

THE DRAMATIC THEORY

OF

WILLIAM HAZLITT

"IMAGINATION" IN CRITICISM

by

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Hunter College of the City of New York, whose forthcoming edition of Hazlitt's correspondence will be of great interest to Romantic scholars. My debt to Mr. Reuben Musiker, Deputy University Librarian at Rhodes, is enormous; he and the staff of the Rhodes University Library went out of their way to assist me at every conceivable juncture. The British Museum Library, and the Libraries of the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, as well as the South African Public Library, accorded me readership facilities. The Director of the Universitäts-Bibliothek, Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, kindly donated to the Rhodes Library a copy of Georg Schnöckelborg's 1931 thesis on the influence of A. W. Schlegel upon Hazlitt's criticism of Shakespeare. I am grateful to Rhodes University for a research grant toward the cost of microfilm, made to me in 1963, and to the Department of Education, Arts and Science (National Council for Social Research) for very generous financial assistance toward the cost of research. The opinions herein expressed and the conclusions reached are my own, and are of course not to be regarded as representative of those of the Department and Council. The present form of many of those opinions and conclusions is the result of close criticism of my premises on the part of my students in English Honours, to whom I offer my thanks. My greatest debt is to my wife, who has had to live with this study, and whose consistent encouragement has sustained it. Perhaps the depth of her interest in it can be gauged from the fact that she saved for a year to buy me a set of Hazlitt's complete works. I have indicated the fact in the text when I have

intentionally made use of the ideas of others, and it remains to say that the faults of this study are my own, and its merits the result of help and co-operation from all those I have mentioned. This dissertation has not been submitted for a degree at any other University.\*

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\*Full details of publication for works cited and quoted from are given once; thereafter, for Hazlitt's works, short title, volume and page number are given, and in the case of other authors name and page number are cited. It will be noted that Hazlitt's printers sometimes confused its and it's, and Keats's idiosyncratic spelling is well enough known not to need pointing with sics. Hazlitt was quite capable of spelling the Bard's name as Shakspeare, Shakespear, or Shakespeare within the space of one article, and I have not standardised his spelling. A table of Short Forms of Citation will be found immediately before the bibliography.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the many paradoxes at the heart of the English Romantic Movement concerns the impulse of the writers of the time, great and minor, towards drama. It is startling to discover, for ordinarily we do not think of the early nineteenth century as a period of much activity in the theatre, that while 110 tragedies (to mention only one dramatic form) were printed in England between the appearance of Gorboduc in 1565 and the closing of the theatres in 1642, 200 were published between 1800 and 1825 alone, and this number does not take into account the very numerous translations from foreign works.<sup>1</sup> The "spirit of the age" was lyrical rather than dramatic, and yet each of the great Romantic poets tried his hand at drama--some with considerable, but hardly durable, popular success. The motives behind the composition of their plays ranged from the financial to the doctrinal, but one constantly-reiterated sentiment sets the attitude to drama of the great Romantics apart from that of their less illustrious contemporaries. For all the major poets and critics of the time, drama was the highest and the truest of literary forms. In spite of this belief, and in spite of the remarkable flowering of literary genius which characterises the period, the drama was without any doubt the weakest of all literary

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<sup>1</sup>See Carl J. Stratman, "English Tragedy 1819-1823," PQ, XLI (1962), 465-474.

modes until late into the century.

But if the Romantics produced no great drama, they did write great and enduring dramatic criticism. William Hazlitt's Characters of Shakespear's Plays has been fairly constantly available since its publication in 1817, having gone through ten editions and innumerable reprintings since that time. Coleridge's several lectures are now regarded as seminal in the history of Shakespearean criticism, and Lamb's remarks in the Specimens of English Dramatic Poets are only slightly less well established in English critical tradition. The greatest part of the corpus of dramatic evaluation written at the time was, of course, journalistic, but a significantly large portion of it, especially that by Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, is journalism which has taken on the stature of criticism and in turn that of literature. Their newspaper reviews, hurriedly written a century-and-a-half ago, have lost their news value, their immediate and practical usefulness; they survive now not as guides to pleasure, but as pleasures in themselves, self-sustaining and self-contained.

At this juncture, it seems to be worth repeating the point that final judgments of literary criticism must always be literary judgments. When we read the reviews in defunct periodicals, our admiration is naturally aroused by the expression of aesthetic notions which anticipate those upon which the taste of our own day is founded; and we applaud the occasional contemporary notice in favour of a writer whose fame was otherwise posthumous. But, like other things, aesthetic notions are subject to constant change, and

what appears to us today to be prophecy or insight may very well escape the notice of generations to come. We must take care when we evaluate the criticism of the past by referring its standards to present ones, since few equations discoverable by this method can be proved to have more than a transitory bearing on the essential value of the work of art under scrutiny. Criticism is neither science nor history; it is a branch of literature which is a branch of art, and it is, in one sense, only as a work of art that it endures, and it is only as such that we can appreciate that portion of the criticism of the past the quality of which continues to fix our attention. And it is not the prophetic ability, nor the dim outline of ideas used by later writers, nor the possibility that the critic would have reacted favourably to new artistic concepts-- it is not on such grounds that past criticism continues to exercise an influence and an appeal. It is the sensibility and the passions expressed in the prose of those long-dead critics which have a force that, however misapplied in the light of current thought, nevertheless continues to have its way with us.

William Hazlitt has never been secure in his reputation as a critic of English literature. His opinions of the literary productions of his own day were distrusted and disputed by many of his contemporaries. Much of what he wrote regarding Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Southey was received as evidence of his "malignity" and "spite." Those of his works devoted to earlier periods were applauded by readers who kept separate politics and literature in an age when it was the fashion to combine them. But

Hazlitt, like many of his literary forbears, seldom found a large and appreciative audience. There are many reasons for the distrust and dislike of his works, one of which is implied in the mention of politics. Hazlitt's loyalty to his own particular brand of political and social liberalism, a loyalty which in one respect demanded allegiance to Napoleon even to the bitter end, is the primary cause of the prejudiced and sometimes vitriolic attitude of his contemporaries towards his work. His devotion to political radicalism was a costly one in his own lifetime; its expense has not decreased over the years. Those who emphasise his political bias against such great poets as Coleridge and Wordsworth frequently deny that he possessed a stable literary platform, a theory of literary art. But it is not unreasonable to assume that his constancy in politics argues at the least a comparable constancy in his literary views. One of the aims of this study is to illustrate this constancy, and to answer affirmatively through its illustration the question whether a writer's views expressed at different ages, for different purposes, and in varied contexts, constitute--or even imply--either a systematic critical theory or an ideology.

Just as Hazlitt's political beliefs endangered his reputation as a serious, disinterested critic, so his method and practices in criticism contributed to ambivalent and contradictory estimates of him. Since his death in 1830, he has been frequently praised and damned, both separately and in combination. To Thackeray, for example, Hazlitt was "one of the keenest and brightest

critics that ever lived."<sup>1</sup> Harriet Martineau called him "the Prince of Critics,"<sup>2</sup> and George Saintsbury wrote that he was "one of the very greatest critics who have ever lived."<sup>3</sup> Ian Jack considers that "he is not only a major critic, a worthy successor to Dryden and Johnson," but that he as surely excels Coleridge in the practice of criticism "as he is excelled by him in the discussion of critical theory."<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot on more than one occasion simply dismisses Hazlitt as uninteresting, and René Wellek feels that the ideal of criticism implied by Hazlitt's practice is "hardly one of knowledge or judgment, system or theory. The critic, rather, serves as an enthusiastic guide through a picture gallery."<sup>5</sup> In nineteenth-century America, it was sometimes a mark of esteem to be compared to him: Henry Tuckerman was often praised, in the 1830's, as the American Hazlitt, and many of the criticisms of Poe, Reid, and Longfellow are extensions and developments of Hazlitt's ideas. Of course, he has never lacked admirers as well as detractors. But he has been frequently subjected to a combination of misunderstanding of his ideas and disapprobation of his personal affairs: this is certainly true of Saintsbury's "impressionistic" view and the "holier-than-thou"

<sup>1</sup>"Roundabout Papers," in The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray (22 vols.; London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), XX, 152.

<sup>2</sup>History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace, 1816-1846 (2 vols.; London: C. Knight, 1850), II, 178.

<sup>3</sup>A Short History of English Literature (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1920), p. 701.

<sup>4</sup>English Literature 1815-1832 ("Oxford History of English Literature"; Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 270.

<sup>5</sup>A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950 (4 vols.; London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), II, 197.

attitude of Augustine Birrell's biography.<sup>1</sup> In general, the earlier opinions mentioned simply delayed the attempt at a just estimate of Hazlitt's place in the history of criticism, an estimate which was not provided until the publication of P. P. Howe's Life in 1922 and Elisabeth Schneider's The Aesthetics of William Hazlitt in 1933.

The ambivalent attitudes toward Hazlitt are partly the result of his own methods. The mere fact that he wrote so much has been against him, for his commentators have sometimes felt that quantity presupposes the lack of critical principles and theory, and that a critic who is primarily a journalist can have no really valuable ideas about literature. Moreover, in speaking of himself as "a taster for the public," and in characterising rules and models as useless, Hazlitt left himself vulnerable to the imputation that his methods are merely impressionistic, superficial, and capricious. There is some truth in this approach, but it distorts by its over-emphasis upon the journalistic side of Hazlitt's career, and it ignores his repeated references to the concepts of sympathy and gusto, to the criterion of "nature," and to his theory of the poetic imagination. Miss Schneider's pioneer work provided a scholarly but very general treatment of these ideas in Hazlitt's aesthetic theory; in the following pages an attempt is made to clarify the bases of the system on which Hazlitt erected his dramatic theory, and to show that his dramatic criticism is more a pattern than a collection of casual journalistic observations.

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<sup>1</sup>William Hazlitt ("English Men of Letters"; London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1902).

Anyone who gives more than a cursory glance at Hazlitt's literary theory will realise that he saw literature and life as complementary parts of a whole, which will not bear separation without weakening those parts. His frequent correlation of the health of the drama and the health of the community in which the drama exists is sufficient proof of this. "We are all Hamlet," and "we are all poets," are remarks which grew out of this tendency to see life in literature and literature in life. This should not be taken to mean that Hazlitt subscribed to any ideas about the identity of art and normal daily experience. Rather, he felt positively that art is not something apart and sacred, to be approached with care and then set aside while one gets on with the ordinary business of living. His ideas of sympathy and gusto are closely related to this belief, since for Hazlitt a literary work must contain the basis of its readers' response. The more powerfully they respond to it, the more intensely their feelings are excited about and by the work, the greater the work is. To Hazlitt, the final value of literature lies in its ability to affect its audiences, to add something to their lives. "Art for art's sake," "ivory-tower" aesthetics, are in general as foreign to Hazlitt as would be that modern insistence on form implied by MacLeish's "Ars Poetica"--"A poem should not mean / But be." Like Arnold, Hazlitt felt that if art was to survive it had to fill the hearts and souls of Everyman. The future of literature, he was convinced, lay in its rôle as a shaping, ordering, moulding power in the future of man.

It is possible that the distrust of many modern critics

and literary historians for the type of criticism practised by Hazlitt springs from their confusion of the notion of the inseparable nature of life and literature, so fundamental to a man like Hazlitt, with the belief that life and literature constitute an essential unity, which is something very different. René Wellek castigates Hazlitt because he "confuses fiction and reality," and he cites the passage on Desdemona from Characters of Shakespear's Plays as an example:

The remarks on Desdemona which suggest lewdness as a motive for her marrying the Moor might be appropriate if applied to a real life situation where Hazlitt's realistic insight into sexual relations might apply, but they are completely inapplicable to the Desdemona of the play,

a maiden never bold:  
Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion  
Blush'd at itself.

She is not actual flesh and blood but a dramatic character.<sup>1</sup>

Wellek continues that "with Hazlitt we are not far from books like The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines or discussions of the famous question 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' Because Hazlitt has an insufficient sense of the distinction between art and reality he teeters on the brink of such absurdities. His Characters of Shakespeare's Plays [sic] is partly vitiated by a view of art as a mere copy of reality. Antony and Cleopatra and Hamlet are pronounced, astonishingly enough, transcripts of real events."<sup>2</sup> Now it is true that Hazlitt often discusses dramatic characters as if

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<sup>1</sup>A History of Modern Criticism, II, 205.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. The last statement is simply untrue, as a glance at the relevant essays will show.

they had lives outside the plays in which they appear, but, as I hope to show, this is not evidence that he had an insufficient sense of the distinction between art and reality. It is, however, part of a theory of drama which places more importance upon probability and verisimilitude in character for its own sake and for an ultimately moral end, than upon the integral nature of character, plot, and action; the consequences of this attitude, which is not a view of art as a mere copy of reality, will also receive attention in these pages. And against Wellek we might cite part of Hamlet's advice to the players: "anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." We should remember, in discussing the work of critics and theorists of the past, not to distort their accomplishments by finding them wanting against criteria which are "from their purpose" and which ignore the tools they had at hand. Hazlitt's aim, a perfectly respectable one fifty years after Burke's Enquiry had pointed the way, was to evoke for the reader or intending spectator the "feeling" of a work; his critical apparatus was a psychological one; and, as will emerge from the ensuing discussion, he wrote at a time when the study of man's mental complexion and the study of art had not yet reached the stage where it was possible to distinguish clearly the aesthetic from the psychological and the moral. "There is a common mistake made," said a critic of the London theatre recently, "that a dramatic critic essentially delivers judgments; what he really does is to record feelings, his feelings, though these feelings may easily take the form of judgments. Any

other sort of theatrical criticism is either self-deception or a fraud. . . . Emotion must, of course, be anchored to intellect."<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt's statements about the nature and function of criticism have been more of a bane than a blessing to his reputation. Because he spoke of himself as a taster and characterised criticism as an attempt to "reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work,"<sup>2</sup> he became and remains for many the outstanding example of the superficial critic. Saintsbury was hardly voicing an isolated opinion when he wrote that Hazlitt is "remarkable for his extraordinary fertility and felicity, as regards English literature, in judgments, more or less 'grasped', of individual authors, books, or pieces,"<sup>3</sup> and we have already noted Wellek's estimation of him as an enthusiastic guide through a picture gallery.

Nonetheless, Hazlitt regarded criticism as an art, and though he felt that the critic should impart "the essence of the work . . . what passion has been touched, or how skilfully, and what tone and movement the author's mind imparts to his subject or receives from it,"<sup>4</sup> he adhered consistently to a theory of criticism based on his conceptions of sympathy, gusto, and nature. There are several reasons why his approach to criticism as an art has not been given the attention it deserves. Chief among them is the fact that he did

<sup>1</sup>Harold Hobson, "A Hand upon the Royalty," Sunday Times (London), October 27th, 1963, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>"On Criticism," Table-Talk. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols.; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1930-1934), VIII, 217. Hereafter cited as Works.

<sup>3</sup>A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in England (3 vols.; 3rd ed.; Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1917), III, 252.

<sup>4</sup>"On Criticism," VIII, 217.

not leave a manifesto of his critical principles. It is not possible, as it is with Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, to turn to a single work by Hazlitt and to find there his ideas organised into a system. As, primarily, a journalist who wrote for bed and board, he had neither the time nor the financial resources for such an undertaking. In the second place, he was opposed to collections of rules and precepts, for he felt that criticism itself "undergoes a great variety of changes, and aims at different objects at different times,"<sup>1</sup> and that "rules and models destroy genius and art."<sup>2</sup> Because criticism may emphasise different concepts and ideas at different times, depending on the temper of the times, the critic's true function in his view is to examine the work for what it says, and then to estimate its effectiveness for, and its appropriateness to, the mass of readers. His ideas about the nature and purpose of literature as applied to drama were philosophic and psychological in origin, as will be shown.

Hazlitt's debt to eighteenth-century theories of mind has been noted by every serious student of his work. It is appropriate, perhaps, to call him a man with an eighteenth-century vocabulary and a nineteenth-century head. To a greater extent than any other major Romantic critic, Hazlitt is dominated by eighteenth-century modes of thought. He spent his life trying to formulate his objections to empirical philosophy, but his indebtedness to it was too great to be

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<sup>1</sup>"On Criticism," VIII, 216.

<sup>2</sup>"Outlines of Taste," Works, XX, 390.

discharged.<sup>1</sup> The limitations which an eighteenth-century empiricist vocabulary forced upon him are real enough, but so is the intellectual balance which he achieved. Stephen Larrabee has called him "the most balanced, if most unclassifiable, of the Romantic critics,"<sup>2</sup> and Jacob Zeitlin referred to "the rare union in his nature of the analytic and the emotional."<sup>3</sup> Walter Jackson Bate sets the conflict in its context when he writes that

Hazlitt, in his moral, critical, and psychological premises, represents more than any other writer of his time a union of eighteenth-century English empiricism and emotional intuitionism, a combination which--with its distrust of abstraction, its confidence in concrete nature, its values of sympathy and emotional immediacy--had encouraged the disintegration of classical rationalism and sustained the development of European romanticism as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The attention which this study pays to the eighteenth-century background of Hazlitt's ideas is calculated not so much to show those intellectual debts per se, but to show how they contributed to his conception of drama and how they formed the basis of his critical principles.

Dramatic poetry, on Hazlitt's premises, is that form of

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<sup>1</sup>See Elisabeth Schneider, The Aesthetics of William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), p. 14; W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 308; Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, II, 203.

<sup>2</sup>"Hazlitt's Criticism of Greek Sculpture," JHI, II (1941), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Hazlitt on English Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp. xi-xii. See also Virginia Woolf, The Second Common Reader (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), p. 160, and G. D. Klingopoulos, "Hazlitt as Critic," EC, VI (1956), p. 588.

<sup>4</sup>Prefaces to Criticism ("Anchor Books"; New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 125.

literary composition which best manifests the creative imagination's powers. The creation of character, which in order to be convincing and successful demands the annihilation of the author's own personality and his identification through sympathy with the essential nature of the character he depicts, is for Hazlitt the foundation of the dramatic.

The characters which the dramatist creates must not be mere puppets, and neither must they be extensions of the poet's own nature. They must be true to life, and internally consistent or "probable," as must be the events in which they are involved. Chaucer's pilgrims, Hazlitt felt, fulfil these requirements, and so his poetry may fairly be described as dramatic: his sentiment

is not the voluntary indulgence of the poet's fancy, but is founded upon the habitual prejudices and passions of the very characters he introduces. His poetry, therefore, is essentially picturesque and dramatic.<sup>1</sup>

Integral in his delineation of character is Chaucer's careful co-ordination of all the parts of his composition, and their subordination to what Hazlitt sees as the poet's major purpose-- the presentation of convincingly realistic and significant human types. Description there is in the Canterbury Tales, but it is not inserted by Chaucer for its own sake; the picturesque and the dramatic, which in Hazlitt's view are usually opposed, are in Chaucer "in a great measure the same thing; for he only describes external objects as connected with character,-- as the symbols of

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<sup>1</sup>"Sismondi's Literature of the South," Works, XVI, 54.

internal passion."<sup>1</sup>

The element of passion is vital to the dramatic creation of character. In Hazlitt's theory, the creative imagination is in one of its modes an associative faculty. Not only is it the poet's means of perceiving, which enables him to "image" vividly the "truth" of the objects on which he fixes his attention; not only is it a combining factor which in the act of artistic creation allows him to bring about a coalescence, as Coleridge called it, of subject and object; it is also the faculty by means of which he calls up the correspondences between those impressions which were obtained by his senses and which were hoarded by his memory. On the basis of experience, Hazlitt says, the mind, through the agency of the associative imagination, forms a series of intuitive comparisons between the sense-impressions retained by memory. Experience, in other words, provides the mind with a mine of correspondences from which, in a state of imaginative excitement, the poet can draw. This process, raised to a higher pitch than is normal by the poet's passion, becomes his impulse--and the basis of his ability-- to intuit poetic truth. In this higher excitement of emotion, the process of association is speeded up, and many more correspondences are introduced, albeit in a very short space of time, to give the poet's conclusions a far higher degree of truth than is available to the imagination of the ordinary person. It is the "gusto," then, the condition of intense excitement, which enables the poet to grasp

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<sup>1</sup>"Sismondi's Literature of the South," XVI, 54.

more truthfully the nature of the character which he attempts to portray. Hazlitt considered that although Manfred had provided evidence of Byron's capacity for gusto, Marino Faliero, with its parade of flat stage personages mouthing sentiments which were inconsistent with their personalities and which did not advance the play's action, was convincing proof that its author's genius was not dramatic:

We know not much about the plot, about the characters, about the motives of the persons introduced, but we know a good deal about their sentiments and opinions on matters in general, and hear some very fine descriptions from their mouths; which would, however, have become the mouth of any other individual in the play equally well . . . [Lord Byron] dives into the secret and subterranean workings of his own breast; but he does not, with equal facility or earnestness, wind into the march of human affairs upon the earth, or mingle in the throng and daily conflict of human passions. There is neither action nor reaction in his poetry; both which are of the very essence of the dramatic.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt does not go so far as to say that delineation of character alone constitutes the dramatic; the characters, passionately and therefore truthfully conceived, must be developed before our eyes through action, and in this development they must manifest to us the essence of their individuality. In this again Byron's play is singularly deficient:

We cannot call to mind, after reading it, a single electric shock of passion; not a spark of genius struck out of the immediate occasion, like fire out of the flint; not one revelation of our inmost nature, forced from the rack of restless circumstance. But this is all that is truly dramatic in any tragedy or poem.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Lord Byron's Tragedy of Marino Faliero," Works, XIX, 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

If the truly dramatic author is merely the vehicle, in one sense, for the sentiments of his characters, then, Hazlitt says, we must conclude that Milton's genius was essentially undramatic, for "he saw all objects from his own point of view, and with certain exclusive preferences."<sup>1</sup> He is a writer of epic, and while his characters appeal to our imagination, we do not sympathise with them or identify with them to the degree that we would with truly dramatic characters, for epic figures affect us by their "magnitude and distance" as much as by their "permanence and universality." They fill us with "admiration and delight," while tragic characters, of course, fill us with terror and pity."<sup>2</sup>

Hazlitt's insistence upon the premise that drama is character in action leads him to minimise certain aspects of the dramatic mode and to ignore others, and the dangers inherent in his theory will receive attention in due course. But there are certain positive qualities in his theory which also deserve notice too, the most important of which is his concept of the sympathetic imagination; and the subtitle given to this essay, "'Imagination' in Criticism," is intended to indicate the centrality of that concept in his thought. It is in the eighteenth century that men gradually begin to believe that the excellence of great poetry depends not so much on its general truth as upon its power of stimulating the reader's sensibility by emotional means. A hundred and fifty years before Eliot, a growing

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<sup>1</sup>"Comus," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 230.

<sup>2</sup>"On Shakspeare and Milton," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 52.

number of critics and poets came to realise that the sensationist philosophy first systematised by Hobbes had led to a dissociation of sensibility in which Feeling and Reason were polarised, and their spheres of operation regarded as distinct. The Romantics, synthesising and building on the theories of mind worked out by men as separated by time and outlook as Shaftesbury, Bishop Butler, Hume, Hartley, Reid, and Stewart, attempted to heal the breach by maintaining that the poetic imagination and its products were not reducible to rule or rational, logical evaluation. To the Romantics, imagination is "Reason in her most exalted mood," an intuitive, unerring faculty of cognition. The eighteenth-century vogue for the sublime, for the Gothic novel and the paintings of Salvator Rosa, is only one manifestation in the taste of the period of the emergence of feeling, based upon the imagination, as the principal criterion of artistic power.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this study is an attempt to define Hazlitt's theory of the imagination, and to place it against similar eighteenth-century theories out of which it developed. This is followed by an examination of Hazlitt's theory of tragedy, and finally the development of his concept of the comic is traced. The latter section is perhaps more technical and abstract than the portion devoted to tragedy, for Hazlitt attempted a number of detailed theoretical discussions of the substance of comedy, while

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<sup>1</sup>It would be superfluous to attempt to add to the outstanding work done on the concept of the sublime by Samuel H. Monk, in The Sublime: A study of Critical Theories in XVIIIth-century England (New York: Modern Language Association, 1935), and by J. T. Boulton in the introduction to his edition of Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

most of his remarks concerning the nature of tragedy are scattered throughout his writings. Hazlitt's practical criticism, the fruit of the theories here examined, are easily available in the many one-volume editions of separate works of his, in several collections of his essays, and in Howe's magnificent edition of the complete works, which incorporates a great deal more material than was known to Waller and Glover, whose thirteen-volume edition, now extremely difficult to obtain, was published between 1902 and 1906. This criticism has been recorded and discussed in its own right by a fair number of scholars, as a glance at the bibliography will show. It has been my major purpose in this investigation not to evaluate Hazlitt's critical pronouncements, but to elucidate the grounds upon which he made them. If this essay makes some contribution to the knowledge of Hazlitt's ideas, and through them to an understanding of one aspect of the Romantic impulse toward drama, it will have achieved its aim.

PART I

IMAGINATION

## CHAPTER I

While many of the major writers of the nineteenth century openly and uniformly based the tenor and direction of their writings upon the sympathetic imagination, or turned frequently to it for justification and support, many of their counterparts in the previous century held that the principal means of grasping and articulating poetic truth was reason. Many of the Romantics and their successors made attempts toward careful definition of the faculty of imagination; some, with varying measures of success, tried to distinguish it from its traditional association with fancy and fiction; nearly all of them emphasised the necessity of imagination to the perception of truth, and stressed its singular importance in aesthetics. But before the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the function of the imagination was never systematically investigated, and it was usually considered a "wild and lawless" appendage to reason, so seductive that "like an High-ranging Spaniel it must have Cloggs tied to it, lest it out-run the Judgment."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Johnson's restatement of Horace's dictum, "the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing," may be regarded as an attitude typical of those held by many of the more central writers of his time. To the majority of such men, poetry,

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<sup>1</sup>John Dryden, "Dedication" in The Rival Ladies, 1664.

being "merely a luxury, an instrument of pleasure," could have no value, "unless when exquisite in its kind,"<sup>1</sup> and the imagination was the agent which added this beauty and rendered the instruction pleasurable:

The great art of a writer shows itself in the choice of pleasing allusions, which are generally to be taken from the great or beautiful works of art or nature; for, though whatever is new or uncommon is apt to delight the imagination, the chief design of an illusion being to illustrate and explain the passages of an author, it should always be borrowed from what is more known and common than the passages to be explained. . . . The imagination makes additions to nature, and gives a greater variety to God's works. . . . It is able to beautify and adorn the most illustrious scenes in the universe, or to fill the mind with more glorious shows and apparitions than can be found in any part of it.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson, who with Sir Joshua Reynolds produced perhaps the most representative body of criticism in his day, indirectly emphasised this decorative quality of the imagination in his comment on Akenside's Pleasures of the Imagination when he asserted that "the subject is well-chosen, as it includes all images that can strike or please, and thus comprises every species of poetical delight";<sup>3</sup> and he expressly pointed out the imagination's inability to grasp truth when, in summing up the career of The Rambler, he clarified his editorial policy--"As it has been my principal design to inculcate wisdom or

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<sup>1</sup>Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (rev. and enlarged ed. by L. F. Powell; 6 vols.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1934), II, 351-352.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Addison, Spectator 421.

<sup>3</sup>The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., ed. Sir John Hawkins (11 vols.; London: J. Buckland, J. Rivington, et al., 1787), "Akenside," in The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, IV, 290.

piety, I have allotted few papers to the idle sports of imagination."<sup>1</sup> This "licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations,"<sup>2</sup> could give pleasure, but if abused or exercised without restraint it could obscure and falsify the truths obtained from reason and judgment. It is undeniable that during the greater part of the eighteenth century, a large number of writers and critics implicitly believed that particular truth and the products of the imagination were at opposite poles. Poetry was a pleasant embellishment of general truth, but it was essentially illusory and fabulous; therefore it was inferior to the products of reason. "These two poems," Johnson remarked in a paper comparing the pastoral forms of Theocritus and Virgil, "were produced by events that really happened; and may, therefore, be of use to prove, that we can always feel more than we can imagine, and that the most artful fiction must give way to truth."<sup>3</sup> However, there were those who disagreed with Johnson, and unless we examine their theories, it is all too easy to accept as fact the facile juxtaposition, originated by the Romantics themselves, of neo-classic reason and romantic imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Although the first three quarters of the century produced no systematic investigation of the faculty of imagination, a growing interest in its mode of operation was evinced, and as empirical

<sup>1</sup>The Works of Samuel Johnson, "Rambler" 208, VII, 396.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., "Rambler" 125, VI, 344-345.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., "The Adventurer" 92, IX, 76.

<sup>4</sup>The imagination in the eighteenth century is treated by M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); W. J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946); W. J. Bate and J. M. Bullitt, "Distinctions Between Fancy and Imagination in Eighteenth-century English Criticism," MLN, LX (1945), 8-15; and W. J. Bate, "The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-century English Criticism," ELH, XII (1945), 144-164. I have drawn on all of them.

psychology turned from its mechanistic origins and discounted the mind as a strictly rational instrument, a broadly uniform theory of the workings of the imagination evolved. Hobbes had asserted that imagination was a mere mechanical associative faculty, "decaying sense," and that it was totally dependent for its raw material on original sense impressions.<sup>1</sup> Addison, who perhaps most clearly reflects the influence of the Hobbesian psychology as modified by Locke, spoke for the aestheticians who accepted this theory when he wrote that

it is this sense [sight] which furnishes the imagination with its ideas; so that by the "pleasures of the imagination," or "fancy" (which I shall use promiscuously), I here mean such as arise from visible objects, either when we have them actually in our view, or when we call up their ideas into our minds . . . we cannot indeed have a single image in the fancy that did not make its first entrance through the sight, but we have the power of retaining, altering, and compounding those images.<sup>2</sup>

Other writers did not limit the impressions to those of sight; but

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<sup>1</sup>The theory which Hobbes expanded in Leviathan was earlier applied by him specifically to art in "The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir William Davenant's Preface before Gondibert": "Time and education begets experience; experience begets memory; memory begets judgement and fancy; judgement begets the strength and structure; and fancy begets the ornaments of a poem. . . . For memory is the world (though not really, yet so as in a looking glass) in which the judgement . . . busieth herself in a grave and rigid examination of all the parts of Nature, and in regist'ring by letters, their order, causes, uses, differences, and resemblances; whereby the fancy, when any work of art is to be performed, findes her material at hand and prepared for use, and needs no more than a swift motion over them, that what she wants, and is there to be had, may not lie too long unespied. So that when she seemeth to flye from one Indies to the other . . . the voyage is not very great, her self being all she seeks; and her wonderful celerity, consisteth not so much in motion, as in copious imagery discreetly ordered, and perfectly registered in the memory." The Works of the English Poets, ed. Alexander Chalmers (21 vols.; London: J. Johnson et al., 1810), VI, 370, et passim.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Addison, Spectator 411.

in general it was accepted that the imagination "selects ideas from the treasures of remembrance," and, by an arbitrary process of association, "produces novelty only by varied combinations."<sup>1</sup>

Since its operations are circumscribed by the range of original sense impressions received, "the imagination is incapable of producing anything originally of itself, and can only vary and combine those ideas with which it is furnished by the senses."<sup>2</sup> Its mode of operation is self-analytical and essentially passive, since it depends entirely on the mind's "original frame"<sup>3</sup> and its accretions of sensory images: "it is but opening the eye, and the scene enters. The colours paint themselves on the fancy, with very little attention of thought or application of mind in the beholder."<sup>4</sup>

Distinctions between imagination and fancy before 1750 are seldom encountered, and indeed after that date are by no means numerous. Characteristic of their identification is Johnson's definition of the terms:

FA'NCY . . .

1. Imagination; the power by which the mind forms to itself images and representations of things, persons, or scenes of being. . . .

IMA'GINATION . . .

1. Fancy; the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent to one's self or others.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Works of Samuel Johnson, "The Idler" 44, VIII, 175.

<sup>2</sup>The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight, ed. Edmond Malone (4th ed.; 3 vols.; London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1809), "Discourse VII," I, 220.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Addison, Spectator 411.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Johnson, Dictionary.

On those occasions when the distinction was made by the more prominent artists and critics of the day, the difference was held to be more of degree than of kind, more of product than of process: the images produced by the imagination were considered to be more vast and awe-inspiring, more sublime, than those made by the fancy. Reynolds, whose Discourses to the Academy naturally dealt with aesthetics mainly in terms of painting, not only made this rudimentary distinction, but he also indicated that, besides working by varying and combining sensory impressions, the imagination tended to exaggerate and to distort those impressions:

Raffaele had more Taste and Fancy, Michael Angelo more Genius and Imagination. . . . Michael Angelo has more of the Poetical inspiration; his ideas are vast and sublime; his people are a superior order of beings; there is nothing about them, nothing in the air of their actions or their attitudes, or the style and cast of their limbs and features, that reminds us of their belonging to our own species.<sup>1</sup>

The insistence of the writers of the early nineteenth century upon the positive value, and, indeed, the necessity, of the imagination in great art was, however, by no means a complete volte-face in aesthetic theory. Hazlitt derived some of his most fundamental ideas from Butler's sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel, and from the Analogy with its appended Dissertations. Consequently his theory, though it has not attracted as much attention as Coleridge's, is clearer, more English, less subtle, and certainly more central in the Romantic ethos. Butler had emphasised the existence of a faculty of intuition allied to the imagination; by 1754 the intuit-

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<sup>1</sup>The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse V," I, 128-129.

ional theory had been so far developed that James Burgh was able to assert that

there is no natural absurdity in supposing it possible for a human . . . to arrive at a clear and distinct perception of truth by intuition. . . . It is therefore certain, that all evidence whatever is to be finally tried by and reduced to intuition.<sup>1</sup>

Reynolds in 1776 ridiculed the idea that truth could be grasped by intuition and not by reason:

Genius and taste . . . both, in the popular opinion, pretend to an entire exemption from the restraint of rules. It is supposed that their powers are intuitive; . . . One can scarce state these opinions without exposing their absurdity; yet they are constantly in the mouths of men, and particularly of artists.<sup>2</sup>

Ten years later, however, he told the students at the Academy that in certain circumstances, imagination was indeed "the residence of truth,"<sup>3</sup> although reason was the final judge. Even Johnson gives evidence, in his life of Pope, published in 1781, that much of his earlier distrust of the imagination had diminished. But it is only well toward the end of the eighteenth century that any really systematic attempt to define the imagination, to delineate its operations in detail, and to rescue it from its demi-monde career, is to be found.

Dugald Stewart, who as Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh from 1785 to 1810 was one of the most

<sup>1</sup>James Burgh, The Dignity of Human Nature (London: J. Johnson and J. Payne, 1754).

<sup>2</sup>The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse VII," I, 197.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., "Discourse XIII," II, 113.

influential members of the Scottish "Common-sense" school (and whose writings were certainly known to both Coleridge and Hazlitt), produced in 1792 a careful analysis of the nature and workings of the imagination in his Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind. Stewart distinguished sharply between what he called "conception" and the imagination:

The province of the former is to present us with an exact transcript of what we have formerly felt and perceived; that of the latter, to make a selection of qualities and of circumstances from a variety of different objects, and by combining and disposing these, to form a new creation of its own.<sup>1</sup>

It is noticeable that Stewart's "conception" embraces Hobbes' notion of "decaying sense," and that it is clearly on a lower level than the imagination proper.

In spite of the marked eighteenth-century emphasis upon the part of selection and association in his outline of the imaginative process, Stewart expressly rejects the well-established belief that the imagination is entirely dependent upon sensory impressions for its material. He also suggests a new significance in the operation of the faculty: if the imagination is able to "form a new creation of its own" from the "variety of different objects" which the conception has presented to it, it follows that the imagination can form ideas not previously contained in the mind--it can, in other words, function as a cognitive faculty just as reason or judgment does. Stewart is one of the first to suggest

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<sup>1</sup>The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart, ed. Sir William Hamilton (11 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877), II, 431.

that the gap between the individual and the external world may be bridged by the imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Stewart sees imagination not as a simple, automatically-working endowment, but as a "complex power," independent of, but not antithetical to reason, and including conception, abstraction, judgment or taste, and fancy, "which presents to our choice all the different materials which are subservient to the efforts of imagination."<sup>2</sup> It is a dynamic power, not merely selecting and associating, but affording an immediate and intuitive perception into external reality. It enables the mind to comprehend the emotions and feelings of others:

I have often been inclined to think, that the apparent coldness and selfishness of mankind may be traced, in a great measure, to a want of attention and a want of imagination. . . . Without a common degree of both, it is impossible for any man to comprehend completely the situation of his neighbour. . . . If we feel therefore more for ourselves than for others, the difference is to be ascribed, at least partly, to this; that in the former case, the facts which are the foundation of our feelings, are more fully before us than they possibly can be in the latter.<sup>3</sup>

Stewart is thus to be regarded as a precursor of the Romantics not only in their insistence upon the intuitive capabilities of the imagination, but also in their marked and most important belief that the imagination affords the only valid perception of the emotions and character of another: Hazlitt, the spokesman in

<sup>1</sup>See Stewart, II, 144-158.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 435-436.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 453-454. I use Stewart here because he is a vehicle for the theories propounded by such diverse people as Duff, Beattie, Alison, Gerard, and Smith, all of whom made contributions to the theory of the imagination. For Duff, see the discussion of fancy and imagination on pp. 30 ff.

applied criticism for the Romantics, made this theory the foundation of his writings on ethics and, of course, on drama. It should also be noted that Stewart believed that exercise given to the imagination could lead to more immediate perception of external truth, and that he advocated the "cultivation" of the imagination as an instrument for social benevolence.

Careful and frequent analyses of the imagination are characteristic of the Romantic period. Many writers of the time saw imagination as the fountain-head of morality, and poetry, the language of a disciplined but strong imagination, as the only permanent and universal articulation of nature's truths. The importance which the Romantics attached to the imagination can be seen in Shelley's assumption that it constitutes the true moral and ethical foundation:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.<sup>1</sup>

For Shelley, as for Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Keats, this "great instrument of moral good," through the active participation which it makes possible in the passions and feelings of others, obviated a rigid necessity for fixed standards of behaviour and rational

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<sup>1</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, A Defence of Poetry, in Shelley's Literary and Philosophical Criticism, ed. John Shawcross (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 131.

codes of social intercourse.<sup>1</sup> The decorum of the eighteenth century, supported as it was by rules of conduct and ethical virtues delineated by reason, appeared not only sterile and constricting to the thinkers of the next century, but was also inimical to the growing sense of individuality which developed, as an understandable reaction, out of the relative conformity of the Age of Reason. While all four men wavered in or even discarded any faith they might once have had in the perfectibility of man, they retained a fervent belief in man's potential for benevolence, and they maintained an entrenched mistrust of the common eighteenth-century assertion that man was motivated naturally by self-love. The Romantic conception of imagination enabled them to cast off the distastefully rigid idea of rules governing behaviour, to maintain their cherished individuality, and to propound a satisfactory instrument for man's humanity to man.

The basic importance of the imagination in the Romantic conception of poetry is demonstrated by Leigh Hunt's suggestion that it alone is able to grasp the inmost truths of life, and that only poetry, which is "imaginative passion,"<sup>2</sup> can properly express them:

Poetry begins where matter of fact or of science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth, that is to say, the connexion it has with the world of emotion, and its power to produce imaginative pleasure. . . . Truth of every kind belongs to [the poet].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It could perhaps be argued that this leads eventually to a lack of dogmatic and moral frames of reference, which in turn might be one explanation for the need of later poets to be their own priests, prophets, philosophers, and myth-makers.

<sup>2</sup>Leigh Hunt, Imagination and Fancy (New ed.; London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1891), p. 3. (1844.)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-5.

