The Idea of the Personal: “My First Acquaintance with Poets”

Am I to feel no more for a friend or relative (say) than for an inhabitant of China or of the Moon, because...the objects are, perhaps, of equal value? Or am I to screw myself up to feel as much for the Antipodes...as for my next-door neighbours, by such a forced intellectual scale?

William Hazlitt, “The New School of Reform”

Hazlitt may seem an anomalous subject in this set of studies. Wordsworth, Austen, and Byron are gigantic figures in English literature, who permanently changed the directions it took, its resources, and the areas of its interest. Hazlitt’s work is not on that scale, despite occupying twenty-one volumes to Austen’s half-dozen; and not on that scale of intensity either, despite its strong intellectual, historical, and autobiographical appeal. One of the greatest essayists in the language, his stature and impact will never rival that of the others. He is a British writer, but they belong to the world.

To some extent this is itself a justification for his inclusion here. His case demonstrates that the kind of thinking I am trying to describe was not confined to the greatest writers of the period. Romantic realism was an attitude articulated and built up by modest talents as well as great ones. Hazlitt’s case demonstrates that the psychological realism this study associates and identifies with Romanticism is not the possession of only a tiny few, or of imaginative writers like Wordsworth, Austen, and Byron. A commentator and critic like Hazlitt saw the writing on the intellectual wall as clearly as the creative and dramatic originators he lived alongside in early nineteenth-century England: perhaps more clearly—or more visibly at any rate, for us as later readers and witnesses, precisely because he was commentating on what they were doing. Hazlitt “was able,” David Bromwich remarks, “almost alone in his time, to leave us a sustained discussion of what came to be called romanticism, yet to do so from a point of view sympathetic to romanticism,” and this makes his testimony significant in a particular way.1 For that reason, too, this chapter will take a form somewhat different from its predecessors: though Hazlitt’s essay on

meeting Coleridge and Wordsworth will be discussed in some detail it will not dominate proceedings as the two-part Prelude, Northanger Abbey, and Don Juan have dominated earlier chapters, but rather serve as the culminating example in a wider examination of Hazlitt’s work and position.

Furthermore, if Hazlitt is akin to the major Romantic writers, they are akin to him. The qualities he demonstrates are not his alone. Laurence Lockridge suggests that “Hazlitt has a resoluteness, clarity, and pointed irony that are winning after the laborious problematics of visionaries, opium-eaters, and infidels.” It’s a passing remark—and it certainly indicates Hazlitt’s qualities as a Romantic realist—but is it true that such qualities are his alone? Are not his resoluteness, clarity, and pointed irony cognate with the “blunt,” unoffended vision of the other Romantic writers discussed here? Coleridge was an opium eater, but he was also resolute enough to insist that “no sound is dissonant which tells of life.” Shelley was an infidel, but also possessed sufficient clarity to see that “many a green isle needs must be/In the deep wide sea of misery.” Keats was a visionary, but was also pointed enough to call Byron a “mock lyrist,” a “large self worshipper,” and a “careless hectorer in proud bad verse,” whom it would be a pleasure to see sprawling before him into the grave. If Lockridge is right to say that for Hazlitt “mind is not reducible to matter in motion, mental activity is not wholly the result of association, psychological egoism is not the only motive spring of human behaviour, [and] pleasure and pain are not the only values,” then that is true of any writer or intellectual whom we are likely to consider a Romantic—especially one I would call a Romantic realist. The notion that “human nature is at best an unstable merging of the noble and the base,” and that “idealists lack the mental tact of common sense, and, worse, they are helpless when their ideals get trounced by the reality principle” is also one those writers share, albeit in differing degrees. As I have been at pains to point out, the reality principle—hard-nosed, blunt, gloomy but honest, and so forth—is something Romantic writers sought out as often as they dreaded contact with it. They could all occasionally take a “dyspeptic view of human affairs,” and occasionally “see the passional self as a reservoir of envy, egotism, hypocrisy and vindictiveness”—for that is what it is, as often as not. Above all, they frequently shared “Hazlitt’s passion for the concrete, the particular, the factual, the sensate.” The moral psychology this book attempts to describe is an ethically realist one. Consciousness is not a standard-issue form of equipment, but something altered in the hands of the user. It is haunted by unconscious

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3 Lockridge, Ethics of Romanticism, 334–5.