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reads

William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man

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by

Duncan Wu

ON HIS DEATHBED, William Hazlitt told his son, 'Well, I've had a happy life', a statement better known for its ambiguity than its confessional sincerity. After reading Duncan Wu's masterful recounting of Hazlitt's life, I thought I was momentarily caught in an alternate universe, because the life I had just read did not seem to evoke anything close to happiness. Wu's biography, however, more than any other written on Hazlitt in the past five decades,[1] proves Hazlitt's deathbed summation to be truly Hazlittian—not a form of happiness everyone might choose to seek, but one that befits the subject of this impressive volume. Wu does not attempt to offer extensive criticisms of Hazlitt's nearly thirty books and several hundred essays and periodical pieces written between 1805 and his death in 1830, but rather sticks to his subject—the life of Hazlitt—a subject which, when added to Wu's previous work, leaves him without an equal among Hazlitt scholars. After more than a decade's work, beginning with his impressive *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt* (9 vols, 1998) and more recently his *New Writings of William Hazlitt* (2 vols, 2007), *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* is a fitting capstone to Wu's impressive record of scholarship.

Wu reveals numerous previously unknown details about Hazlitt's life, gathered from his exhaustive research into Hazlitt's printed and manuscript sources, over 200 of which Wu has identified for the first time in his *New Writings of William Hazlitt*. He weaves these sources into a seamless tapestry, employing a fast-paced narrative style that brilliantly encapsulates Hazlitt's frenetic life: from his birth in Maidstone in 1778, to the travails of his family in America between 1783 and 1787; to his father's failed efforts to make his son into a Unitarian preacher during the latter's time at Hackney College between 1793 and 1795; through Hazlitt's undistinguished painting career (despite several months in residence at the Louvre in 1802-03); his turbulent marriage in 1808 to Sarah Stoddart and their eventual divorce in 1822; his unsuccessful second marriage to Isabella Bridgwater in 1824; his recurring attraction (some might call it an addiction) to prostitutes and actresses and young maids (like Sarah Walker, the subject of *Liber Amoris*); and finally, to the central thrust of this biography, an account of Hazlitt's career as a writer, lecturer, and journalist.

Wu takes us on a fascinating journey through Hazlitt's life, most of which takes place in London, with a steady focus on Hazlitt's systematic and often

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[1] See Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (1962); Ralph Wardle, *Hazlitt* (1971); John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (1978); Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life, from Winterslow to Frith Street* (1989); and Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (1998).

precarious movements within the periodical press in the first three decades of the nineteenth century: from his work as a parliamentary reporter for the *London Times* (Wu attributes the origin of the modern political sketch to Hazlitt's piece on Richard Wellesley in April 1813); to his recurring stints as a lecturer, theatrical reviewer, political commentator, and brilliant (though not always the most tactful) literary critic for such publications as the *Morning Chronicle*, *The London Magazine*, *The New Monthly Magazine*, *The Yellow Dwarf*, *The Champion*, *The Examiner*, and the *Edinburgh Review*; to his literary career as a writer of grammars, histories (both political and literary), biographies (most notably his *Life of Napoleon*), travel narratives, aphorisms, and countless 'familiar' essays on people, politics, art, literature and topics not previously thought to fall within the purview of the genre (such as an unauthorized boxing match in Hungerford that drew 25,000 people), many of which are recorded in *The Round Table* (1817), *Political Essays* (1819), *Table Talk* (1821-22), *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), and *The Plain Speaker* (1826). Wu does not provide complete readings of any of Hazlitt's writings, but his precise, informative, and, at times, highly provocative discussions of more than seventy works by Hazlitt offer brilliant insights into Hazlitt's genius and the incredible power and range of his thought. For all his personal troubles, Hazlitt left behind a body of work that remains a remarkable testament to his unyielding desire to be a writer. It is impossible to know in what way, if any, a more fortuitous financial situation might have altered Hazlitt's career; as Wu makes clear, Hazlitt's writings never provided sufficient remuneration for him to support himself and his family adequately, certainly not at the level of gentility both wives expected. Wu's opening line of Chapter Fifteen—'Hazlitt still needed money'—and his later reference to Hazlitt's second marriage to Mrs. Bridgwater—'Money was always a problem—her possession of it and his lack of it'—are most apropos, the directness and brevity of the lines emblematic of one of the starkest realities of Hazlitt's life, his never-ending financial woes, all recorded with relentless accuracy by Wu.

