite consistent with the general interpretation put forward in this thesis.

The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte was originally published in 1830, in four volumes. The first two had appeared in 1828, but the difficulties of his publishers, the problem of amassing his materials, and a decline in his health delayed their full publication. The reception of the completed work was disappointingly muted, and sales were poor. Twenty-two years after the author's death, however, his son could describe the Life as "my father's last, largest, and, upon the whole, greatest work", and although the latter judgement would probably be disputed by most of Hazlitt's admirers, the book is still a fascinating, if occasionally provocative, read.<sup>1</sup> Although this is not the place to argue over the quality of the Life, some attention will be paid to earlier criticisms as the major task of interpretation progresses.

There is an enormous amount of literature which deals with Napoleon's career, and yet the subject remains as controversial as it did when Hazlitt decided to respond to Sir Walter Scott's lengthy biography. The fact that no consensus exists presents a difficult methodological problem; if we are to assess the political implications of Hazlitt's biography, we must

be able to detect his bias. However, since most of the other writers on Napoleon have had polemical purposes it is difficult to establish an acceptable model for comparison. At least Peter Geyl, in the preface to his Napoleon; For and Against was honest enough to state that "my sympathies are with the against rather than with the for category". But Geyl had been incarcerated at Buchenwald, and many of his statements suggest that he was an unsuitable person to summarise the debate objectively. His book demonstrates how far the subsequent course of French history has inspired idolators and detractors in turn, just as Napoleon's statue in the Place Vendôme has been torn down and re-erected with every fluctuation in fortune. French historians are not alone in their guilt; unacceptable bias, for instance, mars a recent English biography, that of J.M Thomson(1963). His sympathies are clearly unmasked when he refers to the allies as "us" throughout.

It is especially fascinating that while historical developments have quite a predictable impact on interpretation, the effect of ideological commitment seems less clear. Napoleon has his admirers almost everywhere, except, perhaps, in Quaker Meeting Houses. His appeal to French Nationalists is obvious, but some case can be made for a Napoleon who inspired almost all of the nationalist movements in the nineteenth century. Needless to say, a case can be made against this, emphasising the examples of Spain and Poland which arraign him as the callous foe of nationalities. Conservatives can admire the order he brought after the Revolution, but equally it is open to them to detest the cynical exploiter of religion, the disturber and re-arranger of Europe. Marxists can exult in his apparent bourgeois prejudices, and recoil as he denounces the ideologists. Liberals, perhaps, are confronted with the sharpest dilemma of all. Here is the living symbol of the careers open to all talents, the scourge of annointed kings, the man who compromised between the arbitrary ancien regime and the anarchistic Jacobins,

tolerating both sides within limits. Yet the same tomb in the Invalides shrouds the centraliser, the enemy of a free press, the man of violence and of vaulting ambition, the sexist who believed that the world's greatest woman was she who had borne the most children, the racist who suppressed the slaves in Saint-Domingue, the Judas of Revolutionary idealism. Because these conflicting reactions can all be supported by reasonable evidence, the debate will continue. At the bottom line are the facts that for his admirers, Napoleon may have threatened much, but he fell; for his detractors, he may have fallen, and yet he threatened much.

While the problem of bias appears insuperable, the subject is so important that the best must be done with the materials to hand. In view of the difficulties, the method of interpretation will concentrate on the internal argument of Hazlitt's book, and to indicate Hazlitt's bias only when it seems incontrovertible that he has distorted the facts available to him.

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The reputation of Hazlitt's Life has not thrived, even at the hands of his admirers. David Bromwich is pro-Hazlitt and anti-Napoleon, a problem he tries to solve by claiming that Hazlitt somehow "made" Napoleon into his ideal, presumably for want of a better, even though this was inconsistent with his normal political stand-point. Bromwich speaks of "the starkest and most general apology conceivable" presented by Hazlitt for his hero in his chapter on the foundation of the Empire. Herschel Baker is more forthright, believing that "In Napoleon's career Hazlitt found a precedent and inspiration for almost all of his political ideals." Napoleon's fall, however, he "implausibly construed as the destruction of reform". In other words, Hazlitt was not so much the victim of wishful, as of muddled thinking. Baker concludes that "As history, the Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, with its

sentimental view of Caesarism, is of course bizarre; but as Hazlitt's paean to the triumphant individualism that he regarded as the consummation of reform it is extremely moving." Robert Robinson found the Life largely derivative, and opined that "the work deserves perhaps even less praise and attention than it has received"- a particularly harsh assesment of a book which has rarely received either. According to Robinson, the Life's deficiencies are "attributable, no doubt, to the author's too firmly established convictions; deficiencies in knowledge and experience, ill-health, personal disappointments, and premature old-age". Like the character which it portrays, Hazlitt's biography has therefore inspired criticism which appears, at least on first sight, to be contradictory. For Baker, Hazlitt's life-long radicalism remained unshaken even though he was taken in by Napoleon; for Bromwich, Hazlitt stretches his principles to embrace a tyrant. From Robinson's account it appears that Hazlitt distorted Napoleon's career because of his own inflexible pre-conceptions. The common theme of all these interpretations is never questioned - that Hazlitt was a radical; in early nineteenth-century terms, a democratic liberal. It is this theme which will receive most attention here, in an attempt to remove any confusion over the political message of the Life. As I have explained, it would be hazardous to do this by comparing Hazlitt's account with what is generally accepted as true today. There must be another caveat, in that Hazlitt was much too close to the events he chronicled for objectivity, even if that elusive standard had been his goal. Hence it is important to compare his biography with contemporary appraisals. Yet, with all these qualifications in mind, the Life can yield some valuable insights into Hazlitt's politics.

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After a brief history of Corsica, and a description of Napoleon's early life, Hazlitt tackles the French Revolution itself. Here, he

is largely concerned with a refutation of Burke's Reflections, but his account is by no means one of unrelieved triumph. It emerges that the Revolution was necessary, since the ancien regime had clearly failed at all levels of society. Like Burke, Hazlitt allows that the influence of intellectuals such as Rousseau and Voltaire was profound; but of course for him their posthumous rôle had not been pernicious. Rather, they had prepared the French nation to question. The Revolution was a direct result of the invention of printing. Once the old abuses had been held up for scrutiny and ridicule, they were doomed.

The outstanding characters in Hazlitt's tale are Louis XVI and Robespierre. His Louis XVI is a great advance on Burke's panegyric, in that the pervading tone - in this case hostility - is softened by sympathetic understanding. Louis could have done no other than he did. He was born an absolute king, which disqualified him from ever acquiescing in the constitutional rôle thrust upon him by the National Assembly. His behaviour in the face of the mob was sometimes brave, and almost always tactful. However, being an absolute king he could not resist intriguing for the restoration of his power. In the circumstances of 1793 his execution was inevitable. Not only was he a rallying point for the Royalists, but having agreed to the early constitutional changes in the hope of reversing them with the aid of foreign bayonets, he was a traitor to his country. Nevertheless, Hazlitt's portrait is a tragic one. He sees in Louis the impossibility of combining absolute power with virtue, however well-intentioned the ruler. By contrast, with his eye on Burke, he is compelled to cast Marie-Antoinette as a haughty schemer, driving her husband ever-faster along the road to disaster. But even she is permitted to show dignity and courage at the end.

Robespierre emerges from Hazlitt's pages as a bloodthirsty fanatic, and is not even granted the consolation of an edifying exit. Even his



oratory left much to be desired; "his declamation was typically a disjointed tissue of rhapsodical common-places, forced into an abortive union by dogmatical assertions, and where, in the midst of an utter barrenness of thought or illustration, there is an appearance of coming to the point with great directness and simplicity." "The truth is, in one word, he was a natural bigot, that is, a person extremely tenacious of certain feelings and opinions, from an utter inability to conceive of anything beyond them, or to suppose that others do." Hazlitt proceeds to compare Robespierre's fanaticism to that of "monks and inquisitors", drawing a parallel much beloved by enemies of totalitarian democracy in the present century. "The religious and the political fanatic are one and the same character, and run into the same errors on the same grounds", he writes. However, he shows rather more insight into the problem than those more recent commentators, who by equating political "messianism" with religious fervour have done little more than demonstrate their hostility towards religion. Religious persecutions were undoubtedly terrible, but "to argue from hence that those who sanctioned or who periodically assisted at such scenes were mere monsters of cruelty and hypocrisy, would be betraying a total ignorance of the contradictions of the human mind." This concession to Robespierre, one suspects, is wrung from Hazlitt because he does not want the reader to imagine that the Terror was solely the product of gratuitous evil from above. By contrast, Robespierre's enemies the Gironde, and later, Danton, are presented with mildly critical sympathy. The men who instigated the "Incorruptible"'s fall seem to have shared his guilt to a great extent, but Hazlitt can forgive this in his pleasure at the events of Thermidor.