Also, "without imagination there is no true embodiment."<sup>1</sup> Hunt quotes with approval Shelley's words on the moral power of the imagination, and he too considers poetry to be a moral agent, administering "to the effect by acting upon the cause"; what the imagination, as the intuitive agent of truth, can create, that poetry expresses.

Although, as we have seen, the dominant tendency in those instances in the eighteenth century when fancy was distinguished from imagination was to characterise the difference more as one of degree than anything else, there is evidence that the terms were not always used synonymously, and that the distinction was taken by some men to be a more profound one. Such differentiation naturally tended to derogate fancy, since there had been noticeable a general shift in the relative positions of the terms--in this respect--as early as Dryden's Prefatory Letter in Annus Mirabilis, published in 1667:

The first happiness of the Poet's imagination is properly Invention, or finding of the thought; the second is Fancy, or the variation, deriving or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to that thought; the third is Elocution, or the Art of clothing and adorning that thought so found and varied, in apt, significant and sounding words: the quickness of the Imagination is seen in the Invention, the fertility in the Fancy, and the accuracy in the Expression.<sup>2</sup>

What is noteworthy here is that although the "fertility" of the imagination is assigned to fancy, the basic imaginative power of

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<sup>1</sup>Hunt, Imagination and Fancy, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>John Dryden, Preface, Annus Mirabilis, 1667.

invention is not, and Dryden's comprehensive expression for the three aspects of poetic interpretation is "imagination." Instances occur soon after this where fancy is implicitly regarded as inferior to imagination, so perhaps Dryden's formulation encouraged a shift of which it was partly symptomatic. Some writers, while they usually employ the terms interchangeably, seem to tend toward using fancy when they speak of the lighter or more licentious aspects of imaginative indulgence, and imagination in a more complimentary sense. Shaftesbury, for instance, usually couples imagination with conceit, in reference to inherent capacity, and poetic inspiration; while he invariably associates fancy with a condition of mental abandon.

William Duff's Essay on Original Genius, published in 1767, would appear to be the first clear attempt at explaining the nature of the distinction, which by this time had begun to crystallise out in the theories of several Scottish writers. Duff holds that imagination is characterised by its vigour, its range, and its plasticity, while fancy is essentially quick and lively. The plastic imagination lays bare truths which were formerly unknown. Fancy, however, the less serious faculty, is the parent of "wit" and of "wit and humour" as distinguished from Genius, which is the province of imagination. Duff suggests that fancy depends upon association for the correspondences which it produces, while imagination is able to produce creations of its own.

The distinction is also noted by James Beattie, in his

Dissertations Moral and Critical, which appeared in 1783, but perhaps the clearest differentiation is that made by Stewart. Stewart elaborates on Duff's theory to the extent that he sees fancy as a power of associating ideas according to resemblance and analogy, and its proper function is the collection of materials for the imagination. On this reasoning, imagination presupposes the existence of fancy, asserts Stewart, but the reverse is not necessarily true. A "man of fancy" is one who habitually illustrates a subject by analogy or resemblances, but imaginative illustration requires something more than this. The latter includes, as we have seen, abstraction and conception, which separate the selected materials from the circumstances which are connected with them in nature; and it also includes judgment or taste, which selects the materials and directs their combination. And finally, imagination in her highest manifestation also includes fancy itself.

Thus, by the time that the Romantics came to theorise on the nature of the imagination and its relation to the fancy, there was behind them a fairly strong tradition of speculation on those very subjects. The way in which Coleridge and Hunt, the two writers of the period in whom the dichotomy between the two faculties finds its fullest expression, deal with the problem illuminates quite clearly one aspect of the poetic imagination which will receive fuller attention in the next chapter.

To Hunt, imagination is "the feeling of the subtlest and most affecting analogies; the perception of sympathies in the nature of things," while fancy is "a sporting with their resemblance,

real or supposed, and with airy and fantastical creations."<sup>1</sup> Fancy is neither rooted in truth, nor does it satisfy more than our most superficial desires. It deals in the less serious, transitory aspects of nature, while imagination's province is nature's underlying truth, which is eternal. Hunt sees fancy, in effect, as an inferior kind of imagination. (Wordsworth, too, outlined a vaguer but similar distinction in the Preface to the 1815 edition of his poems--"Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and support the eternal."<sup>2</sup>)

In Biographia Literaria Coleridge understands fancy and imagination to work in two distinct processes. In his view, fancy is a combining and a collecting process, retaining those qualities of memory, choice, and combination which characterised the Johnsonian concept of imagination:

FANCY . . . has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.<sup>3</sup>

It is a passive quality or faculty, operating according to the law of association, and it is therefore necessarily self-conscious and wilful. The imagination, however, is far more complex. Coleridge

<sup>1</sup>Hunt, Imagination and Fancy, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. William Knight (2 vols.; London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1896), II, 217.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. John Shawcross (2 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1907), II, 202.

arbitrarily divides it into two parts, differing only in degree:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.<sup>1</sup>

Imagination is thus "the prime agent of all human perception."

For Coleridge it is vastly more important than fancy, or even reason. Neither of the latter, dependent as they are on memory and association, are capable of escaping the finite limitations of the senses. But the imagination, through its sympathetic and vital self-identification with whatever is external to it, is not limited to the senses or by the senses--it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" the sensuous framework of nature, and can perceive and portray in its unified ideality the hidden, underlying movement of life, the "living power" of existence: it can detect and express what Kant had implied by the "noumenal" world.

Coleridge's distinction is condensed and ambiguous. Many of his readers must silently have demanded, along with the more articulate Lord Byron, that Mr. Coleridge "explain his explanation." But Hazlitt attempted a clear, consistent analysis of the operation and function of the poetic imagination, based upon the concept of

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<sup>1</sup>Biographia Literaria, II, 202.

sympathetic identification.

Sympathy, benevolence, disinterestedness--these are frequently synonymous in Hazlitt's vocabulary. They pose something of a semantic problem, because at least as often they are used to indicate a universal quality or a feature of the imagination. As Bate points out, earlier in the eighteenth century the attempt had been made to ascribe moral feeling to sympathy. Hume is perhaps one of the best-remembered of the philosophers who dealt with the matter, and Adam Smith of course tried to base a whole Theory of Moral Sentiments upon it. "Psychological analysis joined with this assumption to evolve a theory of the imagination that was eminently adaptable to criticism, especially the criticism of the drama and of Shakespeare," writes Bate

developed most fully by Hazlitt, and echoed by Keats in his term "negative capability," this was a concept of the imagination by which few English critics were untouched. A general sentiment congenial with it persisted. But the idea, in a specifically critical sense, largely disappeared until at the close of the nineteenth century it was rediscovered, interpreted in a more subjective way, and systematized into the theory of Einfühlung--or "empathy"--by the German esthetician, Theodor Lipps; while, in a more directly concrete way, the idea of imaginative identification was suggestively applied in Russia to the theory of acting by Konstantin Stanislavsky.<sup>1</sup>

"Sympathy," then, carries, in Hazlitt's writing, both an ethical and an aesthetic connotation. It is the first attribute of his critical theory, a theory based upon a notion that criticism is

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Jackson Bate, Prefaces to Criticism ("Anchor Books"; New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 110. See also Clarence D. Thorpe, "Some Notices of 'Empathy' Before Lipps," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, XXIII (1937), 525-533.

an art. Through sympathy, we project our imagination-- one "projects himself into the station and circumstances of others with a fellow feeling of their joys and sorrows as the case may be; there is also the possibility of projecting one's self into another's point of view as well, and from that point of view of looking in an external fashion, as it were, upon our moral motives and purposes."<sup>1</sup> Like Coleridge's distinction between the primary and the secondary imagination, there is an implied distinction in Hazlitt's thought between the sympathetic imagination and the imagination as an entity in itself. Thus he is able to say that Wordsworth's imagination holds immediately from nature, and "owes no allegiance' but 'to the elements.'"<sup>2</sup> Milton's imagination "has the force of nature,"<sup>3</sup> and "the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature."<sup>4</sup> Thus the imagination is both a sympathetic faculty and an "exclusive" quality, the former being the spring of the reader's response (and, of course, the poet's chief tool), and the latter a characteristic inherent in every work of art. It is to the nature and function of the imagination as Hazlitt sees it that we now turn our attention.

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<sup>1</sup>John G. Hibben, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1910), pp. 262-263.

<sup>2</sup>"Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem, The Excursion," Works, XIX, 10.

"On Milton's Versification," The Round Table, Works, IV, 37.

<sup>4</sup>"On Poetry in General," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 3.

## CHAPTER II

Although he echoes and expands Reynolds's cautious statement of 1786 that truth may reside in the products of the imagination, Hazlitt never denies the necessity and the value of reason, which "is no doubt one faculty of the human mind, and the chief gift of Providence to man";<sup>1</sup> but, he maintains, reason is not the only faculty of the mind, and it is subject to other instincts and principles, the chief of which is imagination. It should be remembered, when Hazlitt's occasionally vituperative attacks on reason are read, that he was passionately against any theory which seemed to him to reserve cognitive power to reason at the expense of imagination. He does not confuse their provinces, and agrees with Abraham Tucker that "of things within our reach, some we discern by immediate intuition, others we gather by inference and by long deductions of reasoning";<sup>2</sup> nonetheless, he does believe that the imagination can discover much that is inaccessible to reason. Hazlitt's criticism and his philosophical speculations are based upon those truths lying within the grasp of the imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>"On the English Novelists," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 132.

<sup>2</sup>An Abridgement of the Light of Nature Pursued, by Abraham Tucker, Esq. ed. William Hazlitt (London: J. Johnson, 1807), p. xliii.

For Hazlitt, poetry is "the eloquence of the imagination,"<sup>1</sup> "the language of the imagination and the passions, of fancy and will."<sup>2</sup> The poet and the painter, both of whom depend upon the quality of their imagination, "are superior to the mere philosopher or man of science, because they exercise the powers of reason and intellect combined with nature and passion. They treat of the highest categories of the human soul, pleasure and pain."<sup>3</sup> Thus (and Hazlitt's point is as pertinent today as it was in 1817), they do not deal in trivia, as

poetry is an interesting study, for this reason, that it relates to whatever is most interesting in human life. Whoever therefore has a contempt for poetry, has a contempt for himself and humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Since poetry is the expression of what is most vitally apprehended and intensely felt in life, it cannot proceed upon those principles

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 15 n.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>"On Imitation," The Round Table, Works, IV, 76. In order more clearly to understand Hazlitt's version of the sensationist criteria it is necessary to read this passage in the light of what follows, from his essay "On Reason and Imagination," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 46: "So with respect to moral truth (as distinct from mathematical), whether a thing is good or evil, depends on the quantity of passion, of feeling, of pleasure and pain connected with it, and with which we must be made acquainted in order to come to a sound conclusion, and not on the inquiry, whether it is round or square. Passion, in short, is the essence, the chief ingredient in moral truth; and the warmth of passion is sure to kindle the light of imagination on the objects around it. The 'words that glow' are almost inseparable from the 'thoughts that burn.' Hence logical reason and practical truth are disparates."

<sup>4</sup>"Lear," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 271. This was, of course, one of Keats's most fundamental tenets. He heavily marked this passage in his copy of the volume, which is now in the Houghton Memorial Library, Harvard University.

of consecutive logic established by reason,

for the end and use of poetry, "both at the first and now, was and is to hold the mirror up to nature," seen through the medium of passion and imagination, not diverted of that medium by means of literal truth or abstract reason.<sup>1</sup>

The truths open to reason and those available to the imagination are not identical:

To say that the intellect alone can determine or supply the movements or the language of passion, is little short of a contradiction in terms. . . . Nor can the indifferent observation of the outward signs attain to the truth of nature, without the inward sympathy to impel us forward, and to tell us where to stop.<sup>2</sup>

Thus for Hazlitt the province of reason is confined to the observation only of what is external and apparent to the senses. Imagination, however, is able to grasp the hidden truths of nature. Just as objectivity and disinterestedness are vital to the proper function of the reason, so intense involvement and sympathy are the foundations of the imagination. It is only through this sympathetic interest that the mind can "determine the movements" or, as it were, supply the language of the "highest categories of the human soul."

Collation of Hazlitt's remarks on reason shows that he saw it as an analytic, disentangling faculty which "conquers by dividing; and instead of exaggerating and excluding, aims at universality, connection, and proportion in all its determinations."<sup>3</sup> It selects its materials from the store of memory, atomises them, and

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 8.

<sup>2</sup>"On Novelty and Familiarity," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 297.

<sup>3</sup>The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Works, XIII, 51 n.

wilfully reconstructs the resulting particles of memory and experience into patterns which are significant for their order and their arrangement. It is a commonplace (and an oversimplification) that the Romantics rebelled against the eighteenth century's reduction of nature to a vast and artificially neat plan, which was acknowledged to be Divine in origin, but which, the Romantics felt, was bereft of the wonder which they themselves felt nature to harbour. Something of the earlier spirit is apparent in Reynolds's complacent insistence that reason "renders [its subjects] more artificial, carries it still further from common nature, and deviates only to render it more perfect." Reynolds points out that reason appeals to a specific need in man's constitution--to "the sense of congruity, coherence, and consistency, which is a real existing principle in man; and it must be gratified."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt would have agreed wholeheartedly that reason abstracts its subject from "common nature," but he would certainly have held that, however much the end-product appealed to one's "sense of congruity," it had, through its artificiality and final remoteness from "the movements or the language of passion," no place in poetry or painting.

Coleridge's fancy is very close to Hazlitt's reason: as has already been indicated, the former faculty depended for its material on "fixities and definites," modified by deliberate choice which was guided in its operation by the stable laws of association. Hazlitt's concept of reason differs only in its superior aims and

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<sup>1</sup>The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse XIII," II, 123.

in its more serious aspect. For Coleridge's much-disparaged fancy had as its end the stimulation of delight through novelty; Hazlitt's reason, guided by the same mechanical laws of association, and utilising the same "decaying sense," "tries to persuade the will"<sup>1</sup> by logical demonstration and consecutive argument.

Reason depends "on the discursive or extensive";<sup>2</sup> it is essentially disputatious in character, and, in its highest manifestation, moralistic. But although this is an excellent attribute--the chief gift of Providence to man--it does not admit reason into the realm of poetry. The eloquence of the imagination is poetry, whereas the eloquence of reason and of the understanding is rhetoric: art depends "on the intuitive and intensive power of the mind."<sup>3</sup> The human mind, says Hazlitt, "is a finer instrument than we sometimes suppose it, and is not only swayed by overt acts and tangible proofs, but has an instinctive feeling of the air of truth."<sup>4</sup> Reason attains to truth "through a certain process,"<sup>5</sup> but the imagination, by an immediate and instinctive movement, seizes on truth without effort or even conscious intention. Minds too

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 15 n. Cf. "Character of Lord Chatham," Works, VII, 299-300.

<sup>2</sup>"Why the Arts are not Progressive?" Works, XVIII, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>"On Disagreeable People," Works, XVII, 227.

<sup>5</sup>"Troilus and Cressida," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 226. My italics. Of course, the very notion of a "process" presupposes a certain degree of abstraction or distance, a lack of involvement. This is another reason for the superiority of imagination; imagination goes straight to the essential identity of its object.

"sensible to the external differences of things, too passive under their impressions, to admit of those bold and rapid combinations which imagination creates, . . . and too confined . . . by the material form or vehicle in which [ideas] were conveyed"<sup>1</sup>--minds like those of the Graeco-Romans, for example--are minds which are open only to the truth of the external signs of nature--reason's truth; the truths of imagination are more profound, and cannot be ascertained by attention merely to the outward forms of objects, which, in Coleridge's words, "as objects, are essentially fixed and dead." Imagination perceives analogies and relationships between these objects:

This intuitive perception of the hidden analogies of things, or, as it may be called, this instinct of the imagination, is, perhaps, what stamps the character of genius on the productions of art more than any other circumstance: for it works unconsciously, like nature, and receives its impressions from a kind of inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the "hidden analogies" are not inherent in the objects, and, in fact, are often antithetical to the observations of reason. But they are, nevertheless, true to nature while they are imperceptible to reason, or false in literal fact, since they express the truth of the impressions made by the objects upon a mind under the influence of passion and feeling.<sup>3</sup>

Hazlitt admired the artistic abilities of the Graeco-

<sup>1</sup>"Character of Mr. Burke," Works, VII, 312.

<sup>2</sup>"On the English Novelists," VI, 109.

<sup>3</sup>For an extension of this argument, see the discussion of Hazlitt's conception of gusto in the next chapter.

Romans, whose forte, he felt, was "exquisite art and perfect imitation";<sup>1</sup> but, since the two "principles of imitation and imagination, indeed, are not only distinct, but almost opposite,"<sup>2</sup> he considered their products to be inferior to those which had been made by the sculptors of the Elgin Marbles, for instance, or to those poems and novels which had been written by the imaginative geniuses of his own day. Obviously, Hazlitt considered that "art" and "imitation" were functions of systematised thought and developed reason, and that works of art produced according to their principles were necessarily limited to delineation, deliberate and disinterested, of literal truth--

The ideas of the ancients were too exact and definite, too much attached to the material form. . . . The great difference . . . between the classical and the romantic style, between ancient and modern poetry, is, that . . . the one dwells more on the immediate impressions of objects on the senses--the other on the ideas which they suggest to the imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, as far as Hazlitt is concerned, the "ancients" were concerned only with the fixed, static, external world: their consecutive reasoning was incapable of grasping the inner significance, the "hidden analogies." He acknowledged that the excellence of the Graeco-Romans lay in their superlative use of man's rational faculties; the intuitive insight, however, into imaginative truth, which he believed constituted the criterion of great poetry, was beyond their

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<sup>1</sup>"Character of Mr. Burke," VII, 312.

<sup>2</sup>"On Ancient and Modern Literature," Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, Works, VI, 350.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

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Description in poetry and allegory in painting, Hazlitt contended, are both dependent on reason, and demand progressive and logical interpretation to be understood.<sup>2</sup> They are like "the pasteboard machinery of a pantomime . . . and have no purchase on the imagination,"<sup>3</sup> whereas "neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end of poetry, without the heightenings of the imagination."<sup>4</sup> Poetry's ultimate truth lies not in the imitative repetition of externals, but in the intuitive discovery and expression of the "hidden analogies" between them. In this discovery and expression, the dynamic "instinct of imagination" infuses motion and vitality into the objects, which in

<sup>1</sup>There is an excellent discussion of "Hazlitt's Criticism and Greek Sculpture" by Stephen Larrabee in JHI, II (1941), 77-94. Hazlitt's emphasis on the importance of the intuitive aspect of the poetic imagination can be seen in his remark that "poetry, we grant, creates a world of its own; but it creates it out of existing materials. Mr. Shelley . . . mistook the nature of the poet's calling, which should be guided by involuntary, not by voluntary impulses." ("Shelley's Posthumous Poems," Works, XVI, 265.) Hazlitt found support for his view in Tucker, who, while confining the sphere of the imagination to the purely fanciful, nevertheless understood by it "that faculty by which different ideas and objects . . . are presented to the mind spontaneously, and without any effort on her part; and by Understanding I would chuse to donate the power we have of voluntarily leading the thoughts into certain trains rather than others." (Hazlitt's Abridgement of the Light of Nature Pursued, pp. 81-82.)

<sup>2</sup>See "Conversations as Good as Real," Works, XX, 272, where "T" is Hazlitt and "J" is Northcote.

<sup>3</sup>"On the English Novelists," VI, 127.

<sup>4</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 3.

themselves are essentially fixed and dead. The truths of reason are descriptive and logical; they depend on a consecutive and orderly arrangement of particulars, and "what is mechanical, reducible to rule, or capable of demonstration, is progressive, and admits of gradual improvement."<sup>1</sup> The truths of analogy, which are discovered by the imagination and are expressed in poetry, are not "progressive," and achieve their effect "by instantaneous sympathy. Nothing is a subject for poetry that admits of a dispute."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in Hazlitt's system, reason is a persuasive power, which is founded on logical demonstration and which (though Hazlitt does not expressly say so) is destructible by superior logic. It cannot, at all events, demonstrate, improve, or modify the truths grasped by the imagination. Poetry is not necessarily logical, is not "progressive," is not argumentative: "poetry begins where matter of fact or of science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth, that is to say, the connexion it has with the world of emotion."<sup>3</sup> The poet and the painter, as Hazlitt maintained, exercise "the powers of reason and intellect combined with nature and passion. They treat of the highest categories of the human soul."<sup>4</sup>

Imagination, without which no poet can be great, he sees as a faculty which is instinctive and intuitive in operation. Unlike

<sup>1</sup>"Why the Arts are not Progressive?" The Round Table, Works, IV, 161.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 15 n.

<sup>3</sup>See above, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup>See above, p. 39.

reason, it works unconsciously, and seizes the truth not of the external forms of objects, but of their hidden analogies. It cannot exist in a mind devoid of the basic constituents of the faculty of reason, but it can be said to transcend reason in its ability to grasp and portray truth, especially those truths of emotion and feeling: "for imagination is that power which represents objects, not as they are, but as they are moulded according to our fancies and feelings."<sup>1</sup> Thus imagination is, beyond all the other faculties of the mind, the most conversant with human life; it "creates a world of its own; but it creates it out of existing materials"; its province is, to use Keats's words, "the looking upon the Sun the Moon the Stars, the Earth and its contents as materials to form greater things--that is to say ethereal things."<sup>2</sup>

The instinct of intuitive imagination, despite the immediacy with which it grasps truth, is founded upon knowledge and experience. By an unerring power of association, it synthesises and combines particles of past experience and impressions of immediate sensation to create something new. The unity and integrity of this creation depend on the consistency and intensity of the impressions made on the mind by existing materials. Hazlitt rejected Hartley's modified Hobbesian doctrine that imagination is a passive faculty, associating in accordance with stable laws the particles of decaying sense; he

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<sup>1</sup>"Schlegel on the Drama," Works, XVI, 63.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to Haydon, 10th-11th May, 1817. The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (2 vols.; Cambridge: at the University Press, 1958), I, 143. (Hereafter cited as Rollins.)

saw it rather as a dynamic, active, intuitive, synthesising faculty, which by a single combinatory but immediate effect creates a reality which is at once beautiful and utterly true, true to nature.

It is evident that Hazlitt tries, with the constant reference to "nature" in his argument, to provide an objective norm for the evaluation of art, an objective basis which in many respects is similar to and goes beyond that developed in the eighteenth century. Thus, he says that poetry is an imitation of nature, but he immediately qualifies this by adding that the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature. Nature and the imagination, or the objective and subjective features of art, are complementary, "parts of one stupendous whole," and it is characteristic of Hazlitt to fuse the old with the new. His concept of poetry, as it finds expression in the lecture "On Poetry in General," embraces both the general and the particular: "Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself," and he shows metaphorically how poetry fixes on the concrete universal as well as the particular, for "the light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light, that while it shews us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it."<sup>1</sup>

Although many of Hazlitt's quotations on the theoretical aspects of art are from Horace and from Pope's Essay on Criticism, his most frequent is "and snatch a grace beyond the reach of art"-- which is characteristic of his concept of nature and natural genius.

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<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 3.

Like Byron, Hazlitt was able to appreciate and to esteem natura naturata, the "lovely texture of the visible world" in Pope's poetry; but unlike Byron, Hazlitt felt the awareness of natura naturans, the informing principle within it. He distinguished between the poet "of nature" and the poet "of art," and his distinction shows not only his conception of nature as a literary principle, but also the "universal interest" which such a principle arouses in the mind of a reader.

The poet of nature is one who, from the elements of beauty, of power, and of passion in his own breast, sympathises with whatever is beautiful, and grand, and impassioned in nature, in its simple majesty, in its immediate appeal to the senses, to the thoughts and hearts of all men; so that the poet of nature, by the truth, and depth, and harmony of his mind, may be said to hold communion with the very soul of nature; to be identified with, and to foreknow, and to record the feelings of all men, at all times and places, as they are liable to the same impressions; and to exert the same power over the minds of his readers, that nature does. He sees things in their eternal beauty, for he sees them as they are; he feels them in their universal interest, for he feels them as they affect the first principles of his and our common nature.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction which Hazlitt develops between the poet of art and the poet of nature occurs frequently in his criticism. The poet who uses nature as the source of his art speaks through "eternal beauties" to the "universal interest" of mankind, and creates "an intuitive and mighty sympathy with whatever could enter into the heart of man in all possible circumstances."<sup>2</sup> Thus Shakespeare and Milton are poets of nature; they had a greater depth of insight than was usual

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Question Whether Pope was a Poet," Works, XX, 90.

<sup>2</sup>"Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles," Works, XIX, 83.

into "ruling principles." These "ruling principles" of nature are not to be equated with Pope's "Nature methodiz'd." Rather, the great poet finds in nature "the storehouse of lasting truth," and he turns to her "inexhaustible variety" not for "those Rules of old discovered" but for her "immediate appeal to the senses, to the thoughts and hearts of all men."

The poet of art, however, derives his inspiration from "the works of man," from "those objects and feelings which depend for their subsistence and perfection on the will and arbitrary conventions of man and society," such as an "amber-headed snuff-box," or "the nice conduct of a clouded cane."<sup>1</sup> Pope, Hazlitt felt, "preferred the artificial to the natural in external objects, because he had a stronger fellow-feeling with the self-love of the maker or proprietor of a gew-gaw, than admiration of that which was interesting to all mankind."<sup>2</sup> The poet of art is "the poet of personality and of polished life," the master of "smooth and polished verse" which depends for its subsistence and perfection on the arbitrary conventions of man and society. Unlike the poet of nature, the poet of art is seldom concerned with natural objects of an habitual and universal interest.

Hazlitt felt that the poets of art were of a lower order than the poets of nature, for "the more our senses, our self-love, our eyes and ears, are surrounded and, as it were, saturated with

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<sup>1</sup>"Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles," XIX, 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

artificial enjoyments and costly decorations, the more the avenues to the imagination and the heart are unavoidably blocked up."<sup>1</sup> Nature is thus for Hazlitt the fundamental source of creativity and the permanent source of beauty. The artist is enabled, by training his imaginative power upon nature, to transcend the boundaries of art. Rather than merely holding the mirror up to nature, the great artist penetrates behind the mirror into the fecund source of truth, and recreates it in his own medium. The critic is able, in his turn, to use nature as a norm for judging the universal validity of the work.

The beauty of nature is not to be found by any process of rational analysis in which the imagination remains passive. Reason can dissect nature, but only the imagination acting under the most intense impressions can reveal its hidden truths--

Every mind is not a gauge and measure of truth. Nature has her surface and her dark recesses. She is deep, obscure, and infinite. It is only minds on whom she makes her fullest impressions that can penetrate her shrine or unveil her Holy of Holies.<sup>2</sup>

Reason always operates in a deliberate process of selection and rejection, and is therefore always circumscribed in its ability to penetrate truth. Nature's truth is not on the surface, where it may be readily seen and analysed, but in the recesses of human passion and feeling. It consists in "an unusual vividness in external objects or in our immediate impressions, exciting a

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<sup>1</sup>"Pope, Lord Byron, and Mr. Bowles," XIX, 79.

<sup>2</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 46-47.

movement of imagination in the mind,"<sup>1</sup> and enabling it to grasp the hidden analogies beneath external forms.

No great art, Hazlitt insists, is produced by a process of rational abstraction and consecutive logic. He professed, and Keats put into practice, the belief that

the arts hold immediate communication with nature, and are only derived from that source. . . . The arts may be said to resemble Antaeus in his struggle with Hercules, who was strangled when he was raised above the ground, and recovered his strength when he touched his mother earth.<sup>2</sup>

Where there is no direct communication with nature, where logic and abstraction rule at the expense of imagination, there can be no strength of feeling; where there is no passion, there can be no artistic truth.

The imagination is an associating faculty,<sup>3</sup> but the method of association by which it operates is not mechanical, as Hobbes, Locke, and Hartley held it to be. Hazlitt is especially against Hartley's hypothesis that association is the basis of all mental activity: "it is an absurdity, and an express contradiction to suppose that association is either the only mode of operation of the human mind, or that it is the primary and most general principle of thought and action."<sup>4</sup> A poet does not merely load the

<sup>1</sup>A Letter to William Gifford, Esq., Works, IX, 45.

<sup>2</sup>"Why the Arts are not Progressive?" IV, 160.

<sup>3</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 51.

<sup>4</sup>An Essay on the Principles of Human Action, to which are added, Some Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius, Works, I, 51. Hereafter cited as An Essay.

riffts of his mind with the ore of fading memory and decaying sensation; he does not merely rearrange his materials; he uses his imagination, which, although it necessarily receives its first and deepest impressions from the senses, unconsciously yet with intensely active effort fuses and "coadunates" those materials to form a new creation. Fancy perhaps associates and combines sensory impressions without regard to truth; association in progressive logical patterns of demonstrable truth is the function of reason; but imagination moulds into new shapes and combinations; it systematises and modifies, "idealizes and unifies"; and simultaneously it directs its process to the discovery and the expression of truth--which is its true province, and, of course, that of poetry.

It is worthwhile to notice the close resemblance of some of Hazlitt's ideas on imagination to those of John Fearn, an obscure sea-captain turned philosopher, who, according to the DNB's rather patronising dismissal, discussed most of the contentious philosophical problems of the day without contributing in any degree to their resolution.<sup>1</sup> Fearn gives intuition the power of relating not only separate sensory impressions but also "any two other subjects whatever."<sup>2</sup> He deplores the mechanistic insistence on mere sensation as the sole origin of ideas. Take, Fearn suggests, a plane surface

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<sup>1</sup>Hazlitt knew Fearn (Works, XX, 215), and cites with approval on three separate occasions his Essay on Consciousness (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1811).

<sup>2</sup>John Fearn, First Lines of the Human Mind (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1820), p. 197. Of course, many of these ideas were fairly well established by this time, but the personal relationship makes the similarity significant.

thickly stippled with minute dots of a particular colour. (If Fearn had lived a century later, he could very well have instanced the rotogravure printing of a photograph onto newsprint.) When the surface is viewed from an appreciable distance, the dots will appear to have blended into one colour-mass, "yet Sense cannot Connect any two of these points together. . . . It belongs to the faculty of intuition . . . to combine all the sensible points of any sensation of colour into one mass or surface."<sup>1</sup> Intuition, the fusing principle, unlike simple sensation, grasps unconsciously and without voluntary effort the relationship between any given set of particulars. The colour-mass--or the face in the photograph--may be said to be created by the intuitive imagination, since the relation between the separate points of colour is not inherent in the points themselves, but must be supplied by a human agency. (Fearn's illustration is not, of course, entirely valid; in such instances it is, in fact, an optical illusion which produces the final effect. But once one knows that a newspaper photograph is made up of minute and thinly-separated dots of black and grey, how much of one's apprehension of the colour-mass as the representation of a face is due to illusion, and how much is due to intuition and a "willing suspension of disbelief"?) The truth of the new creation consists in "the truth of human nature"; and although the points of colour are necessary to the final illusion of surface, they are not recognisable as particulars in the total impression they create in the mind. It is the truth of colour which

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<sup>1</sup>Fearn, First Lines of the Human Mind, p. 198.

is constituted by the total impression.

Hazlitt not only gives the un-rational, intuitive imagination the ability to relate the separate points of a single sensation, but he also attributes to it the capacity to integrate and unify separate sensations into a single totality of impression. The results of this operation are in accord with the truth of human nature:

And is there no true and rooted analogy between our different sensations, as well as a positive and literal identity? . . . The finest poetry, then, is not a paradox or a trite paraphrase; but a bold and happy enunciation of truths and feelings deeply implanted in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

Only the imagination can grasp this analogy, since reason, that disentangling and segregating faculty, is subservient to external reality, and therefore insists on the literal truth of separate sensations.

Hazlitt admired the artistry of Claude, but thought that his landscapes afforded a good illustration of the maxim that the truth of nature is not perceptible through the medium of any single sense alone:

Claude's landscapes, perfect as they are, want gusto. . . . They do not interpret one sense by another; they do not distinguish the character of different objects as we are taught, and can only be taught, to distinguish them by their effect on the different senses. That is, his eye wanted imagination: it did not strongly sympathise with his other faculties. He saw the atmosphere, but he did not feel it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"Poetry," Works, XX, 210.

<sup>2</sup>"On Gusto," The Round Table, Works, IV, 79.

It would appear that for Hazlitt the strength of painting or of poetry is in proportion to the totality of impression created by the interpretation of one sense by another--by gusto. "In a word," he writes, "gusto in painting is where the impression made on one sense excites by affinity those of another."<sup>1</sup> Only through the process of modifying and coadunation, not by separation and abstraction, can the mind create that reality of expression which is the power and the truth of art.

Thus the imagination is not, as sensation is, directed toward the external form of objects--which "as objects are essentially fixed and dead"--but toward that vital and intense creation which is formed by the intuitive fusion of the several properties of the objects. For the imagination, as Hazlitt envisages it, does not disentangle the original sensory impressions while it retains the distinction between sense and the outline of form--while it atomises and wilfully combines these impressions; it obliterates the distinctions, reverses the Hartleyan procedure of association, and coadunates the impressions into a single creation. The objects and their impressions unite cordially together, are melted down in the imagination, and no particular is recognisable in its original form:

It is of the very nature of the imagination to change

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<sup>1</sup>"On Gusto," IV, 78. Hazlitt is not the first in this field; the eighteenth-century associationists had speculated on the nature of what we now call synaesthesia, and so did Rousseau, Diderot, and Coleridge. The later deliberate and somewhat forced confusion of the senses indulged by Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Huysmans has a respectable pedigree.

the order in which things have been impressed on the senses, and to connect the same properties with different objects, and different properties with the same objects: to combine our original impressions in all possible forms, and to modify these impressions themselves to a very great degree.<sup>1</sup>

The impressions are greatly modified because the objects in their first impression on the senses, no matter how intense and immediate those impressions might be, are "fixed and dead" without the active and intuitive moulding of the imagination--the "heightenings of the imagination." (Coleridge's theory coincides with Hazlitt's on this point, as the Table Talk entry for June 23rd, 1834, bears witness; there, Coleridge remarks that the imagination "modifies images, and gives unity to variety; it sees all things in one, il piu nell' uno."<sup>2</sup>) Mere association, although it too changes the order of sense impressions and in this way produces novelty, is unable to fuse these impressions into one--since fusion is an active process--which is the very stuff of great poetry. Association cannot escape from the original forms of the sensory impressions which it links, and is therefore denied the apprehension of the "power" or "intensity" of impression, the creation of which is a primary object of all great art:

The poetry of the Bible is that of imagination and of faith: it is abstract and disembodied: it is not the poetry of form, but of power; not of multitude, but of immensity. It does not divide into many, but aggrandizes into one.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>An Essay, I, 27.

<sup>2</sup>See also Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare . . . by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (ed. T. Ashe; London: George Bell and Sons, 1904), p. 220.

<sup>3</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 16.

Thus the final product of the imaginative process (although Hazlitt would have disputed the applicability of the word "process"), is the total impression made by any given phenomenon on the mind. Instead of dividing and disentangling the several points of sensations, or rearranging them, the imagination modifies and unites them by first destroying the form of the original sensory impression, and then, by intuition and immediate effort, reconstructing them into a unified whole. It "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate."

The associative aspect of imagination, then, differs from the established precepts of association in that it modifies, moulds, and unifies, and also in that what it creates is true, and in its highest manifestation not subject to dispute or error. This truth springs from the inherent and unstudied agreement between the mind and nature, which enables the mind, through imagination, to grasp nature's hidden analogies. Hazlitt agreed with Leibniz that there was "a germ or principle of truth, a pre-established harmony between its innate faculties and its acquired ideas, implied in the essence of the mind itself."<sup>1</sup> In other words, and this is an assumption of fundamental importance, when nature makes a sufficiently intense impression upon a mind endowed with a vigorous imagination, the mind will intuitively and effortlessly grasp the truth of that particular aspect of nature. Hazlitt defined genius as "some strong quality in the mind, answering to and bringing out some new and striking quality in nature."<sup>2</sup> He contended that great art, which is a product of

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<sup>1</sup>"On Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding," Lectures on English Philosophy, Works, II, 166.

<sup>2</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 42.

genius, does not consist in either a mere delineation of sense impressions or in abstractions of pure thought, divorced from sensation; the hidden analogies of nature, he maintained instead, can be grasped only by an intimate conjunction of the two mental processes--a conjunction confirmed and established in the imagination. "The arts," he wrote, are conversant both

with the world of thought within us, and with the world of sense without us--with what we know, and see, and feel intimately. They flow from the sacred shrine of our own breasts, and are kindled at the living lamp of nature.<sup>1</sup>

So the imagination can create something which is not only novel but unerringly true, but it can do this only by the most vital and intimate union of man's "innate faculties" and his "acquired ideas," and then only when both agents are operating with extraordinary intensity. Imagination is a systematising faculty,<sup>2</sup> and in creating unity out of variety, it shapes the sensory impressions to fit the "germ or principle of truth" inherent in the mind itself. "The imagination gives out what it has first absorbed by congeniality of temperament, what it has attracted and moulded into itself by elective affinity, as the loadstone draws and impregnates iron."<sup>3</sup> For the imagination is not only capable of drawing affinities from natural objects, but it also impregnates them with its own being. The process depends, in short, on an intimate interplay of the principles of external nature agreeing with and conforming to the

<sup>1</sup>"Why the Arts are not Progressive?" IV, 162.

<sup>2</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," XII, 51.

<sup>3</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 47.

"moulds" of truth inherent in the mind.

Thus, in Hazlitt's view, although the synthesising and creative imagination obtains its materials in the intense and forceful sensory impressions of external objects, its validity resides ultimately in the nature of the human mind. While he rejected the Kantian philosophy (there is no evidence to show that he really understood it) after reading Willich's translation, Hazlitt nevertheless took over Kant's dictum, "the mind alone is formative," and wove it into the fabric of his own. Simple sense impressions merely repeat and imitate the "externality" of objects, but the understanding, that faculty of "multiplying, varying, extending, combining, and comparing,"<sup>1</sup> can form something new from the impressions. The imagination is also formative, and goes further than the understanding: it does not only invent, but it can "invent according to nature,"<sup>2</sup> a nature "seen through the medium of passion . . . not diverted of that medium by means of literal truth or abstract reason."<sup>3</sup> Hazlitt holds that it is the strength of human passion which vitalises objects inherently fixed and dead, and which can grasp nature's hidden analogies. Imagination is the most human of all forms of mental activity, since it alone can perceive and then express in poetry the essential truth of human feeling. Poetry, the "eloquence of the imagination,"

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<sup>1</sup>An Essay, I, 20. And see "Madame De Staël's Account of German Philosophy," Works, XX, 21, and Schneider, The Aesthetics of William Hazlitt, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>"Mr. Kean's Macbeth," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 204.

<sup>3</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 8.

is "a fanciful structure; but a structure raised on the groundwork of the strongest and most intimate association of our ideas";<sup>1</sup> and it is rooted in the very marrow of man's thoughts and feelings. Impassioned poetry, the highest eloquence of all the truths perceived, synthesised, and recreated in the alembic of the intuitive "instinct of imagination," is "an emanation of the moral and intellectual parts of our nature, as well as of the sensitive--of the desire to know, the will to act, and the power to feel."<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that Hazlitt contends that whoever has a contempt for poetry, has a contempt for himself and for humanity.

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<sup>1</sup>"Poetry," XX, 211.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 6.