Like Stanley Jones, Wu begins his biography with a defining moment in Hazlitt's life—not his retreat to the cottage at Winterslow in November 1808, shortly after his marriage to Stoddart (as Jones does), but rather Hazlitt's first encounter with Coleridge and Wordsworth at the age of eighteen in 1798. In his Preface, Wu establishes his narrative style, which relies at times on contrived conversations (not all readers will like this, but these conversations are judiciously handled and always acknowledged by Wu in his notes), as well as several recurring motifs in Hazlitt's life and literary career. Based loosely upon Hazlitt's essay, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', Wu incorporates material from numerous sources into a riveting recreation of Hazlitt's January 1798 encounter with Coleridge at Shrewsbury and Wem, followed by his walk that spring from Wem to Nether Stowey. The youthful Hazlitt, already the outspoken republican, social egalitarian, religious skeptic, and enthusiastic supporter of the French revolution and Napoleon, was enthralled by the

Unitarian poet-preacher he believed exemplified those same ideals, some of which Hazlitt had derived from his father, William Hazlitt, Sr. (1737-1820), at that time the dissenting (Unitarian) minister at Wem and no novice to republican ideology. It was a moment, Hazlitt would later write in his review of Coleridge's *Lay Sermon* in 1817, when 'Poetry and Philosophy had met together, Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion'. At least that was what he thought in 1798. His developing theory of 'disinterestedness', however, clashed with Wordsworth's necessitarian views, an indiscretion Wordsworth would never forget or forgive. Similarly, Hazlitt would never forget Coleridge's enthusiasm for political reform expressed so powerfully in his sermon that January, nor would he ever forgive him or Wordsworth (or Southey, for that matter) for their later political apostasy.

Wu demonstrates convincingly how the tensions and expectations established in those initial meetings (exacerbated by some unfortunate events that occurred during Hazlitt's 1803 visit to the Lake District) played a central role in determining Hazlitt's relationship with the Lake Poets the remainder of his life. Wu is clearly sympathetic (at times, almost, to a fault) to his primary subject, and as such, we should not be surprised that Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey do not fare particularly well in this volume. Wu writes that Wordsworth had 'a patrician streak' in him and was often 'prickly in the company of other men'. He regarded himself as Hazlitt's 'social superior and never acknowledged Hazlitt's intellectual achievement'. If Wordsworth is petulant, prickly, and proud, Coleridge is indolent, devious, and jealous, his lectures 'a bore', and both men fearful that Hazlitt was their intellectual superior and would one day 'surpass' them. Both men also publicly criticized Hazlitt's morality, especially his relations with women, which Wu attacks as hypocritical, noting Wordsworth's illegitimate daughter and Coleridge's meetings with prostitutes at Cambridge and infatuation as a married man with Sara Hutchinson. Though they never admitted to their 'beastly appetites', Wordsworth and Coleridge were no less subject to them than Hazlitt, Wu contends. To Wu, Hazlitt's attitude toward and interaction with women does not make him 'a depraved example of human sexuality', as some have contended. Instead, such criticism is derived from class politics: 'why else could it be that for Lord Byron, Lady Caroline Lamb, and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, their love-lives remain elemental to their appeal?' Wu argues that Hazlitt should not be unduly criticized for his 'sexual appetite' but rather applauded for 'the honesty with which he wrote about it'. 'It is a sad reflection' on contemporary scholars to use Hazlitt's 'candour to repudiate him', Wu contends. 'Hazlitt's crime was to bring to light things his contemporaries preferred to deny—a tribute to both his courage and modernity'.

