# Hazlitt's Gendered Distinction between Gusto and Enthusiasm and its Application to Coleridge's Pulpit Rhetoric

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## *Introduction*

THE WORD 'GUSTO' is central to William Hazlitt's critical vocabulary and his ideology, encapsulating a sense of energetic and passionate commitment. Indeed it could be seen as the defining attribute of Hazlitt, expressing his attitude to life, his style, his inimitable energy. One of Hazlitt's explicit definitions of gusto, with reference to the expressive arts, as 'the power or passion defining any object', denotes the passion invested in creative expression that invites a reciprocal response, and, in a kind of inspired fusion of production and reception, represents an intimate relationship of connection and engagement. This quality resembles the essential reciprocity of enthusiasm more generally, but may differ in other respects from enthusiasm as conventionally understood. The 'power' of Hazlitt's 'gusto', for example, is a defining attribute, and is implicitly assertive and authoritative. This seems opposed to the 'melting' religious enthusiasm of visionary raptures, with the disillusion of self and of boundaries which this implies. I intend to consider the relationship of gusto to the *enthusiasm* alongside which the term is used, explicitly and implicitly by Hazlitt, but from which it is usually subtly distinguished.

The sometimes contradictory use of each term seems to me to reveal a problematic relationship with enthusiasm, both conceptually and stylistically. I shall examine the ambivalence in Hazlitt's attitude partly with reference to the enthusiasm and discourse of religious dissent and how this was manifested in Coleridge's 'pulpit' style. Because of the communicative energy and 'ardent missionary spirit' commonly ascribed to Coleridge,[1] it seems appropriate to consider Coleridge as an exemplar both of the enthusiastic spirit and the enthusiastic style.

I suggest that Hazlitt's different interpretations of enthusiasm are influenced by distinctions of gender and the qualities traditionally ascribed to the masculine and feminine. This ambivalence, and the gendered connotations of enthusiasm and gusto seem particularly apparent in Hazlitt's contrasting responses to the enthusiasm of Coleridge's pulpit oratory in the inaugral sermon he delivered in the Unitarian church at Shrewsbury in 1798, and the written rhetoric of the Lay Sermons published in 1816 and 1817. A simple polarisation would symbolically identify the feminine principle with watery and aerial elements, the masculine with vital components of earth and fire. In its association with the visionary nature of divine inspiration, enthusiasm has

[1] J.H.. Muirhead, quoted in Gill, Frederick, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism*, The Epworth Press, 1937, repr. 1954, p. 171

often invited ethereal metaphors of air and water, while gusto has more robustly physical connotations. Each are also separately identified by Hazlitt with the distinct enthusiasms of Rational and Popular Dissent, which are implicitly suggestive of masculine and feminine attributes. I shall consider how Hazlitt's metaphorical application of the various elements to Coleridge's enthusiastic style reflects his estimation of the quality of that enthusiasm.

Although the word 'enthusiasm' has come to denote a positive, creative energy, from the insurrection of the English Civil War, it had been negatively redolent of Puritan fanaticism. The word is problematically rooted in the semantic derivation of 'possession by the divine' of the original Greek 'enthusiasmos' with its dual connotations of madness and the sublime. Hazlitt's 'Gusto', on the other hand, with its sensory derivation of taste, retains a more physical and human emphasis. *Enthusiasmos* would seem to have more visionary connotations than the sensory 'gusto' with its assonantal and semantic relationship to the muscular 'robust' and 'gumption'.

This gusto signifies health of mind and body and involves wisdom, proportion and self-mastery, qualities Hazlitt feels to be lacking in the enthusiastic rhetoric of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*. In his application of the concept to effective communication, Hazlitt sometimes uses martial metaphors to suggest the gusto of masculine force and precision, as well as combative engagement, praising the way in which Robert Southey's prose style for example 'doesn't waste powder and shot in the air, but (the writer) loads his piece, takes a level aim, and hits his mark'.[2] The potentially problematic enthusiasm of spiritual inspiration is respected insofar as it denotes passionate conviction, as in the 'religious devotion' of monks and anchorites which in his 'The Tendency of Sects', Hazlitt claims 'we can understand'.[3] Hazlitt also uses the word 'enthusiasm' to positively denote the spontaneous energy of poetry which the more cerebral rigours of prose can 'dampen', cutting off 'the resources of the poet.'[4] However, elsewhere, the word is critically qualified by such modifiers as 'misguided', 'extravagant', or by the simply disparaging 'mere'. It is obvious that the concepts cannot always be conveniently separated, are sometimes ambiguously conflated, and carry different connotations in different contexts