### CHAPTER III

Hazlitt's first published work was An Essay on the Principles of Human Action, which appeared in 1805. A dry, repetitious discussion of an ethical problem over which he had cudgelled his brains since his student days at the Unitarian College in Hackney, the volume, in the face of widespread public indifference, fell "still-born from the press."<sup>1</sup> To the end of his life, however, Hazlitt remained proud of this tortuously-written book, counting it the most important of his writings;<sup>2</sup> the "original discovery" which he announced in it he returned to and repeated many times,<sup>3</sup> and he made the theory propounded in it the foundation on which his subsequent literary, political, and ethical opinions were to rest.

An attempt to refute the ethical principles established by those materialist philosophers who supposed mankind to act only in obedience to the dictates of innate self-love, the Essay presents Hazlitt's earliest and most revealing definition of the sympathetic

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Causes of Popular Opinion," Works, XVII, 312.

<sup>2</sup>"A Reply to Z," Works, IX, 3.

<sup>3</sup>See i.a. the Preface to his abridgement of Tucker, 1807; "On Self-Love" in the Lectures on English Philosophy, 1812; "A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.," 1819; "On Self-Love and Benevolence," 1828. The "discovery" is examined with reference to Hazlitt's theory of tragedy in the next chapter.

function of the imagination.<sup>1</sup> Denying the primacy of the principle of self-love, Hazlitt contends both that the imagination is an "efficient and operative" principle of action,<sup>2</sup> and that benevolent affections are just as inherent in man's constitution as is any bent of self-love, while, if the truth were known, selfishness would be recognised as the product of habit.<sup>3</sup> In the Essay, the intuitive and synthetic instinct of imagination appears as a faculty which is capable of grasping knowledge and truth by annihilating the limitations imposed on the individual by the bonds of personal identity, and by simultaneously projecting itself into whatever is external to it. Keats's statement to Bailey, "if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existince and pick about the Gravel,"<sup>4</sup> is one of the most vivid expressions of that poet's theory of negative capability, which is almost identical to Hazlitt's theory of the sympathetic imagination. The latter's insistence on the mind's capacity for active participation in what is outside its sensuous limitations emphasises what is not only the basis of his ethical doctrine but also the substance of his conception of poetic genius,

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<sup>1</sup>Herschel Baker shows how the Essay reflects Hazlitt's solidly-rooted position in the English tradition of Dissent, and he also clarifies its embodiment of Hazlitt's radical and optimistic attitude to political reform--William Hazlitt (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 139-152. See also W. P. Albrecht's "Hazlitt's Principles of Human Action and the Improvement of Society," in If By Your Art: Testament to Percival Hunt, ed. A. L. Starrett (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1948).

<sup>2</sup>An Essay, I, 22.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Rollins, I, 186.

and explains much of his influence on Keats.

Debates on benevolence, on the belief that man could and should be moved to good works by natural sympathy with and love for man, were common in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In opposition to those "Modern Projectors," as Shaftesbury called them, "who would new frame the Human Heart; and have a mighty fancy to reduce all its Motions, Balances, and Weights to that one Principle and Foundation of a cool and deliberate Selfishness,"<sup>2</sup> eighteenth-century thinkers often posited the necessary existence of true benevolence in man's nature. The view that it existed as a reflection of God's beneficence and mercy innate in man, and that it was thus man's greatest virtue while self-love was the root of all vice, deeply influenced the writers of the early nineteenth century, but Hazlitt was especially stimulated by the points made by Butler, and, to a smaller degree, by Shaftesbury. The latter maintained, according to his disciple Charles Bulkley,<sup>3</sup> that

not only the benevolent affections . . . are deeply implanted in our natures; but they are likewise pointed out by a principle of moral approbation equally essential to the human mind as the first in

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<sup>1</sup>See Fielding's comments in Tom Jones, Bk. VI, ch. 1, and Bk. XIII, ch. 5; Amelia, Bk. III, ch. 5; Champion, Dec. 11th, 1739; True Patriot, Nov. 26th, 1745. The debates are carried on in the pages of--to mention a few of the better known--Barrow, King, Adam Smith, Stewart, Hume, Beattie, Kames, Alison and Reid, and against them, on the Hobbesian side, Mandeville, Rochefoucauld, Condillac, Helvetius, et al.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristicks . . . (London: n.p., 1743), Bk. II, pt. 3, sec. 3, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup>[Charles Bulkley], A Vindication of my Lord Shaftesbury (London: n.p., 1751), p. 52.

worth and excellence, and as those to which all other passions and affections are to be made subservient.

This principle of moral approbation, or, as Shaftesbury termed it, this innate "moral sense," is essentially intuitive in operation, and it infallibly directs one to concern for the public good, while "to be well affected," Shaftesbury categorically states, "towards the Public Interest and one's own, is not only consistent but inseparable."<sup>1</sup> Butler in turn enlarged on Shaftesbury's ideas, giving to intuition far greater authority and attributing to it a more pervasive influence on human action than the latter had ventured to ascribe to the "moral sense." Nonetheless, both Butler and Shaftesbury concluded that "Duty and Interest are perfectly coincident."<sup>2</sup>

Hazlitt was well acquainted with Butler's Analogy, which he had read when a boy, and he was introduced to the Sermons, the fullest exposition of Butler's ethical position, by Coleridge in 1798.<sup>3</sup> Two years before his death, Hazlitt acknowledged that Butler

<sup>1</sup>Characteristicks, Bk. II, pt. I, sec. 8, p. 81. Shaftesbury's followers, with immense significance for the trend of Romantic writing, understood the moral sense to imply a measure of feeling; the already growing tendency to refer in matters of aesthetic judgment to a criterion including emotion thus received a strong and respectable impetus from the authority (however broadly interpreted) of benevolist and empirical philosophy.

<sup>2</sup>The Works of Joseph Butler, D.C.L., ed. W.E. Gladstone (2 vols.; Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1896), II, 76. (Sermon III.) Cf. Sermon I, pp. 35 ff.

<sup>3</sup>"My First Acquaintance with Poets," Works, XVII, 113. Baker, in his biography (p. 144 n.), suggests that as Hazlitt had formulated his theory by the time he read the sermons, Butler's ideas had no influence on it. He overlooks the fact that "On Personal Identity," subjoined to the Analogy, is a condensation of the central problem treated in the first three sermons.

had been the first to produce a satisfactory rebuttal to the case presented by the sensationists;<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt's "original discovery," the basis for his own theory of benevolence, is founded on exactly the same grounds. In the essay "On Personal Identity," appended to the Analogy, Butler had asserted that as man's existence is corporeally and actually confined to the present moment, and that identity as such in any future moment is actually non-existent, man can necessarily have no more interest in his own future identity than in the future identity of another--

If the self or person of today, and that of tomorrow, are not the same, but only like persons; the person of today is really no more interested in what will befall the person of tomorrow, than in what will befall any other person.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore the very nature of personal identity does not admit self-love to be the sole principle of human action. Hazlitt takes over this theme, and proceeds to insist that imagination is not only the basis of all voluntary action, but that it is the cornerstone of all morality.

Hazlitt visualises personal identity as being rooted in two faculties, neither of which is operative in the future: in sensation, or rather consciousness, and in memory.<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of personality, he suggests, is "nothing more than conscious individuality";<sup>4</sup> it is "the power of perceiving that you are and

<sup>1</sup>"On Self-Love and Benevolence," XX, 162.

<sup>2</sup>Butler, Works, I, 393.

<sup>3</sup>An Essay, I, 38.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

what you are from the immediate reflection of the mind on it's own operations, sensations, or ideas. It cannot be affected in the same direct manner by the impressions and ideas existing in the minds of others."<sup>1</sup> Thus the individual, as the subject of his own consciousness, feels himself to be dissociated from whatever is external to him. Furthermore, this state of consciousness can be attained only through the media of sensation and memory, which relate only to the present and to the past, and thus, Hazlitt reasons, personal identity cannot relate to the future:

Suppose a number of men employed to cast a mound into the sea. As far as it has gone, the workmen pass backwards and forwards on it, it stands firm in it's place, and though it recedes farther and farther from the shore, it is still joined to it. A man's personal identity and self-interest have just the same principle and extent, and can reach no farther than his actual existence.<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious, to go further, that "all action undertaken with a view to produce a certain event or the contrary, must relate to the future,"<sup>3</sup> and not only is the future the only subject for action, but clearly it is unreal, or ideal:

The primary, essential motive of the volition of anything must be the idea of that thing, and the idea solely. For the thing itself, which is the object of desire and pursuit, is by the supposition a nonentity. It is willed for that very reason, that it is supposed not to exist.<sup>4</sup>

Our own future, therefore, is no less unreal than that of another's, and our interest in it inherently no more acute.<sup>5</sup> All action,

<sup>1</sup>An Essay, I, 36.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 40 n.

<sup>3</sup>"A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.," Works, IX, 54.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>"On Self-Love," II, 232.

Hazlitt argues, following the theory of the moral sense propounded by Shaftesbury, is directed toward what is good,<sup>1</sup> and

there is naturally no essential difference between the motives by which I am impelled to the pursuit of my own good and those by which I am impelled to seek the good of others.<sup>2</sup>

If we accept the proposition that the imagination is the only efficient and operative cause of action, it follows that the limitations of personality or identity can be transcended only by that faculty, which, Hazlitt holds, by a projection of itself into the future discovers the personal good which is the subject for action. An important corollary to Hazlitt's basic theme is his contention that the imagination is able also to project itself into the identity of another individual or object, just as easily and efficiently as it can throw itself forward into the ideal future; both future and external object are equally ideal to the imagination. The same faculty, then, which enables a person to "throw himself forward into the future, to anticipate unreal events, and to be affected by his own imaginary interest," also makes him capable "in a greater or less degree of entering into the feelings and interests of others."<sup>3</sup>

Hazlitt thus considers imagination to be the only faculty by which we can truly know other people and other things. Just as our sympathy "is always directly excited in proportion to our

<sup>1</sup>An Essay, I, 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 42. My italics.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

knowledge of the pain, and of the dispositions and feelings of the sufferer,"<sup>1</sup> so the only perception which another can have of a similar state of feeling in me is by means of the imagination.<sup>2</sup> If this intuitive instinct of imagination is operative to such a degree that it not only can identify itself with the sensations and the sufferings of others, but can make the mind a conscious repetition of these feelings, then "all proper personal distinction would be lost either in pure self-love, or in perfect universal sympathy."<sup>3</sup> Shelley was, of course, invoking this belief--almost a Romantic slogan--when he insisted that "a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own."<sup>4</sup> The most intense imaginative identification, the most complete annihilation of personal identity, is a characteristic of the heroic, says Hazlitt, in any sphere of activity:

To play the hero, it is only necessary to be wound up to such an unavoidable interest in any thing, as reflection, prudence, natural instinct, have no power over. To be a hero, is, in other words, to lose the sense of our personal identity in some object dearer to us than ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Hazlitt, it is clear, holds that true greatness is a product of active

<sup>1</sup>An Essay, I, 23.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>See above, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>"Guy Faux," Works, XX, 104. This is not, of course, Hazlitt's last word on the subject of heroism. See chapters VI and VII for a discussion of his conception of the tragic hero.

effort by the intuitive imagination, making itself the "conscious repetition" of the ideas and feelings of another--not the result of a reasonable reflection on values and consequences, not the reward of rational prudence. The sympathetic imagination enables the individual truly to know the essential character and feelings of the other before him, to recreate them within himself; "proper personal distinction" is obliterated, and, since all voluntary action relates to the future and is directed by the moral sense toward the good, the individual's actions concerning the other will be morally impeccable--if the identification is complete.

For Hazlitt, greatness in art as well as in morality consists in the intense annihilation of personal identity, and the subsequent identification of the artist with his subject. Perhaps, he felt, in weighing the claims to immortality of the long procession of English and French writers of the first rank, perhaps Shakespeare alone had this faculty to an extraordinary degree.<sup>1</sup> The great majority of artists fail to reach the heights, since it is rarely that a man "even of lofty genius will be able to do more than carry on his own feelings and character, or some prominent and ruling passion, into fictitious and uncommon situations."<sup>2</sup> The superlative quality of

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<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 42.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Compare Coleridge's statement that "it is easy to cloathe Imaginary Beings with our own Thoughts & Feelings; but to send ourselves out of ourselves, to think ourselves in to the Thoughts and feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly & strangely different from our own / hoc labor, hoc opus / and who has atchieved it? Perhaps only Shakespere." Letter to William Sotheby, 13th July, 1802. Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (4 vols.; Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1956), II, 810.

Shakespeare's "instinct of imagination" placed him in the forefront of those who had what Hazlitt calls "gusto"--a rare and profound excitation of the imagination, emotional in character, by which in its identifying process it is stimulated to apprehend the dynamic character of the object, and to express that character in a vivid emotional equivalent. The process is not a cloaking of the object with the artist's feelings, a half-controlled overflow of natural sensibility; it is not a projection of the artist's feelings into the object which has aroused them, an empathic response; it is rather intuition, through sympathy, of the dynamic, informing essence of the external object, and is therefore an objective process. In grasping the character of the object, the imagination grasps a form of truth; in a state of vital and intense sympathetic emotion, or gusto, the imagination is able to fuse and quicken into a new creation the different sensory and emotional aspects of the object. When the artist has gusto, when his imagination's fusing power comes into play through sympathetic excitement, then all the artist's senses will be brought into operation--they will receive and modify the various sense-impressions of the object, and they will involuntarily augment each other, producing such imagery as Keats's "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might," or

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet . . .

In Hazlitt's opinion, Raphael and Titian had gusto, but Claude, Vandyke, and West did not; the sculptors of the Elgin Marbles had it, but the later Graeco-Romans, as we have seen, did not:

There is a gusto in the colouring of Titian. Not only do his heads seem to think--his bodies seem to feel. This is what the Italians mean by the morbidezza of his flesh-colour. It seems sensitive and alive all over; not merely to have the look and texture of flesh, but the feeling in itself. . . . The gusto in the Greek statues is of a very singular kind. The sense of perfect form nearly occupies the whole mind, and hardly suffers it to dwell on any other feeling. It seems enough for them to be, without acting or suffering. Their forms are ideal, spiritual. Their beauty is power. By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of pain or passion; by their beauty they are deified.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, gusto in art "is power or passion in defining any object; . . . there is hardly any object entirely devoid of expression," says Hazlitt,

without some character of power belonging to it, some precise association with pleasure or pain: and it is in giving this truth of character from the truth of feeling, whether in the highest or the lowest degree, but always in the highest degree of which the subject is capable, that gusto consists.<sup>2</sup>

Thus gusto is both a characteristic of the products of intense feeling, and also the intense feeling itself which characterises the creative power of the greatest artists. It is an inherent quality, enabling the man to concentrate his powers on a given subject and to drain its essence into telling expression. Through gusto, the artist is able to provide the truth of character of his subject from the intensity of his own feeling. In this way his work will reflect a universal "eternal character," a living principle, since he will not only have caught with inimitable precision the character of the object (which is a concrete and particular point in the wider scheme of nature),

<sup>1</sup>"On Gusto," The Round Table, Works, IV, 77-79.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

but also whatever has aroused his feelings will affect mankind in general.

Gusto, then, has in Hazlitt's critical writing a two-fold application: it characterises both the intensity of the artist's feeling, and the object the truth of which the artist has intuitively expressed. Great art for Hazlitt is the combination of object and feeling, a balance between the artist's "power and passion" and the object's internal character. Milton, Hazlitt wrote, had great gusto. "He repeats his blows twice; grapples with and exhausts his subject. His imagination has a double relish of its objects, an inveterate attachment to the things he describes, and to the words describing them.

--'Or where Chinese drive  
With sails and wind their cany waggons light.'"<sup>1</sup>

It should be noticed that Hazlitt expressly avoids the equation of gusto's validity with the power of natural sentiment: he never confuses a trust in the power of the imagination with a trust in "natural feeling," that sentimentality which characterises a great deal of the popular literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> What he termed gusto does not include the maxim that "feeling is all," that the end of art (as some of those who came after Goethe considered it) is self-expression; he would

<sup>1</sup>"On Gusto," IV, 79-80.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. "On the Character of Rousseau," The Round Table, Works, IV, 88-89, 92; "Mr. Southey," The Spirit of the Age, Works, XI, 80; "Mr. Wordsworth," Ibid., p. 87; "On the Living Poets," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 162; "Sismondi's Literature of the South," Works, XVI, 55.

have denied the possibility of the production of great art by any artist who carried self-expression to the extreme, typical perhaps of nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle writing, in which artistic creation is justified and judged on the grounds that it provides a cathartic release for the artist. The artist who, in Hazlitt's view, "carries on his own feelings and character" into the work of art and is unable to produce an objective emotional equivalent for the object he tries to define, generates what Eliot a century later was to call a "dissociation of sensibility" in that work: the proper equilibrium between subject and object, and between emotion and sensation, will have been destroyed. The writer who presents only what he feels diminishes the internal character, the "living principle" of the object, and therefore detracts from the universality of his work. Without imagination and gusto, feeling is circumscribed within the individual. With gusto, imagination's highest form in the sphere of art, the bounds of personal identity are obliterated, and feeling is carried out of the self by the imagination, which fastens onto the essence of the object and empowers the artist intuitively to recognise that essence and to express it. It is on these grounds that Hazlitt took issue with Mme. de Staël's judgment of Rousseau: "Je crois que l'imagination étoit la première de ses facultés, et qu'elle absorboit même toutes les autres."<sup>1</sup> This opinion, Hazlitt remarked, was "radically wrong." The only quality which Rousseau had possessed in an eminent degree, which "raised him above ordinary

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Hazlitt in the Round Table essay "On the Character of Rousseau," Works, IV, 88 n.

men, and which gave to his writings and opinions an influence greater, perhaps, than has been exerted by any individual in modern times, was an extreme sensibility. . . . He had the most intense consciousness of his own existence."<sup>1</sup> For Rousseau, Hazlitt believed, feeling had certainly been all; he had been a great writer, but he could never "play the hero."

Hazlitt's praise of Shakespeare rests on his conclusion that Shakespeare expressed himself only as the medium of the thoughts and feelings of others--he had no personal identity, no self-interest, and his concern was only with the identity of the object of his immediate attention:

The striking peculiarity of Shakespear'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 peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. . . . He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. . . . He had not only in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively. . . . He had only to think of any thing, in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it.<sup>2</sup>

A more vividly-detailed consideration of the same opinion is that of Keats, who had been attending Hazlitt's Lectures on the English Poets in January 1818; as Walter Jackson Bate has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> the influence of Hazlitt's doctrine of the poetical character had crystallised out

<sup>1</sup>"On the Character of Rousseau," IV, 88.

<sup>2</sup>"On Shakespear and Milton," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup>In his Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), pp. 28-33.

for Hazlitt's protégé by the following autumn, as his letter of October 27th to Woodhouse shows:

As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself--it has no self--it is every thing and nothing--It has no character--it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated--It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.<sup>1</sup> What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet.<sup>2</sup> It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body--The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no identity--he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. . . . It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature--how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated--not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children.<sup>3</sup>

For Hazlitt, as for Keats, the poetical character is not intent

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hazlitt's remark that "there was no respect of persons with Shakespeare . His genius shone equally on the evil and the good." ("On Shakespear and Milton," V, 47.)

<sup>2</sup>Cf. "On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 42: [Shakespeare was a man with] a perfect sympathy with all things, yet alike indifferent to all: who did not tamper with nature or warp her to his own purposes. . . . Genius in ordinary . . . is just the reverse of the cameleon; for it does not borrow, but lend its colour to all about it."

<sup>3</sup>Rollins, I, 386-387. Woodhouse's comments on this letter, expressed in a note to Taylor, are also illuminating: "I believe him to be right with regard to his own poetical character--and I perceive clearly the distinction he draws between himself and those of the Wordsworth School. . . . The highest order of

upon itself but on its subject; it does not attempt to present its own peculiar identity, but makes the mind the "conscious repetition" of the identities of others.

Poetry of sentiment, the poetry written by men who, like Rousseau, are able to carry only their own feelings and character into fictitious and uncommon situations, may be termed poetry of identity, since its excellence depends upon the greatness of the poet's personality, on the stature of his "conscious individuality"; if his feelings and character or his passions are sufficiently pronounced and interesting, he may become a great poet, but he can never "play the hero." Hazlitt considered that Wordsworth had a full measure of poetic genius, but that it was inferior to Shakespeare's:

Mr. Wordsworth . . . is the greatest, that is, the most original poet of the present day, only because he is the greatest egotist. . . . Whatever does not relate exclusively and wholly to himself, is foreign to his views. He contemplates a whole-length figure of himself, he looks

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Poet will not only possess all the above powers but will have as high an imag<sup>n</sup> that he will be able to throw his own soul into any object he sees or imagines, so as to feel be sensible of, & express, all that the object itself wo<sup>d</sup> see feel be sensible of or express-- & he will speak out of that object--so that his own self will with the Exception of the Mechanical part be 'annihilated.'--and it is the excess of this power that I suppose Keats to speak, when he says he has no identity. . . . Shakspe<sup>r</sup> was a poet of the kind above ment<sup>d</sup>-- and he was perhaps the only one besides Keats who possessed this power in an extr<sup>v</sup> degree . . . Let us pursue Speculation on these Matters: & we shall soon be bro<sup>t</sup> to believe in the truth of every Syllable of Keats's letter, taken as a description of himself & his own Ideas and feel<sup>gs</sup>. . . . He has affirmed that he can conceive of a billiard Ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness volubility. & the rapidity of its motion." Rollins, I, 388-389.

Coleridge, too, believed that the poetical character in its highest manifestation was an intuitive, self-annihilating faculty. Characteristically, he announced that he had from his youth been training his imagination by practising projective sympathy. See Biographia Epistolaris, ed. A. Turnbull (2 vols.; London: George Bell and Sons, 1911), II, 153-154.

along the unbroken line of his personal identity . . .  
his genius is the effect of his individual character.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's genius, then, is that of the egotistical sublime--  
it is the highest perfection of the poetry of identity. Hazlitt  
held that, in general, the strength and consistency of the  
imagination ("the power of carrying on a given feeling into other  
situations, which must be done best according to the hold which the  
feeling itself has taken of the mind"<sup>2</sup>) was in proportion to the  
strength and depth of feeling. He defined genius, "or originality,"  
as "some strong quality in the mind, answering to and bringing out  
some new and striking quality in nature,"<sup>3</sup> and asserted that the  
"test and triumph of originality" was

not to shew us what has never been . . . but to point  
out to us what is before our eyes and under our feet,  
though we have had no suspicion of its existence, for  
want of sufficient strength of intuition, of determined  
grasp of mind to seize and retain it.<sup>4</sup>

Wordsworth's genius and originality, however, consisted in drawing

the outgoings of his own heart, the shapings of his own  
fancy. . . . An intense intellectual egotism swallows up  
every thing. . . . The power of his mind preys upon itself.  
It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe.  
He lives in the busy solitude of his own heart; in the deep  
silence of thought.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, Hazlitt felt, Wordsworth had only genius in  
ordinary, which is inferior to true imaginative genius; a more  
obstinate and less versatile gift, it is "exclusive and self-willed,

<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>5</sup>"Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem, The Excursion,"  
Works, XIX, 10-11.

quaint and peculiar . . . it excels in some one pursuit by being blind to all excellence but its own."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt was driven to conjecture that Wordsworth had "a repugnance to admit anything that tells for itself, without the interpretation of the poet, . . . a systematic unwillingness to share the palm with his subject."<sup>2</sup> Considering as he did that the only feelings Wordsworth knew were his own, and the only emotions the "outgoings of his own heart," Hazlitt must certainly have remarked with satisfaction how Wordsworth's definition of poetry--"the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"--seemed to echo his own characterisation of the future Laureate's style.

In contrast, Shakespeare, who "by an art like that of the ventriloquist" throws himself out of himself, obliterates his own identity, and so merges himself in the identity of others that his ideas seem to be but the "mere conscious repetitions" of their most intimate and deeply-felt emotions. "He appears to have been all the characters, and in all the situations he describes. It is as if either he had had all their feelings, or had lent them all his genius to express themselves."<sup>3</sup> The magnitude of his genius is the more remarkable when we realise that each of Shakespeare's characters "is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 42-43.

<sup>2</sup>"Character of . . . The Excursion," XIX, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup>"Henry IV," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 284.

<sup>4</sup>"Schlegel on the Drama," Works, XVI, 91.

By refusing to obtrude his own identity onto the scene, Shakespeare avoided mere description of emotions; he expressed them as vividly and with the same intensity as they are encountered in nature. His genius consisted in "the faculty of transforming himself at will into whatever he chose: his originality was the power of seeing every object from the exact point of view in which others would see it."<sup>1</sup> This genius and power enabled him to express phenomena which lesser poets and men of less intense feeling could only explain or judge in the light of their own reflections on the subject.<sup>2</sup>

From one point of view, therefore, Shakespeare was of all poets the most amoral, since he was endowed with the most powerful imagination, and, as Keats said, it is in the nature of the poetical character to delight equally in conceiving Iagos and Imogens. For Shakespeare was "a man of genius, raised above the definition of genius";<sup>3</sup> he "did not tamper with nature or warp her to his own purposes." He had no didactic aim in writing his plays; he was content to leave the moralising to his audiences and readers, and to apply himself only to the expression of what really exists in nature-- "he had 'a mind reflecting ages past,' and present:--all the people that ever lived are there. There was no respect of persons with him. His genius shone equally on the evil and on the good, on the wise and the foolish."<sup>4</sup> All was in his mind as it was in nature; there

<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 42.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. "Othello," "Henry VI," "The Merry Wives of Windsor," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 200-201, 293, 351; "Mr. Kean's Macbeth," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 204.

<sup>3</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 42.

<sup>4</sup>"On Shakespear and Milton," V, 47.

was no destructive obtrusion of personal identity.

This "generic" quality of Shakespeare's imagination is enough to distinguish his poetry from Wordsworth's and almost everyone else's--from the poetry of all those who are unwilling or unable to share the palm with their subjects. Shakespeare's mind was guided by the dictates of an extraordinary power of imagination, and in his practice his full attention was elicited by his subjects, and not by any impressive "interpretations" which his reason might have formulated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hazlitt felt that Otway, though he had "warmth of genius," nevertheless "indulged his mere sensibility too much, yielding to the immediate impression or emotion excited in his own mind, and not placing himself in the minds and situations of others." ("On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," Works, VI, 355.) Beaumont and Fletcher, too, "with all their prodigious merits . . . thought less of their subject, and more of themselves. . . . [They] were the first who made a play-thing of it, or a convenient vehicle for the display of their own powers." ("On Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Ford, and Massinger," VI, 248.)

Keats's letter to Reynolds, dated February 3rd, 1818, shows clear evidence of the poet's appreciation of this point, which Hazlitt had recently made in the third of the Lectures on the English Poets--a course at which Keats had been an enthusiastic member of the audience. He writes "It may be said that we ought to read from our Contemporaries. that Wordsworth &c should have their due from us. but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist." Rollins, I, 223.

While he acknowledged that Wordsworth was a great poet, and the founder not only of a new school but also of a new genre of poetry (Hazlitt does not connect poems like The Excursion with the fairly long tradition of confessional poetry), Hazlitt was positive and immovable in his insistence that Wordsworth held the mirror of poetry not up to nature but up to himself, and that this was the over-riding weakness of his work. "Vanity," he wrote, "and imagination are two incompatible qualities." ("Travelling Abroad," Works, XVII, 338. And see "On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 45.)

Shakespeare's imagination owes its pre-eminence to its consummate ability to seize and express poetic truth. Poetry, Hazlitt said, is the language of the imagination, and its proper scope is the expression of those truths which imagination grasps. Just as the imagination differs in its operations from reason, so poetry, its product, differs in its expression from reason's products. It is of the very nature of poetic language to exaggerate, confuse and distort the objective reality of literal truth. The poet, who "aims at effect,"<sup>1</sup> tries to recreate in language the intense impression made by a phenomenon upon his imagination. In order that he may recreate and express this immediate impression, his imagination must "aim at aggrandizing some one object, person or thing at the expense of all others."<sup>2</sup> But the language of poetry, Hazlitt said,

is not the less true to nature, because it is false in point of fact; but so much the more true and natural, if it conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind.<sup>3</sup>

It is the intensity of the final effect or impression which "pushes the poet over the verge of matter-of-fact, and justifies him in

<sup>1</sup>"Coriolanus," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 214.

<sup>2</sup>The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Works, XIII, 51, n.1. Poetry, Hazlitt says, "signifies the excess of the imagination beyond the actual or ordinary impression of any object or feeling." ("On Poetry in General," V, 3.) Cf. "The imagination is serious, even to passion, and exceeds truth by laying a greater stress on the object." ("Definition of Wit," Works, XX, 360.)

<sup>3</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 4.

resorting to the licence of fiction to express what without his "winged words" must have remained forever untold."<sup>1</sup>

But if poetry is "every thing by excess,"<sup>2</sup> the literal absurdity does not make itself apparent, lost as it is in the unity and integrity of the final impression it creates. "In a poetical comparison," Hazlitt maintained, "there cannot be a sense of incongruity or surprise";<sup>3</sup> the mind must not stop to analyse and dissect the particulars of which a poetic image is compounded--the image must "evaporate of itself."<sup>4</sup> If we compare a giant to a tower, the magnitude of wonder aroused by the image compensates for the disparity in literal truth: "the intensity of the feeling makes up for the disproportion of the objects."<sup>5</sup> Thus the medium which the poet adopts to recreate his own emotion at a given phenomenon, though false in point of fact, is true to nature only if it succeeds in its sole intention--the recreation of emotion. In this sense, poetry is but an instrument to raise emotion, and its validity must be adjudged according to the strength and consistency of its final result.

Furthermore, the poet is justified in creating an intense emotional feeling. Hazlitt maintained that the mind not only has

<sup>1</sup>"Poetry," Works, XX, 211.

<sup>2</sup>"Coriolanus," IV, 214. Cf. Keats's statement to Taylor that "Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity," in his letter of 27th February, 1818. Rollins, I, 238.

<sup>3</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 360.

<sup>4</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 15. Cf. Keats's assertion that "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." Rollins, I, 192.

<sup>5</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 4.

"a germ or principle of truth" but has also implanted in its core "a craving for strong excitement." "I affirm, Sir," he wrote to Gifford,

that poetry, that the imagination, generally speaking, delights in power, in strong excitement, as well as in truth, in good, in right, whereas pure reason and the moral sense approve only of the true and good.<sup>1</sup>

This intense emotional reaction, moreover, is part of the whole truth of a phenomenon, since that is only a half-truth which is the delineation of an object abstracted from its effect on the observer. Indeed, this strong excitement, inextricably interwoven with the threads of immediate sensation and past experience, forms the substance of the imagination. Imagination, in Hazlitt's view, is that dynamic, vital energy, which, after the mind has grasped the essence of an object by its sympathetic identification with the object, modifies, coadunates, and synthesises its impressions into a new reality--a reality as true as nature itself. And it this whole intuitive, sympathetic, synthetic process, integrated by strong emotion, which enables the highest order of poet to grasp and express the fundamental truths of human nature or of any other phenomena. For, unlike reason, which when it analyses life can see it only as a series of static impressions, imagination can perceive the underlying and ceaselessly fluid truth of nature. Poetry, says Hazlitt, "describes the flowing, not the fixed . . . throws us back upon the past, forward into the future";<sup>2</sup> the imagination perceives

<sup>1</sup>"Letter to William Gifford, Esq.," Works, IX, 37.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 3-5. Keats's article on Kean in the Champion, Dec. 21st, 1817, has clear echoes of this passage.

that the whole truth consists not in the delineation of the immediate surface and momentary contours of anything, but in its relation with what has been and what is to come, as well as with what is. For this reason, therefore, poetry is superior to painting, since

painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies. Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself: poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it. But this last is the proper province of the imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Although the hidden analogies are not, as we have already seen, inherent in the object itself, nevertheless they comprise the whole truth of that object and can only be perceived by the imagination.

Thus, for Hazlitt, the imagination (which is essentially vital, while objects as objects are fixed and dead) is directed in its intuitive working to the fluctuating character of nature. Above all, it takes as its exclusive province the elusive and hidden energy and movement of human nature and emotion. "Shakespear's mastery over his subject," Hazlitt averred, "was owing to a knowledge of the connecting links of the passions,"<sup>2</sup> and it was in this knowledge and in his ability to express it that his superlative skill resided:

The dialogues in Lear, in Macbeth, that between Brutus and Cassius, and nearly all those in Shakespear, where the interest is wrought up to its highest pitch, afford examples of this dramatic fluctuation of pattern. . . . In Shakespear

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 10. Compare Coleridge's "painting cannot go beyond a certain point; poetry rejects all control, all confinement." Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare and Other English Poets, ed. T. Ashe (London: George Bell and Sons, 1904), p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>"Lear," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 260.

[the interest] is like the sea, agitated this way and that, and loud-lashed by furious storms.<sup>1</sup>

In his plays, Hazlitt observes, there is a "continual composition and decomposition . . . a fermentation of every particle in the whole mass."<sup>2</sup> It is this movement, this fluctuation of all the elements, which comprises the essential metabolism of all life. Feelings and emotions are not static, nor reducible to photographic description; they are in a constant ferment, always taking on new forms, and giving rise to new reactions. Only Shakespeare has been able to express, without pausing to describe, the essential truth of human passion, the

ebb and flow of the feeling, its pauses and feverish starts, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the manner in which it avails itself of every passing word or gesture, its haste to repel insinuation, the alternate contraction and dilatation of the soul.<sup>3</sup>

It is in the understanding and portrayal of man's strongest feelings and passions that the greatest strength of genius resides.<sup>4</sup> It is

<sup>1</sup>"On Shakespear and Milton," V, 52.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 51. Cf. Keats: "The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty . . ." Rollins, I, 265.

<sup>3</sup>"Lear," IV, 259.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 271, and "On the German Drama," Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, Works, VI, 362. Cf. Keats: "There is an ellectric fire in human nature tending to purify--so that among these human creature there is continually some birth of new heroism. . . . May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind m[a]y fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a stoat or the anxiety of a Deer? Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel--By a superior being our reasoning may take the same tone--though erroneous they may be fine--This is the very thing in which consists poetry." Rollins, II, 80-81.

only by the most unusual development of the instinct of imagination --the most eloquent expression of which is to be found in the tragedies of Shakespeare--and by the most perfect integration of all its faculties of sympathetically grasping and intuitively synthesising the truths of immediate sensation and past experience--only by this extraordinary capacity that a man, as a moral agent or as a poet, can "play the hero" by grasping the highest truth of nature, the truth of human feelings. "This is the true imagination," says Hazlitt, "to put yourself in the place of others, and to feel and speak for them."<sup>1</sup> Only great poetry can adequately express this truth, and therefore it is the most "heroic" of all the arts.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Drama: No. VII," Works, XVIII, 345.

PART II

TRAGEDY

## CHAPTER IV

A slight acquaintance with the works of the major Romantics leads all too frequently to the assumption that these men were, in general, so vitally concerned with questions of natural beauty, the sensibility of the imaginative reader, and the psychology of the poetic process, that they were to a more or less culpable degree unconcerned with the intellectual and emotional currents underlying the political and social controversies of their day. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth; almost without exception, the great poets and critics of the fifty years preceding the first Reform Bill were "committed" to an extent seldom equalled by English artists in any period. Living through an age in which society, and ways of looking at society, were decisively changed by the rise of modern democracy and the development of industrial technology, they regarded their artistic theory and practice as simply one aspect of the wider issues of the time--as personal expressions of the fundamental attitudes generally exercising the minds of the thinking public. The two generations of Romantic writers produced men who not only wrote political and social comment in addition to their poetry and criticism, but who also acted purposefully upon their political beliefs. It is facile to characterise Shelley's distribution of pamphlets, Byron's part in a political war, and Coleridge's early involvement with the French Revolution merely as part of the

Romantic revolt against conformity; these activities, and those of a similar nature of their contemporaries, should rather be seen in the light of a widespread unity of purpose foreign, at first glance, to twentieth-century notions of the relative isolation of the Romantic artist from his environment--notions nourished, paradoxically enough, by imperfectly understood interpretations of Romantic statements about the Artist as Antenna of the Race. In fact, the political and social activities and attitudes of the Romantic writers had a substantial connection with the personal experience upon which their poetry and their aesthetic drew: "a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man."<sup>1</sup> The Romantic impulse toward drama, and more especially toward tragedy, is less obscure if we understand the implications of this fact. And the nature of Hazlitt's view of the values which tragedy assumes, a view which is informed and shaped by the moral attitude which he adopted, is clarified when his opinions regarding man's position amid his fellows are known.

Hazlitt's position in the English tradition of Dissent has been exhaustively investigated by his latest biographer,<sup>2</sup> and the effect upon his political attitudes (which at every point permeate his criticism of literature) of the radicalism to which throughout his life he passionately adhered has been rather more superficially

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Herschel Clay Baker, William Hazlitt (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

treated.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, further investigation of that political theory will illustrate the basis of Hazlitt's "tragic view" in an age traditionally labelled "optimistic" and by virtue of this optimism, "non-tragic."

The Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation occupied Hazlitt's mind for over thirty years. He first conceived it in 1792, while a student at Hackney, and he states that it took its origin in a discussion of the Test and Corporation Acts --measures naturally regarded by Dissenters as unjustly discriminatory. On internal evidence, the essay's final form may be dated to 1828, two years before its author's death,<sup>2</sup> and it was first published by his son in 1836.

It is material to recapitulate the social conditions under which Hazlitt came to write the essay, since it is apparent that a theorist's ideas are not only shaped by the prevailing currents of thought--whether he synthesise those currents or react against them--but just as directly by the character of the events through which he lives, and which he believes, as Hazlitt did, spring in some measure from those currents.

Before the close of the eighteenth century, and until well after the termination of the war with France, conditions in England were extremely unstable. The Reign of Terror had galvanised Burke into an eloquence which swayed many against the revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup>By Crane Brinton, The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 122-146.

<sup>2</sup>Project . . ., Works, XIX, 303, and pp. 366-367 n.

spirit which they had formerly applauded; the doctrine of the Rights of Man was, in England at any rate, officially almost discredited; the country was teetering on the brink of social and economic collapse. In addition to the high taxes imposed owing to the exigencies of the war, poor harvests were experienced, with a resultant climb in the price of wheat. The situation of the working man was precarious. During the war itself, industry was frequently disrupted by the legalised depredations against trade which were necessary to sustain hostilities; and after the war was over, the distress of the labouring class became even more severe because of the breakdown of the home and foreign markets, which was caused by the growing discrepancy between demand and production. The labour market was flooded by demobilised soldiers, wages lagged far behind prices raised by the Corn Laws, and depreciation of currency brought starvation into the homes of the artisans, who were already depressed by the introduction of more efficient labour-saving machines, and of the farmhands, whose traditional position of smallholder had been undermined by a laissez-faire economy and by over three thousand Enclosure Acts in sixty years.

As a consequence of the fear of civil commotion prevalent among the members of the establishment, legislation was enacted to restrain the labouring class by curtailing its rights. The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended in 1794 and again in 1817; in 1795 Bills were passed through Parliament which prohibited public meetings; societies of working-men were suppressed and their leaders prosecuted, and the Combination Laws of 1799 and 1800 prohibited strikes. The

Poor Laws, enacted in 1601 to provide for the needy from parish funds collected by levy from property owners, had by the close of the eighteenth century decayed into a system which provided for little short of slavery. The Enclosure Acts deprived the poor of their former facilities for farming and grazing, and the "Speenhamland Act," in adjusting the labourer's wage in proportion to the price of wheat, and providing that the discrepancy between this theoretical wage and that actually paid be made up from the Poor Rates, served to cast the worker on the parish for subsistence.