Hazlitt has two major explanations for the Terror. One, as Robert Robinson suggests, "is a restatement of the liberal or radical view of French affairs" - that a peaceful revolution was wrenched from its course by

the aggressive interference of other powers. It is certainly true that the worst excesses of the Revolution took place when Paris was most threatened, and that enough of a fifth column existed in France to justify an atmosphere of mistrust. But, leaving this argument aside, Hazlitt provides a different solution to the problem in his discussion of French character. This theme crops up throughout the work; it appears that Hazlitt considered Napoleon's talents thrown away on the French. The stereotypic Frenchman he presents is easily bored, frivolous and vulgar. Consequently, "If a nation of a species lower than men had undertaken a Revolution, they could not have conducted it worse than this of France, with more chattering, more malice, more unmeaning gesticulation, and less dignity and unity of purpose." Of course, he believes that the brutalization of the ancien regime had contributed much to this depraved national character, and explained the triumphant displaying of heads, the judicial murders and the indifference to suffering. But even this could be regarded as a product of Hazlitt's francophobia; the ancien regime had lasted so long, to his mind, because unlike the English the French were incapable of enjoying liberty for long. Although the Terror might be regarded as a success, in so far as France did repel the foreign invader under this regime, Hazlitt regarded it as a futile exercise. The Terrorists "made one grand mistake. They really thought that by getting rid of the patrons and abettors of the ancient regime they should put an end to the breed of tyrants and slaves; whereas in order to do this it would be necessary to put an end to the whole human race." Hazlitt seems never to have lost his sympathy for the initial ideals of the Revolution, yet this type of remark indicates that he was certainly sceptical about the applicability of such principles at the time that the Life was written.

Hazlitt's account of the Revolution, therefore, sets the scene for a favourable interpretation of Napoleon's career. The Directory which

emerged after the Thermidorian reaction is described as a total failure, with inept governmental intervention in many fields and bankruptcy only staved off by Napoleon's victories in Italy. Thus, although Hazlitt does not play down the extent of Napoleon's ambition, he makes it easier to comprehend that the nation might have cried out for the General as a welcome alternative to chaos. This point is essential if we are to understand Hazlitt's admiration of Napoleon; it is not too much to claim that by the time that the Life was written, its author approved of the Revolution mainly because it had produced  
17  
the Emperor.

It is worth pausing briefly here to assess and explain Hazlitt's progress thus far. There seems little ground for dismissing the work as "bizarre", nor to claim that it deserves less attention than it has received. Hazlitt's prejudices do show through, but it is his hatred for the ancien regime which causes most damage. He reprints some of the cahiers presented to the Estates General, and outlines the Feudal Rights of the nobility, believing that this alone will establish the case against Louis XVI. There is no suggestion that the Revolution may have arisen from a clash between the monarchy and the nobility; the whole system of hereditary honours in France was tainted with corruption in his eyes. However, this mistake was not unusual in his day, and it was quite understandable, when both crown and aristocracy met identical fates, to assume that the third estate had been the instigators from the outset. Hazlitt, therefore, is not so much biased in favour of the Revolution, as against its enemies. For instance, he does not regard the assailants of the Bastille as heroes, even though he demonstrates his abhorrence of the place. It is not difficult to guess the reasons for the even-handedness ; firstly, he is happy to suggest that if Napoleon did betray the Revolution, he was not committing a glaring moral fault; and perhaps equally important, he was not obliged to condemn the movement out of hand, as someone who had once declared that it was bliss to be alive at its dawn. His original

reaction to the events may well have been exultant, but it was not recorded in black and white, as in the cases of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth. The reader is not led to assume that Hazlitt's hopes were wholly entangled with the fate of the Revolution, and the general tone of the book indicates that he ceased to identify himself with its fortunes when the Girondins fell at the latest. If historians today would be unhappy with the application of his belief that "one is concerned not only with what takes place, but with what ought to take place and which seldom actually does so", to the writing of such a biography, this fault is not missing from his great "competitor" Scott, nor indeed from many of his successors. Hazlitt's work, therefore, is scarcely unique in telling us as much about the author as the events he relates.

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Instead of merely recounting Hazlitt's narrative of Napoleon's rule, it will be more useful to examine the possible reasons for his constant admiration. The Life opens with a Preface which presents Hazlitt's apology for the Emperor's actions. Napoleon's deeds may not have been invariably sound, but at least they "recoiled upon the head of the doer" - "they were not precedents; they were not exempt from public censure or opinion; they were not softened by prescription, nor screened by prejudice, nor sanctioned by superstition, nor rendered formidable by a principle that imposed them as sacred obligations on all future generations." Napoleon was the child and champion of the Revolution, the one man who might save Europe from the curse of rule by legitimate monarchs. Hazlitt declares that he felt proud "to think that there was one reputation in modern times equal to the ancients, and at seeing one man greater than the throne he sat upon." From this statement we learn that Hazlitt shared Napoleon's respect for the heroes of antiquity; we also begin to appreciate how far the former could stray from the ideals of the Revolution in praising the Emperor. As Augustine Birrell once noted, the

underlying principles behind such an outburst cannot even be squared with the  
21  
more moderate views which inspired the opponents of James II in 1688. The  
first quotation, at least, is also contrary to facts which Hazlitt must have  
known.

First of all, the assertion that Napoleon's actions recalled upon  
the head of their doer is not much of an apology - the same could be said of  
Louis XVI. As suggested earlier, Hazlitt is taking refuge here in the fact  
that Napoleon failed in the end. Similarly, many of Napoleon's deeds were not  
precedents, softened by prescription, precisely because he did not secure the  
hereditary institution he had inaugurated. Of course, the Code Napoleon, the  
Concordat and the Legion of Honour were seized upon as precedents by his  
"legitimate" successors, but Hazlitt prefers to imply that the whole  
Napoleonic edifice was swept away with its creator. It could be argued that  
the regime was sanctioned by superstition; and the Papal coronation, the  
Imperial Catechism Napoleon introduced, together with the celebration of St.  
Napoleon's Day, reinforce this impression. The most obvious distortion is  
Hazlitt's claim that Napoleon was not free from public censure or opinion.  
While men could think what they liked about the Emperor, it was a different  
matter if they wished to publicise these opinions. The liberty of the press,  
which Hazlitt extolls so highly in other contexts, is hardly mourned in the  
biography of its deadly foe. By 1811, there were only four newspapers left in  
22  
Paris, all of which were under close scrutiny. Napoleon prosecuted an  
English newspaper, and found it hard to believe that its contents had not  
been dictated by the government. Hazlitt does discuss these matters briefly,  
and demonstrates his conviction that both the religious and the press policies  
were mistaken, but it is hard to imagine that his protests would have been so  
muted had Bonaparte been a "legitimate" sovereign. Similarly, he dismisses  
Napoleon's treatment of his critics such as Madame de Stael, by saying  
that "Buonaparte is accused of having intermeddled too much and too harshly

with literature; but not till it had first meddled with him." This acceptance of censorship as a legitimate weapon of government is further evidence that the primary reason for Hazlitt's admiration cannot have been a belief that Napoleon was inspired by the ideals of the Revolution. Talk of the Emperor's "intermeddling" should also remind the reader of the minimalist state approved by Hazlitt in his "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation." Napoleon outraged liberals such as Benjamin Constant with his tendency to centralise power, and his marked extension of the limits of state interference. His wars required a heavy burden of taxation, his army was permanent and conscripted, and the imposition of the Continental System was an unprecedented intervention in trade. Napoleon's regime, in short, was about as far as one could get from Hazlitt's ideal, considering the limited means at the Emperor's disposal. Hazlitt does attack excessive government interference in the Life, but his target is the Directory, not Napoleon. <sup>24</sup>

It might be anticipated that Hazlitt would disapprove of Napoleon's assumption of the Imperial title. This, however, is not the case. "Buonaparte's object almost from the first", he writes, "appears to have been to consolidate the Revolution by softening its features and mixing up its principles with others which had been longer and more widely established, thus to reconcile old to new France, the philosophers and the priests, and the Republic with the rest of Europe." <sup>25</sup> This, it might be argued, is a rather charitable view. D.M.G Sutherland has recently written that "The Revolutionary era began with men hoping they could place limits on the actions of an arbitrary government. It ended with some of the very same men creating a government far more arbitrary and despotic than the monarchy of the Old regime." <sup>26</sup> This verdict was common among Hazlitt's contemporaries. For Wordsworth, Napoleon was the "barbarian Ravager of Europe", the "enemy of mankind." Sir James Mackintosh saw him as the head of a "new nobility of

dishonour". Southey considered that "his acts of perfidy, midnight murder, usurpation and remorseless tyranny" had consigned him "to universal execration, now and for ever". Shelley thought of him as "a hateful and despicable being "; Keats said he had done more harm to "the life of liberty" than all the kings of Christendom. <sup>27</sup> These opinions were echoed by Coleridge, Sydney Smith, Francis Jeffrey and Thomas de Quincey. Indeed, after Waterloo, Henry Crabb Robinson recorded that of his extensive acquaintance only Hazlitt, Godwin and two others regretted the final fall.

Why did Hazlitt fly in the face of contemporary opinion by remaining an admirer of the Corsican ? The critics listed above cover a wide ideological spectrum; some can be questioned, as their dislike for Napoleon was heightened by the guilt they felt for originally supporting the Revolution, but this does not apply to Shelley, Keats or Leigh Hunt. We have seen that the reasons adduced by Hazlitt himself are inadequate. It would be unwise to suggest that Hazlitt was simply mistaken in his man - after all, the materials which he collected for his book were gleaned from hostile sources as well as from the sycophants, and he spent many hours debating the point with friends who despised Napoleon. It is, of course, quite true that Hazlitt relished Napoleon's victories over the crowned heads of Europe. But we are left with the task of explaining why he should have preferred Napoleon to them, since many contemporaries who were critical of legitimacy found it impossible to follow him in this course. Since his own explanations are unsatisfactory, it is justifiable to seek more plausible ones elsewhere.