Hazlitt's own complex attitude towards enthusiasm seems particularly evident in his essay 'On the Causes of Methodism'.[5] In this essay, Hazlitt's portrait of the self-deceived but charismatic enthusiast, the biblical King David, whom he styles 'The First Methodist', has a suggestive affinity with Coleridge in his parsonic capacity in the Unitarian pulpit, and as author of the

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[2] W. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits*: *The* C*ollected Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. by P. P.Howe, 21 vols., (London + Toronto, 1930-4) 'William Godwin' (1825), pp. 30-58, p. 51.

[3] W.Hazlitt, 'On the Tendency of Sects', XVII, printed in *The Round Table: a Collection of Essays on Literature, Men and Manners,* (1817), pp. 141-150.

[4] W. Hazlitt 'On the Prose Style of Poets', *William Hazlitt The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. by Tom Paulin and David Chandler (Penguin Books, 2000).

[5] Hazlitt,. 'On the Causes of Methodism', XIX, *The Round Table,* (Vol. 1), pp.163-172.

*Lay Sermons*. Hazlitt positively acknowledges the *gusto* of David's confident energy while criticising a sublime, naïve disconnection from reality typical of the Methodist enthusiast. Hazlitt's critically ambivalent portraits of David and Coleridge and their enthusiastic performances seem to highlight a persistent tension between the emotional and rational instincts which 'enthusiasm' and 'gusto' separately exemplify, while indicating the pressure for fusion implicit in their conflation. This could indirectly acknowledge a need for the synthesis of opposing elements, including a marriage of the rational vitality of good prose with the visionary inspiration of poetry.

For Hazlitt, meaningful connection with any issue is impossible without the dual engagement of heart and mind. In his precise stylistic criteria, the language of popular enthusiasm confounds both mind and feeling in its spurious imprecision:

> A set of phrases which, without conveying any distinct idea, excite our wonder, our curiosity and desires, which let loose the imagination of the gaping multitude, and confound and baffle common-sense are the common stock-in-trade of the conventicle.

They were criticisms Hazlitt applied both to the popular pulpit orator, and to Coleridge's later rhetorical style. The loosely expansive enthusiastic discourse was in obvious contrast with the mental focus and clarity of gusto. It was also identified with the feminine emotionalism of Methodist revivalism:

> Over and over again, with almost ritual intonation we hear the language of tender and uncontrollable emotionalism—the language of women's nature and behaviour. Preachers and believers felt and wept, trembled and groaned; persons melted and softened and sank into God; hearts were ' tendered' and filled and comforted'.[6]

The vaporous metaphors evoking the melting of tears and floating of visionary transports had a sensuous abandonment remote from gusto's muscular resilience.

There is an ambivalence in the language of Hazlitt's tributes to both the gusto and unworldly innocence of his own father's dissenting zeal:

> Happy are they, who live in the dream of their own existence, and see all things in the light of their own minds; who walk by faith and hope, not by knowledge; to whom the guiding-star of their youth still shines from afar, and into whom the spirit of the world has not entered!

In its sentimental enthusiastic mode and scriptural cadences, such language, for critic David Bromwich 'hovers on the brink of an irony which is never quite

[6] D.H Lobody, '"That Language might be given me"': Woman's experience in early Methodism', in E. Richey et al (eds.): Perspectives on American Methodism; Interpretive Essays. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p.141.

formulated'[7], suggesting a tension between the contrary impulses of rationalist scepticism and piety. The latter is implicitly identified with the more feminine discourse of *popular* dissent like Methodism, while gusto is associated both with a traditional masculine robustness and the political and social involvement of Hazlitt Senior's *Rational* Unitarianism. This was the energetically committed gusto of such reforming free-thinkers as Joseph Priestly and Richard Price. In view of the association of Rational Dissent with political challenge and radicalism, gusto is clearly a politically inflected attribute.