The generally-accepted concept of morality which lay behind the temporarily expedient measures taken by the government stemmed originally from the natural-right theory first systematically formulated by Hobbes and modified by Locke. Hobbes postulated a "state of nature" in which man has certain natural rights, including the right to property, to the pursuit of happiness, and, most important, to self-preservation. It is reason, working from self-interest, which dictates man's voluntary actions. (Reason, of course, operates only on the data presented by the senses.) In the state of nature, the individual's rights are constantly invaded by the self-interested actions of other individuals. Because man naturally seeks pleasure and turns from pain, and because he wishes to carry on his existence with the greatest degree of profit and pleasure possible, the rational individual, calculating the effect of certain causes upon his continued existence, will conclude that if he is to safeguard his rights he must allow others the same measure of liberty against himself as he would wish against them. Furthermore,

he will realise that in order to safeguard this balance of rights and interests, he must surrender to the commonwealth his powers of sanction. In Hobbes's scheme, and, for the most part, in Locke's, morality implicitly becomes a matter of rational prudence and calculation of self-interest. The fundamental principle underlying the whole fabric is the right to self-preservation, and it is from this that the concept of political justice is deduced.

Hazlitt, as we have seen, stood opposed to self-interest and to reason as the basis of action, both in morality and in art. But in his concern to find an answer to the old, thorny question of the liberty of the individual and the authority of the state, he proceeds upon premises similar to those just outlined. That these premises were not absolutely valid, and that the theory he built on them was imperfect, he fully realised; and it is in this realisation and the concept with which he tried to make good the imperfection that his view of man in society, and by extension his view of tragedy, is based. It is, moreover, in this view of man that he is perhaps most characteristically a Romantic.

In the Project, while he accepts the necessity of the commonwealth's demand for some form of tributary payment in return for the supervisory function which it performs, Hazlitt attempts to show how the position of the individual may be strengthened in order that the payment of that tribute, or the mere obedience demanded, shall not impair the natural rights of

of the individuals who constitute the commonwealth. In addition, and as corollaries to his main argument, Hazlitt speaks out in favour of universal suffrage, trade unions, and the right of labourers to strike, and he illustrates the injustices inherent in the system of property representation.

Hazlitt begins the Project with the definition of a right: it is simply that which the individual thinks is good and useful, and which has the sanction of his will as such. Rights originate in the will, since men have differing ideas on what is good and what is useful. In a state of nature the limitations of rights are determined by force, but in society we have political justice, or law, as the agent which assigns to them their boundaries. The most desirable agent, Hazlitt acknowledges, would be moral justice, which in relation to individual questions is based on the sympathetic imagination, and in general questions upon experiential reason; "morals has a higher standard still, and ought never to appeal to force in any case whatever. Hence I always found something wanting in Mr. Godwin's Enquiry concerning Political Justice . . . for he makes no distinction between political justice, which implies an appeal to force, and moral justice."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt however realises that men being what they are, moral justice is likely to give way to selfishness, and so political justice with its recourse to force is the only practical alternative. His criticism of Godwin's failure to distinguish the two is the

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<sup>1</sup>Project, XIX, 304.

basis of Hazlitt's condemnation of the Godwinian benevolent community as mere wishful thinking and hopelessly unrealistic.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the Project characterises law as something by which to ascertain the bounds of the original right, and it arises from the necessity to maintain the equal rights of everyone. It follows that the right to make laws is the aggregate of all the individual rights of the members of society, and not the result of a social compact, since each person has natural rights which he is bound to defend without asking permission to do so, or else the rights would always be at the mercy of whoever chose to invade them, and the redress which society could afford would be useless because too late. In addition, society has no right to interfere with the rights of its members except as these latter rights are forfeited by interference with one another. Hazlitt reinforces this argument by asserting that each man's will is sovereign to himself as long as he does not interfere with others. The will of society is not sufficient ground for the curtailment of his rights, since this will is made up of the wills of the members of society, and where one has not interfered with the rights of others, their wills too have not been tampered with.

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<sup>1</sup>The problem of Godwin's union of moral and political justice and Hazlitt's distinction between them is interesting. Godwin held that individuals acting on association and reason would necessarily move toward an identification of interests. He did not distinguish, in fixing upon "the eternal principle of good," between Reason and Will. In fact, the "universal principle" on which he bases his theory of rational morality is utility. What is good is what is useful: experience is the deciding factor. Hazlitt did not allow that utility could carry this burden: as a basis for morality "it is pragmatical, and putting an imaginary for a real state of things." (Project, XIX, 504.) Hazlitt had also a basic distrust of government's aggregative powers, as the Project shows.

Neither is the probable good accruing to society sufficient ground for the curtailment; the members of society are bound merely to do no harm to it, or "to be barely just: benevolence and virtue are voluntary qualities."<sup>1</sup> He asks himself whether it would not be possible to frame a system of laws which would be confined to punishment of infraction of natural rights, and which would leave everything else to mutual agreement.

Summing up and amplifying his original arguments, Hazlitt emphasises that there is nothing to restrict or oppose the will of one man but the will of another meeting it. Introducing a perennially pertinent note, he warns that while society circumscribes the original rights of man by entrenching equal and mutual rights, the members of society must be careful lest they destroy those rights with habitual abuse of the very agent set up to preserve them. Power, he reiterates, rests with the people; but in the exercising of it, it can be turned against the people's rights. The principle upon which the idea of property rests is identical to that supporting

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<sup>1</sup>Hazlitt differs in an important respect from Locke on the question of the social compact. While the two agree on the utilitarian basis of government, Locke believes that it is the social compact itself which marks the transition from a state of nature to a state of society, while Hazlitt maintains that the difference lies in the mere curtailment of individual rights which automatically occurs on an individual's entrance into society. To Locke, the social compact is indispensable as being the ground for the commonest rights, but Hazlitt holds that individual rights are supported essentially by natural law. He does, however, acknowledge that members of society voluntarily agree to abide by society's laws on the "do as you would be done by" principle--which rests, of course, on both reason and the sympathetic imagination. Hobbes, it is suggested, and Locke after him, reversed this principle to "do not do as you would not be done by," a narrower and more negative maxim, based on self-preservation.

the concept of personal liberty: one man has no right to the product of another's labour, but rather each man has a right to the benefit of his own exertions and the use of his natural and inalienable powers--unless he waive this right for a supposed equivalent and by mutual consent.<sup>1</sup>

In the Project society is compared to a mosaic in which each member is a tile. Each tile fits tightly in its place and can not encroach on its neighbours or be encroached upon by them. As each individual has the right to do as he pleases within the bounds of his will, and to preserve this will as intact as the tile in the mosaic, there are several natural rights which exist for all men, simply by virtue of their being men. The moot point is the determination of the distance to which the individual may go in preserving these rights, and to which society may go in limiting them.

There are four things, Hazlitt says, over which each man is especially master: his person, his actions, his opinions, and his property. These are for Hazlitt the origins of man's natural rights; it is the invasion of these--with the exception of opinion--which cannot on any supposition go unpunished; they are inherent, he

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<sup>1</sup>Thus for Hazlitt slavery is a political illogicality. Locke, of course, on the ground that God is the ultimate owner of the body, says that a man has no right to make himself a slave or to take a slave, and also that slaves may rebel since the master-slave relationship is "a state of warre." (Second Treatise, ch. IV, sec. 24.) But compare his justification of slavery in the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, 1669, as the continuance of a state of war between lawful conqueror and captive. Hazlitt justifies a slave's rebellion on the theory that if a man acquire a right over another, the latter automatically acquires a right over the former.

he suggests, in the human being.

As far as personal rights are concerned, Hazlitt believes that the natural right to defend the person from bodily harm and from nuisance arises out of the incontrovertible fact that the individual has the greatest, if not the sole, interest in and identity with his own body. I may justly defend myself against your attack because the pain and discomfort which you inflict upon me neither assist me nor yourself. (Locke justifies self-defence on the assumption that the attacker allows no time for recourse to justice under law, and he also condemns assault and battery as offences against God's property.)

For Hazlitt the test as to nuisance is the motive behind the act. Malice aforethought is the deciding factor. If a man beat a drum outside my window I am justified in complaining, since his action is unnecessary and malicious; but if my neighbour play a trumpet in his home he does so presumably for his own edification, and since I would wish to retain this privilege for myself also, I have no right of complaint. Thus cases of assault and battery and of nuisance are infringements of personal, or natural, rights, and are punishable by law. Injury by libel or slander or mere expression of opinion does not transgress this natural law since it does not injure me, and thus it should not be legally punishable. No-one is bound to respect me; opinion is free, and being founded on reason it should not be answered with force.

As everyone has the right to use his natural powers in any way as long as he does not interfere with the rights of others, there can, asserts Hazlitt, be no law regulating morals, since morals have

to do with the will and the affections. Drunkenness, gambling, and incontinence are the concern solely of the individual, provided, of course, that they do not infringe the rights of others. Hazlitt asserts that a man has no political obligation to maintain his family; his drunkenness, profligacy, or adultery should not be punished by law since he and he alone is the natural and legal guardian of his family. He agrees with Locke, however, that moral obligations are involved in cases of this nature, and he goes on to say that a man deviating from the moral standards accepted by society may justifiably be excluded from the benefits which society has to offer. As far as suicide is concerned, Hazlitt holds that it is entirely within the rights of the individual as long as the act does not endanger the lives of others. (Locke expressly condemns suicide as usurpation of God's rights over the person.)

Rights of property are necessary since no man can enjoy security or exercise freedom of action unless he can appropriate certain things necessary to his own comfort and subsistence. These rights are set up by prior claim or by labour, since everyone has a right to the fruits of his own work. They are also constituted by inheritance, gift, or sale. According to Hazlitt, man in a state of nature has a right to all he can lay his hands on, and the great difference between this solitary independence and society is that society is simply a limitation of this right by the assertion of other equal rights. According to Locke, whose idea of equality in the state of nature is practically identical to Hazlitt's, property exists antecedent to the formation of society, which is devised

chiefly to protect it. For Hazlitt the object and principle of the law of property is the supply of what is necessary to individuals and society; the securing of an equal share to each individual, other circumstances being the same; and the maintenance of peace and promotion of industry and plenty by proportioning each man's share to his own exertions or to the goodwill and discretion of others. Clearly, Hazlitt, who wishes to equalise distribution under a system of common property, is against Godwin's proposal for the establishment of a common stock. Hazlitt acknowledges that the amount of food and of other necessities of life available to the proprietary class and that available to the labourers is merely an arbitrarily-arrived-at ratio designed by the former, whose share, he says, should be limited so that the amount remaining for wages and so forth could be increased, and extremes of wealth and poverty avoided. The best way to effect this, he believes, would be by combination among the workers, who would then be in a position to bargain--the right to bargain resting on the same basis as the right to property and personal liberty.

Hazlitt speaks out for universal suffrage, and attacks representation by property on the ground that it creates a monopoly, and lays open to abuse the possession of power. The worse the law, the better for the lawmaker. In the last forty years, he says, the upper classes have doubled in number and have become richer, while the labourers have remained relatively stable in population and have steadily become poorer. The individuals comprising the governing class have thus infringed upon the property rights of the poor. But Hazlitt

goes on to justify the existence of the Poor Laws, and their continued application, albeit as a temporary measure, because although everyone should have equal opportunities to work and to enjoy the fruits of that work, the labouring class has been deprived of its opportunity by the employers' abuses and therefore assistance is still called for:

The greater part of a community ought not to be paupers or starving; and when a government by obstinacy and madness has reduced them to that state, it must either take wise and effectual measures to relieve them from it, or pay the forfeit of its own wickedness and folly.<sup>1</sup>

Government, Hazlitt sums up, is not necessarily founded on common consent, but on the right which society has to defend itself against aggression. "Laws are, or ought to be, founded on the supposed infraction of individual rights,"<sup>2</sup> and while the individual is not bound "to pay or support" the government for defending him against injustice, the protection of the law may be withdrawn from him if he refuses. If these rights are always clear, and if the government is always just, then "every government might be its own lawgiver"; but as neither of these propositions is borne out by experience,

it is necessary to recur to the general voice for settling the boundaries of right and wrong, and even more for preventing the government, under pretence of the general peace and safety, from subjecting the whole liberties, rights and resources of the community to its own advantage and sole will.<sup>3</sup>

This, then, is Hazlitt's attempt to solve the problem concerning

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<sup>1</sup>Project, XIX, 319.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

the limits of the individual's actions and the limits of the state's authority. The Project is less a theory of legislation than a vindication, in the face of the near statism which so gradually softened into the austere concessions of 1832, of the position and potential of the individual as opposed to the power of the realm. As such, it is radical, and consonant with at least one of the viewpoints subsumed under that omnibus-word "Romanticism."

Its outstanding weakness as a feasible theory of legislation is inseparable from its method of composition. Hazlitt was no "bookish theoretic"; he tends continually in all his writing toward the empirical. In the Project, however, he moves, as Locke did, demonstratively. The essay is logical, reasonable, and without any anchor in human experience. As Crane Brinton has pointed out, there is implicit throughout the work the understanding that if the demands men make on society are refused, men will at some point revolt:

The first purpose, however, of both practical and theoretical politics, is to locate this point of revolt . . . Hazlitt . . . places these natural rights, this point of revolt, at an absurdly high level. For men sell all but the innermost ward of their citadel and are often content with slavery. If the point of revolt of a given society is very low--that is, if its members will submit to a very great deal of degradation of their manhood before protesting--it is of little use to maintain, as Hazlitt did, that it ought to be very high.<sup>1</sup>

Now, while this point of revolt may differ vastly from class to class and from country to country, and while the Project may be evidence of Hazlitt's incompetence in the field of theoretical politics, two things are clear: Hazlitt does not look on man as

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<sup>1</sup>The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists, p. 129.

subservient to society, and he does not see man as quietistic. He asserts with a tone which sometimes approaches shrill defiance that man is better than society and that it is natural for man to revolt when external forces threaten him. This view is not of course in itself a "tragic" one. It is however fundamental to an understanding of the material in which tragedy deals, and it is alien to the comparative complacency and quietism which Hobbes's theory supported.

Because Hazlitt never wholly escaped from empiricism he remained, behind the facade of his carefully-constructed theory, suspicious of abstract reasoning as a practical basis for action. Although he predicated a selfish foundation for natural and political rights, he did not believe that these rights could ever be exploited for the good of society or of the individual on selfish motives. That he was aware of this clash between belief and theory while he was writing the Project is indicated by his qualification in the final paragraph: "It seems, then, 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 of person, liberty, and property."<sup>1</sup> If the Project postulates a world which in one sense is that narrow, anti-tragic universe bequeathed by the philosopher of Malmesbury, a world in which man acts on, and in which his freedom is defined by, a purely rational calculation of self-preservation springing from enlightened self-interest, then Hazlitt's other examinations of man in society and of the motives behind actions assert

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<sup>1</sup>Project, XIX, 319.

that disinterested benevolence, based upon the intuitively-operating sympathetic imagination, is at the very least as natural a foundation for action. Politics, which proceeds from reason, "lays down a rule to curb and measure out the wills of individuals in equal portions," and thus confines man to actions based on self-interest; "morals has a higher standard still, and ought never to appeal to force in any case whatever." Morality is based upon the mind's ability to identify sympathetically with others through the imagination--

Mr. Burke contemptuously defines the people to be 'any faction that at the time can get the power of the sword into its hands.' No: that may be a description of the Government, but it is not of the people. The people is the hand, heart and head of the whole community acting to one purpose, and with a mutual and thorough consent. The hand of the people so employed to execute what the heart feels, and the head thinks, must be employed more beneficially for the cause of the people, than in executing any measures which the cold hearts, and contriving heads . . . may indicate.<sup>1</sup>

The ideal society will base its laws upon "the aggregate amount of the actual, dear-bought experience, the honest feelings, and heart-felt wishes of a whole people, informed and directed by the greatest power of understanding in the community, unbiassed by any sinister motive."<sup>2</sup> It is not enough to contemplate men acting in society, and to regulate their lives, on the basis of political justice alone: "men act from individual impressions; and to know mankind, we should be acquainted with nature. Men act from passion; and we can only judge of passion by sympathy."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"What is the People?" Works, VII, 267.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>3</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 45.

The "original discovery" which the Essay on the Principles of Human Action announced was actually based on a clearly-defined tradition of speculation regarding the nature of sympathy and benevolence. But the construction which Hazlitt put on the theories he used was original, and forms an integral part of his view of man. We have seen that he rejected the sensationist psychology in his insistence upon the cognitive ability of the imagination; that psychology reduced man to a passive machine, directed hither and yon in the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain by the stimuli of sensory impressions. Hazlitt's theory of disinterested benevolence working through the sympathetic imagination assumes that the mind is not a mere instrument of sensation, a half-blind agent of external matter. He deduces, on the basis of his theory, the rules of moral duty--if not political duty--from nature apprehended by sympathy; he founds his concept of morality not on self-preservation alone, not on a world of efficient causes only, but on "individual impressions" and "passion." If his great discovery was in one sense merely another synthesis, it was in another an innovation in the emphasis which it placed upon man, and more specifically upon the individual, and his feelings and capacity for intuition as the highest authority.

When he commented on the utilitarian theory of morals, Hazlitt complemented the view of man expressed in the Project with the view implied by his metaphysical discovery. He denies that the purely rational calculation of consequences can be "the sole and unqualified test of right and wrong; for we are to take into

the account (as well) the re-action of these consequences upon the mind of the individual and the community. In morals, the cultivation of a moral sense is not the last thing to be attended to-- nay, it is the first."<sup>1</sup> It is his insistence on the inadequacy of abstract reason alone as a basis for action and for self-realisation which marks Hazlitt as a Romantic, and also as a social critic whose undoubted "optimism" nevertheless contains, when it is seen in relation to the thought of his age, the grounds for a view of life which comprehends the tragic experience. We can accept Brinton's statement that Hazlitt's theory "is the old doctrine of the natural goodness of man"<sup>2</sup> only if we perceive that it is a generalisation which fails to account for two important points.

On the one hand, Hazlitt frequently made it clear that he regarded perfectibilitarian schemes as chimerical and based on imperfect knowledge of human nature. It is this attitude which lies behind his rejection of Godwin's Political Justice and of Malthus's system of checks.<sup>3</sup> Individualist and radical though he was, he understood that the modification (not to say perversion) after Rousseau of those attitudes to man's potential for development which inspired so many of the thinkers of his day had little,

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<sup>1</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," XII, 49.

<sup>2</sup>The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>For pointed discussion--not always favourable to Hazlitt--of this rejection, see W. P. Albrecht's "Hazlitt and Malthus," MLN, LX (1945), 215-226, his "Hazlitt's Principles of Human Action and the Improvement of Society," in If By Your Art: Testament to Percival Hunt, ed. A. L. Starrett (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1948), and his brief note on "Godwin and Malthus," PMLA, LXX (1955), 552-555.

if any, foundation in reality:

For this purpose, we think several things necessary which are impossible. It is a consummation which cannot happen till the nature of things is changed . . . All things move, not in progress, but in a ceaseless round; our strength lies in our weakness; our virtues are built on our vices; our faculties are as limited as our being; nor can we lift man above his nature more than above the earth he treads.<sup>1</sup>

This is hardly the run-of-the-mill Romantic optimism.

On the other hand, Hazlitt's stress upon the value, the very intrinsicity, of imaginative sympathy in man's complexion posits, not animate, rational bipeds functioning with machine-like predictability according to the enlightened deliberations of a self-regarding reason, but human beings. "A calculation of the mere ultimate advantages, without any regard to natural feelings and affections, may improve the external face and physical comforts of society, but will leave it heartless and worthless in itself."<sup>2</sup> Hazlitt recognises that man strives perpetually towards improvement, towards the truth; he tempers the more usual romantic exaltation of this insight by his perception that man is in his very nature limited in his aspirations to fulfilment, and by his postulation not of purely rational and selfish men testing their ways merely towards self-defence, but of real men aspiring to self-realisation. "If we are imbued," he writes, "with a deep sense of individual weal or woe, we shall be awe-struck at the idea of humanity in general." It is Hazlitt's essentially sober and compassionate view which sets him apart from so many of the political and social commentators, and theorists of tragedy, of his day.

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<sup>1</sup>"Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem The Excursion," The Round Table, Works, IV, 119.

<sup>2</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," XII, 50. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

## CHAPTER V

A problem which exercised the minds of most of the eighteenth-century theorists of tragedy concerned the nature of the pleasure experienced by the reader or spectator.<sup>1</sup> Tragedy deals in calamitous and catastrophic events; violent death and wretched anguish are its staples; and even if it was only on occasion that the eighteenth century saw man as "Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state, A being darkly wise and rudely great," the writers and playgoers of the time recognised that the world of tragedy is one in which the odds are fatally weighted against the protagonist. The paradox that a form which represented unpleasant events could arouse pleasure called for explanation, and it became common for critics to define tragedy through the effect it has on its audience.

One theory widely accepted in England during the early eighteenth century was that which attempted to explain the pleasure of tragedy by clarifying the psychological and physiological basis of pleasure itself. The foundation of this theory had been laid by Descartes in 1649, when he wrote in Les Passions de l'Ame that

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<sup>1</sup>Apparently the debate is still open. See Roy Morrell, "The Psychology of Tragic Pleasure," EC, VI (1956), 22-37. No-one attempting a conspectus of the various theories could ignore Earl R. Wasserman's fine article "The Pleasure of Tragedy," ELH, XIV (1947), 283-307, to which I acknowledge indebtedness for some of the historical background.

la cause qui fait que pour l'ordinaire la joie suit du chatouillement est que tout ce qu'on nomme chatouillement ou sentiment agréable consiste en ce que les objets des sens excitent quelque mouvement dans les nerfs qui serait capable de leur nuire s'ils n'avaient pas assez de force pour lui résister ou que le corps ne fût pas bien disposé; ce qui fait une impression dans le cerveau, laquelle étant instituée de la nature pour témoigner cette bonne disposition et cette force, la représente à l'âme comme un bien qui lui appartient, en tant qu'elle est unie avec le corps, et ainsi excite en elle la joie. C'est presque la même raison qui fait qu'on prend naturellement plaisir à se sentir ému à toutes sortes de passions, même à la tristesse et à la haine, lorsque ces passions ne sont causées que par les aventures étranges qu'on voit représenter sur un théâtre, ou par d'autres pareils sujets, qui, ne pouvant nous nuire en aucune façon, semblent chatouiller notre âme en la touchant.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the mere stimulation or movement of the emotions, in those instances where such movement is harmonious and does not damage the nervous system, gives rise to pleasure, since the movement is presented to the mind as a "good" which pertains to it just as much as to the body. Sadness and hate, pity and fear, although they are powerful emotions, produce pleasure when they are aroused by a spectacle which we know is artificial and without real moment to ourselves, since their movement is moderated into harmony by the artificiality.

These emotions, or, as Descartes calls them, these passions, are distinct in nature and sphere of operation from the "émotions intérieures qui ne sont excitées en l'âme que par l'âme même."<sup>2</sup> The former are subject to excitation by external stimuli, while the

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<sup>1</sup>Descartes: Oeuvres et Lettres, ed. André Bridoux ("Bibliothèque de la Pléiade"; Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1952), pp. 739-740. (Les Passions de l'Âme, art. 94.)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 765-766. Article 147.

latter are concerned solely with the inner virtue and vice of the individual; there is no causal relationship between them. The interior emotions may thus be directly opposed to the passions, but as long as the latter do not take from the former, the movement of the passions, even though they are contrasted with the emotions, may give an intellectual joy to the mind:

Et lorsque nous lisons des aventures étranges dans un livre, ou que nous voyons représenter sur un théâtre, cela excite quelquefois en nous la tristesse, quelquefois la joie, ou l'amour, ou la haine, et généralement toutes les passions, selon la diversité des objets qui s'offrent à notre imagination; mais avec cela nous avons du plaisir de les sentir exciter en nous, et ce plaisir est une joie intellectuelle qui peut aussi bien naître de la tristesse que de toutes les autres passions ... pourvu que notre âme ait toujours de quoi se contenter en son intérieur, tous les troubles qui viennent d'ailleurs n'ont aucun pouvoir de lui nuire; mais plutôt ils servent à augmenter sa joie, en ce que, voyant qu'elle ne peut être offensée par eux, cela lui fait connaître sa perfection.<sup>1</sup>

John Dennis was an early importer into England of the Cartesian theory, which he probably met in the works of René Rapin. Rapin accepted without reservation Descartes' assertion that agitation of the passions is pleasurable, and he explicitly linked this to tragic pleasure; fear and pity, he held, were the passions which made the strongest impressions on the heart of man, and "in effect, when the Soul is Shaken, by Motions so Natural and so Humane, all the Impressions it feels becomes [sic] Delightful; its Trouble pleases, and the Emotion it finds, is a kind of Charm to it . . . In this Agitation consists all the Pleasure that one is capable

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<sup>1</sup>Descartes: Oeuvres et Lettres, p. 766. Articles 147-148.

to receive from Tragedy."<sup>1</sup> Dennis took this over, but he insisted that fearful and pitiable events in real life were painful. Pleasurable pity and fear are the province of the drama, and what distinguishes the dramatic experience is that we realise, as we watch the action, that it is an imitation at a remove from reality; we ourselves are safe, and the passions aroused by the events on the stage are vicariously experienced. These passions are nevertheless violently agitated, because we see in the protagonist an image of ourselves; but because the pity and fear do not run counter to our will they are pleasurable. Reason, in short, keeps a watching brief in our minds, and because the tragic events on the stage are fictional, the agitation of the passions is moderated into harmony, and we experience pleasure both through the agitation and through the quiet certainty that we ourselves are safe.<sup>2</sup>

Dennis's works, although they were of sufficient importance to earn the antagonism of Pope at the time they were written, did not enjoy very much of a vogue and exerted little influence later in the century. Further developments of the Cartesian theory came to England from the work of the Abbé du Bos and from Fontenelle. The former went as far as to say that mental lassitude is unequivocally the least desirable of mental states since it implies the absence of any motion of the passions. From this state, the mind naturally strains toward any object or experience which will agitate the

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Wasserman, p. 289. The connection between the growing taste for terror and the rise of feeling has been well covered by Monk, and by Boulton in the introduction to his edition of Burke's Enquiry.

<sup>2</sup>The Critical Works of John Dennis, ed. E. N. Hooker (2 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1939-1943), I, 150, 151, 165, 264.

passions, and, although fear and pity are painful emotions, the movement caused by tragedy outweighs the pain with pleasure. Fontenelle also agrees that the heart by its very nature enjoys agitation. The substance of tragedy, if witnessed in real life, would evoke pain in the spectator, but since tragedy is only an imitation of an action, the audience is aware--however dimly--that what is presented to it is a fiction, and the agitation of the passions called up by the action is moderated by this knowledge into pleasure.

Mark Akenside predictably combined the increasingly pervasive benevolism of his day with the Cartesian theory in his treatment of the subject. Any form of emotional agitation is pleasant, he says, if it is a release from the atrophy-like condition of mental indolence. But, like Descartes, he modifies this with the assertion that the movement of the passions is pleasurable as long as those passions do not take from the inner virtue of the individual. If the individual is mentally conscious of the virtue of his own "interior emotions," then any passion, by its motion, will augment this feeling of satisfaction with the pleasure which the motion brings. And pity and fear, which although they are essentially painful passions, yet afford pleasure to the mind, are pleasurable in another way. They are socially-oriented passions, since their effect is a moral one in that through pity and fear for others our benevolence is aroused. Since God has ordained this moral cause and effect, the evocation and the agitation

of pity and fear are pleasurable indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Another major theory was that which originated in Hobbes's mechanistic and "egotistic" explanation of the operation of the mind. For him, the passions are

motion in some internal substance of the head; which motion not stopping there, but proceeding to the heart, of necessity must there either help or hinder the motion which is called vital; when it helpeth, it is called delight, contentment, or pleasure, which is nothing really but motion about the heart . . . but when such motion weakeneth or hindereth the vital motion, then it is called pain.<sup>2</sup>

While the pleasure might be nothing but a motion about the heart, this motion was not for Hobbes, as it was for Descartes, the final cause of that pleasure. With vast consequences for the philosophy of the century which succeeded his, he found the source of emotional pleasure--in fact of any pleasure--to lie in the efficacy with which our self-love, manifested in our appetites, mental and sensual, is satisfied:

This motion, in which consisteth pleasure or pain, is also a solicitation or provocation either to draw near to the thing that pleaseth, or to retire from the thing from the thing that displeaseth; and this solicitation is the endeavour or internal beginning of animal motion, which when the object delighteth, is called appetite.<sup>3</sup>

That which satisfies my self-centred desires is pleasurable, and that which frustrates them is painful.<sup>4</sup> Hobbes does not deal

<sup>1</sup>The Pleasures of the Imagination, II, 157, and II. 155-159, 709-711.

<sup>2</sup>Human Nature, VII, sec. 1. The Works of Thomas Hobbes, ed. Sir William Molesworth (12 vols.; London: John Bohn, 1840), IV, 31.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., sec. 2. See also sec. 8, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>This view is a major factor in the sensationist explanation of the nature of good and evil, which is briefly discussed in the next chapter.

specifically with the pleasure of tragedy, and neither does he attempt to explain in detail the nature of terror, but pity in his philosophy is "imagination or fiction of future calamity to ourselves, proceeding from the sense of another man's calamity."<sup>1</sup>

It is thus a painful passion. Hobbes asks what the emotional basis is of the pleasure which men experience when they "behold from the shore the danger of them that are at sea in a tempest, or in fight, or from a safe castle . . . behold two armies charge one another in the field?"<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly, in the whole sum, joy [and joy is that pleasure which is not sensual but is rather the "delight of the mind"]; else men would never flock to such a spectacle. Nevertheless there is in it both joy and grief: for as there is novelty and remembrance of our own security which is delight; so there is also pity, which is grief; but the delight is so far predominant, that men are usually content in such a case to be spectators of the misery of their friends.<sup>3</sup>

This type of experience is clearly analogous to the tragic, and so it seems justifiable to assume that had Hobbes discussed tragedy he would have explained its pleasure by pointing to the delight which it affords through novelty and remembrance. Curiosity for Hobbes was "appetite of knowledge,"<sup>4</sup> and thus any experience which satisfies curiosity is pleasurable, and furthermore, "because curiosity is delight, therefore also novelty is so, but especially

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<sup>1</sup>Human Nature, IX, sec. 10. The Works of Thomas Hobbes, IV, 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., sec. 19, pp. 51-52.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., sec. 18, p. 50.

that novelty from which a man conceiveth an opinion true or false of bettering his own estate."<sup>1</sup> Thus in tragedy the pity which is aroused causes pain to the spectator, but this pain and grief is mingled with, and counterbalanced by, the egocentric satisfaction of his desire for knowledge, and also by "remembrance," which moderates the effect of pity by reminding him that what he sees is a fiction--by calling to mind his "security present." For Hobbes, then, the actual emotions of pity and fear are painful; but tragedy is presumably pleasurable (not for itself, it should be noted), because it satisfies in several ways our self-love.

Addison, who does discuss tragedy, puts forth a theory which is almost a repetition of Hobbes's own. The events which call forth pity and fear are in real life inescapably painful, because they are so near to us and so momentous that we are unable to turn from our involvement with the suffering of the victim to a contemplation of our own felicity and security. Tragedy, however, pleases because we admire the skill of the dramatist and because our emotions are agitated. Up to this point, Addison is merely repeating the French theory. He goes further in maintaining that the actual effect of tragedy is painful; and the accents of Hobbes are unmistakable when he says that what cancels this pain is our own safety, which we

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<sup>1</sup>Human Nature, p. 51. Compare The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir William Davenant's Preface before Gondibert, p. 453 in the same volume of Molesworth's edition: "That which giveth a poem the true and natural colour, consisteth in two things; which are, to know well, that is, to have images of nature in the memory distinct and clear; and to know much. . . . A sign of the latter is novelty of expression, and pleaseth by excitation of the mind; for novelty causeth admiration, and admiration curiosity, which is a delightful appetite of knowledge."

realise when we compare the predicament of the tragic protagonist with our own position. Again, it is the reinforcement of our self-love which is the cause of pleasure.<sup>1</sup> There is very little advance on Addison in Dr. Johnson's theory.

One of the most important theories in the Hobbesian tradition was that of David Hume. Although it found few supporters, it was widely known, and the theories of men like Hazlitt were in part answers to it. In the Treatise of Human Nature, Hume had proposed in orthodox fashion that tragic pleasure originates in the spectator's perception of the fictional nature of the representation, and that this realisation moderates into pleasure the mental and emotional stimulation experienced by the spectator. In the second book of the Treatise, Hume proposed a sympathetic explanation: the pleasure of tragedy derives from the intensity of the emotion caused in the spectator's breast by his identification with the protagonist.

But Hume found the latter explanation unsatisfactory, and in "Of Tragedy," in Four Dissertations, he revised it extensively. He accepted du Bos' theory as being "in part satisfactory"; and Fontenelle's modification also appeared to him to have some truth in it. Fontenelle had recognised that du Bos had made an inadequate distinction between the emotional effects of art and of real life-- he had seen the effect of the latter as more violent and longer

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<sup>1</sup>It has been discussed by J. Frederick Doering, "Hume and the Theory of Tragedy," PMLA, LII (1937), 1130-1134, and by Ralph Cohen, "The Transformation of Passion: A Study of Hume's Theories of Tragedy," PQ, XL (1962), 450-464.

lasting, not as different in kind. But to Hume, Fontenelle's theory was also inadequate, since it took no cognizance of the fact that art can be composed from actual events, and in such instances the pleasure cannot be explained as stemming from a fiction:

The epilogues of Cicero are . . . the delight of every reader of taste; and it is difficult to read some of them without the deepest sympathy and sorrow. . . . The pathetic description of the butchery made by Verres of the Sicilian captains is a master-piece of this kind: But I believe none will affirm, that the being present at a melancholy scene of that nature would afford any entertainment. Neither is the sorrow here softened by fiction: For the audience were convinced of the reality of every circumstance.<sup>1</sup>

The truth of the matter is that our emotions are transmuted into aesthetic emotion. All passions, excited by eloquence, are agreeable, since pain is overpowered by artistry, "the exercise of noble talents," and is converted into pleasure. This transformation originates in the fact that the work of art transforms the actual experience--"The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotions, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, or at least, tincture them so strongly as to totally alter their nature."<sup>2</sup> In addition, imitation is itself agreeable, and the fact that we are aware of the skill of the author adds to our enjoyment.

Hume's theory is clear evidence that he was moving towards a much-needed distinction between the actual and the aesthetic, a

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<sup>1</sup>"Of Tragedy," Four Dissertations (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1757), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 191-192.

distinction which remained blurred, however, as long as its adumbrations were couched in the sensationist vocabulary. In Hume's view, the work of art subordinates, controls, and channels the emotions it arouses towards an end which is perceived by the imagination. Although our passions are "involved," our imagination, a separate and higher co-ordinating faculty, is more or less distanced, and through it we are conscious that the passions are ordered in an artistic context. Since they elicit a different response from that which reality would evoke, our sympathy with the sufferer on the stage is limited and moderated by a measure of disinterest, and we thus achieve the distance which is necessary for aesthetic appreciation:

We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that required by the performance.<sup>1</sup>

As the century passed the mid-way mark, the doctrine of sympathy was more and more frequently used in explanations of the pleasure of tragedy. The theories which we have noted all imply a measure of detachment from the tragic action and characters, even if it is a detachment which is necessary solely for our appreciation of the fact that the action is a fiction or that imitation itself is a pleasing process. Also, the Cartesian theory demands and gives impetus to a type of tragedy which will be sufficiently formal and artificial to reduce the emotional agitation from pain to pleasure,

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Standard of Taste," Four Dissertations, p. 224.

while the Hobbesian demands a tragedy which will be sufficiently unreal to remind us of our own security. But as early in the century as Shaftesbury, the implication is made that the spectator himself experiences, through sympathetic identification, the emotions which the tragic character undergoes, and that this very identification is delightful. As sympathetic theories multiply and become more closely detailed, the former implicit assumptions of artificiality, formality, and unreality are gradually superseded by a criterion of probability and verisimilitude. Both in the plays themselves and in dramatic theory, fable and event become less important than character, and indeed by Hazlitt's day it was accepted that one of the aims of drama was the presentation of character in depth--not so much in action.<sup>1</sup>

Burke's treatment of the problem in the Enquiry is a store of the points which later writers were to use. He divides the passions into two categories, those pertaining to self-preservation, which turn mostly upon pain and danger, and those pertaining to society, of which the chief is sympathy. When pain and danger are distanced and modified, they become delightful; and what is more,

whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Unreality" is used here in a relative sense. The growing interest in character can easily be traced in the essays in Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare, ed. David Nichol Smith (2nd ed.; Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 39.

For this reason, "objects which in the reality would shock, are in tragical, and such like representations, the source of a very high species of pleasure."<sup>1</sup> Because of sympathy, we can never be indifferent to the actions and circumstances of those about us; therefore, sympathy can "partake of the nature of those passions which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime."<sup>2</sup>

It is through sympathy that the "affecting arts" engraft pleasure upon wretchedness, misery, and death itself. Our knowledge that what passes before our eyes on the stage is a fiction, is not sufficient to account for the pleasure of tragedy, and the theory that the pleasure stems from our realisation of our own safety is simply fallacious. What is true is that we take a certain pleasure in the real misfortunes of other people; there can be no other explanation, holds Burke, for the human predilection for watching executions, conflagrations, or the after-effects of calamities such as earthquakes. If the sufferer is illustrious, our pleasure is even greater, and it is increased if his fate appears unmerited, "for terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close, and pity is a passion accompanied with pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the sympathetic bond is part of the Divine Plan:

Whenever we are formed by nature to any active purpose, the passion which animates us to it, is attended with

<sup>1</sup>Enquiry, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

delight, or a pleasure of some kind, let the subject matter be what it will; and as our Creator has designed we should be united with the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is wanted, in the distresses of others.<sup>1</sup>

But the pleasure aroused by another's suffering is not unalloyed; it is "blended with no small uneasiness"--the pain prompts us to relieve ourselves by relieving others, and this sympathetic drive is intuitive and immediate, pre-rational.