Firstly, there is the suggestion thrown out by Georges Lefebvre in his own biography of Napoleon. He writes, "The romantics were not altogether wrong [in making him their hero], for what was classical in him was only his culture and the form of his intellect. The spring of his actions, however, was the imagination, the irresistible impulse of the temperament. This is the

secret of the charm which he will always exercise on men. If only in the passing fervour and confusion of youth they will always be pursued by the romantic dream of power." This statement might lead to a discussion taking us beyond the limits of this paper, but it is relevant to notice an immediate difficulty here. First of all, Lefebvre seems to believe that there is a clear distinction between Classicism and Romanticism. But these are merely generalised tendencies, bearing scant relation to the beliefs and actions of real historical characters. If these constructs are regarded too seriously, they become obstacles, not aids, to understanding. Napoleon was deeply read in the classics, and he seems to have derived great inspiration from the deeds of Alexander and Caesar. But this would make him a Classicist no more than an octogenarian reading Wisden would thereby become an international cricketer. The Classicists are presumed to have been most interested in form, the Romantics to have placed great emphasis on spontaneity and the imagination. But we should not follow the literary student into the trap of inferring from this that Pope had no imagination, and Byron no respect for form.

Secondly, it is important to notice Lefebvre's point about a romantic "love of power", since many of Hazlitt's critics have paid great attention to this trait in him. This, they believe, explains his admiration for Burke's style, and for Napoleon's rule. This line of criticism seems to receive support from a suggestion of Leigh Hunt's, but in his case, as in that of the recent writers, it appears to be an evasion of the real issue. Human power is an abstraction, and can hardly be assessed in isolation from its effects. Hazlitt most certainly did not admire the power of the allies which overcame Napoleon at Waterloo; he did not appreciate the powers of the Inquisition, nor of the Tsar of Russia over his people. It would be fair to say that he was interested in powerful men and institutions, but that is a fairly characteristic feature of a political writer. It leaves us with the problem of deciding why Hazlitt admired power when it was exercised in a



particular way. Hence, Hazlitt's espousal of the Napoleonic cause cannot be wholly explained by an appeal to "Romantic" aspects of the Emperor's character, nor by referring to Hazlitt's love of power.

A more promising suggestion is provided by David Bromwich in his book Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic. According to Bromwich, the Life includes "Burkean assumptions about human nature which few readers could have deduced from his Preface". As we have seen, Hazlitt's political beliefs do not present such a stark contrast to those of Burke as critics such as Bromwich have asserted. It would be a mistake to describe Napoleon's own assumptions as "Burkean", although he paid due attention to customs and prescription during his Egyptian expedition, to take only one example. His introduction of the Legion of Honour, his respect for the power of religious conviction, and his hatred of the mob could all be described as "Burkean" without stretching the term too far - indeed Napoleon's politics should be classed as "aristocratic" if anything. Echoes of Burke can be found throughout the Life, even though Hazlitt was evidently concerned to rebut many of his arguments. For instance, we find the phrase, "Those who instantly lose sight of the past can have no security for the future", and again, "Every state contains within itself the means of salvation, if it will look its danger in the face, and not shrink from the course actually necessary to save it", and also, "Nothing old can ever be revived; for if it had not been unsuited to the circumstances of the people, it would have been still in existence."

But these are not Burkean assumptions about human nature, however much they might logically follow from such assumptions. Bromwich (who evidently rejects these assumptions himself), is right in so far as the Burkean side of the debate over human nature was the pessimistic one; but Burke was hardly ever so gloomy as the Hazlitt of the Life. Most remarkable

from a so-called radical is his insistence that "No man is ever wiser from  
experience or suffering, or can cast his thoughts or actions in any other  
mould than that which nature has assigned them." This cuts the ground from  
beneath many of Hazlitt's radical contemporaries, who believed that  
environmental factors largely determine character formation, and that by  
improving political and social institutions a similar amendment could be  
brought about in human nature. This is not all; his notion of the French as  
light-headed and changeable is paralleled by a picture of the English as the  
perpetual dupes of malicious leaders. One of Napoleon's faults, we learn, was  
not allowing for the ignorance of his subjects; Hazlitt extends the moral to  
all nations. "There is nothing that people resent more", he states, "than  
having benefits thrust upon them." After recounting the behaviour of the  
defenders of Moscow in 1812, he declares, "Ignorance is power". By 1826,  
Hazlitt had become bitterly disillusioned; but he had always admired the  
Napoleon who could say on St. Helena, "Men must be very bad to be as bad as I  
think they are", and of whom John Gibson Lockhart could truthfully say, "we  
doubt if any man ever passed through life, sympathising so slightly with  
mankind." In short, there was a temperamental affinity between Hazlitt and  
the Emperor, illustrated further by their shared love of glory and  
immortality. Bourrienne records a conversation with Napoleon, during which the  
latter congratulated his secretary on the future fame awaiting him; Bourrienne  
retorted by asking if he could name Alexander's secretary. Napoleon's  
proclamations to his armies, even his defiant Will, show his sense of history  
and the part he was playing in it. Hazlitt was always receptive to the desire  
for immortality in others, since he craved it for himself. This disposition  
can only be termed aristocratic, but most emphatically an aristocratic  
tendency that pays homage to merit rather than birth. It is an important  
reason for Hazlitt's unpopular enthusiasm for Napoleon, but it requires a  
further point to render it more plausible.

As we have seen, Hazlitt responded to the glory of Napoleon's deeds, although he was not normally a blind worshipper of power however it was exercised. It has been suggested that he could overlook Napoleon's absolutism because it was used both more efficiently and more beneficially than that of the legitimate monarchs of Europe. We must take it for granted that this was Hazlitt's view, although he does not produce much evidence for it. He also thought the French unfitted for the liberties enjoyed by Englishmen. In the earlier discussion of Hazlitt's patriotism, we saw that although he denied that love for one's country entailed hatred for foreigners, he occasionally demonstrated an inability to sympathise with the characteristics of other nationalities. The hostility to Frenchmen which he exhibits in the biography, together with his skimpy treatment of Napoleon's domestic policies, suggests that he was unable to envisage the daily life of the Emperor's subjects. It is not entirely fanciful to claim that Hazlitt regarded Napoleon as a figure in a drama, whose victims merely existed for stage effect, and did not really suffer. But his contemporaries were unable to see things in that light; they could not view Napoleon objectively until the news of his death reached Europe. It is revealing that when the final fall occurred, Plymouth harbour filled with Englishmen hoping for a glimpse of their greatest enemy on his way to St. Helena. Even the conservative John Gibson Lockhart could later reflect that "Napoleon was ...essentially and irreclaimably a despot...but his successor, whether a Bourbon or a Buonaparte, was likely to be a constitutional sovereign. The tyranny of a meaner hand would not have been endured after that precedent."

Similar sentiments were echoed by Hazlitt when he wrote to his publisher in 1827, "I thought all the world agreed with me at present that Buonaparte was better than the Bourbons, and that a tyrant was better than tyranny." But Hazlitt had admired Napoleon when the Army of England was gathered at Boulogne, when invasion fears in England were so exaggerated

that Coleridge and Wordsworth fell under suspicion for studying a stream. The reason for Hazlitt's attitude at that time can be found in the biography written twenty years later. Here he wrote; "If Buonaparte had made good his landing ...he might have levelled London with the dust, but he must have covered the face of the country with heaps and tumuli of the slain, before this mixed breed of Norman and Saxon blood would have submitted to a second Norman Conquest." As usual, the courageous English are contrasted with the supine French; "in England (dull as we are), a thousand enemies would only call up a thousand champions to answer them". Hazlitt, therefore, did not fear that England would be successfully invaded, however the continental conflict might fare. His reference to the Norman Conquest is revealing, aside from the obvious fact that both threats came from France. There had been a successful invasion of England in 1688, which had been bloodless because James II had forfeited his popularity. Perhaps unconsciously, Hazlitt the defiant "revolutionist" is here conceding that the Hanoverians, for all their faults, were tolerable enough to justify the defence of their regime from external danger, at least. Hazlitt's admiration for Napoleon, one may guess, would not have survived long at close quarters; however justified the cause of reform in England, the right of the people to change their governors did not need to be exercised at this time.

The conclusions to be drawn from Hazlitt's Life are manifold, and it is impossible to do much more than scratch the surface here. But I believe it is reasonable to suggest that the work has never been well received because it alienates both camps; it is too favourable to Napoleon to satisfy his enemies, and not radical enough to please those of Hazlitt's modern admirers who wish to reflect their left-wing beliefs back onto their hero. Hazlitt was not only never a strict Republican; he was not against arbitrary power so long as it was wisely exercised. Perhaps the greatest flaw in the Life is that Hazlitt concentrates upon the battles rather than the domestic

affairs of France. This leaves a grand impression of Napoleon's strategic abilities, but does nothing to rebutt the argument that he was far from being a "benevolent" despot. However, in itself this helps us to understand the grounds for Hazlitt's admiration; it reveals once again how far apart he stood from the radicals who contested for forms of government. It appears to be most likely that commentators have been unable to appreciate the Life because, understanding that it would be difficult for a radical to praise Napoleon and remain consistent to their beliefs, they have preferred to sacrifice Hazlitt's consistency rather than his radicalism. But, in a field where political bias will probably never permit an authoritative assessment, Hazlitt's Life of Napoleon has a great deal of merit - after all, it could not avoid being derivative to some extent, since he was not a witness of events, nor privy to those inner thoughts which prompted the Emperor's endlessly controversial actions.

