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Hazlitt's People

FRANCES FERGUSON

When I received word shortly before the conference that our session had been labeled “free and open to the public,” I was initially alarmed: I was planning to speak about the essayist and critic William Hazlitt when my fellow panelists were going to discuss texts such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Jane Austen’s novels, texts that have gained so much currency as almost to be free and open to the public in and of themselves. But then I realized that the designation gave me an opportunity to describe to you the importance of a public venue, the Surrey Institution, and a particular speaker, William Hazlitt, in 1818.

AT THE VERY END of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, various organizations calling themselves institutions came into being. The Royal Institution, which continues to this day, was established in 1799 for the dissemination of scientific learning; the Russell Institution, founded in 1808, endured for most of the nineteenth century; the London Institution began in 1806 to promote lectures on science (especially chemistry), and continued until it was absorbed into University College, London in 1912; and the Surrey Institution sponsored lectures on scientific, technical, and literary subjects between 1808 and 1823, with the aim of reaching what Frederick Kurzer calls “a wider public.”¹ That wider public consisted in large measure of the people known as Dissenters for their refusal to swear their allegiance to the Established Church, a refusal that cost them access to the educational institutions allied with Establishment, including the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The Institutions—Royal, London, Russell and Surrey—provided access to learning and thinking outside the context of the university proper. They were the TED talks of their day, or the Chhattaquas of another century in the United States.²

1. Frederick Kurzer, “A History of the Surrey Institution,” *Annals of Science* 57:2 (2000), p. 109.

2. Jon Klancher offers a wide-ranging and in-depth account of the Institutions as they represented a crucial moment “in the history of the modern category ‘arts and sciences.’” Although my talk in January 2018 centered on some of the lectures that the Surrey Institution sponsored, Klancher’s reach is much broader. He examines the Institutions as administrative formations as well

In 1818—that is, 200 years ago—William Hazlitt delivered a series of lectures on the English poets at the Surrey Institution.³ He aimed to characterize the phenomenon of poetry, and to explain its claim on the attention of readers. He gave a defense of poetry from the ground up, and hoped to justify it without recourse to received opinion. He also laid down a number of observations and judgments designed to illustrate the degrees of success that various different poets had had in producing a poetry that he thought worthy of the name. Hazlitt did not speak of doctors, lawyers, or divines, and did not contrast them with poets. But I introduce those characters who practice professions in which work is done in and by the book to distinguish them from poets as Hazlitt described them. For the most striking feature of Hazlitt’s poets is that he sees anything that smacks of professionalism as disabling. Hazlitt repudiates the notion of the poetic career or a poetic establishment, and decries appeal to traditions of poetic practice. Poetry defeated itself, he thought, whenever it represented itself as poetry that treated itself as a professional code of conduct—by relying on traditions of poetic practice, making a claim on behalf of elevated poetic diction, insisting on the importance of rhyme or even meter, or betraying a marked concern for the response of one’s audience. Poetry, in Hazlitt’s view, speaks universally, and any poet’s attempt to claim a poetic tradition as their own constitutes something like an illegitimate arrogation of power.

Yet even as Hazlitt was outlining the general impulse that gave rise to poetry and suggesting its primordial claims, he did not offer uniform injunctions but recognized various kinds of excellence in poetry. He provided a range of different instances of poetry’s strong claims, as if to make clear that there was no single royal road for poetry. Thus, he said in his opening lecture “On Poetry in General” that Homer “describes his heroes going to battle with a prodigality of life, arising from an exuberance of animal spirits” (V:16) ; that the poetry of the

as venues for particular lectures, and takes into account the fragility that beset some of these institutions, despite their monumentally stable name. See his *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1–19. Readers of this essay should also consult a book that is forthcoming as I write: Sarah Zimmerman, *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3. William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930), V:1–168. Further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

Bible “is not the poetry of social life, but of solitude: each man seems alone in the world, with its original forms of nature, the rocks, the earth, and the sky” (V:16); that Dante “seizes on the attention, by shewing us the effect objects produce on his feelings; and his poetry accordingly gives the same thrilling and overwhelming sensation, which is caught by gazing on the face of a person who has seen some object of horror” (V: 17-18); and, finally, that Ossian “conveys [one impression] more entirely than all other poets, namely the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country” (V:18).