The only difference between reality and "imitated distresses" in the matter of pleasure is that imitation itself is pleasurable. Burke avoids the detachment implicit on this point in the earlier theories by asserting that our apprehension of the fictional nature of the events is not the result of a rational process but of intuition. This additional pleasure is really a comparatively slight one, because the nearer the representation approaches the reality, "and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power."<sup>2</sup> (Sympathy is, in Burke's philosophy and in those of his successors, a "passion" designed primarily for the real relationships of society; it is an extension of this basic assumption that the greater the verisimilitude and probability, the more powerfully affecting and therefore the better the drama will be.) Even the most realistic tragedy, however moving it may be, is far from equal to "the thing it represents"; if the very best tragedy were to be presented under

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<sup>1</sup>Enquiry, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p, 47.

the most favourable conditions, and it were to be announced just before the curtain rose that a notorious criminal were to be executed in the next square, the audience would leave the theatre and "proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy."<sup>1</sup> The true answer to the question why we feel pain at the reality and pleasure in the representation is that "we delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed." We do not, in other words, desire tragedy to occur, but when it does, we are pleased by our sympathy with the sufferers.<sup>2</sup>

Lord Kames, whose Elements of Criticism went through a large number of editions after its publication in 1762, was a little more conservative than Burke was in discussing the pleasure of tragedy. In addition to accepting the well-worn argument that artistry and imitation are pleasing in themselves, he goes back to the old theory of the agreeable agitation of the passions: "objects that strike terror in a spectator, have in poetry and painting a fine effect. The picture, by raising a slight emotion of terror, agitates the mind; and in that condition every beauty makes a deep impression."<sup>3</sup> Kames also accepts the notion that our realisation of our present security is pleasurable in contrast to the action represented by the tragedy, but, like Burke, he holds that the intuitive nature of our perception of the fiction is immediate and leaves no "leisure for

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<sup>1</sup> Enquiry, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames, Elements of Criticism (5th ed.; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & W. Creech et al., 1774) II, 365.

reflection."<sup>1</sup> Pity, which is always painful and yet always agreeable,<sup>2</sup> is the spring of the lasting pleasure which tragedy offers. When we are faced by distress and painfully-affecting things,

the benevolence of our nature gives a very different direction to the painful passion of sympathy, and to the desire involved in it: instead of avoiding distress, we fly to it in order to afford relief; and our sympathy cannot be otherwise gratified but by giving all the succour in our power. Thus external signs of distress, tho' disagreeable, are attractive.<sup>3</sup>

What restrains us from rushing onto the stage and assisting the hero is, of course, our intuitive realisation that we are watching a fictional representation. Specifically, tragedy is pleasing in spite of the painful nature of its subject because "Sympathy, tho' painful, is attractive, and attaches us to an object in distress, instead of prompting us to fly from it."<sup>4</sup>

Hugh Blair's theory is somewhat more thorough-going than Kames's.<sup>5</sup> Tragedy deals in pity and terror, but we experience a measure of relief from these passions by our pleasure in the dramatist's artistry and our apprehension of the fictional nature of the drama. Tragedy raises the highest emotions, those which are virtuous--"love and admiration of virtuous characters, compassion for the injured and the distressed, and indignation against the authors of their suffering, are the sentiments most generally raised by tragedy."<sup>6</sup> Therefore tragedy is moral in its effect. Blair even

<sup>1</sup>Elements of Criticism, I, 95-96.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., I, 110.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 447.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., I, 447-448 n.

<sup>5</sup>It is very close to George Campbell's. See The Philosophy of Rhetoric (2 vols.; London: W. Strahan et al., 1776), Bk. I, ch. xi.

<sup>6</sup>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (8th ed.; 3 vols.; London: T. Cadell, W. Davies, and W. Creech, Edinburgh, 1801), III, 274.

rejects Aristotle's theory of catharsis, and asserts that the true function of the form is the improvement of our "virtuous sensibility."

On this basis, the natural and the probable must always be the distinguishing marks of tragedy, in order that the "tender passions" may be moved. "Passion can be raised, only by making the impressions of nature, and of truth, upon the mind."<sup>1</sup> Because the best tragedies, by this definition, are the closest to reality, real distress is often occasioned to the spectators; what then is the nature of tragic pleasure? It lies, says Blair in the Burkean tradition, in the very operation of sympathy: "By the wise and gracious constitution of our nature, the exercise of all the social passions is attended with pleasure. . . . Whenever man takes a strong interest in the concerns of his fellow creatures, an internal satisfaction is made to accompany the feeling. Pity, or compassion, . . . is attended with a peculiar attractive power."<sup>2</sup> But pity includes a degree of distress because of the sympathy with the sufferer which it involves; however, as it includes benevolence and friendship it "partakes of their pleasing nature," and pleasure is its dominant effect. "At the same time," says Blair,

the immediate pleasure, which always goes along with the operation of the benevolent and sympathetic affections, derives an addition from the approbation of our own minds. We are pleased with ourselves, for feeling as we ought, and for entering, with proper sorrow, into the concerns of the afflicted.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, III, 276.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 293-294.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 294.

By the time Hazlitt formulated his theory of the pleasure of tragedy, the doctrine of sympathy had, as we have seen, achieved a dominant position in aesthetics as well as in ethics. It had given impetus to and maintained the progress of the sentimental drama, and had contributed significantly to the emergence of the pathetic, or "middle-class" tragic hero. Lord Kames had distinguished the different types of tragedy according to the different ends they aimed at. Pathetic tragedy, he concluded, simply moves the passions and exhibits pictures of virtue and vice; moral tragedy, the category described by Aristotle, is designed to illustrate some moral truth. Both types "tend to a habit of virtue, by exciting us to do what is right, and restraining us from what is wrong."<sup>1</sup> Pathetic tragedies evoke pity, while moral tragedies arouse fear also. The best subject for a pitiful effect "is where a man of integrity falls into a great misfortune" as a consequence of his essentially innocent action. Moral tragedy turns upon some "misfortune" which "must be occasioned by a fault incident to human nature, and therefore in some degree venial," and

when a misfortune is the natural consequence of some wrong bias in the temper, every spectator who is conscious of such a bias in himself, takes the alarm, and dreads his falling into the same misfortune [sic]; and by the emotion of fear or terror, frequently reiterated in a variety of moral tragedies, the spectators are put upon their guard against the disorders of passion.<sup>2</sup>

But of all the passions, sympathy is the most valuable and the most

<sup>1</sup>Elements of Criticism, II, 374.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 376-377, 378.

agreeable, and sympathy is most efficiently aroused by "the misfortunes of virtuous persons, arising from necessary causes,"<sup>1</sup> or by the presentation of "a perfect character, suffering under misfortunes." In short, for Kames, and for many other people of the period, the end of tragedy--the most effective kind of tragedy--is "to rouse our sympathy, tho' [it] inculcate no moral."<sup>2</sup> Blair adds to this that there is no need for the tragic hero to be illustrious in order that our sympathy be raised; he must merely be worthy of our moral approval, for the intention of tragedy is the improvement of our virtuous sensibility.<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of sympathy had, by the end of the eighteenth century, effectively consolidated the dominance of the sentimental drama. It had minimized the tragic irony, since tragedy was now to be designed simply to arouse sympathetic emotions; it denied what many earlier critics and playwrights had taken to be a positively moral function of the genre, since it made unnecessary the inculcation of moral lessons through the agency of pity and fear--now the mere experience of sympathy was a moral experience; and it undermined the Aristotelian concept of purgation of the emotions by pity and fear,<sup>4</sup> and substituted the evocation of compassion as an end in itself, for, as Kames indicated, the sympathetic emotions are

<sup>1</sup>Elements of Criticism, II, 381.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>3</sup>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, III, 274-275.

<sup>4</sup>I understand Aristotle's doctrine of catharsis to mean that the painful element inherent in the emotions of pity and fear as experienced in real life is purged by the tragic experience, resulting in the distinctive pleasure of tragedy--a blending of the two emotions in an essentially aesthetic effect.

capable of refinement and improvement by exercise.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of hamartia was replaced in popular taste by the concept of the perfectly innocent hero, whose sufferings are brought about by external forces over which he has no control whatever; and as the tragic action and characters had to approach as closely to reality as possible in order that the most intense sympathy might result, the tragic character was frequently represented as a man whose distinction from the audience existed not so much in his high estate or personal greatness as in the nerve-racking situations into which he was plunged. The purpose of the dramatist had become the promotion of pity, the refinement of sensibility, and verisimilitude, while the test of his work was not so much its artistry as the intensity of the emotions it raised. For the critic, character-depiction was the criterion of dramatic skill, and character moved out from its old integration with plot and action to become the drama itself.

Hazlitt's explanation of the pleasure of tragedy is to be found in scattered remarks throughout his work. It is on two or three occasions only that he deals with the problem explicitly, but nevertheless a coherent theory does emerge, and it is the best basis for explaining Hazlitt's theory of tragedy itself.

He acknowledges that objects in themselves disagreeable or indifferent often please in the imitation. One source of this pleasure is "undoubtedly the surprise or feeling of admiration, occasioned by

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<sup>1</sup>Elements of Criticism, II, 377-378.

the unexpected coincidence between the imitation and the object."<sup>1</sup>  
 But this pleasure does not inhere only in the novelty of the experience, since it endures beyond our first exposure to the imitation, and is evoked each time we confront the work of art. Hazlitt falls back upon a modified version of the Hobbesian idea that the mere satisfaction of our desire for knowledge is itself pleasant:

Imitation pleases . . . because, by exciting curiosity, and inviting a comparison between the object and the representation, it opens a new field of inquiry, and leads the attention to a variety of details and distinctions not perceived before. This latter source of the pleasure . . . has never been properly insisted on.<sup>2</sup>

But the pleasure which Hazlitt here characterises does not stem simply from our perception of literal similarity between object and representation. There can be no dispute over the fact that Hazlitt's distinction between imitation and copying is far less clear and less systematically worked out than that of Coleridge; the former often uses the words synonymously, and frequently, as in the passage quoted above, seems to move toward a position in which the validity of artistic imitation is apparently held to consist in the faithful and literal representation of detail. But it should be remembered that Hazlitt felt that art provides the spectator with a new experience of reality, the "truth" of which consists in truth to feeling rather than in literal imitation. The pleasure we experience in the imitation of objects

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<sup>1</sup>"On Imitation," The Round Table, Works, IV, 72.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

in themselves disagreeable is pleasure "in proportion to the insight we acquire into the distinctions of nature and of art." It is, however vaguely Hazlitt expresses it, aesthetic pleasure; art has given us new eyes with which to see the object. This represents a clear advance on the Burkean conception of the distinction between art and reality, in which it is implied that the fundamental difference is little more than art's comparative lack of immediacy. "Art, " says Hazlitt, "may be said to draw aside the veil from nature," and

renders an object, displeasing in itself, a source of pleasure, not by repetition of the same idea, but by suggesting new ideas, by detecting new properties, and endless shades of difference, just as a close and continued contemplation of the object itself would do. Art shows us nature, divested of the medium of our prejudices.<sup>1</sup>

It gives us knowledge, and knowledge is pleasure.

Hazlitt accepts also the venerable theory which holds that the excitement of intellectual activity is itself pleasing, but in his hands it becomes a far more sophisticated piece of psychology. He sounds fairly orthodox when he writes that "it is not the quality so much as the quantity of excitement that we are anxious about: we cannot bear a state of indifference and ennui: the mind seems to abhor a vacuum as much as ever matter was supposed to do."<sup>2</sup> But the more our minds are stimulated, the more our knowledge grows,<sup>3</sup> and of course poetry is interesting because "it relates to what-

<sup>1</sup>"On Imitation," IV, 73-74.

<sup>2</sup>"On the Pleasure of Hating," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 128.

<sup>3</sup>"On Imitation," IV, 76.

ever is most interesting in human life."<sup>1</sup> On this basis Hazlitt can assert that the poet is superior to the scientist or the philosopher, as he exercises reason and intellect combined with nature and passion. One source of the pleasure of tragic poetry, then, is the stimulation it gives to our curiosity and the addition it makes to our knowledge of man's nature, while at the same time it enables us to feel more deeply and to exercise our imaginative faculties.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic presentation of evil--the character of Iago, let us say--is thus attractive "from the interest it excites, the sharper edge which it sets on our curiosity and imagination."<sup>3</sup>

"Without something to hate," Hazlitt says of life in general, "we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men."<sup>4</sup> This dark statement leads him on to the attitude which he expresses in several other essays and which is at the heart of his explanation of the pleasure of tragedy, and of its moral function. "There is a hankering after evil in the human mind, and . . . it takes a perverse, but a fortunate delight in mischief, since it is a never-failing source

<sup>1</sup>"Lear," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 271.

<sup>2</sup>The whole question of the pleasurable nature of imaginative activity is related to the Romantic stress on the importance of suggestion, which enables the reader to "fill out the mould" of the work with his own feelings and thoughts.

<sup>3</sup>"On Mr. Kean's Iago," The Round Table, Works, IV, 15.

<sup>4</sup>"On the Pleasure of Hating," XII, 128. In "More on Hazlitt's Preference for Tragedy," PMLA, LXXIII (1958), 443-445, Sylvan Barnet takes this attitude to be evidence of Hazlitt's "cynicism" and his malignity. With due respect, "On the Pleasure of Hating" is not wholly serious, and in any case the view Hazlitt expresses appears to me to be more realistic than malignant.

of satisfaction. Pure good soon grows insipid, wants variety and spirit. Pain is a bitter-sweet, which never surfeits." Not only do painfully-affecting objects and events, in real life and on the stage, lift us out of a disagreeable mental or emotional vacuum, and provide that variety which is the spice of life, but the very pain is somehow pleasing in the excitement of feeling and passion which it causes. All poetry, and especially the dramatic, has amongst its aims the excitation of passion, and the closer it seems to reality the more intensely will the passions be aroused--"the greatest strength of genius is shewn in describing the strongest passions: for the power of imagination, in works of invention, must be in proportion to the force of the natural impressions, which are the subject of them."<sup>1</sup>

Pain "never surfeits"; like Burke, and actually referring to him, Hazlitt cites the perennial interest men take in barbarous sports, exhibitions of cruelty, newspaper accounts of dreadful events, and so forth. This interest, which Hazlitt is surely not wrong in thinking to be almost inseparable from man's nature, springs from the "tendency in the mind to strong excitement, whether good or evil; and in truth, evil has this advantage over good, that it is the strongest [sic] excitement of the two."<sup>2</sup> On this assumption, Hazlitt can insist that

the pleasure . . . derived from tragic poetry, is not any

<sup>1</sup>"Lear," IV, 271.

<sup>2</sup>The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Works, XIII, 134.

thing peculiar to it as poetry, as a fictitious and fanciful thing. It is not an anomaly of the imagination. It has its source in the common love of strong excitement. As Mr. Burke observes, people flock to see a tragedy; but if there were a public execution in the next street, the theatre would very soon be empty. It is not then the difference between fiction and reality that solves the difficulty. . . . We are as prone to make a torment of our fears, as to luxuriate in our hopes of good . . . we cannot help it. The sense of power is as strong a principle in the mind as the love of pleasure. Objects of terror and pity exercise the same despotic control over it as those of love or beauty. It is as natural to hate as to love, to express our hatred or contempt, as our love or admiration.<sup>1</sup>

The delight in strong excitement does not, however, blind us to what is good and what is bad on the moral plane. While the spectator does not exult when the fire he has run to watch is extinguished (even though he knows "it is better to have it so"), since his "feelings" take part with his "passions" rather than with his "understanding,"<sup>2</sup> yet

in reading we always take the right side, and make the case properly our own. . . . Our own passions, interests, and prejudices out of the question, or in an abstracted point of view, we judge fairly and conscientiously; for conscience is nothing but the abstract idea of right and wrong. . . . On the stage, every one takes part with Othello against Iago. Do boys at school, in reading Homer, generally side with the Greeks or Trojans?<sup>3</sup>

In fact, while we naturally derive pleasure from the strong emotional excitement which evil or things disagreeable in themselves can arouse, we find that the representation of such things in art calls into operation our sympathy, which is unerring in its distinctions and

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<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 7.

<sup>2</sup>"On the Pleasure of Hating," XII, 128.

<sup>3</sup>ibid., pp. 136-137 n.

intuitive in its action, and evil is defined before us. The question does not turn upon a paradox; it is

not that we like what we loathe; but we like to indulge our hatred and scorn of it; to dwell upon it, to exasperate our idea of it by every refinement of ingenuity and extravagance of illustration; to make it a bugbear to ourselves, to point it out to others in all the splendour of deformity, to stigmatise it by name, to grapple with it in thought, in action, to sharpen our intellect, to arm our will against it, to know the worst we have to contend with, and to contend with it to the utmost.<sup>1</sup>

It is this recognition of evil, and the power over it which the recognition affords us, which give another dimension to a facet of Hazlitt's explanation of the pleasure of tragedy, which would otherwise seem to be little more than a repetition of the Hobbesian concept of our own safety. If "the imagination of a poet brings such objects before us, as when we look at wild beasts in a menagerie; their claws are pared, their eyes glitter like harmless lightning," nevertheless "we gaze at them with a pleasing awe, clothed in beauty, formidable in the sense of abstract power."<sup>2</sup>

On one or two occasions Hazlitt's remarks would appear to suggest that he also considered tragedy to afford a kind of nervous relief from the troubles of everyday existence. He writes that tragedy "tugs at the heart-strings; loosens the pressure about them,"<sup>3</sup> and again that through it we have "the loaded bosom 'cleansed of that perilous stuff that weighs upon the soul,' by witnessing the struggles and the mortal strokes that 'flesh is heir to.'"<sup>4</sup> He

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 7.

<sup>2</sup>"On Chaucer and Spenser," V, 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 6.

<sup>4</sup>"The Drama: No. IX," Works, XVIII, 362.

does not pursue this line, fruitful as it had been in discussions of catharsis before him, because in his view the true relief is emotional and sympathetic, and therefore, as the next chapter will show, moral. We go to tragedies, and enjoy cruel sports, because of the natural tendency in our minds to strong excitement. "Whenever this principle is not under the restraint of humanity or the sense of moral obligation, there are no excesses to which it will not of itself give rise, without the assistance of any other motive";<sup>1</sup> but, as we have seen, tragedy, through sympathy, supplies the restraint of humanity and the sense of moral obligation.

If tragedy arouses intense sympathy, and if "a sense of compassion is involuntarily excited by the immediate appearance of distress . . . a violence and injury is done to the kindly feelings by withholding the obvious relief, the trifling pittance in our power"<sup>2</sup>--if this is so, what is there to stop us from rushing onto the stage to see that right is done? Earlier, theorists had said that the restrictive agent was the quiet insistence of reason on the fact that the events before the spectator were fictitious, but there is little room in Hazlitt's aesthetic theory for that rational faculty which stresses personal identity at the expense of sympathetic identification. The answer lies in the nature of dramatic illusion, which Hazlitt felt had not been fully explored:

There are different degrees and kinds of belief. The point

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<sup>1</sup>"Mr. Kean's Iago," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 213. Cf. "On Depth and Superficiality," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 348.

<sup>2</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," XII, 49.

is not whether we do or do not believe what we see to be a positive reality, but how far and in what manner we believe in it. We do not say every moment to ourselves, 'This is real': but neither do we say every moment, 'This is not real.' The involuntary impression steals upon us till we recollect ourselves. The appearance of reality, in fact, is the reality, so long and in far as we are not conscious of the contradictory circumstances that disprove it. The belief in a well-acted tragedy never amounts to what witnessing the actual scene would prove, and never sinks into a mere phantasmagoria. Its power of affecting us is not, however, taken away, even if we abstract the feeling of identity; for it still suggests a stronger idea of what the reality would be, just as a picture reminds us more powerfully of the person for whom it is intended, though we are conscious it is not the same.<sup>1</sup>

And the same answer covers the question whether we actually suffer with the tragic hero when we watch his progress. We believe according to and in proportion to the intensity of the feeling which the tragedy excites. To ask "'why that which is painful in itself, pleases in works of fiction,'" is, for Hazlitt, "not a fair statement of the question," because "that which is painful in itself, pleases not the sufferer indeed, but the spectator, in reality as well as in works of fiction."<sup>2</sup> Until we "recollect ourselves," our craving for strong excitement is indulged, and we do suffer by sympathy, although our suffering never attains the intensity of personal, real experience; and tragedy "exhausts the terror or pity by an unlimited indulgence of it," loses "the sense of present suffering in the imaginary exaggeration of it," and "brings every moment of our being or object of

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<sup>1</sup>Characteristics, CCLXXXIX. Works, IX, 209. This book was published in 1823. Hazlitt seems to be unaware of Coleridge's or Lamb's ideas on the subject.

<sup>2</sup>A Letter to William Gifford, Esq., Works, IX, 48.

nature in startling review before us; and in the rapid whirl of events, lifts us from the depths of woe to the highest contemplations on human life."<sup>1</sup> What is important, then, is that through our own suffering--interrupted though it may be--and our pleasure, we gain in knowledge of the human condition, and our perspective is broadened and deepened to include, through the picture of the tragic protagonist, a definitive depiction of mankind in the struggle against evil. Sympathy is the faculty by which we attain to this knowledge, and it is the sympathetic imagination which gives to tragedy its moral force:

The circumstance which balances the pleasure against the pain in tragedy is, that in proportion to the greatness of the evil, is our sense of the opposite good excited; and that our sympathy with actual suffering is lost in the strong impulse given to our natural affections, and carried away with the swelling tide of passion, that gushes from and relieves the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Hazlitt sees the real pleasure of tragedy as a moral one. If his explanation of that pleasure is little more than a synthesis of the main points of the theories current toward the end of the eighteenth century, his view of the substance of the form which produces it is, as we shall now see, surprisingly modern.

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<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 5.

<sup>2</sup>"Lear," IV, 271-272.

## CHAPTER VI

Poetic truth in Hazlitt's theory is in one sense the fidelity with which the poet renders the intense impression which an object or experience has made upon his mind. This truth augments the aesthetic pleasure we take in the artist's formal skill:

Truth . . . doubles the effect of beauty, which is mere affectation without it, and even reconciles us to deformity. Nature, the truth of nature in imitation, denotes a given object, a 'foregone conclusion' in reality, to which the artist is to conform in his copy. In nature real objects exist, real causes act, which are only supposed to act in art; and it is in the subordination of the uncertain and superficial combinations of fancy to the more stable and powerful law of reality that the perfection of art exists. . . . The difficulty and the charm of the combination begins with the truth of imitation, that is, with the resemblance to a given object in nature, or in other words, with the strength, coherence, and justness of our impressions, which must be verified by a reference to a known and determinate class of objects as the test. Art must anchor in nature.<sup>1</sup>

Art embodies and re-presents the ideas which are conveyed by natural objects, and it expresses the feelings which those objects cause. "The capacity of expressing these movements of passion is in proportion to the power with which they are felt,"<sup>2</sup> and this capacity depends upon the poet's sympathetic imagination. In his insistence on naturalism, on the value in art of the concrete and the particular, Hazlitt is not, of course, rejecting as lacking in artistic truth

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<sup>1</sup>"Madame Pasta and Mademoiselle Mars," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 334.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

those works which treat of subjects outside the personal experience of the spectator. A narrow critical relativism such as that is entirely foreign to him. What he does insist upon is that while the poetic imagination is able to create, to perceive the hidden analogies, it must necessarily start in its creative process from nature and not from abstraction. Equally necessarily, the imagination proceeds from experience, since it is in experience that the impressions of nature are stored. It is the triumph of originality or genius "not to shew us what has never been, and what we may therefore very easily never have dreamt of, but to point out to us what is before our eyes and under our feet."<sup>1</sup> The poet's experience, like the reader's, is composed of innumerable gestures, looks, tones, effects, feelings, and impressions, in innumerable circumstances, variously modified; the "sum total of such unconscious impressions in the ordinary occurrences of life, as they are treasured up in the memory, and called out by the occasion,"<sup>2</sup> is what Hazlitt calls common sense. Every impression of which common sense is compounded is coloured by the association of ideas that was produced by the circumstances surrounding the original experience, and when the poet undergoes a new but analogous experience which arouses him to the creative state, "the tide of passion . . . overflows and gradually insinuates itself into all nooks and corners of the mind. . . . The springs of pure feeling will arise and fill the moulds of fancy that are fit to receive it."<sup>3</sup> According to the

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<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 43.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

associationists, any impression in a series can recall any other impression in that series without going through the whole in order; the mind can drop the intermediate links, and pass on immediately from the impression to its most striking emotional effect:

In other words, the feeling of pleasure or of pain, of good or evil, is revived, and acts instantaneously upon the mind, before we have time to recollect the precise objects which have originally given birth to it. . . . By doing this habitually and skilfully with respect to the various impressions and circumstances with which our experience makes us acquainted, [the mind] forms a series of unpremeditated conclusions on almost all subjects that can be brought before it, just as they are of ready application to human life, and common sense is the name of this body of unassuming or practical wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

There is clearly a difference between the reality and the poetic representation of it. Hazlitt says that while the poet must anchor his feelings in nature, "perverse fidelity of detail" makes, in art, "that which is literally true" seem "naturally false."<sup>2</sup> Emotional correspondence is the criterion. While there is necessary a literal disproportion between reality and work of art--between, say, reference and metaphorical referent--"the intensity of the feeling makes up for the disproportion of the objects."<sup>3</sup> It is the intensity and the "truth of feeling" which both enables the poet to transform the matter of fact into art, and the reader to recreate in his own mind the poet's original impression and to feel on his own pulse and in his own experience its truth. Great poetry is true, then, because it

<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 34-35.

<sup>2</sup>"Madame Pasta and Mademoiselle Mars," XII, 333.

<sup>3</sup>"On Poetry in General," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 6.

faithfully recreates the impression which the poet's mind has received from nature.

But clearly it is true in a deeper and more permanent way as well. "Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct and forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry, without the heightenings of the imagination."<sup>1</sup> The poetic imagination, under the stress of passion, intuitively draws for its materials upon common sense, and "represents forms chiefly as they suggest other forms; feelings, as they suggest other forms or feelings."<sup>2</sup> Passion is the catalyst in the creative experiment, enabling the imagination to adduce from common sense's store the "other forms" and "other feelings" the habitual and experiential nature of which confirms and strengthens the fidelity to the momentary impression. "Impassioned poetry," of which the highest form is tragedy, is true because it is grounded firmly in experience; this foundation, since man's capacity to feel changes little from age to age, gives to impassioned poetry its timelessness and its universal validity:

the storm of passion lays bare and shews us the rich depths of the human soul; the whole of our existence, the sum total of our passions and pursuits, of that which we desire and that which we dread, is brought before us.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to impassioned poetry, there is "poetry of sensibility," which appeals solely to our power to feel. Tragedy "is an emanation

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

of the moral and intellectual part of our nature, as well as of the sensitive--of the desire to know, the will to act, and the power to feel; and ought to appeal to these different parts of our constitution, in order to be perfect."<sup>1</sup> Poetry of sensibility lacks the informing power of passion, and is "immediate, personal, instead of being permanent and universal."<sup>2</sup> It does not draw on or appeal to the validating force of common sense, which

is an impartial, instinctive result of truth and nature, and will therefore bear the test and abide the scrutiny of the most severe and patient reasoning. It is indeed incomplete without it. By ingrafting reason on feeling, we 'make assurance double sure.'<sup>3</sup>

Passion is not only intense feeling, but it is also a means of revealing truths and correspondences which are available to the moral and intellectual part of our nature. Since the poetry of sensibility appeals only to our power to feel, it is narrower, and less true, than tragedy.

The domestic or prose tragedy, which is thought to be the most natural, is in this sense the least so, because it appeals almost exclusively to . . . our sensibility. The tragedies of Moore and Lillo, for this reason, however affecting at the time, oppress and lie like a dead weight upon the mind, a load of misery which it is unable to throw off: the tragedy of Shakspeare, which is true poetry, stirs our inmost affections: abstracts evil from itself by combining it with all the forms of imagination, and with the deepest workings of the heart, and rouses the whole man within us.<sup>4</sup>

Mere sensibility implies, as Hazlitt's strictures on Wordsworth,

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 6.

<sup>2</sup>"Mr. Southey," The Spirit of the Age, Works, XI, 80.

<sup>3</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 35-36.

<sup>4</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 6.

Rousseau, and Southey, the Laureate, show, a tendency on the poet's part toward egotism.<sup>1</sup> We have already examined Hazlitt's concept of the sympathetic nature of the imagination, and his belief that through sympathy it is possible to escape from one's own identity and, to use Keats's words, take part in the "existence" of other individuals and even of external objects. On this basis, as well as on the grounds of passion, a poet's ability to express truth will be severely hampered if his imagination is introverted. Clearly, the degree of poetic truth will be higher in proportion as the poet is able to express emotion, rather than describe it. If the intuitive power of the imagination enables him to annihilate his own identity and to identify with others, he will, in proportion as his common sense is developed and augmented by this process of cognition, be able to efface himself from his work and produce a more intense perception of the truth and reality of his subject. Shakespeare, for example, was "the least of an egotist that it was possible to be," and "the striking peculiarity" of his 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." Again, "by an art like that of the ventriloquist, he throws his imagination

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<sup>1</sup>But Hazlitt believed, and seldom failed to state, that Wordsworth's weakness was also his strength. No-one before him had had the power of sensibility to such a degree "as to lend to it the voice of inspiration, as to make it the foundation of a new school in poetry. . . . He has opened a new avenue to the human heart, has explored another secret haunt and nook of nature, 'sacred to verse, and sure of everlasting fame.'" ("On Genius and Common Sense," VIII, 45.)

out of himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the mouth of the person in whose name it is given. His plays alone are properly expressions of the passions, not descriptions of them."<sup>1</sup>

Passion and sympathy thus provide from the depth of his common sense the poet's working materials. The instrument which combines them is gusto, which gives "truth of character from the truth of feeling."<sup>2</sup> Through gusto, the poet fuses together all the elements of poetry which appeal to our moral, intellectual, and sensitive powers, in a "passionate interpretation of [nature] to accord with his own feelings."<sup>3</sup> The more intensely the poet feels, and the more deeply his imagination or sympathy is excited, the more inclusive and efficacious will be the fusion that gusto brings about, and the greater will be the number of hidden analogies which he will express from his experience. In fact, Hazlitt writes, "the infinite quantity of dramatic invention in Shakspeare takes from his gusto. The power he delights to show is not intense, but discursive. He never insists on anything as much as he might, except a quibble."<sup>4</sup> This remark gives some indication of the other important aspect of the concept of gusto. We have seen that when an artist's gusto operates, all his senses are brought into play, receiving and modifying the impressions of the object, augmenting

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<sup>1</sup>"On Shakspeare and Milton," V, 50.

<sup>2</sup>"On Gusto," The Round Table, Works, IV, 77.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

each other, and, specifically, fastening upon some impressions as being more germane to the ultimate effect than others.<sup>1</sup> Thus gusto not only enables the writer of impassioned poetry to invest his work with universal validity, but it also enables him to make that work more true, more telling, and more intensely moving, because through its operation the poet will introduce those correspondences which are most vividly expressive of his feeling, and those correspondences only. Gusto enables him to be selective--but intuitively, not by any rational process.

The truest poetry, then, is impassioned poetry: it depends upon the poet's imaginative ability to annihilate his own personality and to identify with others, participating in their experience and enriching his own; it depends on his ability to appeal through passion not merely to feeling, but also to morality and the intellect; and it depends on the universal quality of his material and his treatment of it. All poetry describes in one way or another "the feelings of pleasure or pain, by blending them with the strongest movements of passion, and the most striking forms of nature";

Tragic poetry, which is the most impassioned species of it, strives to carry on the feeling to the utmost point of sublimity or pathos, by all the force of comparison or contrast; loses the sense of present suffering in the imaginary exaggeration of it; exhausts the terror or pity by an unlimited indulgence of it; grapples with impossibilities in its desperate impatience of restraint; throws us back upon the past, forward into the future; brings every moment of our being or object of nature in startling review before us; and in the rapid whirl of events, lifts us from the depths of woe to the highest contemplations on human life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"On Gusto," IV, 79. It is because Claude's pictures lack gusto that they "lay an equal stress on all visible impressions."

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 5.

Thus of all the arts, impassioned poetry, or tragedy, expresses for Hazlitt most completely that which is universal in nature and in life itself. It abstracts from life, in its revelation of the eternal and universal, that which is temporary and accidental, and places before us the permanent possibilities of human nature.<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, it deals in facts, but it transforms those facts into truths. Its essence is a strict linkage of cause and effect in more or less clear connection, not only in action and plot but in character too. In fact, because the tragic poet is able to discriminate between the materials available in common sense to his imagination, the characters he portrays and the action in which they are involved observe a more rigorous probability than that which seems to obtain in reality. The probability which Hazlitt demands is by no means a narrow vraisemblance, limiting the poet to actuality's more trivial data; the events depicted in tragedy, when measured against everyday existence, might appear improbable or even false. It is the emotional effect of the whole, the truth to feeling, which validates the literal falsity. The structure of the tragedy itself must cohere and maintain an internal consistency; while it is grounded in nature, it transcends fact, and presents "a stronger idea of what the reality would be." "The flame of the passions," Hazlitt says, "communicated to the imagination, reveals to us, as with a flash of lightning, the inmost recesses of thought, and penetrates our whole being,"<sup>2</sup> and again,

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Aristotle, Poetics, IX, 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 3.

Poetry is only the highest eloquence of passion, the most vivid form of expression that can be given to our conception of any thing, whether pleasurable or painful, mean or dignified, delightful or distressing. It is the perfect coincidence of the image and the words with the feeling we have, and of which we cannot get rid in any other way, that gives an instant 'satisfaction to the thought.'<sup>1</sup>

Tragedy affords, in other words, the form which answers to the idea. Its truth is essentially different from that of fact, and because of the nature of poetic truth, the world which tragedy depicts is more intelligible than the world of real experience. Its materials are permanent and universal, abstracted from those elements which obscure our ordinary comprehension of real human behaviour and our perception of the causal relationships of real events. In tragedy, we discover the universal through the particular, the permanent in the concrete; and we perceive this on our own pulses.

In its presentation and ordering of insight into the human condition, and its artistic definition of our inmost knowledge of that condition, tragedy has a pleasurable effect upon us. Hazlitt is not very far from saying that the end of tragedy is the production of a pleasurable effect on the spectator's mind. This attitude is foreign to a large body of modern critical opinion, which holds that the end of a work of art is formal perfection, or the consummation of the autonomous, objective character of the work as art; the work is self-sufficient, and its effect is not connected with it as a work. Hazlitt once pointed out that the

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<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 7.

end of an object is inherent in that object, and is reached when the object achieves its peculiar excellence and fulfils itself-- "a thing is not more perfect by becoming something else, but by being more itself."<sup>1</sup> If he could say this, why could he not perceive that art attains its end not through some external effect but in being most completely itself? If, as he appears to believe, the end of poetry is the emotional effect which poetry has on its audience, he must have been more than slightly obtuse not to have realised that this theory, logically extended, would make the success of a poem an entirely subjective matter, dependent upon the accidental complexion of the hearer's mood and emotions at the time of listening to the poem.

There is little room to doubt that Hazlitt is here guilty of inconsistency. One implication of his theory is that generally the end of art is immanent; another indicates that it is transcendental, ultimately subjective, inhering in the pleasure felt by the spectator. Perhaps the contradiction arises out of his critical practice: his method is largely the observation and recording of the emotional effect which particular works have on him, and it is quite possible that he stresses the emotional effect of art unduly. But it should be noted that he considers drama to be the most objective form of poetry, since the dramatist does not attempt to set down his own feelings, imitating as he does through the medium of the sympathetic imagination the fundamentals of human existence. In that state of

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<sup>1</sup>"The Ideal," Works, XX, 303.

strong emotional excitement which Hazlitt calls *gusto*, the poet's imagination calls forth into uniquely telling language the essence of his material. Hazlitt's insistence on the value of emotional excitement on the part of the poet is so vehement that it sometimes obscures the fact that he refers to emotion directed not inward but outward, toward the subject. But as far as the end of art is concerned, Hazlitt's theory appears at first glance to assume that the artist writes with his audience's emotions always in mind as the final criterion, and that his aim is achieved when his work arouses pleasure. The poem, almost by definition, is something designed to appeal to the emotions and the imagination of the reader, and its success as art depends on the reader's subjective response.

It is noteworthy, however, that all Hazlitt's practical criticism, and the examples with which he illustrates his more theoretical discussions, are designed to fix the emotional effect of works of art by reference to the works' content--to what they are about. He discusses them in terms of the emotional effect which they produce because he sees them and their effect as inseparable. And this emotional effect does not depend upon the accidental complexion of the reader's emotions; while it is necessarily subjective--it can hardly be anything else--it is solidly based on that sum of experience which Hazlitt calls common sense, and it is therefore objectively valid. In the last chapter, the groundwork of Hazlitt's theory of tragic pleasure was examined, and it emerged that whatever the origin of that pleasure, he saw it as characteristic of tragedy. For him, the end of tragedy is not--as it might first seem

to be--simply some vaguely pleasurable feeling in the mind of the reader or spectator: it is the specific tragic pleasure, the pleasure which distinguishes and defines the form. Thus, though the aim of the tragedian is the production of a particular emotional effect, that effect is not divorced from the experience which tragedy embodies. Tragedy "is human nature tried in the crucible of affliction,"<sup>1</sup> and, as "Aristotle has long since said . . . purifies the mind by terror and pity; that is, substitutes an artificial and intellectual interest for real passion."<sup>2</sup> What we enjoy in tragedy, says Hazlitt, is the characteristic response, moral in its direction, which, through pity and fear tragedy and only tragedy provides. In his theory as in his practical criticism, the test of a good tragedy is ultimately the degree to which it achieves this characteristic end.

Hazlitt sees evil as the informing element of the tragic experience. If the eighteenth century had, broadly speaking, rested secure in an optimism based upon confidence in the order of the universe and in man's ability to apprehend and submit to that order, Hazlitt, in so many ways an eighteenth-century man out of his time, took a darker path and saw that "evil . . . is a fated, inevitable necessity hanging over us. It follows us wherever we go: if we fly into the uttermost parts of the earth, it is there: whether we turn

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<sup>1</sup>"Sir Walter Scott, Racine, and Shakespear," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 346.

<sup>2</sup>"On Modern Comedy," The Round Table, Works, IV, 13.

to the right or the left, we cannot escape from it."<sup>1</sup> Pope had said that

All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, universal good . . .

which neatly summed up the pleasant belief of his time that rational apprehension of the Divine Plan which ordered the universe would lead to right action and the perception that the apparent irrationalities of life were necessary rubs, insignificant against the tremendous significance of a fundamental Order and Decorum. Hazlitt, who unlike many of the sensationist thinkers of his day does not confuse good and evil with mere pleasure and pain, but views them as "properly that which gives the mind pleasure or pain on reflection, that is, which excites rational approbation or disapprobation,"<sup>2</sup> rejected such easy, deistic faith in the order of nature. Like Swift, Butler, and Johnson--but without their religious conviction--he saw that "evil is inseparable from the nature of things,"<sup>3</sup> and he was unconvinced by the attempts of rationalist theologians to argue evil into a disguised harmony in the universal frame:<sup>4</sup>

The theological writers . . . affirm, I think erroneously, that God or the first cause is the sole agent in the universe, to which all second causes are to be referred as

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<sup>1</sup>"Mind and Motive," Works, XX, 52.

<sup>2</sup>"On Liberty and Necessity," Lectures on English Philosophy, Works, II, 260.

<sup>3</sup>"Mr. Southey," The Spirit of the Age, Works, XI, 79.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Locke's The Reasonableness of Christianity; Matthew Tindal's Christianity as Old as Creation; and John Toland's Christianity Not Mysterious.

instruments, having no real efficacy of their own. If so, all events are produced immediately by the divine agency, that is, all second causes are parts of the divine essence, and in all that we see or hear or feel, we must conceive of something far more deeply interfused, a spirit and a motion that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things.<sup>1</sup>

For Hazlitt man is a free moral agent,<sup>2</sup> able to determine his own destiny by choice and consequent action. But he is limited by his very humanity; he is

an intellectual animal, and therefore an everlasting contradiction to himself. His senses centre in himself, his ideas reach to the end of the universe; so that he is torn in pieces between the two, without a possibility of its ever being otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"On Liberty and Necessity," XX, 267-268. Hazlitt actually considered that the passage from Tintern Abbey reflected what he called a Spinozist pantheism, and was a fine illustration of the doctrine of philosophical necessity. His use of it here, unacknowledged and in this context, is uncharacteristic.

<sup>2</sup>"The true hero devotes himself [to his cause] of his own accord, and from an inward sentiment. The service on which he is bound is perfect freedom. He is not a machine but a free agent." ("Guy Faux," Works, XX, 106.)

<sup>3</sup>Characteristics, CLVIII. IX, 192. The passage recalls Pope's lines about the "being darkly wise and rudely great." But in spite of this darkening of mood, Pope and many of his contemporaries felt on the whole that "spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite, / One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right." They were not so much pessimistic as gently melancholy, in regard to the human condition:

Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,  
Pleas'd with a rattle, tickled with a straw:  
Some livelier plaything gives his youth delight,  
A little louder, but as empty quite:  
Scarfs, garters, gold, amuse his riper stage,  
And beads and pray'r-books are the toys of age:  
Pleas'd with this bauble still, as that before;  
Till tir'd he sleeps, and life's poor play is o'er.