#### NOTES

1. William Hazlitt, The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, London, 1852 ed. Preface (written by his son William), v.
2. P. Geyl, Napoleon: For and Against (Trans. Olive Renier), Jonathan Cape reprint, 1949; Preface, passim.
3. D.Bromwich, Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic, Oxford, 1985 reprint; p.303.
4. H. Baker, William Hazlitt, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1962; p.328.
5. Ibid, p.329. W. Albrecht speaks of Hazlitt's "aberration" over Napoleon; see William Hazlitt and the Malthusian Controversy, Kennikat Press, 1969 re-issue, p.5.
6. Ibid, p.330.
7. R.E Robinson, William Hazlitt's "Life of Napoleon Buonaparte"; Its sources and Characteristics, Geneva, 1959, p.11.
8. Ibid., p.36.
9. Hazlitt, Works, Vol 13, p.127.
10. Ibid., Vol 13, p.153.

11. Ibid., p. 168.
12. See esp. J.L Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, Sphere, 1970 reprint, passim.
13. Hazlitt, Works, Vol. 13, p.168.
14. Robinson, op.cit., p.12 note.
15. Hazlitt, Works, Vol 13, p.184.
16. Works, Vol.XX, p.432.
17. It is interesting to find that Nietzsche shared this view: "the revolution made Napoleon possible: that is its justification. For such a prize the anarchical crash of our entire civilization is welcome." (quoted in A.J.P Taylor, Europe: Grandeur and Decline, Pelican ed., 1967, p.198).
18. Ibid., p.300. For Scott, of course, what happened in the end was rather more desirable than for Hazlitt; see his Works (Edinburgh, 1835) Vols VII-XVI. See also J. Anderson, Sir Walter Scott and History & Other Papers; Edinburgh, 1981, p.12; "In attempting to be impartial and just, Scott fails."
19. Hazlitt, Works, Vol 13, p.IX.
20. Ibid., X.
21. A. Birrell, William Hazlitt, Macmillan, 1902, p.203. See also R. Whateley, Historic Doubts Concerning Napoleon Buonaparte (1819), reprinted in Famous Pamphlets, London, 1886, p.267; "if [the Whigs] believed in the real existence of this despot, I cannot conceive how they could so forsake their principles as to advocate his cause and eulogise his character".
22. D. Sutherland, France 1789-1815: Revolution and Counter-Revolution; Fontana, 1983, p.390.
23. Hazlitt, Works, Vol.XIV., p.249.
24. Works, Vol.XIII., p. 307; "It is always bad policy in a government to meddle more than it can help with the concerns of private life, which individuals understand so much better than mere theorists."
25. Ibid, p.126. Hazlitt does, however, criticise the Concordat and the Legion of Honour. See Ibid. pp.129-135, & pp.114-17.
26. Sutherland, op. cit., p.365.
27. All quotations taken from Baker, op. cit., pp. 329-30. These examples are from the literary intelligensia who might have been expected to provide the greatest support for Napoleon. In other circles the reaction was even more extreme; Spencer Perceval was satisfied that Napoleon was "the woman who rides upon the beast, who is drunk with the blood of the saints; the mother of harlots" (quoted in D. Gray, Spencer Perceval, The Evangelical Prime Minister. A character in Hardy's Dynasts voices the common suspicion that the Emperor "lives upon human flesh, and has rashers o' baby every morning for breakfast" (Act II, Scene V).

28. G. Lefebvre, quoted Geyl op. cit., p.447. Henry Crabb Robinson claimed that Hazlitt "vindicates Napoleon Bonaparte not because he is insensible to his enormous vices, but out of spite to the Tories of the country and the friends of the war of 1792," quoted in R. Wardle, William Hazlitt, Lincoln, 1971, p.140. Robinson disagreed violently with Hazlitt on this question, and was likely to attribute the worst motives to his opponent. More recently, the late Mr. Alan Taylor has identified the common feature of English admirers of Napoleon in the fact that they are all "agin the government." Such people (whom Taylor believes are "often (perhaps usually)" on the political left) have confused Napoleon's emnity against England with their own cause. This is an interesting starting-point for debate. Unfortunately, Mr. Taylor's love for epigrams overwhelmed his consistency, and he broaches different reasons for admiring Napoleon which betray his animus; for example "Napoleon is the hero of all those who resent reality, of all those who will not trouble to master 'the art of the possible'." It appears that Mr. Taylor's real target in such writing was Hitler; being too close a contemporary to determine the verdict of posterity on the latter, he vented his rage upon Napoleon. In this well-meant but ultimately mistaken approach he resembles Geyl; it is revealing that he describes that partisan historian as "a dispassionate Dutch observer." See A.J.P Taylor, op. cit., pp.11-21.
29. See Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism, ed. L.H and C.W Houtchens, New York 1956, p.253.
30. Bromwich, op. cit., p.303.
31. See the present writer's "Hazlitt Against Burke: The Radical Stance of an Ambivalent Essayist", Durham University Journal, June 1989, pp. 229-39. See below (Part 3, Chapter 2) for a briefer discussion of this issue.
32. Works, Vol.XIII, p.127; Vol. 13, p.168; Vol 14, p.23. In view of these remarks, it may be pertinent to suggest that it is the tone of the Preface which is unrepresentative of Hazlitt, contrary to Bromwich's interpretation.
33. Works, Vol.XIII, p.116.
34. Works, Vol.XIV, p.316. See an earlier outburst on the same theme in Works Vol.IX, p.227; "The multitude who require to be led, still hate their leaders."
35. Works, Vol.XV, p.71.
36. J.G Lockhart, The History of Napoleon Bonaparte, Everyman Reprint, 1947, p. 504.
37. Charles Lamb reported that although he enjoyed the book he "skipped the battles". The four volumes cannot have occupied him long if he stuck to this method. It is interesting to compare Hazlitt's indifference to the domestic policies of Napoleon with that of Germaine de Stael, who shared his moderate liberalism. De Stael squared her hostility to the Emperor with her love of France by praying for Napoleon's death in the hour of a great victory. See C. Herold, Mistress to an Age, Book Society ed., 1959, p.436. It might be argued in Hazlitt's defence that if he tended to idealise Napoleon from afar, then De Stael and her circle over-rated the English constitution in a similar fashion.

38. Lockhart, op. cit., pp.505-6. On St. Helena, Napoleon is reported as saying, "Men must be very bad to be as bad as I think they are"; quoted in F. Markham, Napoleon, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966, p.124. While Hazlitt thought that Napoleon had mistakenly paid too much respect to the intelligence of his subjects, Carlyle criticised the Emperor for believing "too much in the Dupe-ability of men"; On Heroes and Hero-Worship, Everyman ed., n.d, p.463.
39. Hazlitt to Charles Cowden Clarke, Dec. 7, 1827. See Letters, ed. H. Sikes, New York, 1978; p.348.
40. Works, Vol 14, p.210. See also E. Targye Lean, The Napoleonists: A Study in Political Disaffection 1760-1960, London, 1970, p.272; "The Napoleonists neither believed Napoleon could succeed in invasion nor wanted him to." Although Lean's book is fascinating, it does seem that the Napoleonists' motives were (and are) too diverse to be treated without distortion.
41. Works, Vol 13, pp. 119-20.



## MUSINGS ON MISANTHROPY

"Pure good soon grows insipid, wants variety and spirit. Pain is a bitter sweet, which never surfeits. Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal."

1  
On the Pleasure of Hating (1825)

During the course of this study, it has emerged that, while Hazlitt held many views which are characteristic of liberalism, his espousal of these opinions was often qualified. We have seen that while the responses of a political actor to the contingent events of his lifetime may provide clues which indicate his ideological position, the examination of his notion of human nature is the most likely way to establish his ideological identity. It remains for us to investigate Hazlitt's work on this subject, to discover whether the tentative label "conservative liberal" has more solid justification.

In a recent notable study of this period, Ian Christie has  
2  
remarked that Hazlitt was "brilliant but misanthropic". Although Christie does not elaborate upon a verdict which has the most marginal importance for his book, the comment provides a convenient point of embarkation for this chapter. If borne out by the evidence, this judgement would imply that the prevailing bias of Hazlitt's thought was towards conservatism. But immediately the problem of definition arises. Misanthropy has not been extensively studied, presumably because it indicates an unattractive human disposition. Before deciding whether Hazlitt really was a "man-hater", it may be useful to investigate the nature of this trait, as exemplified in literary productions which Hazlitt knew and commented upon. From this we should learn much about Hazlitt's impression of human nature, which will assist us in providing him

with an ideological label.

A misanthropic outlook is often associated with certain of the ancient Cynic philosophers, notably Diogenes of Synope. Shakespeare's Timon of Athens includes a portrayal of a Cynic - Apemantus,

"...that few things loves better  
3  
Than to abhor himself"

Since it is treated by Hazlitt in his Characters of Shakespear's Plays, it represents a particularly suitable starting-point for discussion.

Timon gives us three possible versions of the misanthropic temperament, for, along with Apemantus, there is Alcibiades, who returns from a brooding exile to destroy corruption in his native city, and Timon himself, who, bowed down by debts and ingratitude, shuns the world and lives as a hermit. Alcibiades' hatred is compassed by those who have harmed Timon and himself; he readily forgives those Athenians who are innocent of such crimes. As for Apemantus, Hazlitt notes that "The churlish profession of misanthropy in the Cynic is contrasted with the profound feeling of it in Timon, and also with the soldier-like and determined resentment of Alcibiades against his  
4  
countrymen." Apemantus, indeed, seems to have struck the pose of misanthropy voluntarily. He eventually tells Timon "thou art too bad to curse." Timon retorts,

"Thy nature did commence in suffrance, time  
5  
Hath made thee hard in't"

However, it is Timon who tells Alcibiades "I am  
6  
misanthropos, and hate mankind." When asked by Apemantus what most resembles the flatterers who have brought him low, Timon replies; "Women nearest, but  
7  
men, men are the things themselves." This implies that Timon has rejected the

whole of humanity. He treats his friend Alcibiades no better than the robbers who come to take his gold. His hatred for Alcibiades originated because "thou spok'st well of me"- Timon no longer cares whether his former flatterers were sincere or not.