Hazlitt's first three examples—Homer, the Bible, and Dante—would all have been uncontroversial, but Hazlitt was speaking more than fifty years after James Macpherson published the Ossian poems that he said he had translated from ancient Gaelic and more than fifty years after Samuel Johnson had countered Hugh Blair's defense of the poems. When Blair asked Johnson whether he thought any man of a modern age could have written such poems, Johnson delivered one of the most famously dismissive verdicts in literary history: “Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children.” In the Surrey Institution lectures, Hazlitt offered a subdued but firm rejoinder to Johnson's charge of inauthenticity: “If it were indeed possible to shew that this writer were nothing, it would only be another instance of mutability, another blank made, another void left in the heart” (V:18). The Ossian poems so thoroughly capture necessary feelings, Hazlitt thinks, that he can scarcely imagine what a real challenge to their authenticity might be. He implies that the philological impulse to validate or disconfirm a text is itself part of “the police [that] spoils all,” and constructs “society, by degrees, into a machine that carries us safely and insipidly from one end of life to another, in a very comfortable prose style” (V:10).

Poetry is authentic for Hazlitt wherever readers, hearers, viewers find it: “wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the notion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower...,” and “the child is a poet in fact, when he first plays at hide-and-seek” (V:1). He counters charges that poetry is a symptom of and an encouragement to idleness with a strong statement of its relevance: “It is not a branch of authorship: it is ‘the stuff of which our life is made’” (V:2). “It comes home to the bosoms and businesses of men; for nothing

but what so comes home to them in the most general and intelligible shape, can be a subject for poetry" (V:1).

In all that Hazlitt has to say about poetry in the Surrey lectures, he emphasizes that it "is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself" (V:1)—at times sounding as if he's thinking along lines that Wordsworth pursued when he described poetry as the history or science of feelings. Hazlitt's poet stands essentially in the place of a scribe: the child playing hide-and-seek, the shepherd-boy garlanding his mistress with flowers, the miser hugging his gold, the courtier crediting a smile with deep import, all these and others live for Hazlitt "in a world of their own making" (V: 2). Individual character as it concentrates motivations and filters circumstances is world-making. The poet's project is to describe the feelings that animate and express those self-made worlds, or rather to create characters who can make those worlds available. And while Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton join Homer, the Bible, Dante, and Ossian as poets whom Hazlitt can wholeheartedly endorse, Shakespeare quickly becomes the model of the poet: "The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds—so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men" (V:47).

Hazlitt treats Shakespeare's generic poetic self—being like all other men—as an achievement in itself, but he also suggests how much of an obstacle he thinks poets' lives present to their poetry. He is glad that we have such scanty biographical records for Shakespeare, glad that it is out of the realm of possibility for him to talk with the bard over dinner. And thus it is that his survey of all of the poets of the relatively recent past finds each of them betraying the cause of poetry to one degree or another. Even the poets who earn some measure of praise from him failed to sustain their poetic achievement, he thought, because they did not manage to write authentically. Samuel Johnson, who had questioned the authenticity of the Ossian poems as poems written in a distant Gaelic past, wins Hazlitt's dismissal for language that itself sounds like the hybrid he had criticized. Johnson continually mixed Latin and English formulations, "invent [ing] a sort of jargon

translated half-way out of one language into the other" (V: 105), a language that no one but he spoke.

Hazlitt favors a poetry that scarcely recognizes itself as poetry but registers the impress of passion on language, and in the process comes to embody the spirit of poetry. Even as he says that "there is nothing either musical or natural in the ordinary construction of language" (V:12), he identifies an origin for the music of poetry in common language: "every one who declaims warmly, or grows intent upon a subject, rises into a sort of blank verse or measured prose" (V:13). Poetry, that is, represents its readers' and auditors' emotions even when the words are authored by someone else. It captures the emphatic in feeling, as Hazlitt says in recognizing that "oaths and nicknames are only a more vulgar sort of poetry or rhetoric" (V:7), a sign of the pleasure we take in luxuriating in "our violent passions" just as much as we enjoy "reading a description of those in others" (V:7). Although Chaucer and Dryden have translated some of Boccaccio's Tales "into English rhyme," "the essence and power of poetry was there before"—in the Tales and in two other works "which come as near to poetry as possible without absolutely being so"—the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* (V:13). Even prose is sometimes poetry.