Hazlitt, in spite of maintaining that evil is a pervasive influence, rejects the concept of original sin (in common with many of his time); but he does so because its only object appears to him to be the coercion of "the headstrong propensities to vice," and it denies the "natural disposition to good in the mind, which [it] is possible to improve, refine, and cultivate." (Characteristics, CXXXVIII-IX, IX, 189.)

Hazlitt is also unorthodox in his rejection of poetic justice as the proper close to tragedy. A work in which poetic justice is triumphant will not produce the pity and fear which together constitute the peculiar pleasure of tragedy, and, furthermore, such a work is unnatural because, contrary to experience, it assumes that right vanquishes evil as a matter of course. Thus Hazlitt refers to Lillo's George Barnwell as "one of the most improbable and purely arbitrary fictions we have ever seen." The play is dismissed as "a caricature on the imbecility of goodness, and of the unprovoked and gratuitous depravity of vice"; it supposes that virtue is relinquished and vice adopted "without common sense or reason, for the sake of a Christmas catastrophe, of a methodistical moral," and instead of drawing from nature, it drags the theatre "into the service of the conventicle."<sup>1</sup> Because of its assumption that the ascendance of evil and irrationality is temporary and terminable by a rational instrument such as the law, George Barnwell affords no play to the moral and intellectual parts of our nature, and appeals only to our sensibility. For this reason, although it may affect us while we watch it, in the long run it does nothing but "oppress and lie like a dead weight upon the mind, a load of misery which it is unable to throw off."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this vehemence, Hazlitt does occasionally incline towards poetic justice as a cathartic function of tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup>"George Barnwell," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 268-269.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 6.

Tragedy, he writes in discussing Othello, "excites our sensibility by exhibiting the passions wound up to the utmost pitch by the power of imagination or the temptation of circumstances; and corrects their fatal excesses in ourselves by pointing to the greater extent of sufferings and of crimes to which they have led others."<sup>1</sup> But this is more a tendency to poetic justice than an acceptance of it,<sup>2</sup> since it does not imply a fundamental assumption that virtue will necessarily be rewarded or vice necessarily punished. It is, however (and the importance of this will become apparent in due course), an emphasis upon the moral function of tragedy. In general, Hazlitt's view of life, a view which he realises he shares with the writers of great tragedy, is one in which evil is mysterious and irrational, beyond the consolations of philosophy or religious faith. Evil is not total or overwhelming, but it is real and threatening and ineluctable, and while "the habitual belief of a universal, invisible Principle of all things" may rest on faith in order and justice, experience tells us that no belief can always dissipate the "vastness and obscurity which confounds our perceptions,"<sup>3</sup> and through which justice is at best infrequently dealt out to those who would seem to deserve it.

It is within this universe that tragedy places its characters, Hazlitt's criticism suggests. The tragic hero must be capable of some great action which will enlist the audience's admiration:

To impress the idea of power on others, they must be

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<sup>1</sup>"Othello," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 200.

<sup>2</sup>See Professor Albrecht. See his "Hazlitt's Preference for Tragedy," PMLA, LXXI (1956), p. 1049.

<sup>3</sup>"Schlegel on the Drama," Works, XVI, 66.

made in some way to feel it. It must be communicated to their understandings in the shape of an increase of knowledge, or it must subdue and overawe them by subjecting their wills. Admiration, to be solid and lasting, must be founded on proofs from which we have no means of escaping. . . . No act terminating in itself constitutes greatness.<sup>1</sup>

What impels him to this action may be "distinct and pointed . . . causes of complaint,"<sup>2</sup> like Othello's, or "injuries . . . without provocation, and which admit of no alleviation or atonement," like Lear's. The latter are

strange, bewildering, overwhelming: they wrench asunder and stun the whole frame: they accumulate 'horrors on horror's head,' and yet leave the mind impotent of resources, cut off, proscribed, anathematised from the common hope of good to itself, or ill to others--amazed at its own situation, but unable to avert it, scarce daring to look at, or to weep over it.<sup>3</sup>

It is when "this load of disabling circumstances" oppresses the hero that the dramatist is best able to bring out "the action of the mind . . . in the most masterly and triumphant manner."<sup>4</sup> The suffering which the hero undergoes is part of an isolation which defines the ambiguity of his position, and it is not mere physical suffering.<sup>5</sup> The dramatist must not describe the anguish of his

<sup>1</sup>"The Indian Jugglers," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 85.

<sup>2</sup>"The Drama: No. VI," Works, XVIII, 332.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>See "Mr. Kean's Bajazet and The Country Girl," Works, XVIII, 205, where Hazlitt censures Rowe's Tamerlane for its display of mere "physical passion and external energy." Cf. also "Miss O'Neill's Belvidera," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 261: "The intention of tragedy is to exhibit mental passion and not bodily agony, or the last only as a necessary concomitant of the former."

hero, for description implies the selective, guiding influence of the author, limiting--be it never so slightly--the sympathy of the audience; "it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of the interest lies."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt does not discuss the question of choice of action, but he does indicate that the action and the consequent suffering involve the hero totally.<sup>2</sup> It is in the depth of his isolation that the hero is impelled toward action, when he is "abandoned of fortune, of nature, of reason";<sup>3</sup> and joining with his sense of injustice, his pride is the motivating force. At some stage in his progress, he becomes "a partaker with his kind"<sup>4</sup>--just as the spectator, through sympathetic identification, does--and he sees that his anguish is the product of elements which are not unique to himself. The dramatist must build up his action on this principle, realising that "it is the business of poetry, and indeed of all works of the imagination, to exhibit the species through the individual. Otherwise, there can be no opportunity for the exercise of the imagination, without which the descriptions of . . . the poet are lifeless, unsubstantial, and vapid."<sup>5</sup>

The pride or "sense of merit"<sup>6</sup> which is essential in the

<sup>1</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 10.

<sup>2</sup>See "The Drama: No. VI," XVIII, 332, and Hazlitt's dramatic criticism in vols. V and XVIII, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup>"The Drama: No. VI," XVIII, 332.

<sup>4</sup>"Othello," IV, 200.

<sup>5</sup>"Mr. Kean's Macbeth," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 204.

<sup>6</sup>"On the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity," XX, 64.

the tragic hero is not, in Hazlitt's view, a weakness or a moral flaw. It is not prejudged by tragedy. Hazlitt would have agreed with Arthur Miller's statement that it is the hero's "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status."<sup>1</sup> Modesty is the lowest of the virtues as far as Hazlitt is concerned;<sup>2</sup> pride, which is founded "on the sense of power,"<sup>3</sup> is a natural attribute. It "is the great stimulus of exertion,"<sup>4</sup> and just as it is natural to man, so "the admiration of it in others" is natural.<sup>5</sup> The spectacle of a man's putting a just valuation on his own dignity or on an idea and acting to protect it in the face of evil is a stirring experience, whereas "the tame submission to usurped authority, or even the natural resistance to it, has nothing to excite or flatter the imagination."<sup>6</sup> Hazlitt suggests that hubris is not sin, but the source of the tragic hero's action. It is perilous, as his comments on Lear and Coriolanus frequently suggest, because it involves a real challenge to external and superior powers, but it is hardly, in the objective world of tragedy, either morally good or bad. Through it, the tragic character is often led to calamity and destruction, but without it no man can fulfil himself; no man can feel, or know, or

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man." New York Times Theatre Section (February 27th, 1949), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>"On the Knowledge of Character," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 304.

<sup>3</sup>"On Novelty and Familiarity," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 308.

<sup>4</sup>"On the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity." XX, 64.

<sup>5</sup>"Coriolanus," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 348.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

act. Pride in this sense is the quality which sets the hero apart from lesser men. Milton, in attempting to justify the ways of God to man, drew the great villain of his poem as having been cast out from heaven because of his pride, and as continuing in sinful pride in his attempts to regain what he thought was his by right. Hazlitt's scattered remarks on Paradise Lost show that he - like, one imagines, most readers - is blinded to the moral and theological sinfulness of Satan by the dramatic force of the poem, and he points out that Satan

suffers infinite losses, and makes the most desperate efforts to recover or avenge them; and it is the struggle with fate and the privation of happiness that sharpens our desires, or enhances our sympathy with good or evil. We have little interest in unalterable felicity, nor can we join with heart and soul in the endless symphonies and exulting hallelujahs of the spirits of the blest.

This "is the true reason and apology for Milton's having unwittingly made Satan the hero of 'Paradise Lost.'"<sup>1</sup>

In his tragic suffering, the hero does not abandon life or give up his cause, although he might be driven to a state of despair. In his soul's dark night, he resists every temptation to compromise or to turn back, and though his mind "staggers under its load, it does not yield."<sup>2</sup> "To have an object always in view," Hazlitt writes,

to have an object always in view dearer to one than one's-self, to cling to a principle in contempt of danger, of interest, of the opinion of the world,--this is the true ideal, the high and heroic state of man. It is in fact to have a standard of absolute and implicit faith in the mind, that admits neither of compromise, degree, nor exception.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Why the Heroes of Romance are Insipid," Works, XVII, 254. (They are insipid because "instead of acting, they are acted upon." p. 252).

<sup>2</sup>"The Drama: No. VI," XVIII, 332.

<sup>3</sup>"Guy Faux," XX, 99.

This determination and steadfastness is another factor which distinguishes the hero from those about him. Because of his "high principle of enthusiasm and disinterested zeal for truth,"<sup>1</sup> what would break lesser men reveals positive moral qualities in him, and he rises above personal anguish and remorse. Macbeth, for instance, pushes on with his purpose "and banishes remorse for his past,"<sup>2</sup> Richard III "in the busy turbulence of his projects never loses his self-possession, and makes use of every circumstance that happens as an instrument of his long-reaching designs."<sup>3</sup>

Coriolanus has an "inflexible sternness" of will and an admirable magnanimity;<sup>4</sup> and Lear's character

is cemented of human strength and human weaknesses (the firmer for the mixture): . . . [and is] sustained, reared to a majestic height out of the yawning abyss, by the force of the affections, the imagination, and the cords of the human heart--it stands a proud monument, in the gap of nature, over barbarous cruelty and filial ingratitude.<sup>5</sup>

Rough and uncertain though his path may be, the tragic character gains in spiritual poise and perspective. His suffering (though it is never completely stilled and remains, as we saw concerning Lear, without provocation and admitting of no atonement, out of proportion to his deserts), affords him--and gives the audience through their sympathetic identification with him-- a deeper knowledge of what it is to be a human creature. It yields him a new perspective into human experience, because in his agony he has found, for himself and

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Macbeth, IV, 193.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>"Coriolanus," V, 217.

<sup>5</sup>"The Drama: No. VI," XVIII, 332.

for those watching him, his strengths and his limitations. His progress toward this knowledge is tragic because the suffering it entails is so disproportionate; that suffering is tragic because of its intensity; and the hero's destruction is tragic because it is the destruction of a great and admirable man, and also because it is a necessary condition of existence.<sup>1</sup> Thus Hazlitt says that Cleopatra "had great and unpardonable faults, but the grandeur of her death almost redeems them. She learns from the depth of despair the strength of her affections. She keeps her queen-like state in the last disgrace."<sup>2</sup> In the final analysis, what forms "the perfection of tragedy, whether in acting or writing" in Hazlitt's theory is "that terrible reaction of mental power on the scene"--"those reaches of the soul, in which it looks down on its sufferings, in which it rises superior to nature and fortune, and gathers strength and grandeur from its despair."<sup>3</sup> Impassioned poetry is "an emanation of the moral and intellectual parts of our nature, as well as of the sensitive--of the desire to know, the will to act, and the power to feel; and ought to appeal to these different parts of our constitution, in order to be perfect"; in our sympathetic identification with the tragic hero, our passions are aroused, and in such a

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, "A Conspectus of Dramatic Genres," Kenyon Review, XIII (1951) takes an appreciably similar stand.

<sup>2</sup>"Antony and Cleopatra," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 230.

<sup>3</sup>"Miss O'Neill" Works, XVIII, 196. Comparison should be made with D.G. James, Scepticism and Poetry (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937), p. 118, who arrives at a strikingly similar conclusion.

condition of imaginative excitement we perceive, through the whole action of which he is a part, that the chaos, incoherence, and darkness inseparable from life have been placed in a clearer perspective. Tragedy is a progress toward value. "It is this moral and intellectual perspective . . . in its full signification and extent . . . that gives a proportionable superiority in weight, in compass, and dignity to . . . the tragic Muse."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Sir Walter Scott, Racine, and Shakespear,"  
XII, 336-337.

## CHAPTER VII

In general, Hazlitt sees tragedy and the tragic protagonist as affirming moral qualities which are more positive than mere remorse or endurance. Although on occasion his remarks concerning the function of tragedy incline toward the unnaturally neat balance and didacticism of poetic justice, his theory as a whole is in some respects similar to Blair's, who dismissed poetic justice as an unnecessary and fallacious rationalisation.<sup>1</sup> For Hazlitt as for the Edinburgh professor, the function of tragedy is "to afford a probable representation of the state of human life, where calamities often befall the best, and a mixed proportion of good and evil is appointed for all."<sup>2</sup> But Hazlitt would have changed the emphasis in Blair's additional statement, that the end of tragedy is "to affect us with pity for the virtuous in distress," because he saw, as his criticism makes clear, that our sympathy for the hero is likely to be more intensely aroused if the hero is closer to our own "middle state" than perfect virtue would allow. And he would perhaps have re-worded Blair's sentence to bring out his own belief that the calamities and the mixed proportion of good and evil which tragedy

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<sup>1</sup>"It is not necessary . . . that poetical justice, as it is called, should be observed in the catastrophe of the *Piece*. This has long been exploded from Tragedy [the academic was sadly out of touch with actuality], the end of which is, to affect us with pity for the virtuous in distress." (Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, III, 274-275.)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

depicts are usually undeserved by the hero, and that the fate which they thrust upon him is out of all keeping with his stature.

In the light of his ubiquitous insistence upon the necessity for sympathetic identification with the tragic character, it is not surprising that Hazlitt's idea of the hero's stature is conditioned by his estimate of the hero's capacity to invite identification. If it is the hero's action, capacity for suffering, knowledge, and his insight and moral qualities which set him apart and define his greatness and make him heroic, it is his likeness to us which first calls forth our sympathy with him and allows us to see him as a partisan of humanity.<sup>1</sup> He is above us, distanced from us, in his moral heroism; he is one with us in his limited nature and his mortality. On this ground, Hazlitt frequently stresses the essential likeness of the tragic character to ourselves. It is in this sense, for example, that Hamlet "is as little of the hero as a man can well be," and that "it is we who are Hamlet."<sup>2</sup> Lear is a "poor old king,"<sup>3</sup> but it is not his kingship so much as his human nature that draws us to him--"he is a poor crazy old man, who has nothing sublime about him but his afflictions, and who dies

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<sup>1</sup>This is not, after all, very different from Greig's standpoint: "The tragic writer . . . raises his hero above the level of common humanity, so that the audience shall respond to him not simply as to one like unto themselves, but as to one greater than themselves in those capacities they yet share with him." J.Y.T. Greig, The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1923), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup>"Hamlet," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 233 and 232.

<sup>3</sup>"Lear," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 258.

of a broken heart."<sup>1</sup> Aristotle considered that tragedy should portray characters who are morally great, and who are illustrious by birth or position--the representation of the narrow lives of obscure persons not being capable of striking out an action of sufficient magnitude for tragedy. This was extended by critics after him to limit the tragic character to one of royal or noble birth.<sup>2</sup> But for Hazlitt, illustrious station is not necessary. It is true, as Albrecht points out, that in speaking of Coriolanus Hazlitt says that "wrong dressed out in pride, pomp, and circumstance, has more attraction than abstract right,"<sup>3</sup> but the reason for this attraction is not necessarily the pride, pomp, and circumstance--"the love of power in ourselves and the admiration of it in others are both natural to man," and "it is the assumption of a right to insult or oppress others that carries an imposing air of superiority with it. We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed;"<sup>4</sup> and from the tone of Hazlitt's statement it is clear that he regrets this. Hazlitt is well in that tradition, nourished by men like Lord Kames, Burke, and Blair, which sanctioned the gradual introduction of the bourgeois or pathetic hero, who by Hazlitt's time was fairly in command of the stage. Also, Hazlitt was a radical, and his democratic political

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," Lectures chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, Works, VI, 348.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle's successors in classical times used this limitation primarily to distinguish tragedy from comedy; neo-classic French critics saw it as a characteristic of tragedy.

<sup>3</sup>W.P. Albrecht, "Hazlitt's Preference for Tragedy," PMLA, LXXI (1956), 1051.

<sup>4</sup>"Coriolanus," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 215.

convictions sometimes shaped his literary judgments to the degree that he was able to make such statements as "the chief cause of most of Lord Byron's errors is, that he is that anomaly in letters and in society, a Noble Poet. It is a double privilege, almost too much for humanity."<sup>1</sup> However it is not only this levelling sentiment which leads Hazlitt to write of Richard II that

we feel neither respect nor love for the deposed monarch; for he is as wanting in energy as in principle: but we pity him, for he pities himself. His heart is by no means hardened against himself, but bleeds afresh at every new stroke of mischance, and his sensibility, absorbed in his own person, and unused to misfortune, is not only tenderly alive to its own sufferings, but without the fortitude to bear them. He is, however, human in his distresses; for to feel pain, and sorrow, weakness, disappointment, remorse and anguish, is the lot of humanity, and we sympathize with him accordingly. The sufferings of the man make us forget that he ever was a king.<sup>2</sup>

What is important to Hazlitt in the character of Richard is that he is akin to us in his humanity--"the weakness of the king leaves us leisure to take a greater interest in the misfortunes of the man,"<sup>3</sup> and we are therefore able to exercise our sympathy and identify with him all the more easily.

Hazlitt places such emphasis upon the importance of sympathy in the spectator's reaction to tragedy because, as we have seen, he believes that the exercise of sympathy is essentially a pleasurable activity. But his primary reason for doing so is his fundamental conviction regarding the real value of sympathy.

<sup>1</sup>"Lord Byron," The Spirit of the Age, Works, XI, 77.

<sup>2</sup>"Richard II," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 272-273.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 272.

The sympathetic imagination is not merely the only true means of knowing the feelings of others nor the only basis of all voluntary action: it is for Hazlitt the basis of highest form of morality itself. "I would not," he says, "wish a better or more philosophical standard of morality, than that we should think and feel towards others as we should, if it were our own case. If we look for a higher standard than this, we shall not find it; but shall lose the substance for the shadow!"<sup>1</sup> And if

we must have some outstanding object for the mind, as well as the eye, to dwell on and recur to--something marked and decisive to give a tone and texture to the moral feelings . . . [because] not only is the attention thus roused and kept alive; but what is most important as to the principles of action, the desire of good or hatred of evil is powerfully excited--<sup>2</sup>

then great tragedy, if we accept Hazlitt's theory, will most amply fill that need. He sees the theatre as a school of instruction, which "not only refines the manners, but . . . is the best teacher of morals, for it is the truest and most intelligible picture of life. It stamps the image of virtue on the mind by first softening the rude materials of which it is composed, by a sense of pleasure. It regulates the passions by giving a loose to the imagination."<sup>3</sup> It is also "a test and school of humanity," for "there is no place where the social principle is called forth with such strength and harmony, by a powerful interest in a common object."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 47-48.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>3</sup>"On Actors and Acting," The Round Table, Works, IV, 153.

<sup>4</sup>"The Free Admission," Works, XVII, 367-368.

Because the creation of dramatic characters requires, on the playwright's part, the annihilation of his own identity and as complete a sympathetic projection into those characters as possible, and because the mere exercise of the sympathetic imagination is moral, the writing of a tragedy is a moral experience. In addition, the vast sum of experience and knowledge of humanity which is the tragedian's, and upon which his imagination draws intuitively to create character, is another source of the morality of tragedy from the point of view of the poet--

I defy any great tragic writer to despise that nature which he understands, or that heart which he has probed, with all its rich bleeding materials of joy and sorrow. The subject may not be a source of much triumph to him, from its alternate light and shade, but it can never become one of supercilious indifference. He must feel a strong reflex interest in it, corresponding to that which he has depicted in the characters of others. . . . This is summed up in the wish of the poet--

'To feel what others are, and know myself a man.'<sup>1</sup>

The tragic poet cannot be a cynic, and he cannot be a pessimist.

Equally clearly, watching or reading a tragedy is a moral experience if we are able to identify with the tragic characters, and for this reason they must be so shaped by the poet that they elicit sympathetic identification. It is a moral experience because "tragedy gives us a high and permanent interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such," and it "makes man a partaker with his kind."<sup>2</sup> Because the tragic hero typifies humanity, and

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<sup>1</sup>"On Reason and Imagination," XII, 55.

<sup>2</sup>"Othello," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 200.

because (in Hazlitt's view) he is so like us, we sympathise with him, annihilate our real identities, and not only learn more about the human condition but are made less self-centred. "It has been said that tragedy purifies the affections by terror and pity. That is, it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness."<sup>1</sup>

The evil which tragedy sets before us is pleasurable, we have seen, because it appeals to our love of strong excitement. But it has a far more important function additional to this in Hazlitt's theory of tragedy. Properly handled, it precisely defines the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. In the tragedy of sensibility, evil remains chaotic and meaningless, because by definition it is not treated in such a way as to arouse the moral and intellectual parts of our nature. Its power remains with us when the play is over, and we are oppressed by it. In impassioned tragedy, however, evil is placed in perspective. We recognise it for what it is, and we see that it plays a major part in the destruction of the hero. We sympathise intensely with the hero in his fate, and "in proportion as it sharpens the edge of calamity and disappointment, [tragedy] strengthens the desire of good."<sup>2</sup> Thus the true pleasure of tragedy, which the tragic catharsis arouses, is for Hazlitt essentially a moral one. Not only are we purged of our selfishness, but a more positive aspect is apparent--

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," Lectures on the English Poets, Works, V, 6. Cf. Characteristics, CCLXXXVIII, Works, IX, 209; "Mr. Crabbe," Works, XIX, 54-55; "Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe," "The Spirit of the Age," Works, XI, 167.

the circumstance which balances the pleasure against the pain in tragedy is, that in proportion to the greatness of the evil, is our sense and desire of the opposite good excited; and that our sympathy with actual suffering is lost in the strong impulse given to our natural affections, and carried away with the swelling tide of passion, that gushes from and relieves the heart.<sup>1</sup>

And in tragedy's appeal to our love of strong excitement, and in our indulgence of that love, "we see the thing ourselves, and shew it to others as we feel it to exist, and as, in spite of ourselves, we are compelled to think of it."<sup>2</sup> Burke suggested that we do not desire tragedy to occur, but that when it does, we are pleased by our sympathy with the sufferers; Hazlitt is on firmer ground when he says that

we do not wish the thing to be so; but we wish it to appear such as it is. For knowledge is conscious power; and the mind is no longer, in this case, the dupe, though it may be the victim of vice or folly.<sup>3</sup>

So we are armed against evil by knowing it; we slake our thirst for strong excitement; by our sympathy we are provided with "the restraint of humanity" and the "sense of moral obligation" which restrain and direct that excitement; and we intuitively desire the good.

Hazlitt considered that although classical drama differed markedly in style from the Elizabethan and Jacobean, it was in the same rank with them in regard to artistic worth. Like them, it presented persons "speaking, feeling, and acting according to nature, that is, according to the impression of given circumstances on

<sup>1</sup>"Lear," Works, IV, 271-272.

<sup>2</sup>"On Poetry in General," V, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

the passions and mind of man in these circumstances."<sup>1</sup> It differed from the drama of Shakespeare's time in its "external form," its ritualistic dignity of attitude and expression, its "selection in the figures," and in a "unity in their grouping" which reminded him of Greek statuary.<sup>2</sup> While he refused to set up on the basis of personal preference arbitrary standards of excellence by which to judge works of art, and felt that both Greek and Elizabethan drama were "founded in essential and indestructible principles of human nature," his own taste ran quite clearly to the latter form.

Sophocles differs from Shakespear as a Doric portico does from Westminster Abbey. The principle of the one is simplicity and harmony, of the other richness and power. The one relies on form or proportion, the other on quantity and variety and prominence of parts. The one owes its charm to a certain union and regularity of feeling, the other adds to its effects from complexity and the combination of the greatest extremes. The classical appeals to strength and habit: the Gothic or romantic strikes from novelty, strangeness and contrast.<sup>3</sup>

The preference is based upon subject as much as on the effect of differing techniques. Following Schlegel, Hazlitt in the final lecture of the series on the dramatic literature of the age of Elizabeth assumes the primary distinction between the classical and the romantic to be "that the one is conversant with objects that are grand or beautiful in themselves, or in consequence of obvious and universal associations; the other, with those that are interesting

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," V, 347.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., and see p. 349: "(Schlegel) is right in affirming that the true way to understand the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus, is to study them before the groupes [sic] of the Niobe or the Laocoon."

only by the force of circumstances and imagination."<sup>1</sup> While the classical tragedians gave as much of the absolute truth of imitation as could be given by words, they had not those wider reaches of the imagination open to them that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had--

The ideas of the ancients were too exact and definite, too much attached to the material form or vehicle by which they were conveyed, to admit of those rapid combinations, those unrestrained flights of fancy, which, glancing from heaven to earth, unite the most opposite extremes, and draw the happiest illustrations from things the most remote.<sup>2</sup>

This, in Hazlitt's opinion, is the fundamental cause of the comparative severity and simplicity of the Greek drama, "which excluded every thing foreign or unnecessary to the subject." It is also, he feels, the source of the Unities (Hazlitt does not seem to be aware of the already well-established attack by scholarship upon the attribution to Aristotle of that doctrine): because the Unities, by imposing order and coherence upon the drama, identify the imitation as much as possible with the reality. It is also the source of the "beauty and grandeur" of the material presented by the Greek tragedians, for "deriving their power over the mind from the truth of the imitation, it was necessary that the subject which they made choice of, and from which they could not depart, should be in itself grand and beautiful."<sup>3</sup> And finally, it is the source of their perfection of technique, which consisted in giving the utmost harmony, delicacy,

<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," VI, 348.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>3</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," VI, 350.

and refinement "to the details of a given subject." Hazlitt is able, given this basis of his theory, to state that Sophoclean tragedies, the perfection of the classical style, "are hardly tragedies in our sense of the word":

They do not exhibit the extremity of human passion and suffering. Firmness of purpose and calmness of sentiment are their leading characteristics. Their heroes and heroines act and suffer as if they were always in the presence of a higher power, or as if human life itself were a religious ceremony, performed in honour of the Gods and of the State. The mind is not shaken to the centre . . . contradictory motives are not accumulated, the utmost force of imagination or passion is not exhausted . . . the contrast and combination of outward accidents are not called in to overwhelm the mind with the whole weight of unexpected calamity. The dire conflict of the feelings, the desperate struggle with fortune, are seldom there. All is conducted with a fatal composure; prepared and submitted to with inflexible constancy, as if Nature were only an instrument in the hands of Fate.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt is not so much concerned with the effect of the Greek mythology and ethos upon the subject matter of their tragedies as he is with their effect upon the poets' range of imagination.

"The religion or mythology of the Greeks was nearly allied to their poetry: it was material and definite,"<sup>2</sup> and according to Hazlitt the effects of this mythology and the view of man which it implied were those which we have just seen outlined. Christianity, on the other hand, "is essentially spiritual and abstracted," and if the Greek mythology resulted in a predominance of form, the result of the Christian is "unlimited, undefined power":

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 351-352.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

The imagination alone "broods over the immense abyss, and makes it pregnant." There is . . . a vastness and obscurity which confounds our perceptions . . . A mysterious awe surrounds the doctrines of the Christian faith: the infinite is everywhere before us, whether we turn to reflect on what is revealed to us of the divine nature or our own.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabethan tragedy is informed, if not by the Christian mythology, at least by the poets' versions of that mythology and the moral system which it sanctioned; and "religion has contributed to enlarge the bounds of imagination."<sup>2</sup> Both Greek and Elizabethan tragedy are founded in nature, and are therefore outstanding in the history of the drama, but the latter is "emancipated from . . . precise imitation"<sup>3</sup>; both are founded in nature and are true because they deal in human experience and human nature as conceived by the respective playwrights, but Elizabethan tragedy is imaginative, and "described things . . . for the sake of the associations of ideas connected with them."<sup>4</sup> Hazlitt prefers Elizabethan tragedy because it is truer: it presents human nature less formally and more naturally, and it embodies the insights and truths available to a more deeply-probing imagination.

As his carefully-worked out introduction to the lectures on the age of Elizabeth shows, Hazlitt firmly believed that great drama is written only in periods of extraordinary national energy and power. Since the early seventeenth century, he felt, the distinctive imaginative power which had characterised the dramatic

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," VI, 353.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

productions of England's greatest writers had gradually degenerated into a self-regarding sensibility which was the antithesis of the dramatic. The "anchor in nature" which was the outcome in art of the exercise of a strong sympathetic imagination upon a deep fund of experience had given way to vapid abstraction; whereas Shakespeare had been in one sense the least didactic of all writers, the dramatists from the Restoration until Hazlitt's own day tended more and more to make their plays the vehicles of their own thoughts on matters of importance in politics and philosophy--they turned the stage into the lecture-hall or the pulpit, and the very nature of drama was gradually undermined. Accompanying the decay and the distrust of imagination, which Hazlitt justifiably considered to progress in proportion as the Hobbesian sensationism developed, there was in the English temper a growing self-consciousness which he was convinced could lead only to a very much less vital art than had been produced under Elizabeth and James.

In the seventeenth century Hazlitt asserted, "with the exception of a single writer, Otway, and of a single play of his (Venice Preserved),"<sup>1</sup> there were no tragedians who could stand comparison with "the great men of the age of Shakespear, and immediately after." Venice Preserved Hazlitt saw as a tragedy written upon the "classic or regular model" (classic here is synonymous with Shakespearean rather than with Greek), and he was sure that its "indisputable excellence and lasting interest,"

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<sup>1</sup>"General View of the Subject," Lectures chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, Works, VI, 181.

which made it as powerful to read as to watch, had made it "a proud and inseparable adjunct of the English Stage."<sup>1</sup> In The Orphan, on the other hand, "there is little else but this voluptuous effeminacy of sentiment and mawkish distress, which strikes directly at the root of that mental fortitude and heroic cast of thought which alone makes tragedy endurable--that renders its sufferings pathetic, or its struggles sublime."<sup>2</sup> Addison's Cato (which if frequency of performance in the eighteenth century were a reliable criterion of greatness, would surely merit mention in the same breath as Hamlet, Oedipus, and Lear), is dismissed with a tour-de-force of scorn which not only damns the play but gives a delightful idea of Hazlitt's public manner - "There is nothing . . . in the play to excite ridicule, or shock by absurdity," he suggests,

except the love-scenes which are passed over as what the spectator has no proper concern with; and however feeble or languid the interest produced by a dramatic exhibition, unless there is some positive stumbling-block thrown in the way, or gross offence given to an audience, it is generally suffered to linger on to a euthanasia, instead of dying a violent and premature death. If an author (particularly an author of high reputation) can contrive to preserve a uniform degree of insipidity, he is nearly sure of impunity.<sup>3</sup>

Hazlitt also felt that the decline of drama had been hastened by more tangible elements. In his reviews he constantly attacked the theatrical monopoly which reserved legitimate drama to Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Theatre Royal, Haymarket; he complained about the size of these theatres, and the coarsening effect upon

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature," VI, 354-355.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 356.

acting which their cavernous interiors had; and he perceived that there was a direct link between the demands made by playing in huge, ill-lit auditoria which were far from being accoustically perfect, and the growing vogue for spectacle and effect. He pointed out the fact that the patent theatres were run by actor-managers who seldom accepted new plays unless the plays afforded opportunities for the display of their own talents, and he attacked the star system which encouraged would-be dramatists to write not for the play's sake but for the idiosyncrasies and technical devices peculiar to particular actors. He also understood that the composition of the audiences had changed; whereas in Shakespeare's day a play had been presented to a fair cross-section of the community, in Hazlitt's time the audience was largely composed of the lower orders of society, whose taste for extravaganza and whose boisterous manners had driven the better-educated and more refined classes out of the theatre. And even amongst those who did visit the theatre, the novel was fast becoming the major focus of leisure-time attention.<sup>1</sup> In general, drama was fast becoming what it undoubtedly is for many people today: a mere pastime, a pleasurable break from the business of living, an opportunity to gaze in pleasant awe at famous and highly paid public figures.

But Hazlitt did not stop at the empirical facts of the

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<sup>1</sup>These reasons for the decline of drama have been examined and listed by Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900 (6 vols.; Cambridge: at the University Press, 1955), vols. 1-4; George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (London: Faber and Faber, 1961); and U.C. Nag, "The English Theatre of the Romantic Revival," Nineteenth Century, CIV (1928), 384-398.

contemporary theatre in his attempts to pinpoint the causes of the malaise. The upheavals following the French Revolution had plunged all men into the real stream of current crises:

That event has rivetted all eyes, and distracted all hearts; and, like people staring at a comet, in the panic and confusion in which we have been huddled together, we have not had time to laugh at one another's defects, or to condole over one another's misfortunes. We have become a nation of politicians and newsmongers; our inquiries in the streets are no less than after the health of Europe; and in men's faces, we may see strange matters written,--the rise of stocks, the loss of battles, the fall of kingdoms, and the death of kings. . . . Our attention has been turned by the current of events, to the general nature of men and things; and we cannot call it heartily back to individual caprices, or headstrong passions, which are the nerves and sinews of Comedy and Tragedy. . . . We participate in the general progress of intellect, and the hugest private sorrow looks dwarfish and puerile. . . . In a word, literature and civilisation have abstracted man from himself so far, that his existence is no longer dramatic; and the press has been the ruin of the stage, unless we are greatly deceived.<sup>1</sup>

The general dearth of dramatic talent was betrayed by the perpetual search after effect, the premature and effeminate indulgence of nervous sensibility," and writers were no longer aware that "we must get at the kernel of pleasure through the dry and hard husk of truth. We must wait nature's time."<sup>2</sup> The general fault of contemporary tragedy, even of such popular successes as Maturin's Bertram, is the result of this indulgence of sensibility--they lack business. There is no action, there is no necessary connection between what happens, what is said, and what is done; "mere sentiment is voluntary, fantastic, self-created, beginning and ending in itself;

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<sup>1</sup>"The Drama: No.IV," XVIII, 302 ff.

<sup>2</sup>"On Old English Writers and Speakers," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 318.

true passion is natural, irresistible, produced by powerful causes, and impelling the will to determinate actions. The old tragedy . . . is a display of the affections of the heart and the energies of the will; the modern romantic tragedy is a mixture of fanciful exaggeration and indolent sensibility . . . [and] courts distress, affects horror, indulges in all the luxury of woe, and nurses its languid thoughts, and dainty sympathies, to fill up the void of action."<sup>1</sup> In short, the temper of the age is "critical, didactic, paradoxical, romantic, but it is not dramatic,"<sup>2</sup> and its reigning spirit is "a bias to abstraction" essentially inimical to drama, which is "individual and concrete, . . . the closest imitation of nature."<sup>3</sup> In a state of manners "where the poet and philosopher have got the better of the man; where the reality does not mould the imagination, but the imagination glosses over the reality," it is impossible to write a good tragedy, because the imagination, weakened by abstraction from nature and experience, is "blunted, sheathed, and lost, amidst the flowers of poetry strewed over unreal, unfelt distress, and the flimsy topics of artificial humanity prepared beforehand for all occasions."<sup>4</sup>

A measurable effect of these tendencies upon the drama-- was, in Hazlitt's opinion, the stimulus given to the adoption by British dramatists of certain characteristics of Kotzebuean tragedy. Although "the German tragedy" aims at effect, "sets at nought all

<sup>1</sup>"Bertram," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 304-305.

<sup>2</sup>"The Drama: No. IV," XVIII, 302.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

the established rules of composition," it is "a good thing": "it is a fine hallucination: it is a noble madness, and as there is a pleasure in madness, which none but madmen know, so there is a pleasure in reading a German play to be found in no other."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt felt that this type of bourgeois tragedy, while it did not hold the mirror up to nature, at least reflected faithfully the spirit of the age in its vehemence, hyperbole, appeal to the senses, spectacular scenery, and its "glow of sympathy." Nevertheless, "it is a tissue of philosophical, political, and moral paradoxes . . . [and] it is the tug of war between the inert prejudice [of old opinions and established rules] and the startling novelty which is to batter it down . . . that gives the excitement and the zest."<sup>2</sup> The "natural" man is always pitted against the "social" man, with the former winning the audience's sympathy. The morality of the genre is based upon "the principle of contrast and contradiction": instead of a view of man's lot on earth which sees that "the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together," the German tragedy presents black and white characters in clear-cut situations where virtue is always at odds with vice, and where, ultimately, virtue triumphs. But, says Hazlitt,

Opinion is not truth: appearance is not reality: power is not beneficence: rank is not wisdom: nobility is not the only virtue: riches are not happiness: desert and success are different things: actions do not always speak the character any more than words. We feel this,

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature--On the German Drama, Contrasted with that of the Age of Elizabeth," VI, 360.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

and do justice to the romantic extravagance of the German Muse.<sup>1</sup>

One of the two elements which Hazlitt incessantly emphasises in both his theoretical discussions of tragedy and in his practical criticism of it is the moral function of the form. Even "German" tragedy, with all its faults, affects us with its "glow of sympathy," although that sympathy is evoked by characters who are not natural in the sense that Oedipus, Othello, or Lear are natural. The mere excitation of sympathy is a moral event, and the greatest tragedies banish, for the moment, our normal selfishness and substitute the most intense desire for "the opposite good." Hazlitt even re-defines the Aristotelian doctrine of catharsis to reinforce his theory--he accepts that tragedy purifies the affections by pity and fear, but he asserts that this enigmatic statement means that "it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness."<sup>2</sup>

This is hardly the place in which to trace the long line of those literary theories which hold that the aim of the writer is to instruct, rather than to please, or to instruct by pleasing, or to instruct while he pleases, nor the equally well established tradition which holds that the end of art is a particular pleasure and that instruction is incidental. Suffice it to say that a considerable body of modern critical opinion criticises romantic literary theory for its wilful or its confused conflation of the aesthetic and moral questions. With regard to the theory of tragedy, such

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature--On the German Drama, Contrasted with that of the Age of Elizabeth," VI, 361-362.

opinion maintains that it is essentially a misunderstanding of the office of art itself to assume that the end of tragedy is to mould men's lives and to make them better. The character of the tragic hero is hardly to be deduced from any ethical mode of conduct; it is constructed in order to evoke pity and fear, which together constitute the characteristic aesthetic pleasure of tragedy. Similarly, the moral order--or the lack of it--which tragedy may be said to embody must not be taken as anything but an objectively-constructed frame of reference within which the tragic pleasure may most efficiently be attained. No-one would deny that there is more than a grain of truth in this attitude. But all too often its proponents forget or reduce to insignificance the indisputable fact that great tragedy, like all great art, proceeds from a moral centre. Its subject-matter is life, and, as Aristotle said, "life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action."<sup>1</sup> Tragedy presents a complete action, which has magnitude--which involves the protagonist totally, involves his world because it calls into question the very basis on which its convictions and ways of life are founded, and which transcends his world in time because his problem, which is nothing more than a particular instance of the human condition, is by its very nature perennially relevant. Now Hazlitt did not believe that it was the business of the tragedian consciously to teach, but it cannot be said that in the final analysis his criterion of excellence is not the moral power of the work. When he praises Shakespeare, as he

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<sup>1</sup>Poetics, VI, 9.

often does, for being the least didactic of writers, he does so because he feels that by effacing himself from his plays, Shakespeare made them more true, more natural, more internally consistent, more imaginatively suggestive, and more effectively moral than would otherwise have been the case. When he attacks German tragedy for its improbability, heavy-handedness, and paradox, he does so because it is precisely these qualities (not to mention the vast gulf between the talents of the respective writers) which prevent it from attaining to the artistic, and through that the moral excellence of Shakespearean tragedy. In other words, Hazlitt stands on the borderline between aesthetics and morals. The pleasure of tragedy, as far as it is pleasure, is not sufficient for him; ultimately, the true pleasure of tragedy is tragedy's positive morality.