It would be a mistake to ignore Timon's occasional lapses from this all-inclusive hostility. For instance, when the steward Flavius weeps, Timon declares "then I love thee, because thou art a woman, and disclaimst flinty mankind; whose eyes do never give but through lust and laughter." Flavius, according to Timon, is "more honest now than wise", which recalls an earlier remark by one of Timon's neighbours; "Every man has his fault, and honesty is [Timon's]". Timon dismisses his old employee with the injunction to "Hate all, curse all, show charity to none; but let the famished flesh slide from the bone, ere thou relieve the beggar."

We might, therefore, agree with Hazlitt's opinion that "All [Timon's] vehement misanthropy is forced, uphill work", unlike that of Apemantus, who "shows only the natural virulence of his temper, and antipathy to good or evil alike." "Timon", he writes, "does not utter an imprecation without betraying the extravagant workings of disappointed passion, of love altered to hate." His hatred does not extend to all humanity, and therefore we cannot admit him as an example of thorough-going misanthropy. Apemantus appears to be much closer to the mark. He seems never to have expected more from humanity than he receives; he hates and is hated in turn, and is not affected by this consequence. Even he declares that he loves Timon better when he curses mankind than he ever did before, but this is a temporary lapse. He tells Timon, "The middle of humanity, thou never knew'st, but the extremity of both ends". He feels superior to Timon, because with Hazlitt he suspects that the latter's "sour-cold habit" has been put on "enforcedly"- "thou'dst courtier be again wert thou not beggar."

Moliere's Misanthrope presents two possible models.

Alcestes is embittered by the world. He hates

"Some, because they are wicked and mischievous, and others for being complaisant to the wicked and not having that vigorous hatred for 'em, which vice ought to give to all virtuous minds."<sup>17</sup>

Alcestes treats his well-wisher Philintes no better than Apemantus treats

Timon in his prime. Yet he loves Celimine in spite of her apparent

faithlessness. His desire is to to live with her on a desert island, and

to forget the follies of men in their absence. Like Timon, he admits an

exception to his hatred, which casts doubt upon his misanthropic

characteristics. In his comments on the play, Hazlitt expressed his disbelief

in the character of Alcestes:

"What can exceed the absurdity of the Misanthrope, who leaves his mistress after every proof of her attachment and constancy, merely because she will not submit to the technical formality of going to live with him in a desert?"<sup>18</sup>

Hazlitt might have added weight to this remark if he had said that such an

odd request stretches our credulity because Alcestes has been shown to have a

good heart at bottom.

Philintes, however, might be claimed as a misanthrope

himself. He tells Alcestes, "'tis an extremity of folly to busy ourselves in

correcting the world "- he sees defects as "vices linked with human nature".<sup>19</sup>

While Alcestes burns with idealistic love for Celimine ,Philintes is content

to marry a woman who chooses him as second-best. Not expecting much from the

world, he does not rail against it like his friend. His unflattering view of

man is not "uphill work"; he seems to be resigned to it. He is concerned for

Alcestes' well-being, sure enough, but in Philintes' world relationships seem

to be based upon calculation rather than emotion.

It may be in order to pause briefly here to examine what is already emerging. Timon and Alcestes are both characters of strong emotions, who have grown disillusioned in the world. In short, they loved man in the abstract, and, confronted by his "too solid flesh", this enthusiasm has suddenly melted. But the habit of abstraction has not left them; now that they hate humanity they are likely to lapse whenever they uncover the inevitable exceptions to their rule. By contrast, Iago in Othello is motivated by his detestation of a single man. He is not given to philosophising about the species, but he might be seen as a representative of misanthropy in action. In order to achieve his end, he uses any means available, especially other individuals. In some ways, his assertion "I hate the Moor" is a more effective declaration of war against humanity than Timon's "I am misanthropos". Hazlitt, indeed, compares the "ancient" with Apemantus; like Iago, the latter is "indifferent to good or evil", but rests "satisfied with the mischief existing in the world, and with his own ill-nature" while Iago takes great pains to  
20  
augment it. However, while all men come alike to the Cynic, Iago dupes those who are naive enough to trust him. In so doing, he shows himself to be aware that virtue exists in the world. This, I believe, establishes his psychopathic tendencies, rather than misanthropy. Hazlitt seemed to be aware of this; his major objection to Edmund Kean's portrayal of Iago was that it lacked mirth.

Book IV of Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a familiar example of a jaundiced account of man. The description of the "Yahoo" provoked shuddering rage in many Victorian men of letters. Swift makes it clear that the Yahoos represent a deterioration from normal human behaviour. But this seems contradicted by the revelation that the Yahoos have only  
21  
"natural" vices; mankind has developed others through his "civilisation". Humans are blessed with a small amount of reason, but they use this to perfect their vices. Some comfort may be derived from the fact that the name of the

Houyhnhms meant "the perfection of nature". Swift is showing us a vision of an uncorrupt humanity, along with an exaggerated portrait of contemporary Englishmen, extremes between which Gulliver represents an acceptable compromise. Swift suggests that the modicum of reason possessed by man is being put to vicious purposes at present, but this still distinguishes him from the Yahoos, and makes him capable of future improvement. Swift's epitaph, which declares that "He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more" sums up the reality behind his "misanthropic" mask. The hopes he took with him into public life had been thwarted by political friend and foe alike; but misanthropy was a struggle for him as for Timon. While the majority of mankind was beneath his lofty contempt, he found several kindred spirits with whom he could share his burden. Like the later satirist Byron, he might have claimed that he

".....would also deem

O'er other's griefs, that some sincerely grieve;

That two, or one, are almost what they seem-

22

That goodness is no name, and happiness no dream"

La Rochefoucauld is another "misanthropic" writer who engaged Hazlitt's attention. Hazlitt believed that "The error in the reasonings of Mandeville, Rochefoucault (sic) and others, is; they first find out that there is something mixed in the motives of all our actions, and they proceed to argue that they must all arise from one  
23  
motive, viz., self-love."

Yet Hazlitt wrote a set of maxims "In the Manner of La Rochefoucauld", and certainly was more cordially inclined towards Mandeville than others of his  
24  
generation, notably the political "apostate" James Mackintosh. We can dismiss Mandeville as a misanthropist without much trouble, for although he believed that the virtues could be analysed into the "vice" of self-love, he leaves the

impression of being at peace with his fellows. His quarrel is with hypocrisy rather than with real virtue. La Rochefoucauld's cynicism also suggests acute observation rather than hatred. Like Mandeville, he believed that "some people are thought well of in society whose only good points are the vices useful in social life", and that "The virtues lose themselves in self-interest like  
25  
in the sea". He also writes,

"When we work for the benefit of others, it would appear that our self-love  
26  
is tricked by kindness and forgets itself."

Yet he is inconsistent when he states, "There are more people free from self-interest than from envy"; it is also not clear that a man may be envious  
27  
without taking his self-interest into account. In contrast to Mandeville,

Rochefoucauld believes that "when all individuals seek their own interest  
28  
they neglect the public weal." Whatever his short-comings as a moralist, Rochefoucauld's purpose, if any, is to reform the subjects of his analysis.

In this he resembles Swift, who once wrote,

"As Rochefoucault his maxims drew  
From nature, I believe 'em true  
They argue no corrupted mind  
29  
In him; the fault is in mankind,"

and he acknowledged an intellectual debt to the Frenchman. Like Swift, La Rochefoucauld had nursed an unrealistic political ambition, and this appears to have produced some of his more biting work. But it would be wrong to call his later attitude misanthropic. The stance of the satirist, above the fray but not aloof from it, despairing at times but exhorting at others, does not square with the definition of misanthropy as a hatred for humanity.

A final example may be drawn from the writings of Schopenhauer, although of course Hazlitt did not comment on his work. According to him, man's "conception is a crime, his birth a penalty, his life a labour, and his death

a necessity."

For him, the only way to suppress hatred and contempt of man is to regard him "as an object of pity." This method was not always successful, however, and he occasionally found himself feeling "a positive enjoyment" of man's pain. Schopenhauer believes that self-interest lies "in the background" of most motives to action, and since he defines a good person as one who subordinates his own interests to those of others, he might be justified in seeing little good in the world. His doctrine that once a man's character is formed, the rest of his life follows by strict necessity, might also have deepened his natural pessimism. However, it would be difficult to describe him as a misanthropist. Like Mandeville, he sets a very high moral standard for the world, and his despair at man's incapacity to act from pure motives was always a likely result of this. The prevailing message is one of sorrow, not hatred. Schopenhauer takes pessimism to a radical extreme, but he still should be ranked with those who wished to change the world for the better, not merely to shun it.

It appears, therefore, that what many have called misanthropy is often the result of an optimistic view of the world gone sour. The word carries connotations of disapproval which render it unsuitable in these cases. To this extent, therefore, all those commentators who have sought to "clear" their favourites of the imputation are justified. But it is possible to go further, and to suggest that the word is scarcely applicable in any circumstances. This is because there will almost always be exceptions to an apparently universal hatred of mankind. Even in literary creations, the portrayal of such beings is difficult to sustain. Goneril and Regan have their Edmund, Franz Moor his Amalia, and even Turgenev's nihilist, Bazarov, falls a victim to something like love. In Iago, Shakespeare may have created a perfect model; but in doing so he renders the naivety of the other characters in



Othello implausible. If we are to be as precise as possible, therefore, a misanthrope should be regarded as a "monster, that the world ne'er saw."