Nevertheless, both Coleridge and Hazlitt embody the enthusiasm associated with Romanticism, in their different creative energies and verbal exuberance. Hazlitt famously relates his rapturous response to Coleridge's enthusiastic discourse when as an idealistic 17 year old he walked 10 miles in the mud to hear him preach in the Unitarian chapel at Shrewsbury where he was due to succeed Hazlitt's father in his ministry. With a reciprocal enthusiasm, Hazlitt was initially enthralled by the persuasive power of Coleridge's inaugral sermon. He acknowledges the associated charisma of poetic and religious inspiration in admitting being curious to see 'a poet and philosopher getting up into the pulpit to preach' in what would 'seem a revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity'.

With infectious reciprocity, Coleridge's elevated pulpit rhetoric provokes similarly exalted, visionary language from Hazlitt, who declared he 'could not have been more delighted if he had heard the music of the spheres'. Together with additional references to angels and souls, such language evokes a sublime authority and celebrates the spiritual inspiration of enthusiasm. Coleridge's rhetoric affected Hazlitt with the power of a visionary revelation which irradiated and released his imprisoned consciousness and imagination:

> My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longings infinite and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dull and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge.

Hazlitt credits the speaker with the power of intellectual enlightenment as well as articulate expression. In view of the communicative gift conferred in scripture by the Pentecostal tongues of flame, it seems apposite that Coleridge's enthusiasm should empower Hazlitt with a liberating fluency, a fluency which he later presents as a crucial component of gusto, denoting the necessary connection with one's inner energies and the animating principle of life. He honours the gusto of Coleridge's conviction, while suggesting that the

[7] David Bromwich, *The Mind of a Critic,* (Oxford Universty Press, 1983), p. 61.

principles it expresses are dignified and accorded authority by its religious context. His statement that 'Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced under the eye and with the sanction of Religion', also expresses a kind of divine creative synthesis remote from the diffuse fragmentation he criticises in the supposedly unconvinced rhetoric of the Lay Sermons. The analogy of Coleridge as 'an eagle dallying with the wind', in its image of soaring power, suggests a confident mastery of the elements, an assured command of both theme and language.

Though typically applied to enthusiastic religious discourse, the visionary rhetoric which Hazlitt applies to Coleridge's pulpit address does not denote a vapid inflation, but a genuine inspiration. The exalted language reflects Hazlitt's natural youthful idealism but also his sense of the speaker's genuine passionate connection with human experience. Hazlitt would undoubtedly admire the evidence of Coleridge's own moral principles in his discourse on moral decay and his engagement with issues of social injustice. He appealed both to reason and imagination in his vivid descriptive portrait of the 'simple shepherd boy' sacrificed to the political logic of war and 'tricked out in the loathsome finery of the profession of blood'.

The traditionally feminine, atmospheric metaphors which Hazlitt applies to the oracular style, structure and content of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons* contrast with the vigorous and muscular metaphor applied in earlier tributes. The changing language seems to reflect the way in which the original gusto of a rationally focused conviction has progressively dissolved into fluid and elusive speculation, or been inflated into balloons of visionary abstraction. Hazlitt applies the image of a balloon to Coleridge's rhetoric, and, in his 1816 reviews for *The Examiner* of some of his *Lay Sermons*,[8] specifically to his personal disenchantment. He describes the deflation of his early expectations in the expressive analogy of being flung from the balloon in which Coleridge had made his first confident ascent', demanding to know what right he had 'to throw me from the height of his career upon the ground, and dash me to pieces?'