The other element continually emphasised by Hazlitt is really inseparable from the morality of tragedy as he sees it. In order to call forth our sympathy to the utmost degree, a tragedy must be natural, and its character must be as natural and as like us as possible. The strong connection of fellow-feeling between spectator and protagonist must be maintained, for it is along this connection that the sparks of pity and fear leap.

If we accept Aristotle's definitions of pity and fear, we will see that Hazlitt's insistence upon the paramount importance of

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sympathy leads him into a somewhat paradoxical position. Fear, as Aristotle implies, is at the bottom a selfish emotion, stemming as it does from the apprehension that the trials and suffering experienced by another may fall upon ourselves. Pity, which is altruistic, becomes fear when we are so closely identified with the sufferer that his tribulations appear to be our own. In tragedy, the hero is akin to us in his humanity, and we pity him his fate and his sufferings because we feel that they are disproportionate to his deserts. But he is also distanced from us by his station in life, and by all those qualities-- including dignity and fortitude--which make him a hero. For this reason the fear we experience in tragedy is different from the fear which reality enjoins upon us; it is not the paralysing misgiving which is caused by an impending personal disaster, but a generalised awe excited by the whole action, its ineluctable chain of consequences, and our perception that the figure of the protagonist typifies the human lot. The almost impersonal fear which tragedy excites intensifies the pity which we feel for the tragic character, and the pity simultaneously intensifies the fear. For Aristotle both emotions are necessary, and they are in fact blended into one.

Hazlitt's accentuation of the likeness of the tragic hero to ourselves, not simply in his humanity but in his status also, strips the hero of many of those qualities which would set him apart from us. But this does not, in Hazlitt's theory, make for an increase in the immediacy of fear at the expense of pity. It is surely true

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that there is little place for fear in Hazlitt's theoretical discussions of tragedy. He makes little attempt to explain its nature, its function, or its relation to pity, because his emphasis on compassion obscures from his view that part which fear plays. But to say that there is little place for fear in his theoretical discussions does not mean that there is no place at all for it in his theory; he did not consider fear to be superfluous, as Schiller, for example, in his essay Ueber die tragische Kunst suggested it was, or as the closet tragedies of many of Hazlitt's contemporaries implicitly assumed it was. He criticises Moore for glossing over life's "sharp calamities" with sweetness--his is "a kind of cosmetic art";<sup>1</sup> he complains that French tragedy excludes "the dark and doubtful view of things";<sup>2</sup> he discusses the influence of the religious faith of the Elizabethans and Jacobean upon their "means of exciting terror";<sup>3</sup> but in general he seems to take tragic fear for granted, and there can be no doubt that his theory of sympathy serves to minimise it. If we were carelessly to base our conception of tragedy and our reaction to it on Hazlitt's theory, we would identify so closely with the tragic character that we would be unable to set his suffering in its context--we would be unable, perhaps, to see the wood for what we took to be the largest tree in it. Hazlitt's understatement of the function of fear in tragedy is at once a consequence of and a factor contributing to his conviction that

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<sup>1</sup>"Moore and Byron," Works, XVI, 413.

<sup>2</sup>"Schlegel on the Drama," XVI, 89.

<sup>3</sup>"General View of the Subject," VI, p. 185.

tragedy must be "natural" in order to support our sympathy.

In addition, his stress on the morality of tragedy and the likeness of the tragic hero to ourselves confuses the great irony which tragedy exhibits, an irony in which our pity and fear are finally blended into the distinctive universalised sympathy of tragedy. The tragic hero's fate is ironically inappropriate to the hero's greatness, and its irony is intensified, not diminished, by its inevitability. Hazlitt's concentration on the character's essential likeness to ourselves, his references to Lear as a poor crazy old man and his statement that Richard's sufferings make us forget that the man was ever a king, tend to minimise the irony; his moral bias tends to a reorganisation of the irony on the lines of poetic justice, as we saw; both, again serve to exaggerate pity at the expense of fear, and to change--even if, in Hazlitt, the change is slight--that pity into the tenderness for another's distress or suffering which has since the eighteenth century gradually come to predominate in dramatic composition.

Finally, it must be pointed out that although we identify ourselves with the tragic hero, and through him with mankind, there is a point in the tragic experience at which we perceive that mankind is identified with ourselves. We recognise, however dimly, that we stand together against the apparent order of things, even though in the face of its moral inscrutability we might for a moment seem to be flies killed for sport. Tragedy demands from its spectators some inkling of self-consciousness, even if only to sharpen by contrast the sympathy upon which its values depend.

While Hazlitt's magnification of the function and moral effect of sympathy may mean that his theory of Tragedy neglects certain aspects of the full tragic experience and confuses others, we cannot begin to demolish the structure he raises upon the sympathetic imagination unless we deny the view of life and the human values which tragedy presents.

PART III

COMEDY

## CHAPTER VIII

Like theories of tragedy, theories of comedy may be either formal or affective, but, springing from the conviction that laughter is essential to comedy, and since in any case laughter is an overt reaction to comedy, most comic theories have been largely affective. It is for this reason, perhaps, that comic theory has usually concerned itself with the determination of the nature of those serious attitudes which are expressed by laughter, and two fairly clearly-defined attitudes toward the problem have developed--a division recently summed up in the following manner: "It seems that the main difference of opinion concerning the ludicrous has been about the nature of its origin. There are those who say that the ludicrous is born of negation, of rejection; and there are those who say it comes from the positive, from acceptance."<sup>1</sup>

Classical theories of comedy are predominantly negative, perhaps under the influence of Aristotle, who characterises the ridiculous as a species of the Ugly, a mistake or deformity "which is not painful or destructive," and which "does not imply pain."<sup>2</sup> His

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<sup>1</sup>Shlomo Zemach, "A Theory of Laughter," JAAC, XVII (1959), 311. "Negative" laughter is "laughter at," or laughter tinged with malice; "positive" laughter is "laughter with," or laughter from pleasure. Although the terms have obvious disadvantages, I use them for their convenience.

<sup>2</sup>Poetics, V, l. 1449 a. The old Attic comedies support the malicious interpretation. And see Plato, Philebus, pp. 48-50.

separation of the ridiculous from the merely painful places a limit on the negativity of the ridiculous--for example, he excludes personal satire and vindictive caricature from true comedy--but this limit was frequently forgotten or minimised as classical theory modulated into neo-classical. Sidney was presumably stating a generally accepted conviction when in 1591 he said that "comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the comic poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornfull sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one."<sup>1</sup>

As neo-classic theories of literature declined during the eighteenth century, the negative theory of comedy declined too, and gave way to a rationale in which the comic ideal became sympathetic humour.<sup>2</sup> "In Restoration theory of comedy," points out Stuart Tave, which is

largely a derivative and a reduction of Renaissance theory, it was a commonplace that the function of comedy is to copy the foolish and knavish originals of the age and to expose, ridicule, satirize them. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a commonplace that the best comic works present amiable originals, often models of good nature, whose little peculiarities are not satirically instructive, but objects of delight and love.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An Apology for Poetry, ed. G. Gregory Smith, in Elizabethan Critical Essays (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1904), I, 176-177.

<sup>2</sup>The School for Scandal (1777) embodies both aspects, and is a good example of the difference between the two. Lamb recognised its hybrid nature, and at the same time indicted contemporary morality for its insipid and hypocritical emphasis on the sympathetic aspect at the expense of the negative. See "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century."

<sup>3</sup>Stuart M. Tave, The Amiable Humorist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. viii.

The change in theory is partly the result of that growing emphasis upon the sympathetic imagination as a basis for action which was outlined at the beginning of this study. The strikingly pervasive character of this re-orientation is apparent from the fact that during the century laughter itself participated, in its motivation, in a distinct change of direction, a movement toward what might be called a "humanisation." It was long ago indicated that

a modern writer like Eastman is amusing in his perplexity over Hobbes and his followers. He cannot understand unsympathetic or anti-sympathetic theories. There need be no perplexity if Hobbes lived in a less sympathetic age than the present. Laughter has responded to the growth of sympathy and become more sympathetic itself. A survey of laughter and a comparison of estimates of its nature show that it has steadily tended to become less contemptuous and more sympathetic.<sup>1</sup>

Laughter tends to be negative or positive according to one's conception of it, but the writer of this passage was certainly wrong if he meant to suggest that it is essentially one or the other. Modern critics insist that laughter is both. This is not merely a theory which attempts to account for the diversity of comic tone by accepting the opposing attitudes. Rather, it is an attempt to explain certain incidents throughout the range of comedy in terms both of acceptance and of rejection. But there is a great difference between feeling the need for such a unifying theory, and actually explaining how it is possible. Hazlitt's thesis is an interesting step in this direction.

The development of Hazlitt's views on comedy illustrates

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<sup>1</sup>J. G. Gregory, The Nature of Laughter (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1924), p. 18.

the direction taken by thought on this subject during the Romantic period. He treated it directly on three different occasions: first in 1807, when he abridged Abraham Tucker's The Light of Nature Pursued, and in doing so added his stamp to Tucker's psychology of laughter; again in 1818-1819, in his Lectures on the English Comic Writers, which include the much-anthologised introductory lecture "On Wit and Humour"; and finally in 1829, the year before his death, in the essay entitled "Definition of Wit," which surprisingly has not received any consideration by students of his work. Hazlitt's theory is also valuable because it shows, in the midst of what might be called a representative romantic attitude, the continuation of certain eighteenth-century theories.

We have seen that the principle of imagination was more to Hazlitt than a guide to morality: it was the basis of his aesthetics. Through the sympathetic imagination, we identify with others, and in the greatest art this identification acts morally in raising, expanding, and developing the sympathy of the reader. In one sense, the sympathetic imagination has been part of tragic theory since Aristotle observed that of the emotions aroused by tragedy, pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune of a kind which we might expect to happen to ourselves, and pity is transformed into fear when the object is so nearly related to us that the suffering seems to be our own. But whereas Aristotle expressly provides for the possibility of a less-than-perfect morality on the part of the tragic hero, and admits a degree of revulsion into the audience's attitude toward him, Hazlitt is in favour of complete sympathetic identification with the hero. And whereas Aristotle stresses

the social gulf, in the most effective tragedies, between the hero and the audience, Hazlitt emphasises their common humanity, and thus sees the possibility of a greater degree of sympathetic identification. Tragedy makes the man who witnesses or reads it "a partaker with his kind" because it "substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness."<sup>1</sup> His belief in the validity and the fundamental nature of the sympathetic character of the imagination has a shaping affect on Hazlitt's theory of tragedy; it provides him with a firmer basis than poetic justice for estimating tragic effect, and it enables him to express the nature of tragic greatness in democratic and moral terms. He is not, of course, the first to "democratise" the tragic hero--witness the great eighteenth-century vogue for domestic drama; he does, however, give critical sanction to that long trend toward the generalisation of the idea of tragic greatness which in our own day has produced "heroes" who are too seldom heroic and tragic.

We have seen, too, that Hazlitt's adherence to the doctrine of sympathetic imagination does not mean that he believed man to be necessarily benevolent. Zeitlin is wrong when he refers to the Essay on the Principles of Human Action as an "attempt to prove that men are by nature altruistic."<sup>2</sup> A more proper view is indicated by the Essay's subtitle: "An Argument in Defence of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind." Hazlitt explains what he means by "disinterestedness" in the following manner:

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<sup>1</sup>"Othello," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 200.

<sup>2</sup>"William Hazlitt: An Appreciation of a Great Literary Journalist," Saturday Review of Literature, XI (Jan. 12th, 1935), 417.

The scheme of which I have here endeavoured to trace the general outline differs from the common method of accounting for the origin of our affections in this, that it supposes what is personal or selfish in our affections to be the growth of time and habit, and the principle of a disinterested love of good as such, or for it's own sake without any regard to personal distinctions to be the foundation of all the rest. In this sense self-love is in it's origin a perfectly disinterested, or if I may so say impersonal feeling.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt does use the word "benevolent" to describe man's nature, but this benevolence is a rare bird not known to Shaftesbury nor to Godwin:

When I say therefore that the human mind is naturally benevolent, this does not refer to any innate abstract idea of good in general, or to an instinctive desire of general indefinite unknown good but to the natural connection between the idea of happiness and the desire of it, independently of any particular attachment to the person who is to feel it.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of the Essay, when he turns again to attacking the doctrine of innate selfishness, Hazlitt introduces what was to become an increasingly familiar note in his work: selfishness, though it is acquired and not innate, is more commonly found than its opposite:

It is chiefly from this greater readiness and certainty with which we can look forward into our own minds than out of us into other men, that that strong and uneasy attachment to self which comes at last (in most minds) to overpower every generous feeling takes it's rise, not, as I think I have shewn, from any natural hardness of the human heart, or necessary absorption of all it's thoughts and purposes in an exclusive feeling of self-interest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Works, I, 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

If Hazlitt could say this in 1805 at the age of twenty-seven, it is hardly surprising that in 1817, after a series of domestic upheavals and financial disappointments, he could write that Shakespeare "knew that the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, is natural to man."<sup>1</sup> Neither is his answer to Godwin, made in 1825, evidence of sudden misgiving:

He conceived too nobly of his fellows . . . he raised the standard of morality above the reach of humanity, and by directing virtue to the most airy and romantic heights, made her path dangerous, solitary, and impracticable. He places the human mind on an elevation, from which it commands a view of the whole line of moral consequences; and requires it to conform its acts to the larger and more enlightened conscience which it has thus acquired. He absolves man from the gross and narrow ties of sense, custom, authority, private and local attachment, in order that he may devote himself to the boundless pursuit of universal benevolence. Mr. Godwin gives no quarter to the amiable weakness of our nature, nor does he stoop to avail himself of the supplementary aids of an imperfect virtue.<sup>2</sup>

It is perfectly clear that Hazlitt was fully conscious of both sides of man's nature--"man is neither a God nor a brute; but there is a prosaic and a poetical side to everything concerning him, and it is as impossible absolutely and for a constancy to exclude either one or the other from the mind, as to make him live without air or food";<sup>3</sup> and it was to account for this duality that Hazlitt held to his doctrine of the sympathetic imagination, which for him was the only valid answer to the extremes represented by Hobbes and Godwin. "Is man a mere animal," he asked in The Plain Speaker, "is man a

<sup>1</sup>"Othello," IV, 206.

<sup>2</sup>"William Godwin," The Spirit of the Age, Works, XI, 18-19.

<sup>3</sup>"On Cant and Hypocrisy," Works, XVII, 349.

mere animal, or a mere machine for philosophical experiments?"<sup>1</sup>

The relation between a theory of human nature and a theory of comedy was clearer to Hazlitt than it might be to us, since his was a time when attitudes to man, and to the representation of man in art, were undergoing a profound change. While one might experience difficulty in demonstrating a necessary connection between Hobbes's view of human nature and his theory of laughter, a logical connection there certainly appears to be. If we conceive of men, as Hobbes did, as being naturally and necessarily selfishly-motivated in all their actions, whether voluntary or involuntary, we are likely to define laughter as a sort of self-exaltation, or, in Hobbes's famous words on the "passion of laughter," as a "Sudden Glory . . . caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves." And it will be remembered that "Joy, arising from imagination of a man's own power and ability, is that exultation of the mind which is called GLORYING."<sup>2</sup> It is logical, too, that the first effective answer to this negative theory should spring from benevolist concepts of human nature. Tave credits Hutcheson with being "the first philosophical critic with sufficient leisure and sufficient confidence in laughter to attack Hobbes strongly at this point."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The New School for Reform," Works, XII, 194.

<sup>2</sup>Leviathan (London: Printed for Andrew Crooke, 1651), pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>The Amiable Humorist, p. 56.

Hutcheson, using the nom-de-plume "Philomeides," published three essays in the Dublin Journal in 1725, the avowed purpose of the first being to refute Hobbes. He notes that Hobbes's "grand View" was to "deduce all human Actions from Self-Love," and continues

Hence it is that the old Notions of natural Affections, and kind Instincts, the Sensus communis, the Decorum, and Honestum, are almost banish'd out of our Books of Morals; we must never hear of them in any of our Lectures for fear of innate Ideas; Laughter it self must be a Joy from the same Spring.<sup>1</sup>

Hutcheson does not deny that negative laughter exists; he simply denies that all laughter is negative, and he distinguishes between "simple" and negative laughter. This type of distinction is made with increasing frequency throughout the eighteenth century.

"Ridicule," Hutcheson maintains, is only one species of "Laughter," and it exists "when we are laughing at the Follies of others."<sup>2</sup>

Instead of the feeling of superiority, which he rules out as a cause of laughter, Hutcheson suggests that recognition of incongruity in some form or another is its source: "It is this Contrast, or Opposition of Ideas of Dignity and Meanness, which is the Occasion of Laughter."<sup>3</sup>

The final form of the eighteenth-century distinction is to be found in the theory of James Beattie. "Some authors have treated Ridicule, without making the distinction between Ridiculous and

<sup>1</sup>Hibernicus's Letters: or, A Philosophical Miscellany ed. James Arbuckle (London: 1734), reprints the essays. See I, 78.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

Ludicrous ideas," Beattie says; "things ludicrous and things ridiculous have this in common, that both excite laughter; but the former excite pure laughter, the latter excite laughter mixed with disapprobation or contempt."<sup>1</sup> This positive laughter has some aesthetic significance, as Beattie draws on it in his discussion of the tone of Don Quixote: "The knight of La Mancha, though a ludicrous, was never intended for a contemptible personage. He often moves our pity, he never forfeits our esteem."<sup>2</sup> But Beattie does not demonstrate just how it is aesthetically significant, and the reason for his failure is that he sees nothing negative in it. It is easy to see that some laughter expresses rejection, but if it does so only through the admixture of some extraneous element, then there exists no clue to what laughter can express without this element. The majority of the eighteenth-century theorists had ready at hand a simple answer to the problem: without negativity, they proposed, laughter can express nothing, and therefore the simply laughable is of little significance. John Brown made the point quite neatly in 1751:

Pure Wit, when not applied to the Characters of Men, is properly a Species of Poetry. It amuses and delights the Imagination by those sudden Assemblages and pleasing Pictures of things which it creates; and from every common Occasion can raise such striking Appearances, as throw the most phlegmatic Tempers into a Convulsion of good-humoured Mirth, and undesigning Laughter. . . . But Ridicule or Raillery . . . hath a further scope and Intention. It solely regards the Opinions, Passions, Actions, and Characters of Men: and may be properly denominated "that Species

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<sup>1</sup>"An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," 1764 in Essays (Edinburgh: E. and C. Dilly, and W. Creech, 1778), 326-327.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

of Writing which excites Contempt with Laughter."<sup>1</sup>

It is true that Brown was only one of the host who were engaged in the controversy over the usefulness of ridicule, and that he was one of those who was sufficiently imbued with the growing benevolism to deprecate its utility; nevertheless his statement of the resolution to the problem is typical. Under the influence of benevolism, the eighteenth-century theorists defined clearly a concept of positive laughter, which, if it had been nothing new to certain dramatists a century or so before--A Midsummer Night's Dream comes to mind as an example of its existence with negative laughter--was to become the touchstone for comedies aspiring to public approbation in the nineteenth century. But its acceptance as that touchstone by practising critics and dramatists did not take place overnight.

Abraham Tucker, whose seven-volume philosophy of mind The Light of Nature Pursued appeared under the pseudonym "Edward Search" between 1768 and 1778, is usually classed in older histories of thought as a theological utilitarian.<sup>2</sup> Today, perhaps, C. S. Lewis's term "theological hedonist" would probably be thought to fit him more closely, since Tucker recommends doing God's will, no matter how unpleasant its carrying-out may be, in order that after death one may enjoy all the pleasures foregone on earth plus a large amount of celestial interest. But Tucker's place in English thought rests on

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<sup>1</sup>Essays on the Characteristics (London: C. Davis, 1751), pp. 41-42.

<sup>2</sup>Cr. Sir Leslie Stephen, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (rev. ed.; 2 vols.; London: John Murray, 1927), II, 109-121.

his psychology, in the exposition of which he frequently declares his discipleship to Locke and as often disagrees with him, usually with an apology for not having understood him fully. There is thus some justice in Hazlitt's remark that "Tucker was certainly an arrant truant from the system he pretends to adopt."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt spent almost two years in preparing his abridgement of the work. He had long known and admired it, and he hoped by its publication under his editorship to realise some of the financial reward of which the failure of the Essay on the Principles of Human Action had disappointed him. But he tended to praise the man rather than the book, the style rather than the content, the literary merit rather than the philosophical. "If [Tucker] was surpassed by one or two writers in logical precision and systematic profundity, there is no metaphysical writer who is equal to him in clearness of apprehension, and a various insight into human nature,"<sup>2</sup> is perhaps Hazlitt's closest approach to a considered encomium in the fourteen pages of his preface.

When we read this, and remember that Hazlitt never expressed admiration for Tucker's system, it is not surprising to find that he made small changes in Tucker's arguments. His claim to his publisher that he was trying to perfect Tucker's intention and to prune his work of confusing repetition<sup>3</sup> is, judging by the results he achieves, a true one, and he does his work skilfully. But in trying to bring

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<sup>1</sup>Preface to the Abridgement. Works, I, 130.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>3</sup>Letter to Joseph Johnson, August 30th, 1806. See W. Carew Hazlitt, Four Generations of a Literary Family (2 vols.; London: G. Redway, 1897), I, 96.

order out of chaos, he frequently brings Hazlitt out of Tucker. His alterations and omissions are not particularly startling--they have not been studied before--but they show that he made Tucker's theory of laughter slightly more negative and subjective.

Tucker's theory is not an "objectivist" one (if such a thing is possible), but it is more subjective in Hazlitt's abridgement. One of the passages which Hazlitt omits contains Tucker's sole reference to any such thing as a comic object: "Besides that a despicable object contemplated ever so long will appear equally so, but a diverting one cannot keep up your merriment for ever."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt's omission of this could, of course, be a move to save space, but the sentence does not occur in an extended omitted passage. On the contrary, Hazlitt keeps the clause preceding it and the sentence following it. Also, changes of this nature are changes which one comes to expect in reading nineteenth-century abridgements of older works. The increasing subjectivity of aesthetic theory in the Age of Reason has been well documented, and one can feel more than a little justification for thinking that the demise of the sublime object and of the beautiful object was paralleled by the demise of the diverting object.

Again, Tucker says that laughter "has been commonly held by our moderns to arise from contempt, upon a comparison of ourselves with something apprehended greatly inferior."<sup>2</sup> Hazlitt corrects "our moderns" to "some persons" and changes "apprehended" to "thought."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Light of Nature Pursued (2 vols.; London: H.G. Bohn, 1852), I, 170.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>An Abridgment of the Light of Nature Pursued (London: J. Johnson, 1807), p. 105.

The effect is to make Tucker even less a disciple of Locke. What becomes important in the abridgement as a result of Hazlitt's change is no longer phenomena impressing themselves upon the senses, but the mind's reaction to phenomena.

The second alteration is primarily one of emphasis, and its significance amounts to this: Tucker maintains that laughter cannot, in essence, be negative, while Hazlitt's abridgement leaves the impression that it need not be. To accomplish his result, Tucker simply denies that negative laughter is really laughter:

Contempt being so apt to show itself in derision, hence the making a thing appear despicable and silly, has been called rendering it ridiculous. But ridiculous, although derived from the Latin word standing for laughter, does not always imply a quality of exciting even that affected laugh which is the expression of contempt: you shall see men with a very grave countenance go about to demonstrate the ridiculousness of a thing without ever raising mirth in themselves, or expecting to raise it in others: therefore ridiculous is not synonymous with comical or diverting, but rather coincides with absurd or foolish, and tends more to provoke your spleen than your laughter.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt omits this passage, as he does Tucker's substitute for the contempt theory. Tucker thought that laughter was the result of a relaxation of attention, and hence of pent-up spirits "when some

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<sup>1</sup>Tucker, I, 172. This laughter-which-is-not-really-laughter is common in eighteenth-century theories, but at the beginning of the century it was identified with positive rather than negative laughter. Thus in Steele's Tatler no. 63 (September 3rd, 1709), Will Truby, whose laughter "proceeds only from a general benevolence," is rebuked by Humphry Slyboots: "That motion which you now make with your mouth open, and the agitation of your stomach, which you relieve by holding your sides, is not laughter: laughter is a more weighty thing than you imagine; and I will tell you a secret, you never did laugh in your life: and truly I am afraid you never will, except you take great care to be cured of those convulsive fits."

pleasurable idea opens the sluices at once," but Hazlitt omits this open statement that laughter's source is pleasure, and retains Tucker's more vague account, that mirth is "occasioned by a sudden influx of spirits."<sup>1</sup> This stressing of the negative is also apparent in those passages where Hazlitt rephrases Tucker. In speaking of the laughter arising from our perception of the follies and blunders of others, Tucker says that

every blunder implies a deliberate endeavour to attain some purpose by means not conducive thereto, and the sight or thought of earnestness and expectation, in the persons so labouring, fills our own imagination by sympathy with the like ideas, which are immediately dissipated upon the reflection of their being ineffectual and nugatory.<sup>2</sup>

Hazlitt changes this to

every blunder implies a deliberate purpose to attain some end into which we enter by sympathy, and the sight of this end suddenly frustrated by the absurdity of the means employed produces that contrast, and disjointedness in our ideas which causes laughter.<sup>3</sup>

As far as Tucker is concerned, we laugh at blunders when our sympathetic expectations come to nought; if we laugh at anything, that thing is Fate. For Hazlitt, we laugh at blunders because our expectations are frustrated by the absurd means used to fulfil them. Fate is not out of joint; some person is at fault and is risible for the disproportion between his ends and the means he employs. The import of the alteration is that here Hazlitt puts back into laughter that element of the absurd which Tucker specifically denies it contains.

Though Hazlitt's disinclination to use technical terms in his

<sup>1</sup>Tucker, I, 171; Abridgment, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Tucker, I, 171.

<sup>3</sup>Abridgment, p. 106.

popular works tends at times to obscure his sources, the main influences on his comic theory are the eighteenth-century philosophers of mind. He draws chiefly on the associationists, Tucker and Hartley, but he is also familiar with a good deal of Reid, Hutcheson, Beattie, and Stewart, all of whom made contributions to comic theory. In the Lectures on the English Comic Writers he mentions specifically Addison's Spectator essays on Wit, Molière's Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes, and Rousseau's Lettre à D'Alembert, sur les Spectacles; he also singles out the treatment of wit and humour in George Campbell's The Philosophy of Rhetoric. Whatever the exact relation may be between Hazlitt's theory of laughter and Tucker's, there is one important respect in which they are more or less similar, and in which they differ from other contemporary theories. In Tucker we read

Mirth I conceive occasioned by a sudden influx of spirits, generally, if not always, turned from some other channel, to which they have been drawn by an earnest attention: and therefore perhaps it is that to make merry is called to divert, as being a diversion of the spirits out of the course that they have been strongly thrown into before. For that attention gathers a considerable fund of them appears manifest from the fatigue and wasting it brings on if continued long, and when some pleasurable idea opens the sluices at once, it lets in so large a flood that reflection cannot employ them all, having no other business for them than to contemplate that idea, and the superfluity overflows upon the muscles causing the convulsions of laughter. Thus there seems to be three causes concurring to excite laughter when not produced mechanically, as by tickling, by fits of hysterics or the like: viz. a stretch of attention loosened at once, the suddenness of such relaxation, and want of employment for the spirits so discharged upon the mind.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Hazlitt in the introductory lecture "On Wit and Humour"

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<sup>1</sup>Tucker, I, 171.

in Lectures on the English Comic Writers says that

to understand or define the ludicrous, we must first know what the serious is. Now the serious is the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity and weight of interest attached to them. When this stress is increased beyond its usual pitch of intensity, so as to overstrain the feelings by the violent opposition of good to bad, or of objects to our desires, it becomes the pathetic or tragical. The ludicrous, or comic, is the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity, by such an abrupt transposition of the order of our ideas, as taking the mind unawares, throws it off its guard, startles it into a lively sense of pleasure, and leaves no time nor inclination for painful reflections.<sup>1</sup>

The similarity of the two passages exists primarily in the assumption on which each is based. For centuries comic theorists had begged the question by asserting that laughter is caused by a sudden surprise which is not serious. In these passages, however, there is an implication for the first time that the theorist knows what the serious is. In speculating on the nature of a relatively unusual mental phenomenon, both feel competent to speak of ordinary mental operations. And it is perhaps a mark of the modernity, in one respect, of Hazlitt's theory of comedy that he formulates it with his theory of tragedy at hand to set it in perspective.

The source of this theory of the normal mind is, of course, the associationist psychology developed primarily by Hartley. Hazlitt was fond of pointing out that the basic formulation of associationism originated with Hobbes, who gave several pages of the first book of Leviathan to an explanation of what he called "Consequence," "Trayne of Thoughts," or "Mentall Discourse":

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<sup>1</sup>Works, VI, 7.

When a man thinketh on any thing whatsoever, His next Thought after, is not altogether so casual as it seems to be. Not every Thought to every Thought succeeds indifferently. But as wee have no Imagination, whereof we have not formerly had Sense, in whole, or in parts; so we have no Transition from one Imagination to another, whereof we never had the like before in our Senses.<sup>1</sup>

In the eighteenth-century elaboration of associationism, Hobbes's materialist basis was somewhat softened. Over and over again, one finds in theories of the time suggestions for a "true basis of association." Tucker substitutes for Hobbes's contiguity of impressions a very tame version of the pleasure principle:

What first links ideas into trains, I take to be the succession of objects causing or leading to our satisfactions: for having observed that things agreeable come to us through several steps, whenever the first of them is made, it carries the thought on to all the rest, and having perceived that our desires cannot be gratified without using some means to obtain them, imagination runs back to all that is necessary to be done for that purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, Hobbes distinguishes "unguided" from "regulated" trains of thought,<sup>3</sup> and Tucker stresses the latter at the expense of the former, thus postulating a more purposive type of train formation and recollection. The result is that in the normal intellect, as Tucker sees it, there is a continual expectation of what is to follow. The accents of the associationists and more than an echo of Tucker can be heard when Hazlitt says

The mind having been led to form a certain conclusion,

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<sup>1</sup>Leviathan, p. 8. Cf. Hazlitt, "On the Writings of Hobbes," Lectures on English Philosophy, Works, II, 133-134.

<sup>2</sup>Tucker, I, 96.

<sup>3</sup>Leviathan, p. 9.

and the result producing an immediate solution of continuity in the chain of our ideas, this alternate excitement and relaxation of the imagination, the object also striking upon the mind more vividly in its loose unsettled state, and before it has had time to recover and collect itself, causes that alternate excitement and relaxation, or irregular convulsive movement of the muscular and nervous system, which constitutes physical laughter. The discontinuous in our sensations produces a correspondent jar and discord in the frame.<sup>1</sup>

The essence of the laughable, then, is for Hazlitt the incongruous, and the distinctions he made between types of incongruity and their effects constitute his comic theory.

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," Works, VI, 7.

## CHAPTER IX

If laughter is built on incongruity, then a comparison of the laughable and the serious is likely to result in a somewhat intellectualised or formalistic notion of the nature of laughter. But sometimes the incongruous is not at all laughable; sometimes it gives rise to terror or to tears. Thus the laughable must be further isolated as a special kind of incongruity or reaction to incongruity.

When he differentiates between laughter and tears, Hazlitt holds that any uncomplicated unexpectedness is naturally laughable, and that it is only through some sort of impurity, such as a veiled but perceptible threat to the individual involved, that tears arise:

The mere suddenness of the transition, the mere baulking our expectations, and turning them abruptly into another channel, seems to give additional liveliness and gaiety to the animal spirits; but the instant the change is not only sudden, but threatens serious consequences, or calls up the shape of danger, terror supersedes our disposition to mirth, and laughter gives place to tears.<sup>1</sup>

"A disposition to mirth," then, is the natural reaction to the perception of an incongruity, but this disposition is followed by tears when the incongruity is dangerous. It is interesting to remark that Hartley and Hazlitt were two of the very small

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 6.

number of writers of the period who compared tears and laughter, and that Hazlitt's view is directly opposed to that of the associationist:

Now it may be observed, that young Children do not laugh aloud for some Months. The first Occasion of doing this seems to be a Surprise, which brings on a momentary Fear first, and then a momentary Joy in consequence of the Removal of Pain. This may appear probable, inasmuch as Laughter is a nascent Cry, stopped of a sudden; also because if the very same Surprise, which makes young Children laugh, be a very little increased, they will cry.<sup>1</sup>

For Hartley, laughter is a "nascent Cry"; Hazlitt's conclusion could perhaps justly be paraphrased as "crying is a nascent laugh."

The reason for this radical divergence is Hartley's grounding of laughter in the removal of psychic pain; in the history of English comic theory he is, it would appear, the first to do so, although the groundwork for his contribution had been laid by Hobbes, who was only the first to note the fact that a sudden psychic shock is characteristic of laughter.<sup>2</sup> The "relief" theory is still the dominant opinion in modern attempts to explain the genesis of laughter.<sup>3</sup> What is relieved may not necessarily be pain--Hartley himself speaks of "sudden alarming Emotions and Expectations" being "dissipated" in laughter,<sup>4</sup> and Tucker, as we have seen, noted a "superfluity of spirits" overflowing to the muscles. Charles Darwin sounds much more modern when he speaks of the expenditure in laughter

<sup>1</sup>Observations on Man (London, 1749), I, 437.

<sup>2</sup>J.Y.T. Greig, The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1923) does not notice the relief theory before Herbert Spencer.

<sup>3</sup>See Greig, p. 49 ff.; Gregory, pp. 20, 59, 64, 77, 81, et seq.; Arthur Koestler, Insight and Outlook (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1949), pp. 54-70.

<sup>4</sup>Hartley, I, 438.

of "superfluous nervous energy".<sup>1</sup> Following Freud, Jacob Levine has put the relief theory quite succinctly--"a joke seems funny only if it arouses anxiety and at the same time relieves it."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, V.K. Krishna Menon calls laughter "a safety-valve for pent-up emotions," a means of "demobilization of forces."<sup>3</sup> These theories all tend to characterise laughter as a kind of psychological sublimation of fear, anxiety, and so forth, the physiological aspect of which process has been fully described both by Gregory and Koestler.<sup>4</sup> When Hazlitt comes closest to a relief theory, his opinion does not appear to be consistent with what he had previously written:

if a child is playing at hide-and-peek, or blindman's-buff, with persons it is ever so fond of, and either misses them where it had made sure of finding them, or suddenly runs up against them where it had least expected it, the shock or additional impetus given to the imagination by the disappointment or the discovery, in a matter of this indifference, will only vent itself in a fit of laughter.<sup>5</sup>

Previously, Hazlitt had said that

if the child meets [a person of whom it is particularly fond] unexpectedly after long absence, the same effect [tears] will be produced by an excess of joy, with different accompaniments; that is, the surprise and the emotion excited will make the blood come into his face, his eyes sparkle, his tongue falter or be mute, but in either case the tears will gush to his relief, and lighten the pressure about his heart.<sup>6</sup>

Hazlitt began by saying that the unexpected--when non-threatening--

<sup>1</sup>The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (London: John Murray, 1872), p. 199. See also Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," Macmillan's Magazine, I (March, 1860), pp. 395-402, for an elaboration of Darwin's theory.

<sup>2</sup>"Responses to Humor," Scientific American, CXCIV (February, 1956), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>A Theory of Laughter (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory, p. 27; Koestler, p. 8 ff.

<sup>5</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 6-7.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

is inherently pleasurable; now he indicates that it is painful. The first explanation postulates a play basis for laughter, the second a relief basis. It is quite possible that the reason for the inconsistency may be an attempt by Hazlitt to follow Hartley, an attempt subverted by imperfect memory; the space given by both writers to the laughter of children, and the similarity in the experiments they cite, make this explanation at least a feasible one. A likelier one, however, is the simple fact that Hazlitt did not labour over matters of detail in his popular pronouncements.

Whatever the reason may be, Hazlitt finds that both laughter and tears may follow the sudden perception of an incongruity. His problem now is to descry the conditions governing each response. Tears result, he says, when the perception of the incongruity is accompanied by sympathy, laughter, when it is not:

We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary, the absurdity of which provokes our spleen or mirth, rather than any serious reflections on it. To explain the nature of laughter and tears, is to account for the condition of human life; for it is in a manner compounded of these two! It is a tragedy or a comedy--sad or merry, as it happens. The crimes and misfortunes that are inseparable from it, shock and wound the mind when they once seize upon it, and when the pressure can no longer be borne, seek relief in tears: the follies and absurdities that men commit, or the odd accidents that befall them, afford us amusement from the very rejection of these false claims upon our sympathy, and end in laughter.<sup>1</sup>

This may appear to be little more than a slightly modernised version of Hobbes' contempt theory, and it is more negative than Hutcheson

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 5. Cf. Walpole's well-known epigram "The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel," and Bergson's equally well-known statement, "The comic appeals to intelligence pure, and requires a temporary anaesthesia of the heart."

and Beattie. But it may look more negative than it is. In fact, it is negative only insofar as an attitude of indifference implies a negative judgment. Compared to sympathy, which for Hazlitt is so important, indifference is negative; compared to contempt, it is not. Also, the distinction between the laughable and the pathetic, which always makes the laughable appear relatively negative, is stated in even more negative a form than Hazlitt's in George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric, which, as we have seen, is a source of Hazlitt's theory. Thus Hazlitt can be seen to soften somewhat in reality the following distinction:

A just exhibition of any ardent or durable passion, excited by some adequate cause, instantly attacheth sympathy, the common tie of human souls, and intensely communicates the passion to the breast of the hearer. But when the emotion is either not violent or not durable, and the motive not anything real, but imaginary, or at least, quite disproportionate to the effect; or when the passion displays itself preposterously, so as rather to obstruct than to promote its aim--in these cases a natural representation, instead of fellow-feeling, creates amusement, and universally awakens contempt.<sup>1</sup>

The presence or absence of sympathy is not for Hazlitt the only determinant of the pathetic or laughable nature of sudden incongruity. He continues,

If every thing that went wrong, if every vanity and weakness in another gave us a sensible pang, it would be hard indeed: but as long as the disagreeableness of the consequences of a sudden disaster is kept out of sight by the immediate oddity of the circumstances, and the absurdity or unaccountableness of a foolish action is the most striking thing in it, the ludicrous prevails over the pathetic, and we receive pleasure instead of pain from the farce of life which is played before us, and which discomposes our gravity as often as it fails to move our anger or our pity!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Campbell, pp. 37-38.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, VI, 5.