What Boccaccio's Tales, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Robinson Crusoe* prepare Hazlitt and his contemporaries to appreciate is an intense descriptivism, the sense that it matters to understand the actions and the objects depicted. The very descriptions represent "objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power" (V:4). We might even say that Robinson Crusoe's attempt at replicating the baskets and food and drink of an English childhood was important to Hazlitt for making it possible for readers to feel an attachment to and nostalgia for things they had never left. And as Hazlitt sifts the writing of the recent past for examples of genuine poetry, he singles out James Thomson as "perhaps the most popular of all our poets" (V: 87) through both accomplishment and limitation. Hazlitt criticizes Thomson for his indolence, observing that Thomson is "affected through carelessness and pompous from unsuspecting simplicity of character" (V:85-86), but Thomson's virtue lies in his essentially forgetting himself in the objects of his description in his poem

The Seasons. Thomson's achievement lies in this capacity to "[give] most of the poetry to natural description" and to treat "of a subject that all can understand, and that is interesting to all alike" (V:87). "He gives back the impression which the things themselves make upon us in nature" (V:87-88).

Hazlitt by this point in his career has already shown himself an excellent analyst of Shakespearean drama, and as someone capable of appreciating such things as the "fine abrupt opening" of *Richard II*. But he produces a summary dismissal of Thomson's plays: "The author could not, or would not, put himself out of his way, to enter into the situations and passions of others, particularly of a tragic kind" (V:91). Yet this negative judgment on Thomson's inability to enter into the "situations and passions of others" serves to highlight the character of Thomson's achievement in his locodescriptive poetry in *The Seasons*: "he gives most of the poetry to natural description," "treating of a subject that all can understand, and in a way that is interesting to all alike" (V:87).

From the time that John Aikin published his "Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry" in 1777, the importance of poetry's description of nature had been an explicit topic, and Aikin had roundly criticized Pope for natural descriptions that were derived from other poems rather than observation of the natural world.⁴ His position involved more than pedantry. He objected that "descriptive poetry [had] degenerated into a kind of phraseology" (5) and gone so much on autopilot that it no longer connected with the objects of description. Moreover, he imagined that poetry that misrepresented the cycles of growth and flowering of various familiar English plants constituted a kind of social insensitivity, as if one were doing the equivalent of calling someone by the wrong name; and he particularly objected that inaccurate descriptions of the things that grow in the English climate(s) interfered with the reader's experience of the poetry. Such descriptions prompted readers to balk, and created an impulse to correct: No, roses don't bloom when crocuses and violets do.

Hazlitt, like Aikin, took accurate natural description in poetry to offer the fewest possibilities for authorial interference with the rec-

4. John Aikin, *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (Warrington: J. Johnson, 1777). See also Sharon Ruston, "The Application of Natural History to Poetry." https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/literature-and-science/essays/ruston_hist/

ollections that a reader or auditor associates with natural objects. It minimized the possibility of dispute between poet and audience. In that sense, it stressed the importance of poetry as an art of memory in relation to the audience rather than to the poet. Hazlitt waggishly quoted someone's assertion that the best lines of poetry in the language were the ones used to aid the memory about the number of days in any given month, but the implicit point in his apparently simple jibe was that poetry should enable people to remember things that they would otherwise forget. "It is because natural objects have been associated with the sports of our childhood" that the mind "clings with the fondest interest to whatever strikes its attention" (V:101).

Hazlitt acknowledges Wordsworth for a poem like "The Idiot Boy" that tracks the meaningfulness of quoted conversation from one of the least socially accredited conversationalists, and calls him the "most original poet now living" (V:156). But the complaint he lodges against Wordsworth is that the poet's person continually obtrudes itself: "It is not everyone who can perceive the sublimity of a daisy, or the pathos to be extracted from a withered thorn" (V: 132). Wordsworth, that is, makes his own memory so distinctive that it does not appeal to readers' memories but only to his own. It is original rather than what Hazlitt terms "abstracted": "the interest we feel in human nature is exclusive, and confined to the individual; the interest we feel in external nature is common, and transferable from one object to another of the same class" (V: 100). The chief thing that Hazlitt recommends in poetry—whether Shakespeare's or that of his contemporaries and near contemporaries—is for the poet to abstract himself and help the reader to a memory she wouldn't otherwise have had access to. The source and satisfaction of poetry for him is what Dorothy Wordsworth identified when she said that she felt herself "more than half a poet" in seeing perceptions themselves as events. It is the natural world as Louise Gluck described it when she wrote ("In "Nostos" in *Meadowlands*) "We look at the world once, in childhood./The rest is memory."⁵ A poetry of and by nature—a poetry that proceeds with minimally distracting descriptions of nature—is a poetry that allows for a poet to be "just like any other man—and like all other men"—abstracting perception into newly perceptible form.

5. Louise Gluck, *Meadowlands* (New York: Ecco, 1997), p. 43.