The disposition which has been termed "misanthropic" is certainly aristocratic in the classical sense. One person, at least, normally is excepted from the writer's anathema - himself. An example of this can be found in Lord Byron, who, fortunately for himself, was

"...only not to desperation driven

Because not altogether of such clay

32

As rots into the souls of those whom I survey."

We have already noted the unlikelihood of a democrat holding such views. We have seen at length that ideological positions are rooted in conceptions of human nature; the natural outcome of such an attitude to the average man would seem to be autocratic tendencies. Schopenhauer, for example, applies his pessimism to politics as follows;

"A constitution which embodied abstract right alone would be an excellent thing for natures other than human, but since the great majority of men are extremely egoistic, unjust, inconsiderate, deceitful, and sometimes even malicious; since in addition they are endowed with very scanty intelligence, there arises the necessity for a power that shall be concentrated in one man, a power that shall be above all law and right, and be completely irresponsible, nay, to which everything shall yield ... a rule by the grace of God."

33

For Schopenhauer, a republic could never be a meritocracy; "For always and everywhere and under all circumstances there is a conspiracy, or instinctive alliance against [able] men on the part of all the stupid, the weak, and the commonplace." By contrast, a monarch needs the best men to serve him, and can choose them without fear because he has no reason to envy natural talent. This

34

is a questionable assumption for Schopenhauer, as it assumes that the monarch is immune from mortal frailties. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer believes the rule of the best men can only come about under absolute monarchy. In many ways his theory is reminiscent of another reputed misanthropist, Thomas Hobbes, and also anticipates Ortega Y Gasset's Revolt of the Masses. A world populated for the most part by fools and potential cut-throats needs firm government, and it is absurd to speak of the "inalienable rights" of such a herd.

We saw earlier that a dim view of human nature is the hallmark of conservative thinking. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all the supposed misanthropes we have examined were conservatives. In most cases the purpose for such writing was to attempt some kind of moral reformation, and while the conservative may wish for such reform, in his case there are definite limits to possible improvement. Also, the violent language used by men like Swift and Schopenhauer is a hint of ideological instability. Conversions most often take place among such extremists; one feels, for instance, that Swift's view of humanity was dependent upon the prospects of the Tory Party as much as his private life and his illnesses. Therefore, it is not enough to establish whether Hazlitt was a pessimist. If this can be shown convincingly, we must also carefully examine the nature of his pessimism.

It may quickly be gathered that Hazlitt's case is similar to those discussed above. He also gives the impression of having hoped too much from mankind. The essay "On the Pleasure of Hating" closes with the words "...Seeing all this as I do, and unravelling the web of human life into its various threads of meanness, spite, cowardice, want of feeling, and want of understanding, of indifference towards others and ignorance of ourselves.... ...mistaken as I have been in my public and private hopes, calculating others from myself, and calculating wrong; always disappointed where I placed most

reliance; the dupe of friendship, and the fool of love; have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough." 36

Also to be found in this essay is the remark "the greatest possible good of each individual consists in doing all the mischief he can to his neighbours." 37

Elsewhere, in his "Common Places" of 1823, Hazlitt writes "Happy are they that can say with Timon - I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind! They can never be at a loss for subjects to exercise upon; their sources of satisfaction must hold out while the world stands." 38

The posthumously-published Aphorisms on Man show that contrary to the opinion of recent critics, Hazlitt never shed this element of pessimism. These pithy remarks include the statement, "I believe in the theoretical benevolence, and the practical malignity of man." 39

Hazlitt accounted for his bitterness in a conversation with the artist James Northcote; "When one is found fault with for nothing, or for doing one's best, one is apt to give the world their revenge. All the former part of my life I was treated as a cypher; and since I have got into notice, I have been set upon as a wild beast. When this is the case, and you can expect as little justice as candour, you naturally in self-defence take refuge in a sort of misanthropy and cynical contempt for mankind." 40

This pessimism seems to be as thorough-going as any we have examined here. Hazlitt does not balk at extending his detestation to himself, and reverses the more usual outlook of hating man in the abstract and allowing exceptions in reality. His general tone is one of an embittered lonely outcast; most of his friendships were short-lived, and he suffered two broken marriages. Yet he asked for an exact definition of his outlook, he would not have described himself as misanthropic. In the "Common Places", he identifies this phenomenon as consisting

"Not in pointing out the faults and follies of men, but in encouraging them in

the pursuit. They who wish well to their fellow-creatures are angry at their vices and some at their mishaps; he who flatters their errors and smiles at their ruin is their worst enemy. But men like the sycophant better than the plain dealer, because they prefer their passion to their reason, and even to their interest."<sup>41</sup>

This definition agrees quite closely with that put forward in this chapter, although it has also been argued that consistent misanthropy even on these grounds is an unlikely disposition. Hazlitt claims for himself the status of "plain dealer", by pointing out that contrary to their claims, men do not often make "rational" decisions. Unlike the true misanthrope, he is not satisfied with this situation, and his motive for writing is not merely to comment on the world, but also to change it if possible. For each quotation which seems to emanate from a spirit weary of the world and all its doings, several may be brought forward which show that he could appreciate the "mingled yarn" which wove the patterns of his life. Not long before his death, he told James Northcote that on an average day, "I rise when I please, breakfast at length, write what comes into my head, and after taking a mutton-<sup>42</sup> chop and a dish of strong tea, go to the play; and thus my time passes."

Another anecdote may help to refute the "misanthropic" label. At the time of his ill-fated obsession with his landlady's daughter, he met an acquaintance by a coffee-house and poured out the whole story of his woes; then he encountered the son of a friend, and repeated his tale in full; finding the artist, Haydon, not at home he made a confidant of his model; and, finally, while inspecting a new lodging-house the landlady asked him if he was not ill, at which point the whole story was blurted out from start to finish. A cynic like La Rochefoucauld would explain this episode in terms of a desire to repair his damaged self-esteem, but such a craving for human approval and sympathy is difficult to reconcile with what has been called misanthropy.<sup>43</sup>

Overall, Hazlitt's attitude is best characterized by his own dictum: "To

think ill of mankind and not wish ill to them, is perhaps the highest wisdom  
44  
and virtue."

It would be a mistake, therefore, to quote Hazlitt's more splenetic outbursts out of their context, and to write him down as an extremist of Schopenhauer's stamp. Hazlitt believed that man's nature was "mixed". Human beings are capable of the purest sacrifices, even while contemplating deeds of a black dye. Genuine benevolence is possible, and the task of the moralist is to encourage it as much as lies in his power. But while we denounce wickedness, we should be conscious that it can never wholly be extirpated, since it too is an integral facet of the human character.

It remains for us to discuss the ideological implications of Hazlitt's ambivalent ideas about human nature. It emerged earlier that there was a tendency for thinkers of a pessimistic nature to favour authoritarian government. Most of the thinkers described above are difficult to label, however; in some cases their disillusionment cuts at the root of all government, as well as anarchy. They are individualists, too conscious of their moral superiority to hope much from individualism as a ruling dogma. As a result, they are normally leaders without disciples, and those who tread in their footprints, like the laissez-faire successors of Mandeville, are not over-anxious to acknowledge their guidance. Other isolated thinkers of both "left" and "right" might claim them, and in most cases it is debatable whether the prevailing bias is towards liberalism or conservatism. However, Hazlitt's leanings are unmistakable. The impression that he is best defined as a conservative liberal is confirmed by his views of human nature. The belief that the corruption of man is permanent prevented him from wholeheartedly backing movements in favour of free institutions, and this consciousness led him to suspect that the success of such reforms would be short-lived. However, his hopes for mankind remained in spite of the

convictions derived from bitter experience, and this emotional support for those who desired lasting improvements places him within the liberal, rather than conservative ranks.

This conservative liberalism was an excellent ideological position for a critic of Hazlitt's day. It provided him with the basis for a sympathetic understanding of both sides in the contemporary debate. For example, although his life might seem a reflection of Byron's defiant claim "I was born for opposition", his suspicion of government action was not the outcome of a belief that such institutions were "brute engines" incapable of good. Rather, he was constantly watching for instances when the governments of the day exploited the weak sides of human nature for their own advantage - he could, of course, applaud such moves when he believed that this was done for less selfish reasons, as in the case of Napoleon. His principled reluctance to commit himself was unlikely to endear him to either side, and it is little wonder that he felt his intellectual isolation at a time of polarised views. Incapable of supporting the British governments of the time, and harshly handled by their literary supporters, Hazlitt was prevented from exercising the even-handedness that his position promised. Consequently, his angry rhetoric often distorts his true position, and has misled critics into the belief that he was a radical. Yet there were occasions when he demonstrated a genuine desire for objectivity, which produced in The Spirit of the Age a contemporary account full of a sympathetic understanding normally restricted to old men recounting the buried strife of their youth. Hazlitt longed for posthumous fame, and perhaps the knowledge that the ideological stance which caused his political isolation also made possible a lasting masterpiece might have comforted his tormented soul.