Wu's defence of Hazlitt's sexual infidelities (and what some would consider his aberrations) will not sit well with all readers, especially when associated by Wu with such a loaded word as 'modernity'. The most far-reaching statements

by Wu on this topic occur in his discussion of *Liber Amoris*, Hazlitt's disturbing account of his infatuation and failed seduction of Sarah Walker, the twenty-year-old daughter of his landlord who owned Hazlitt's heart between August 1819 and August 1822. The work was immediately attributed to Hazlitt, and his reputation (which was questionable to begin with) was forever sullied thereafter. The avalanche of 'Hazlitt-bashing' that proceeded to take place must have been 'a terrible thing' for such a 'sensitive man' as Hazlitt to bear, Wu contends. Henry Crabb Robinson, who first met Hazlitt in 1799 and whose diary is an invaluable source of information and opinions on Hazlitt (a source Wu has used more extensively than any other biographer of Hazlitt), was himself a 'sensitive' man, yet he thought *Liber Amoris* 'disgusting' and 'every way offensive', enough to exclude Hazlitt 'from all decent society'.[2] To Wu, however, the problem was not Hazlitt's immorality or poor judgment but rather his unflinching 'honesty' about matters of sexuality that, to Wu, was considerably 'ahead of his time'. If being 'sensitive', however, means displaying a concern for the other person's feelings, in this case, those of Sarah Walker, there seems to have been little of that in Hazlitt's mind, for when confronted with rejection, he sought to ease his pain by attempting to expose her as a whore, recording in his diary his efforts to have his friend, a Mr. F, seduce her. Hazlitt tells him, "I'll pay you half a guinea a week to take her as your whore', a proposition rejected by F, who believes Walker to be 'too stupid', not wishing to have a child, Hazlitt writes, 'by a monster'.

This section makes for painful reading, which Wu rightly calls 'a squalid postscript to the Sarah Walker affair', though he may be too forgiving of Hazlitt to suit all 'modern' readers. In the months between his divorce proceedings in 1822 and his decision to ask Sarah Walker to marry him, Hazlitt's mind was 'so profoundly undermined', Wu writes, that he 'can surely be forgiven the occasional bout of self-pity'. After his rejection and attempt to have her seduced by another man, Wu admits that 'Perhaps [Hazlitt] *was* behaving like a madman, but, given the stress he was under, it is hardly surprising', for his 'disenchantment with Sarah was justified'. Maybe not 'surprising', but not something easily 'forgiven' or completely 'justified' either. Wu's conclusion about the whole affair is decidedly pro-Hazlitt, for his hero's actions established 'beyond doubt the true nature of the woman he had elevated to the status of a goddess, to whom he remained enslaved in his imagination'. Though some may disagree with that assessment, Wu's vivid and unabashed depiction of this affair and how it played out in Hazlitt's semi-deranged mind in 1822 makes for compelling reading, and the destructive narcissism of its hero does seem strikingly modern. It is certain to create renewed interest in this troubling but important work that Wu believes should be read alongside *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Fitzcarraldo* as a classic work depicting the 'psychology of obsession'.

Wu treats Hazlitt's ongoing disagreement with Wordsworth, Southey, and

[2] 23 June 1823, Crabb Robinson Diary, vol. 9 (May 1823—4 November 1824), Dr. Williams's Library, London.

Coleridge in matters of art, life, and especially politics, with an honesty and thoroughness that is reflective of Hazlitt himself. By 1814, Wordsworth, like Southey, had become to Hazlitt 'a government lackey', and his review of *The Excursion* revealed his disappointment dating back to 1798, when he shared with all three poets 'that glad-dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own'. The change in their political views inevitably shaped his response to their poetry. Wordsworth's 'mind preys upon itself', Hazlitt writes. 'It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe'. His imagination attaches itself to 'bare trees' and mountains, 'viewless tracts of air', and 'silent clouds', but not much more. In 1816 Hazlitt described Coleridge's *Christabel* as 'utterly destitute of value', a 'mixture of raving and driv'ling' exhibiting 'not a ray of genius', and *The Statesman's Manual* as written by someone 'without a strong feeling of the existence of anything out of himself', the work of a mind 'in a constant estate of flux and reflux' resulting in 'everlasting inconsequentiality'. In 1817, when Southey tried to prohibit the surreptitious publication of his radical poetic drama, *Wat Tyler*, originally written in 1794 but long forgotten by the now rabid anti-republican Poet Laureate, Hazlitt exposed his hypocrisy, remembering Southey's radical past all too well. Southey's open support of the government's strong-armed attempts to stifle dissent was too much for Hazlitt to bear, for, as Wu makes clear, Hazlitt would not allow friendships or circumstances to compromise his political integrity. The man who once 'saw nothing but the abuses of power', Hazlitt writes in his review of Southey's *Letter to William Smith, Esq., M.P.*, now 'sees nothing but the horrors of resistance to those abuses', the man who once 'vilified kings, priests, and nobles' now 'vilifies the people'. In becoming a mouthpiece for the government, Southey had become oppressively judgmental, 'the sole standard of right and wrong', Hazlitt writes, 'the central point of all moral and intellectual excellence; the way, the truth, and the life'.