The metaphor is variously suggestive. Although the essential absurdity of this image of deflation would seem to cancel any dignity, the balloon can still imply the exalted capacity of the creative imagination. But it also negatively evokes inflated rhetoric and elsewhere, inaccessible philosophical speculation. As such, it seems to symbolically encapsulate the extreme, opposed potential of enthusiasm for exalted flights and bathos. Importantly, Hazlitt's image of deflation also conveys the self-deceptive, illusory capacity of religious enthusiasm, both for the enthusiast and those moved by his exalted style and vision: 'I begin to suspect', he declared, in a letter of 1817 to the Editor of the *Examiner,* 'that… my… faith in Mr. Coleridge's great powers must have been a

[8] W. Hazlitt, review in *The Examiner* , Sept. 8th, 1816, pp. 571-573 and Dec. 29th, 1816, pp. 824-827 of *The Statesman's Manual*; 'A Lay Sermon on the Distresses of the Country, addressed to the Middle and Higher orders.' By S.T. Coleridge

vision of my youth."[9] As such it is inevitably associated with adolescent idealism and later disillusionment. The visionary balloon, though a source of inspiration, lacks the secure anchorage in reason and connection with reality which is a key component of the more rationally grounded gusto.

In his 1816 *Edinburgh* review of Coleridge's *Lay Sermon on the Distresses of the Country*, Hazlitt acknowledges the speaker's 'great powers of thought and fancy', (p. 122), but in his remark that his Sermon 'is a masterpiece of its kind, having neither beginning, middle, nor end', satirises the lack of focus and direction, the indulgent, diffusive meandering which he explicitly condemned in the pulpit rhetoric of popular enthusiasm quoted earlier. As in religious enthusiasm, this structural looseness and incoherence would seem to denote a lack of intellectual rigour, but more importantly, a failure of moral conviction and connection. This view prompts the harsh concluding observation, sharpened by a very personal disillusionment, that 'If he (Coleridge), had had but common moral principle, that is, sincerity, he would have been a great man… ' Yet it was a principle which shaped Hazlitt's judgement of all enthusiasm and Methodist hypocrisy in particular. Feminine and religious terms are applied satirically both to the obscurity and over-refinement of Coleridge's discourse: 'His are all maiden ideas; immaculate conceptions', with its pervasive sense of aspiration unmatched by achievement.

The metaphors applied to C's cast of mind and expression conspicuously lack the toughness and sharpness of gusto's substance, and are instead loose, ephemeral, aerial and stereotypically feminine, or effeminate: 'floating and unfixed', The strongest of his purposes is lighter than the gossamer 'that wantons in the idle summer–air", the brightest of his schemes a bubble blown by an infant's breath, that rises, glitters, bursts in the same instant..' images which, in their reflective evanescence, resemble the water metaphors applied by auditors to Coleridge's conversational style. Most importantly, despite the sublime potential which the language implicitly acknowledges, it evokes an exploratory, but directionless intellect no longer driven by the will and sense which constitutes gusto and maturity. His elevated but ungrounded rhetoric might seem to illustrate the Methodistical conflict between the 'passions and the understanding' which Hazlitt also attributes to that original 'Methodist', King David. Hazlitt's *Edinburgh* review satirically evokes the exalted character of his enthusiastic style in terms that combine the sublime and the absurd.

> He soars up to heaven, circles the empyrean, or dives to the centre of the earth, but he neither lays his hands upon the treasures of the age, nor can find a resting place for his feet in the other.

Hazlitt's observation that Coleridge's 'genius has angels' wings'; acknowledges the soaring, inspirational quality of Coleridge's rhetoric, echoing the language in which he recorded his early response to his inaugral sermon.

[9] W. Hazlitt, 'On the Causes of Methodism', XIX, *The Round Table,* (Vol. 1), pp.163-172, p. 57.

There is nevertheless a significant difference in Hazlitt's choice of metaphor for his early and later responses to Coleridge's soaring capacity. To the young Hazlitt, Coleridge in his inaugural sermon commands the elements like an eagle, while in the rhetoric of his *Lay Sermons*, he rises on the wings of an angel and circles the empyrean. The image of an eagle, iconic, symbolic, though vividly present to the senses, has an authority which is both masculine and physical. It is redolent of a dangerous power in which the sharply imagined clawed feet and beak have the capacity for challenge and attack and are expressive both of superior power and engagement. By contrast, the angelic imagery employed by Hazlitt in his reviews of STC's *Lay Sermons* is more suggestive of disconnection.