## NOTES

1. Works, Vol.XII, p.128.
2. I. Christie, Myth and Reality, Macmillan, 1970, p.356.
3. W. Shakespeare, Timon of Athens, Act I, Scene I.
4. Works, Vol.IV, p.210.
5. Shakespeare, op. cit., Act IV, Scene III.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., Act IV, Scene I.
12. Ibid., Act IV, Scene III.
13. Works, Vol.IV, p.213.
14. Ibid., p.212.
15. Shakespeare, op. cit., Act IV, Scene III.
16. Ibid.
17. J-B. Moliere, The Misanthrope, Act I, Scene I.
18. Works, Vol.XX, p.11. See also ibid., p.151; Alcestes exhibits "not misanthropy, but sheer 'midsummer madness'"
19. Moliere, op. cit..
20. Works, Vol.IV, p.213.
21. J. Swift, Gullivers Travels, Methuen ed., 1965, p.224. Hazlitt was a great admirer of Swift, and in one of his Lectures on the English Poets he defended the Dean against the charge of misanthropy; see Works, Vol.V, pp. 109-12.
22. Lord Byron, Childe Harold, Canto III stanza cxiv.
23. Works, Vol.XX, p.349.
24. Sir J. Mackintosh, Miscellaneous Works, Philedelphia, 1854 ed., p.117.
25. La Rochefoucauld, Maxims, Trans. C. Tancock, Penguin ed., 1959; p.70, p.56.
26. Ibid., p.65.

27. Ibid., p.93.
28. Ibid., p.117.
29. J. Swift, Lines On the Death of Dr. Swift (1731).
30. A. Schopenhauer, On Human Nature: Essays in Ethics and Politics; Trans. T. Saunders, Allen & Unwin, 1957 reprint, p.3.
31. Ibid., p.5, p.95.
32. Byron, op. cit., Canto IV stanza cxxxvi
33. Schopenhauer, op. cit., p.55. C.f Hazlitt in his Life of Napoleon Buonaparte; "It is so far the misfortune of republican institutions, that those who are placed at the head of them cannot repose on mere external dignity, independently of merit or services; and are therefore more disposed to look with jaundiced eyes on talents or exertions that eclipse their own, and to which, of course, they ought in justice to yield the precedence. An hereditary pre-eminence, not founded on worth or capacity, cannot be supposed to be jealous of it, or to suffer in the comparison with pretensions that are quite foreign to its own." Works, Vol.XII, p.272.
34. Ibid., p.56.
35. See F. Lock, Swift's Tory Politics, London, 1983, for a discussion of Swift's ideological stance.
36. Works, Vol.XII, p.136.
37. Ibid., p.129.
38. Works, Vol.XX, p.132.
39. Works, Vol.XX, p.343.
40. Works, Vol.XI, p.318.
41. Ibid., p.339; see also Vol.X, p.150; "A misanthrope and a philanthropist are not the same thing." Thomas De Quincey wrote after Hazlitt's death that the latter "loathed his own relation to the human race" (Works, ed. D. Masson, London 1897, Vol.XI). It would be a mistake to regard De Quincey as an impartial or well-informed observer of Hazlitt.
42. Works, Vol.XI, p.269.
43. The events surrounding this incident are chronicled in Liber Amoris: Or, The New Pygmalion; Works, Vol.IX, pp.95-162.
44. Works, Vol.IX, p.202. In a review of Peveril of the Peak written for the Edinburgh Review, Hazlitt complimented Scott for treating "human nature scurvily, yet handsomely; that is, much as it deserves." Works, Vol.XIX, pp.95-6.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

### 1) THE PROBLEM OF CONSISTENCY

"I remember once saying to [Mr. Northcote], a great while ago, that I did not seem to have altered any of my ideas since I was sixteen years old. 'Why, then', said he, 'you are no wiser now than you were then!'"

1  
On Consistency Of Opinion (1828)

"A man whose opinions at fifty are his opinions at fourteen has opinions of very little value"

2  
Leslie Stephen, Hours in a Library

Since the approach of this study has been thematic it is only proper that a conclusion should include a chronological account of Hazlitt's writings. The major purpose of this will be to evaluate his repeated claims to consistency. It would not be fatal to his standing as a critic if he can be shown to have changed his views over time. Leslie Stephen's maxim quoted above is an exaggeration, but it is true that a stubborn entrenchment behind a position may be a disadvantage during a mobile war of opinion. However, Hazlitt's intellectual honour does seem to be involved, as he coupled his claims with jibes at others who had deviated from their original views. In the process of learning how consistent he was, we should learn a little more about the opinions he held.

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First of all, we must be quite clear that we are speaking of a consistent ideological position, not of a rigid blue-print for government or of attitudes to contemporary political actors. It is not true, for instance,

to say as Hazlitt did that the Lake Poets must have changed their views simply because they allied themselves with men who had formerly been their violent opponents. He needed to prove that the latter group had not undergone a conversion themselves. Similarly, the various changes in the reform programmes put forward by William Cobbett and John Cartwright do not prove that they were inconsistent; rather, they were flexible in their choice of means to an end which never changed.

Comments on past events and dead men is a different matter. If there is a change over time in a writer's response to these, then it is likely that his underlying views have altered. This suspicion will be properly confirmed if we find that his ideas of human nature have been amended too. But in the absence of this or of new information which might have placed the event or character in a new light, we would be justified in denying total consistency to our subject.

However, with a critic such as Hazlitt there is another difficulty to bear in mind. Living a hand-to-mouth existence as he did, hawking his talents from one publisher to another - and consequently shifting his likely audience from time to time - it is to be expected that at least the surface tone of his work will not remain constant. All of these factors must be remembered as we briefly chart his career as a political writer.

The important works of Hazlitt's twenties are the Essay on the Principles of Human Action (1805), the Free Thoughts on Public Affairs (1806) and the Reply to Malthus (1807). The first of these, it may be recalled, makes no extravagant claims on behalf of human nature. There is evidently a strong desire that benevolence should play a wider role, but it is recognised that a man will normally prefer the interests of himself, his family and his neighbourhood to that of a stranger, however worthy. The Free Thoughts demonstrate a concern for existing liberties and suspicion of the government's

motives at home and abroad. The pamphlet seems to be designed to catch the eye of the Whigs, a suspicion which is re-inforced by his letter to William Windham of 1809, which was an appeal for patronage. The Reply was written for Cobbett's Political Register; it reveals a similar concern for existing institutions, rather than a wish to undermine them. In short, the bulk of Hazlitt's output during these years would not have disturbed a moderate member of the Whig party; its motivation, like theirs, should be termed conservative liberalism.

Between 1809 and 1813 Hazlitt was relatively quiet. Our real problem concerns the period from 1814-19. These years saw the fall of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbons, the suspension of Habeas Corpus (1817), the agitation which led to "Peterloo", and finally the "Six Acts" which imposed restrictions on the press (1819). It was also the time when the "War of the Intellectuals" reached its height; Hazlitt was singled out for particular attack by Tory journalists such as William Gifford and John Gibson Lockhart. It is certainly the period of Hazlitt's angriest prose, much of which is contained in the Political Essays which were published in the year of Peterloo and the "Six Acts". "On Court Influence", "What is the People?" and "On the Regal Character" appeared in this collection. In the year 1819, Hazlitt also lashed back at his critics in his "Letter to William Gifford".

This would appear to be straight-forward enough. However, prior to the Political Essays, the collected essays of the Round Table (written early 1813-early 1817) and the Characters of Shakespear's Plays (mostly 1816) had been printed. There is political material in these works, and some of it is very pointed; but from what we know of Hazlitt, it might be expected that the greatest howl of outrage would have occurred at this point soon after Waterloo, and the tone of the majority of pieces in these collections is restrained. The explanation cannot lie in the respective vehicles for these

works; the Round Table and Shakespear's Plays both originally appeared in journals owned by the Hunt brothers (who had already fallen foul of the libel laws), and the Yellow Dwarf which published the most embittered Political Essays was in the same proprietorship. Speculation on this point cannot produce any certainty, but it is possible that Hazlitt realised the impossibility of publishing his thoughts on Napoleon in 1815. Even the Hunts were initially glad that he had fallen. But when discontent grew in post-war England, and liberal opinion began to wake up to the nature of the restored monarchies in Europe, his self-imposed restraint could be lifted. Marilyn Butler has noted that Hazlitt did not concentrate on domestic politics in these essays; the likely explanation for this is that he reserved his hatred for the conquerors of Napoleon rather than the supposed enemies of domestic liberty.

4

Hazlitt's work in the 1820's has a more mellow flavour, except for isolated pieces such as his "Essay on the Spirit of Monarchy", which probably contains more fireworks because it was published in the joint venture of Hunt, Shelley and Byron, The Liberal Table Talk (1821-2) represents a turn to more contemplative work ("On the Pleasure of Painting", "The Indian Jugglers", etc.); when Hazlitt loses his temper here, his blows are aimed at the public as often as the government. No doubt he was feeling the strain from his relationship with Sarah Walker. But the essay "On Paradox and Common-place" is a clear statement of a middle road between the extreme radicals and the Tories which he applauded in Francis Jeffrey, editor of the Edinburgh Review. The collection of portraits in The Spirit of the Age, as we have seen, is his nearest approach to objectivity when dealing with contemporaries, indicating that the great rage had been killed in him by then. The Plain Speaker (1826) includes the odd outburst - "On the Pleasure of Hating" makes its appearance here - but the political content of these essays is slighter. The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte of his last years includes a view

of the French Revolution which would certainly find assent among members of the Whig Party at the time; his warm feelings towards the fallen Emperor would not be so popular, but contemporaries regarded his "apology" for Napoleon's more controversial actions as evidence that Hazlitt secretly leaned towards "the arbitrary side" in politics. This period also saw the publication of various maxims which hint at a growing cynicism, and a series of Conversations of Northcote conducted in a similar vein.