As Wu recounts this period in Hazlitt's journalistic career, which included some of Hazlitt's finest work, it is not always easy to distinguish when Hazlitt's criticism of Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge ends and Wu's begins. 'Hazlitt's attacks were well founded', Wu contends. Concerning Wordsworth, Hazlitt's 'claims were just', for 'This was the poet who had advocated a new kind of poetry designed to address the concerns of working people and precipitate a more egalitarian society', a 'pamphleteer who had once justified revolutionary violence'. Now he was 'a changed man', an unthinking supporter of 'King and country'. 'Coleridge', Wu writes, 'had the potential to be a great poet, political pamphleteer, philosopher, and preacher', but 'Opium addiction and his own natural indolence had since thwarted that promise, and it was as much as he could do to stifle competitors', of which Hazlitt was foremost. Of Southey and his apostasy, Wu argues that when Southey accepted the post of Poet Laureate, 'the fire-breathing republican of the 1790s' became 'a government stooge', and in defence of his new position would be 'shameless in

his betrayal and persecution of former comrades'. Hazlitt's attacks on these former radicals were, as Wu contends, 'well founded', but, as he aptly notes, they came at a time when few were willing to remember their radical past or recognize the validity of their former ideals. Hazlitt, however, never wavered from the views he held in 1798, a point Wu continues to drive home, and by the end of 1817 his unwillingness to compromise, or 'apostasize', as Hazlitt would have called it, had cost him nearly all the friendships he had once possessed, even that of Crabb Robinson and, for a time, Charles Lamb. As Wu notes, Hazlitt always misjudged the capacity of his friends to accept criticism 'with the same disinterestedness with which he entertained theirs', but this failing was 'less venal than the selfishness, deceit, and ingratitude which so often came his way'. Wu is correct—Hazlitt's critical writings between 1815 and 1818, both in politics and literature (and in some instances, the two cannot be separated), are among his finest and most courageous work. In his unrelenting adherence to the ideals of democracy, equality, and integrity in government, presented by Wu with clarity, thoroughness, and, at times, considerable passion, Hazlitt stands tall, and deservedly so, in the history of English political journalism.

Hazlitt was driven to express himself in words, and his indefatigable efforts to do so, in spite of constant financial and personal problems, resulted in an impressive body of writings, a canon that exhibits a modernity that, though it alienated him from many of his contemporaries, has resonated with readers of Hazlitt since the late nineteenth century. Wu's biography presents a brilliant but very human Hazlitt, a man with ambitions and high ideals but many flaws and a complex, almost destructive, personality. In his detailed descriptions of key places and events in Hazlitt's life, from Nether Stowey to Grasmere, Paris to London, Winterslow Hut to 19 York Street, Southampton Buildings to Frith Street, from the solitude of a West Country cottage to the crowded streets of London, from a trip to Scotland to procure a clumsily staged divorce ('valid', Wu notes, but technically 'illegal') to a tour of the Continent in a failed attempt to save his second marriage, from the gallery in St. Stephen's Chapel to the balcony at Covent Garden, from playing 'fives' in St. Martin's to watching boxing in West Berkshire—all of this not only makes for fascinating reading but also opens many new avenues for the continued study of Hazlitt's life and writings. For this, all students of Hazlitt owe Duncan Wu a great debt. *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* is a triumph of scholarship, a work that, among future biographies of Hazlitt, is unlikely to yield to a superior.