He pays explicit and implicit tribute to Coleridge's creative genius and intellectual energy, but in the remark that he has 'no hands or feet' criticises his lack of rational grounding. 'Hands' seems to denotes a faculty for communicative connection, 'feet' implying a grounded stability and consistency, a grounded and coherent sense of self. It implies a lack of the communicative facility, of personal and human connectedness, a failure 'to stand himself and bid others stand!'. The visionary imagery applied to Coleridge elevates the subject, but at the same time renders him inaccessible and incomprehensible. The metaphors of Hazlitt's review confer absurdity rather than grace in their evocation of a philosophical preacher disappearing into the mists of his own metaphysical speculation.

## *Conclusion*

Hazlitt's very different estimations of Coleridge's enthusiasm reflect the extreme and contrasting responses which the enthusiastic style typically provokes, while the degree of gusto which he detects in Coleridge's discourse will to some degree reflect the extent to which he identifies with its political and moral perspective. Primarily, however, his evaluation of Coleridge's enthusiasm is crucially dependent on the truth it communicates and the evidence of sincerity which that supplies, irrespective of the values it endorses. For Hazlitt, Coleridge's apparent lack of intuitive connection with his subject in the rhetoric of the *Lay Sermons* was reflected in a communicative incoherence that recalled the digressive, self indulgent effusions of the popular pulpit orator and, in Hazlitt's opinion, failed to honour the rich potential of the speaker's imaginative and intellectual gifts. It also demonstrated some more profound, internal disconnection. Above all, for Hazlitt, it was fundamentally reflective of a failure of faith, a loss of the principled conviction which distinguishes genuine from spurious enthusiasm and was the central activating principle both of effective expression and of life itself. As Hazlitt implies in the criticism of Coleridge's written prose style, (and in common with King David), much of the communicative power of the former's early pulpit address was also influenced by the perhaps deceptively seductive charisma of his

physical presence and the masculine energy of gusto that had seemed to communicate. Hazlitt's increasingly critical response to Coleridge is reflected in effeminate metaphors which are nevertheless ambiguously conflated with the language of the sublime more positively identified with an idealised feminine principle which Hazlitt persistently applied positively to poetry. By contrast, the term gusto consistently evokes earth's more vital energies and steely mineral qualities.

It is a truth, however, that air, water, fire and earth are all required in equal measure in a healthy constitution, and a lightning charge is generated through a collision of air and heat. Certainly, Hazlitt's essays on poetry pay tribute to spiritual inspiration and the authority of the creative imagination. A sensitive receptiveness to the process of poetic composition and of inspired prose also acknowledges the fluidity, the fluency of creative spontaneity. But Hazlitt would maintain that creative expression must be rooted in the truth of feeling and a rational if passionate connection with reality, which is the distinguishing quality of gusto. This rationalism might seem to associate gusto more with the masculine than feminine principle, but in case we are tempted into too simplistic a gendered polarisation of enthusiasm, it is important to remember that Hazlitt was as willing to apply the quality of gusto to women—though generally creative artists—as to men. This is evident in the tribute he pays, amongst other female artists, to the actress Fanny Kemble's restrained and truthful portrayal of character which demonstrated that she had the taste to reject 'the meretricious display, the vulgar arts, the loud declamation and over-wrought finesse of the practised actress', or false enthusiast.[10] Such gusto, for him, is the defining feature of creative integrity. It is also, importantly, the source of meaningful communication. By comparison with enthusiasm in its more specific, pejorative, religious sense, Hazlitt's gusto, in its application to the communicative arts, might be seen to represent the fundamental distinction between truth and falsity, self-knowledge and self-deception.

Hazlitt's ambivalent response to enthusiasm may implicitly advocate a reconciliation of the feminine and masculine by according equal respect to the visionary, rational and sensory elements which they seem to embody. Perhaps this represents the ideal synthesis which Coleridge sought, the holistic thisness, fullness which Hazlitt advocated; what was not in doubt for both men, it seems, is that to live with gusto or genuine enthusiasm is the only way to be properly alive.

[10] W. Hazlitt, review for *The Atlas*, Sunday October 1829, *New Writings of William Hazlitt,* Vol II, ed. by Duncan Wu, (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 302-305, p. 304.