A glance at the development of Hazlitt's thought, therefore, leaves the impression of moderate liberalism at the beginning and the end of his career, with a period in the middle when E.P Thompson's remark that Hazlitt was perhaps "the most "Jacobin" of the middle-class Radicals" might make some sense. But this would rest upon a highly superficial reading of Hazlitt's work, similar to his own view that Burke was a blatant apostate. Some critics find it difficult to accept that moderate positions may be expressed in extreme language, but this is actually the case. We have seen that a careful reading of "What is the People?" falls into this category, and this is the most radical-sounding of his essays in the middle period. It reveals great hostility to the government in being, but very limited faith in improvement through constitutional change, and a definite belief that a moral reformation within the present system would do as well. This, I believe, is Hazlitt's attitude from the Free Thoughts on Public Affairs to the Life of Napoleon; occasionally, however, the "good hater" drowns out the cautious liberal. As a journalist who lived, in part, on his ability to comment on current events, Hazlitt found that different personalities and different governmental decisions required changing responses. He decided where he stood very early in his career, and if that position seemed threatened at one time more than another, he measured his own blows accordingly.

However, we noted earlier that if our subject has clearly

changed his mind about a past event or a dead figure, it is prima facie evidence for an ideological conversion. There is an apparent instance of such a change in Hazlitt's Political Essays. In the "Character of Mr. Fox", reprinted from a work of 1806, we find a note which declares that if he were to write an essay on this subject now (1819), it would not reach such a warm conclusion. Fox's life, in fact, had been "deficient in the three principal points, the beginning, the middle, and the end." Hazlitt here refers to Fox's early days in the Tory ranks, the alliance of 1784 with Lord North, and the similar coalition with the Grenvilles which brought about the "Ministry of all the Talents." These facts were notorious when Hazlitt composed the essay soon after Fox's death; no new information appears to have reached him. How, then, do we explain this sign of inconsistency?

The answer lies in the history of the Whig Party subsequent to Fox's death, and Hazlitt's own relations with them. The "Talents" left office soon after this, and the Whigs had suffered thirteen years of inglorious opposition since then. The sins of the disciples, therefore, were visited by Hazlitt on the memory of the figure-head. The faults which he was prepared to overlook in 1806 had to be emphasised in 1819. We have also seen that Hazlitt may well have hoped for Whig patronage as a result of the Free Thoughts which appeared not long before the "Character" was written. Even if the latter piece was not designed to refresh the Whig memory, it is likely that Hazlitt's party allegiance would prevent him from criticising tactics which had helped Fox's prospects of power. By 1819 he had decided that the intended result of such manoeuvres did not justify them. The Whigs were interested in power for themselves, not justice for the people; the fact that Fox possessed "a social and generous sensibility, desirous of the love and esteem of others" did not outweigh the bad impression left by his followers. This change of mind, therefore, is a sign that Hazlitt had lost faith in a party, not a creed.

We have noted that Hazlitt's ideological position was unusually appropriate for the production of incisive judgements on his times. It was also highly adapted to the maintenance of consistency. The more extreme liberals of his youth could not survive the shock of the French Revolution, and their conversion to a very different view of the world is unsurprising. The conservatives did not defect in droves to the liberal ranks, but there were times when domestic or foreign movements forced them to a more extreme and unstable position; they were induced to carry out innovations on the structure of the very constitution they wished to defend. Hazlitt, however, with his "mixed" view of human nature, rode out the storm true to his maxim that "To think ill of mankind and not to wish ill of them, is perhaps the highest wisdom and virtue." The events of his youth had taught him that one should not think too well of one's fellows; the troubled days of his maturity never challenged this conclusion. It must be acknowledged, therefore, that Hazlitt remained consistent throughout his life, in the most meaningful sense of the word.

## 2) HAZLITT AND THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

"Many people have a strong desire to pry into the secrets of futurity: for our own parts, we should be satisfied if we had the power to recall the dead, and live the past over again as often as we pleased!"

10

On Actors and Acting (1817)

Although Hazlitt was a highly appropriate thinker to reflect upon the Spirit of the Age, this by no means implies that he was in tune with it. Indeed he was essentially a backward-looking thinker. He did not seek constitutional remedies for current problems in a glorious free English past, as many liberals of the previous century had done. He seems to have lacked precise historical knowledge, and had little interest in constitutional forms. When he looked back for inspiration, it was to a moral community which had

existed over time; there was no golden age, so much as a group of golden beings. He admired Shakespeare, Milton, Marvell and others, because they were uncompromising individuals who had followed nature and expressed their views without fear. Thus the true genius was not a product of his age, but a man who could transcend it. Apart from Napoleon, he could say this for none of his contemporaries, and this goes a long way to explain his disillusionment with the age he lived in. It may also explain why Hazlitt nowhere clearly defined what he took to be the spirit of his age. As is frequently the case in Hazlitt's writings, we learn about the opponents of this spirit than the phenomenon itself. While this vagueness might be regarded as a serious flaw in the book, a comparison with John Stuart Mill's later work under the same title reveals that it is more properly an advantage; Mill's clear diagnosis of the age's ills is obviously dictated by his personal beliefs, and the proposed remedies read like a manifesto for men like himself.

Crane Brinton has suggested that Hazlitt had much in common with the ideas of the Victorians, but this is an unusual misjudgement on his part. Though his friend Leigh Hunt settled down with a pension to idolise his Queen, Hazlitt would have been a very restive survival into the new era. One might indulge in a paradox here, and suggest that if Hazlitt was forward-looking at all, it is because some of his thoughts anticipate those of men in the future who were disillusioned with the trend of the times. He disliked the industrial system and the commercial spirit which went with it; his distrust of mere machinery led him to question the likely benefits of democracy. It is difficult to imagine Hazlitt in peaceful co-existence with the dogmas of Utilitarianism and of progress. Most fatally of all, the life of a Victorian man of letters would not have appealed to him. Just before his death, he wrote,

"An author no longer, in the silence of retreat, and in the dearth of



criticism, appeals to posterity as a last resource, as in a flat and barren country we look at objects in the distant horizon; in the din and pressure of present opinions and contending claims, he must throw himself, like an actor at a fair, on the gaping throng about him, and seize, by the most speedy and obvious means, the noisy suffrages of his contemporaries."<sup>12</sup>

These are very strange opinions from the man who once ridiculed Coleridge's fears of a reading public!

Hazlitt may have been out of touch with his own age and the one which succeeded to it, but he will probably always evoke a response from individual spirits. There will always be a number who appreciate a good hater, and Hazlitt was among the best who has ever lived. This is not only because he was not afraid to express his emotions; he also appeals because his attacks hit home, even when reflection leads us to suspect his fairness. Although they are rarely appreciated at the time, those who are "nothing, if not critical" add spice to the ages in which they live. In these at least, Hazlitt will continue to find the posthumous admirers he so urgently hoped for.

#### NOTES

1. Works, Vol.XVII, pp.22-3.
2. L. Stephen, Hours in a Library, London, 1892, Vol.II of III, p.84.
3. For the text of this letter, see Letters, ed. H. Sikes, W. Bonner and G. Lahey, New York, 1978, pp.106-7. It must be recalled that Windham was an ardent follower of Burke, and had described the radicals tried in 1794 as "acquitted felons." He was admired for his oratorical skills, but this seems insufficient to account for Hazlitt's flattery in his letter.
4. M. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, Oxford, 1982, p.144.
5. Works, Vol. VIII, pp.146-156. It appears, however, that Hazlitt lost his job with the Champion newspaper because of his pro-Napoleonic stance; see S. Jones, op. cit., pp.168-70.
6. E. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican, 1975 reprint, p.820. R. Harris, in his otherwise excellent book Romanticism and the Social Order, (London, 1969), called Hazlitt "the only true "Jacobin" among the literary men of the day"; p.60. George Watson has called Hazlitt

"a romantic radical born a little too late" (The Literary Critics, London, 1973 ed., p.127). Watson's extremely hostile remarks on Hazlitt might be thought to be a refreshing contrast to the more usual adulation; however, since we are given little reason for sharing his animosity (aside from his evident dislike for Hazlitt's prose-style), the admirer of Hazlitt need not fear the jibes of such a critic.

7. Works, Vol.VII, p.313 note.
8. Ibid., p.321.
9. Works, Vol.XX, p.202.
10. Works, Vol.IV, p.158.
11. Hazlitt comes closest to defining the spirit of the age in his Plain Speaker (Vol.XII, pp.128-9), where he asserts that it is "the progress of intellectual refinement, warring with our natural infirmities." This might suggest to the unwary (or optimistic) that Hazlitt held a dialectical view of history to a reasonable degree of sophistication. But as in so many other cases we find him refuting this suggestion elsewhere. In his aptly-misnamed "Trifles Light as Air" (Works, Vol.XX, p.282), he states that "The human mind seems to improve because it is continually in progress. But as it moves forward to new acquisitions and trophies, it loses its hold on those which formerly were its chief boast and employment...Neither is error extirpated so much as it takes a new form and puts on a more artful disguise." In short, Hazlitt cannot sustain his optimistic vision of the spirit of the age; rather, "Common Sense with a little reflection will teach us, that one age is as good as another; that in familiar phrase we cannot have our cake and eat it; and that there is no time like the time present, whether in the first, the tenth, or the twentieth century" (Works, Vol.XX, p.243). This view of history, which is too sketchy to treat at length here, supports the conclusion that Hazlitt's ideological position was a volatile combination of liberal and conservative elements.
12. Ibid., p.242.

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