When we are the object of laughter, Hazlitt says,

we are occupied with the disagreeableness of the result instead of its oddity or unexpectedness. Others see only the conflict of motives, and the sudden alternation of events; we feel the pain as well, which more than counterbalances the speculative entertainment we might receive from the contemplation of our abstract situation.<sup>1</sup>

These passages show that what separates, as far as Hazlitt is concerned, the pathetic from the laughable is something larger than, and yet embracing, sympathy. It might be called abstraction or perspective, but these labels, like "indifference," merely indicate forms of it. A better term is "distance," a very useful word the development of which in the field of aesthetics was furthered in the Romantic period. Hazlitt himself frequently uses both the term and the concept,<sup>2</sup> and the value he attached to it can be measured in the fact that he saw fit to discuss it at some length in the seminal lecture "On Poetry In General" in 1818:

Objects must strike differently upon the mind, independently of what they are in themselves, as long as we have a different interest in them, as we see them in a different point of view, nearer or at a greater distance (morally or physically speaking) from novelty, from old acquaintance, from our ignorance of them, from our fear of their consequences, from unexpected likeness.<sup>3</sup>

In another instance, Hazlitt allies distance with his concept of the imagination: "Time, like distance, spreads a haze and a glory round imagination. Not to perceive this, is to want a sense, is to be without imagination."<sup>4</sup> One might be tempted to call the operation of distance in laughter a kind of unsympathetic imagination.

<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 9.

<sup>2</sup>Greig seems to believe that it was first used by Edward Bullough; see The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Lectures on the English Poets, V, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>"On Egotism," The Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 157.

Essentially, an act of imagination for Hazlitt is an escape from, or rather an annihilation of self. The most common method of achieving this is through sympathy with others--hence "sympathetic imagination." But although there is not sympathy in laughter, there is some degree of abstraction of the self in the experience, and thus laughter presupposes an act of the imagination.

It might be as well here to examine further both the meaning of "distance" and its application to comic theory. Edward Bullough has written what seems to be the classic treatment of the subject, stressing its wide application to a number of aesthetic problems. He does not so much define it as explain the metaphor involved:

It is a difference of outlook, due--if such a metaphor is permissible--to the insertion of Distance. This Distance appears to lie between our own self and its affections, using the latter term in its broadest sense as anything which affects our being, bodily or spiritually, e.g. as sensation, perception, emotional state or idea. Usually, though not always, it amounts to the same thing to say that Distance lies between our own self and such objects as are the sources or vehicles of such affections.<sup>1</sup>

Of the relationship between the normal outlook and the Distanced outlook, Bullough writes,

It has a negative, inhibitory aspect--the cutting-out of the practical sides of things and of our practical attitude to them--and a positive side--the elaboration of the experience on the new basis created by the inhibitory action of Distance.

Consequently, this distanced view of things is not, and cannot be, our normal outlook. As a rule, experiences

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<sup>1</sup>E. Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a factor in Art and an aesthetic principle," British Journal of Psychology, V (June, 1912), p. 89.

constantly turn the same side towards us, namely, that which has the strongest practical force of appeal.<sup>1</sup>

The main use Bullough makes of psychical distance is to define the aesthetic experience, which he, like Kant, finds to be characterised by a type of indifference. However, he goes on to make psychical distancing the only requirement for creating an aesthetic experience. The result is that the province of aesthetics includes much that is not art:

Even muscular sensations may present aesthetic possibilities, in the free exercise of bodily movement, the swing of a runner, in the ease and certainty of a trained gymnast; nay, such diffuse organic sensations as the buoyancy of well-being, and the elasticity of bodily energy, can, in privileged moments, be aesthetically enjoyed. That they admit of no material fixation, as objects of sight and hearing do, and for that reason form no part of Art in the narrower sense; that they exist as aesthetic objects only for the moment and for the single being that enjoys them, is no argument against their aesthetic character. Mere material existence and permanence is no aesthetic criterion.<sup>2</sup>

Since, according to the relief theory, laughter results from the mind's passing from involvement in an incongruity to non-involvement in it, psychical distancing would seem to be essential to laughter. But if Bullough admits that laughter involves distancing, he has to find the experience of laughter aesthetic, which would extend even more the concept of the aesthetic experience. Thus he finds laughter below the threshold of the aesthetic experience because it is marked by a "non-distanced, practical and personal appeal."<sup>3</sup> The higher forms of comedy, however, are marked by increasing degrees of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Bullough, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

distancing, so that "the supreme achievement of comedy is unquestionably that 'distanced ridicule' which we call humour."<sup>1</sup> Though Bullough does go into the matter, he is here in a similar difficulty: he must say either that humour exists only in art, or that all the humour one finds in life is an aesthetic experience.

Perhaps it would be better to distinguish between psychological distance and aesthetic distance--terms which Bullough uses interchangeably. A detailed distinction would be difficult, but a start might be made by saying that aesthetic distance is a form of psychological distance, initiated outside, rather than inside, the observer. Thus the existence of a work of art would be necessary to the aesthetic experience. (I am not sure that elegant chess combinations, for example, cannot be considered in the same light as works of art, and I feel that the enjoyment experienced in watching the controlled movements of a modern dancer [ballet is something else again] or an athlete springs largely from the sort of projective physiological response which we call empathy.) If such a distinction, like Bullough's formulation, leaves us without a definition of art, it at least serves to separate the field of aesthetics and psychology. Nor does it keep us from seeing some similarity between laughter, which is psychically distanced, and art, which is aesthetically distanced. Thus we can understand why Arthur Koestler can begin an examination of aesthetic principles with a comic theory. We can understand, too, how Hazlitt can say that he who laughs is, as it were, treating life as if it were art and laughing at "the farce of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

life which is played before us."

Thus, although the terms laughable, ridiculous, and ludicrous were distinctive labels in critical terminology long before Hazlitt came to pronounce upon them, the degree to which he develops them results in certain new points of departure in comic theory. Most obviously, in Hazlitt's usage, they are indications of tone, or attitude towards the objects of laughter, as can be seen in Hazlitt's distinguishing them in order of increasing negativity:

The accidental contradiction between our expectations and the event can hardly be said, however, to amount to the ludicrous: it is merely laughable. The ludicrous is where there is the same contradiction between the object and our expectations, heightened by some deformity or inconvenience, that is, by its being contrary to what is customary or desirable; as the ridiculous, which is the highest degree of the laughable, is that which is contrary not only to custom but to sense and reason, or is a voluntary departure from what we have a right to expect from those who are conscious of absurdity and propriety in words, looks, and actions.<sup>1</sup>

Although we might agree with René Wellek that these distinctions are "fuzzy and groping" it is difficult to see how they "are not focused on the use of wit and humor in art."<sup>2</sup> Wellek is right in asserting that the problem of the laughable as such is different from the problem of the comic. Laughter is exploited in literature in many different ways, varying widely in tone if in nothing else from negative to positive, from neutral to mixed. It is possible to believe that Hazlitt's distinctions do not demarcate clearly enough the gap between psychology and aesthetics, but we must credit him

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>Wellek, II, p. 204.

with the fact that they are at least intended to focus on the use of laughter in art. And there is evidence that Hazlitt has succeeded in some degree, since these distinctions are co-ordinate with others manifested in his practical criticism of comedy, a subject well covered by Stuart Tave.<sup>1</sup> The following table will clarify the relationships discernible in Hazlitt's references to comic drama:

Type of Laughter	Tone	Literary Use
Laughable	Negative or neutral	Farce and nonsense
Ludicrous	Mixed (negative and positive)	Romantic Comedy/ Humour
Ridiculous	Negative	Comedy of Manners, Satire.

The degrees of the laughable, in addition to indicating an increasingly negative tone, show an increasing viability in the comic contrast on which the laughter is based. In the simply laughable, the expectation is not only suddenly reversed, but is immediately abandoned after the reversal--

Of these different kinds or degrees of the laughable, the first is the most shallow and short-lived; for the instant the immediate surprise of a thing's merely happening one way or another is over, there is nothing to throw us back upon our former expectation, and renew our wonder at the event a second time.<sup>2</sup>

One literary form using the simply laughable is farce, which Hazlitt treats in discussing Molière in "On Wit and Humour." His appreciation of Molière was limited, principally because he could not find in the dramatist's work sufficient credibility to sustain the comic contrast:

He was unquestionably one of the greatest comic geniuses

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<sup>1</sup>Tave's fullest treatment of Hazlitt occurs on pp. 209-217 of The Amiable Humorist.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 8.

that ever lived; a man of infinite wit, gaiety, and invention--full of life, laughter, and whim. But it cannot be denied, that his plays are in general mere farces, without scrupulous adherence to nature, refinement of character, or common probability. The plots of several of them could not be carried on for a moment without a perfect collusion between the parties to wink at contradictions, and act in defiance of the evidence of their senses.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that Molière indulges in "outrageous caricatures of nature," and considers that although the Médecin malgré lui is "one of the most laughable and truly comic productions that can well be imagined," it, like the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Monsieur Porceaugnac, and Georges Dandin, is characterised by "the utmost license of burlesque imagination . . . and . . . intoxication of animal spirits." Elsewhere he remarks, concerning the first performance of Arnold's The Maid and the Magpye, a piece he considered to be suffused with the spirit of the French stage, that "the French . . . have the advantage of us in playing with the common-place surface of comedy, in the harlequinade of surprises and escapes."<sup>2</sup>

Another literary use of the simply laughable is nonsense, and Hazlitt's great exemplar in this field is Rabelais. In the sixth of the Lectures on the English Poets he compares Swift, Voltaire, and Rabelais:

Swift's wit . . . was serious, saturnine, and practical; Rabelais' was fantastical and joyous; Voltaire's was light, sportive, and verbal. Swift's wit was the wit of sense; Rabelais', the wit of nonsense; Voltaire's, of indifference

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 28.

<sup>2</sup>"The Maid and the Magpye," A View of the English Stage, Works, V, 244-245. An adaptation of Caigniez' La pie voleuse: ou, la servante de Palaiseau.

to both. . . . Rabelais loved [absurdity], exaggerated it with supreme satisfaction, luxuriated in its endless varieties, rioted in nonsense . . . He dwelt on the absurd and ludicrous for the pleasure they gave him, not for the pain.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1825 essay entitled "Merry England," Hazlitt grounds the French taste for nonsense in a natural levity of mind, marked by flippancy and impertinence. But the older French "nonsense," though more extravagant than the English, is akin to it: Molière and Rabelais "approach and exceed the English licence and extravagance of conception."<sup>2</sup> English "nonsense" is marked by its contrast to English gravity and seriousness:

I flatter myself that we are almost the only people left who understand and relish nonsense. . . . When we trifle, we trifle in good earnest; and having once relaxed our hold of the helm, drift idly down the stream, and delighted with the change are tossed about "by every little breath" of whim or caprice,

'That under Heaven is blown.'

All we want is to proclaim a truce with reason, and to be pleased with as little expense of thought or pretension to wisdom as possible.<sup>3</sup>

If David Hume was one of the earliest theorists to recognise the contrasting and relieving function of the comic scenes in tragedy,<sup>4</sup> Hazlitt was one of the few to take up the hint, as is evident from his discussion of "nonsense" in serious drama:

This licensed fooling is carried to its very utmost length in Shakespear, and in some other of our elder dramatists, without, perhaps, sufficient warrant or the same excuse. Nothing can justify this extreme relaxation but extreme

<sup>1</sup>Works, V, 112.

<sup>2</sup>"Merry England," Works, XVII, 158.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>See "On Tragedy," Four Dissertations, p. 185.

tension. Shakespear's trifling does indeed tread upon the very borders of vacancy: his meaning often hangs by the very slenderest threads. For this he might be blamed if it did not take away our breaths to follow his eagle flights, or if he did not at other times make the cordage of our hearts crack. After our heads ache with thinking, it is fair to play the fool.<sup>1</sup>

Since the simply laughable is a species in a genus called by Hazlitt the laughable, its co-species are, according to our expectations, distinguished from it merely by certain circumstantial features. For Hazlitt, as for Beattie and Hutcheson, the feature distinguishing the ridiculous is contempt.

Of these different kinds or degrees of the laughable . . . the third sort, or the ridiculous arising out of absurdity as well as improbability, that is, where the defect or weakness is of a man's own seeking, is the most refined of all, but not always so pleasant as the ludicrous, because the same contempt and disapprobation which sharpens and subtilises our sense of the impropriety, adds a severity to it inconsistent with perfect ease and enjoyment. This last species is properly the province of satire.<sup>2</sup>

If the simply laughable leavened with contempt is the ridiculous, and the ridiculous is the highest form of the laughable, contempt would seem to be honoured with a high place in Hazlitt's theory. The highest form of the laughable really ought to be that in which the essence of the simply laughable reaches its highest perfection, if we are to take at anything more than its face value Hazlitt's statement that "a thing is not more perfect by becoming something else, but by being more itself."<sup>3</sup> The question then is whether

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<sup>1</sup>"Merry England," XVII, 158.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 8.

<sup>3</sup>"The Ideal," Works, XX, 303.

contempt, the distinctive feature of the ridiculous, perfects the essence of the simply laughable. Beattie's answer was no, but Hazlitt says yes--"it sharpens and subtilises our sense of the impropriety," and we recall that impropriety, or incongruity, is the essence of the simply laughable. Thus contempt is a necessary element in the ridiculous, because it brings about the formal perfection of the lowest species. It is necessary to remember in dealing with Hazlitt's development of this theory that the superiority of the ridiculous rests directly on its form, and only indirectly on its content, which to some extent is negative.

The ridiculous, Hazlitt has indicated, is properly the province of satire. Since the ridiculous is a species of the laughable, Hazlitt holds that satire is a form of comedy. Thus, he can call any work employing the ridiculous a comedy or a satire with some propriety, even though at times he appears fully to equate the two. Hogarth, he says, "is essentially a comic painter; his pictures are not indifferent, unimpassioned descriptions of human nature, but rich, exuberant satires upon it. He is carried away by a passion for the ridiculous."<sup>1</sup> Since the ridiculous expresses a negative judgment, the comic artist is responsible for a just assessment of character:

The fools in Wycherley and Congreve are of their own, or one another's making, and deserve to be well scourged into common sense and decency: the fools in Shakspeare are of his own or nature's making; and it would be unfair to probe to the quick, or hold up to unqualified derision, the faults which are involuntary and incorrigible, or those which you yourself encourage and exaggerate, from the pleasure you

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<sup>1</sup>"On Mr. Wilkie's Pictures," Works, XVIII, 98.

take in witnessing them.<sup>1</sup>

This is of course the old distinction between acquired follies and natural follies,<sup>2</sup> though Hazlitt is too much a formalist and not enough a benevolist to believe that natural follies are not laughable. He asserts that in addition to this danger--making the comic character insufficiently culpable to excite ridicule--there is the opposed danger of making him too detestable. Donne's satires, for example, he considered "too clerical":

He shews, if I may so speak, too much disgust, and, at the same time, too much contempt for vice. His dogmatical invectives hardly redeem the nauseousness of his descriptions, and compromise the imagination of his readers more than they assist their reason. The satirist does not write with the same authority as the divine, and should use his poetical privileges more sparingly.<sup>3</sup>

If vice as such is too contemptible, and folly as such is sometimes not contemptible enough to be ridiculous, the problem of the object of the ridiculous arises. The standard answer, which we have seen Hazlitt using, is "acquired follies"; if vice is made to look like folly freely chosen, it can be the object of both contempt and laughter, and is thus ridiculous. Henry Fielding gave another answer: "The only source of the true ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation."<sup>4</sup> A third answer given by Hazlitt is "the proper object of ridicule is egotism."<sup>5</sup> These three concepts are

<sup>1</sup>"On Shakspeare and Ben Jonson," Works, VI, 35.

<sup>2</sup>For the genealogy of this idea, see Tave, p. 49 ff.

<sup>3</sup>"On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etherege, &c.," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 53.

<sup>4</sup>"Preface," The History of Joseph Andrews. (1742.)

<sup>5</sup>"On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," Works, VI, 151.

similar in at least one respect: they make the sine qua non of the ridiculous a moral or behavioural flaw viewed in its intellectual aspect. Because of this flaw, contempt is possible; because the attention is diverted to the intellectual genesis of the flaw and the effects of this genesis, contempt is limited and laughter occurs. As we have seen, Hazlitt considers the ridiculous to be simple laughter sharpened by contempt, and simple laughter to be based on the perception of an incongruity. Thus the ridiculous requires the perception of folly or vice as an incongruity, and not simply as a behavioural flaw. The effect of this theory is not, however, to remove morality from comedy, but to shift the reader's or the audience's attention--and, of course, the attention of the critic holding the theory--from the violation to the thing violated. Egotism, the object of ridicule, is a form of comic hubris; unlike its tragic counterpart, it is, in Hazlitt's theory, bad in itself; like its tragic counterpart, it serves to focus moral issues. This is another reason, and a more than formal one, for Hazlitt's belief that the ridiculous is the highest form of the laughable.

The ridiculous is properly the province of satire, and satire implies something more than contemptuous laughter. It implies also that this contempt is directed at an action, at an attitude, by an author or actor. Satire is made, not simply found. In his Prefatory Remarks to Oxberry's New English Drama in 1818, Hazlitt noted that

nothing can be more ridiculous or more instructive than the scenes [in Colman's *The Jealous Wife*] of which Mrs. Oakly is the heroine, yet they are all serious and unconscious: she exposes herself to our contempt and ridicule by the part she acts, by the airs she gives herself, and the fantastic

behaviour in the situations in which she is placed. In other words, the character is pure comedy, not satire. Congreve's comedies for the most part are satires, in which, from an exuberance of wit, the different speakers play off the sharp-pointed raillery on one another's foibles, real or supposed. The best and most genuine kind of comedy, because the most dramatic, is that of character or humour, in which the persons introduced upon the stage are left to betray their own folly by their words and actions.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between pure comedy and satire is the same as that which Hazlitt frequently draws between the dramatic and the didactic-- as, for example, in his discussion of Hudibras: the

poem in its essence is a satire, or didactic poem. It is not virtually dramatic, or narrative. It is composed of digressions by the author. He constantly breaks off in the middle of a story, or incident, to comment upon and turn it into ridicule. He does not give characters but topics, which would do just as well in his own mouth without agents, or machinery of any kind.<sup>2</sup>

The best comedy is the most dramatic; it is difficult to create, given this qualification, the necessary contempt, since the dramatic development of character tends naturally to arouse sympathetic identification, to a greater or smaller degree, with that character. As Hazlitt maintained in the Essay on the Principles of Human Action, "our sympathy is always directly excited in proportion to our knowledge of the pain, and of the disposition and feelings of the sufferer."<sup>3</sup> Thus a genuinely dramatic representation of character can undermine satire: "Cowley's character of Oliver

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<sup>1</sup>The New English Drama. "The Jealous Wife," Works, IX, 73.

<sup>2</sup>"On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etherege, &c.," VI, 65.

<sup>3</sup>Works, I, 23.

Cromwell, which is intended as a satire, (though it certainly produces a very different impression on the mind), may vie for truth of outline and force of colouring with the masterpieces of the Greek and Latin historians."<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt tends to associate satire with wit, and he defines them in roughly the same way--"wit is, in fact, a voluntary act of the mind, or exercise of the invention, shewing the absurd or ludicrous consciously, whether in ourselves or another."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he differentiates between wit and humour precisely as he had between pure comedy and satire:

Humour is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the production of art and fancy. Humour, as it is shewn in books, is an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind, or of the ludicrous in accident, situation, and character: wit is the illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another, which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view.<sup>3</sup>

He does grant that "wit may sometimes, indeed, be shewn in compliments as well as satire," but he insists that "the favourite employment of wit is to add littleness to littleness, and heap contempt on insignificance."<sup>4</sup> Although wit sometimes does not excite contempt, its

<sup>1</sup>"On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etherege, &c.," VI, 61.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 22. It is "this kind of wit of the humourist, where the person makes a butt of himself," Hazlitt says, which is the principle on which the character of Falstaff is founded.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 15. To compare Hazlitt's idea of wit with that of, say, the *Metaphysicals*, would be interesting but hardly relevant to the present study. Tave's book is in one respect a conspectus of changing conceptions of wit through the eighteenth century into the Romantic period, and is likely to become a standard reference on the subject.

<sup>4</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 15.

opportunities for doing so are favourable, because it is even more negative than simple laughter. Many writers in the eighteenth century had pointed out that Locke's famous distinction between wit and judgment<sup>1</sup> ignored the possibility of finding wit in contrast, rather than comparison; Hazlitt goes further, and makes the indispensable basis of wit the perception of dissimilarity in similitude:

The detection and exposure of difference, particularly where this implies nice and subtle observation, as in discriminating between pretence and practice, between appearance and reality, is common to wit and satire with judgment and reasoning, and certainly the comparing and connecting our ideas together is an essential part of reason and judgment, as well as of wit and fancy. Mere wit, as opposed to reason or argument, consists in striking out some casual and partial coincidence which has nothing to do, or at least implies no necessary connection with the nature of the things, which are forced into a seeming analogy . . .<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, feels Hazlitt, it is dangerous to base a work entirely upon wit, not because wit arouses "necessary sympathy or lasting hatred," but because it arouses neither. It is the "eloquence of indifference,"<sup>3</sup> and indifference--which is by no means the same as disinterestedness--is a serious defect of character in Hazlitt's view:

A common and also a very pleasing ornament to a clock, in Paris, is a figure of Time seated in a boat which Cupid is rowing along, with the motto, L'Amour fait passer le Temps--which the wits again have travestied

<sup>1</sup>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Bk. II, ch. xi.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

into Le Temps fait passer L'Amour. All this is ingenious and well; but it wants sentiment. I like a people who have something that they love and something that they hate, and with whom every thing is not alike a matter of indifference or pour passer le temps. . . . When the volatile salt has flown off, nothing but a caput mortuum remains.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt has a theoretical dislike of wit because its message is that appearance is just as important and just as real as reality. In an essay "On the Question Whether Pope was a Poet," published in the Edinburgh Magazine in February, 1818, he wrote

What discrimination, what wit, what delicacy, what fancy, what lurking spleen, what elegance of thought, what refinement of sentiment! It is like looking at the world through a microscope, where every thing assumes a new character and a new consequence,--where things are seen in their minutest circumstances and slightest shades of difference,--when the little becomes gigantic, the deformed beautiful, and the beautiful deformed.<sup>2</sup>

And again, in the lecture "On Dryden and Pope" in Lectures on the English Poets,

he was the poet of personality and of polished life. . . . He preferred the artificial to the natural in passion, because the involuntary and uncalculating impulses of the one hurried him away with a force and vehemence with which he could not grapple; while he could trifle with the conventional and superficial modifications of mere sentiment at will, laugh at or admire, put them on or off like a masquerade-dress, make much or little of them, indulge them for a longer or a shorter time, as he pleased; and because while they amused his fancy, and exercised his ingenuity, they never once disturbed his vanity, his levity, or indifference. His mind was the antithesis of strength and grandeur; its power was the power of indifference.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously Hazlitt has a good deal of relish for the indifference of

<sup>1</sup>"On a Sun-Dial," Works, XVII, 240.

<sup>2</sup>Works, XX, 92.

<sup>3</sup>Works, V, 70-71. It should be noted that while Hazlitt felt that Pope was not a "poet of nature," he was unequalled as a "poet of art."

the artificial life, as can be seen when he discusses Millamant, "who arrives at the height of indifference to every thing from the height of satisfaction,"<sup>1</sup> or when he writes--albeit ironically--on the age of Charles II,<sup>2</sup> and the age of Louis XIV:

Happy time! Envidable time to think of! When vanity and folly expanded in full bloom, and were spread out ostentatiously like the figures in a gaudy tapestry, instead of being folded up and thrust into a corner by the hand of a cynic and austere philosophy; when personal appearance and amorous intrigue were all in all; when a Marquis stalked the God of his own idolatry, and Madame la Marquise was held for something divine by Monsieur Jourdain; when the whole creation was supposed to be centred in the fantastic circle of lords and ladies, and the universal, the abstract, and the critical were held in the utter contempt which they deserve--and which they receive at the hands both of the ignorant and the adept! <sup>3</sup>

From a life-long radical and apologist for sympathy, this is quite a tribute to the intellectual appeal to be found in the over-distancing of wit. It recalls Hazlitt's frequently-voiced wish that he had been born "poor, a Papist, and a Lord."

The most distinctive feature of Hazlitt's theory of comedy is his treatment of the ludicrous. The separation of the ludicrous and the ridiculous had been made comparatively early in the eighteenth century, but while the critics of the Age of Reason had based their distinction on two grounds--the ridiculous to them implied meaningful laughter, and the ludicrous did not; hence the former had aesthetic value, and the latter had not--Hazlitt, as we

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar," Works, VI, 73.

<sup>2</sup>"Kean's Bajazet and the Country Girl," XVIII, 206-207.

<sup>3</sup>"French Plays," Works, XVIII, 380.

have seen, defines three dimensions of comedy, in which the ridiculous is defined roughly in eighteenth-century terms, and the simply laughable as the eighteenth century had defined the ludicrous. It is not unhelpful, perhaps, to see the laughable and the ridiculous in Hazlitt's scheme as the thesis and antithesis forming the ludicrous. His concept of the latter is what is unique in his theory; like those of all critics, Hazlitt's terms are at times liable to a little slippage; when, however, he considers the ludicrous strictly, he sees it as a source of meaningful laughter:

The ludicrous is where there is the same contradiction between the object and our expectations, heightened by some deformity or inconvenience, that is, by its being contrary to what is customary or desirable.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of this definition, the ludicrous is more negative than the laughable and less so than the ridiculous; Hazlitt, in other words, follows the eighteenth century in finding negativity essential to meaningful laughter. Confirmation for this view may be found in many of his essays, in "Merry England," for example, where he writes that "without a given portion of hardness and repulsiveness of feeling the ludicrous cannot well exist."<sup>2</sup> But we may compare this to the following sentence, which is complementary rather than contradictory--"It requires a considerable degree of sympathy to enter into and describe to the life even the ludicrous eccentricities of others."<sup>3</sup> Thus in treating Fielding, whom he considered a master of the ludicrous, Hazlitt insists on the validity

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Works, XVII, 157.

<sup>3</sup>"On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etherege, &c.," VI, 55.

of respecting Parson Adams at the same time as one feels superior to him: his "unsuspecting simplicity makes it not only more amiable, but doubly amusing, by gratifying the sense of superior sagacity in the reader. Our laughing at him does not once lessen our respect for him."<sup>1</sup> The relation between respect and superiority in the ludicrous may be hard to discover. For one thing, Hazlitt fairly frequently uses the term loosely as being synonymous with laughable, and when he does so, respect is not a necessary ingredient in the experience which he is describing. Also, ludicrous objects or actions command varying degrees of respect. At any rate, respect is possible in the ludicrous, and this is its most distinctive characteristic.

When Hazlitt says that the ridiculous sharpens the impropriety of the laughable contrast between what is expected and what occurs, he takes his metaphor from his first love, painting, in which contrast is intensified by lightening areas of light and darkening areas of more sombre hue. In creating the ridiculous, the comic writer interposes his own negative judgment between the object and the spectator. The effect, to continue the metaphor, is to darken the grey of actuality in order to make the whiteness of the ideal stand out more clearly and sharply. This idealisation which is involved in the ridiculous has the advantage of emphasising principle, but the price which literature pays for emphasis on principle is loss of verisimilitude, of realism, and Hazlitt regretted the loss.

The ludicrous, on the other hand, preserves the greys in

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<sup>1</sup>"On the English Novelists," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 115.

the comic contrast. If the ridiculous represents an intensification of the contrast, the ludicrous represents its extension. The former is a move toward perfection in the ideal, where perfection is possible; the latter is a move toward perfection in experience, where perfection is not possible. Notice how Hazlitt distinguishes the laughable from the ludicrous:

Of these different kinds or degrees of the laughable, the first is the most shallow and short-lived; for the instant the immediate surprise of a thing's merely happening one way or another is over, there is nothing to throw us back upon our former expectation, and renew our wonder at the event a second time. The second sort, that is the ludicrous arising out of the improbable or distressing, is more deep and lasting, either because the painful catastrophe excites a greater curiosity, or because the old impression, from its habitual hold on the imagination, still recurs mechanically, so that it is longer before we can seriously make up our minds to the unaccountable deviation from it.<sup>1</sup>

The ludicrous presents the contrast between the old and the new, between ought-to-be and is, as a contrast between fairly equal powers. It is longer before we can make up our minds about the deviation from what was expected, and when we do, there is still a good deal of mental oscillation between the ideas contrasted. This is a temporal extension of the contrast. One might think that the ridiculous, the highest form of the laughable, would present an even greater extension of the comic contrast, and Hazlitt suggests that this is indeed so:

The principle of contrast is, however, the same in all the stages, in the simply laughable, the ludicrous, the ridiculous; and the effect is only the more complete, the more durably and pointedly this principle operates.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

But although Hazlitt does claim more pointedness for the ridiculous, he does not claim more durability for it. On the contrary, the refining of the sense of incongruity necessary for the ridiculous can be achieved only by bringing to an end the oscillation between the elements of the comic contrast, and this cessation must certainly occur when the new, or actual, is discredited for the sake of the old, or ideal.

If the ridiculous is simple laughter plus contempt, the ludicrous is simple laughter in which is mingled superiority and sympathy--or at the least a seriousness which is not contempt. These are two opposed points of view, and so the ridiculous and the ludicrous cannot occur together, but one may follow the other in the same experience. Hazlitt often cited the "ludicrous dialogue" between Shallow and Silence on the death of old Double--"in one point of view, they are laughable in the extreme; in another they are equally affecting."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, he remarks of Much Ado

Perhaps that middle point of comedy was never more nicely hit in which the ludicrous blends with the tender, and our follies, turning round against themselves in support of our affections, retain nothing but their humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Again, in speaking of Hogarth,

There is in general a distinction, almost an impassable one, between the power of embodying the serious and the ludicrous; but these contradictory faculties were reconciled in Hogarth, as they were in Shakspeare, in Chaucer; and as

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<sup>1</sup>"Henry IV," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 283.

<sup>2</sup>"Much Ado About Nothing," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 338.

it is said that they were in another extraordinary and later instance, Garrick's acting.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt's conception of the ludicrous as partly positive is of course assisted by his having before him the work and examples not only of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, but also of Fielding, Sterne, Goldsmith, and Sheridan. Of The School for Scandal, for instance, he remarks that

besides the wit and ingenuity of this play, there is a genial spirit of frankness and generosity about it, that relieves the heart as well as clears the lungs. It professes a faith in the natural goodness, as well as habitual depravity of human nature. While it strips off the mask of hypocrisy, it inspires a confidence between man and man.<sup>2</sup>

The comedies which are essentially based upon and which most typically express the humour of the ludicrous are those of Shakespeare; and Hazlitt, believing that the highest form of the laughable is the ridiculous, is driven by his theory to place Shakespearean and all "romantic" comedy on a lower level than "genteel" comedy, the "comedy of fashionable life, and of artificial character and manners."<sup>3</sup>

The fault, then, of Shakspeare's comic Muse is, in my opinion, that it is too good-natured and magnanimous. It mounts above its quarry. It is "apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes:" but it does not take the highest pleasure in making human nature look as mean, as ridiculous, and contemptible as possible. It is in this respect, chiefly, that it differs from the comedy of a later, and (what is called) a more refined period. . . . This is a comic character; its essence consists in making light of things from familiarity and use, and as it is formed by habit and

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Works of Hogarth.--On the Grand and Familiar Style of Painting," Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, VI, 144.

<sup>2</sup>"On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," VI, 165.

<sup>3</sup>"On Shakspeare and Ben Jonson," VI, 35.

outward circumstances, so it requires actual observation, and an acquaintance with the modes of artificial life, to describe it with the utmost possible grace and precision. . . . I do not, in short, consider comedy as exactly an affair of the heart or the imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Another distinction between Shakespeare's comedy and the comedy of manners is the difference between "natural and artificial life, between the world of fancy and the world of fashion."<sup>2</sup> The highest forms of comedy, in other words, are based on a considerable degree of aesthetic distance; romantic comedy, "natural" and of "the world of fancy" by definition, is less the product of "art" than of the imagination. That is,

Shakspeare was a greater poet than wit: his imagination was the leading and master-quality of his mind, which was always ready to soar into its native element: the ludicrous was only secondary and subordinate.<sup>3</sup>

Theoretically, then, Hazlitt's relegation of the romantic comedy of Shakespeare is perfectly consistent. But what is not consistent is the tone of his judgments of that type of comedy. Consider, in addition to those already quoted, the following passage:

In general it will be found (if I am not mistaken) that even in the very best of Shakespeare's comic characters the spirit of humanity and the fancy of the poet greatly prevail over the mere wit and satire, and that we sympathize with his characters oftener than we laugh at them. His ridicule wants the sting of ill-nature. He had hardly such a thing as spleen in his composition.<sup>4</sup>

And when Hazlitt says that "it is for this reason only that I think Shakspeare's comedies deficient,"<sup>5</sup> it is clear that his theory has

<sup>1</sup>"On Shakspeare and Ben Jonson," VI, 35-38.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

has broken down in the face of his personal prejudice and practical preference--as, indeed, must all those theories, when faced with the fact of humour, which treat laughter and the comic as the province of the intellect alone.

If for Hazlitt the literary mode of the ludicrous is humour and romantic comedy, the standard of humour is comic keeping, or consistency of character, and this consistency is what the discerning critic looks for in the ludicrous. The following lengthy passage will make this clear, and will also define the basis of Hazlitt's practical approbation of, as opposed to his theoretical strictures on, humour and romantic comedy:

There is nothing more powerfully humorous than what is called keeping in comic character, as we see it very finely exemplified in Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. The proverbial phlegm and the romantic gravity of these two celebrated persons may be regarded as the height of this kind of excellence. The deep feeling of character strengthens the sense of the ludicrous. Keeping in comic character is consistency in absurdity; a determined and laudable attachment to the incongruous and singular. The regularity completes the contradiction, for the number of instances of deviation from the right line, branching out in all directions, shows the inveteracy of the original bias to any extravagance or folly, the natural improbability, as it were, increasing every time with the multiplication of chances for a return to common sense, and in the end mounting up to an incredible and unaccountably ridiculous height, when we find our expectations as invariably baffled. . . . But while this characteristic clue to absurdity helps on the ridicule, it also softens and harmonises its excesses; and the ludicrous is here blended with a certain beauty and decorum, from this very truth of habit and sentiment, or from the principle of similitude in dissimilitude. . . . That which excites so lively and lasting an interest in itself, even though it should not be wisdom, is not despicable in the sight of reason and humanity. We cannot

suppress the smile on the lip, but the tear should also stand ready to start from the eye.<sup>1</sup>

And he goes on to cite as a further example of keeping in the ludicrous that ne plus ultra in sympathy of the eighteenth-century benevolist critics, *My Uncle Toby*. In one sense, Hazlitt's insistence on comic keeping aligns him with the eighteenth-century writers who censured Congreve and other Restoration comic dramatists for excess of wit and a consequent failure to create character; in another, it places him squarely in that tradition which, in its extolling of the virtues--both moral and aesthetic--of feeling and the sympathetic imagination, is so distinctively Romantic.

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 11.

## CHAPTER X

The ludicrous and the ridiculous, as modes of comedy in Hazlitt's theory, are based on psychological assumptions, but he considered them to have an historical foundation too. In Characters of Shakespear's Plays he had distinguished three ages of comedy: the first was the age of natural or romantic comedy, founded on the ludicrous; the next was the age of artificial comedy, founded on the ridiculous; and finally there was the age of sentimental comedy, the comedy of his own day, which was not founded on laughter at all.<sup>1</sup> He thought well enough of this formulation to include it in the last of his lectures on the English comic writers, to explain why "the attempt at getting up genteel comedy at present is a sort of Galvanic experiment, a revival of the dead":

There is a certain stage of society in which people become conscious of their peculiarities and absurdities, affect to disguise what they are, and set up pretensions

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. "Miss O'Neill's Widow Cheerly," Works, XVIII, 212: "The comedy itself, of the Soldier's Daughter, is the beau ideal of modern comedy. It contains the whole theory and practice of sentimentality, of which a bank-note offered and declined is the circulating medium, and a white cambric pocket-handkerchief, that catches the crystal tear in the eye of sensibility ere it falls, the visible emblem. Mr. and Mrs. Milford . . . utter their complaints, but are too delicate to touch upon the cause, and you sympathise with their sorrows, not with their misfortunes. They have a little girl, who has a little doll, which she christens 'Miss Good Gentleman,' after a person whose name she does not know. This is a very palpable hit, and tells amazingly." Hazlitt goes on to quote the passage in Lamb's Specimens on "the insipid levelling morality" of the modern stage.

to what they are not. This gives rise to a corresponding style of comedy, the object of which is to detect the disguises of self-love, and to make reprisals on these preposterous assumptions of vanity, by making the contrast between the real and the affected character as severely as possible, and denying to those, who would impose on us for what they are not, even the merit which they have. This is the comedy of artificial life, of wit and satire, such as we see it in Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh, &c. To this succeeds a state of society from which the same sort of affectation and pretence are banished by a greater knowledge of the world, or by their successful exposure on the stage; and which by neutralizing the materials of comic character, both natural and artificial, leaves no comedy at all--but the sentimental. Such is our modern comedy. There is a period in the progress of manners anterior to both these, in which the foibles and follies of individuals are of nature's planting, not the growth of art or study; in which they are therefore unconscious of them themselves, or care not who knows them, if they can but have their whim out; and in which, as there is no attempt at imposition, the spectators rather receive pleasure from humouring the inclinations of the persons they laugh at, than wish to give them pain by exposing their absurdity. This may be called the comedy of nature, and it is the comedy which we generally find in Shakspeare.<sup>1</sup>

The age of no comedy at all, the age in which the materials of the comic character have been neutralised, is one of Hazlitt's favourite topics. In the autumn of 1813 he wrote two letters to the editor of The Morning Chronicle in reply to the assertion of the paper's dramatic critic that there was still a great deal of material left for the comic writer to exploit. The sequel to the publication of the letters was Hazlitt's own appointment to the post of dramatic critic. It is the first of these letters which Hazlitt used at the beginning of the lecture "On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," in which he discusses the decline of comedy. Basically, he holds, comedy has declined because men and manners have changed. The style of conversation, for instance, has changed from the personal or

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," VI, 154-155n.

dramatic to what Hazlitt calls variously the didactic, dogmatic, critical, and analytical, which "consists almost entirely in the discussion of general topics" such as "ascertaining the merits of authors and their works."<sup>1</sup> The change in men has to some extent been brought about by comedy itself, which "destroys the very food on which it lives; and by constantly and successfully exposing the follies and weaknesses of mankind to ridicule, in the end leaves itself nothing worth laughing at."<sup>2</sup> Comedy has not of course eradicated folly, but it has driven it underground, and has encouraged men to look and act alike, to conform, regardless of what they might privately think.

Wellek finds Hazlitt's theory excessively simple, and he dismisses it as "a naturalistic theory too much in the style of the 'conjectural' histories of the 18th century."<sup>3</sup> This may well be true, but there remains about Hazlitt's theory something of interest and of insight which does help to explain the decline of comedy. He suggests that it has declined because seriousness has declined, to be replaced by self-consciousness and "dandyism," or what would now be called "romantic irony":

As to the gross and palpable absurdities of modern manners, they are too shallow and barefaced, and those who affect them are too little serious in them, to make them worth the detection of the Comic Muse. They proceed from an idle, impudent affectation of folly in general, in the dashing

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," VI, 153.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>A History of Modern Criticism, II, 208.

bravura style, not from an infatuation with any of its characteristic modes.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Barzun, who unlike Hazlitt has had the assistance of reading Freud, sees the purpose of this "uneasy and immediate laugh"; it is "intended to forestall derision by another or by oneself later."<sup>2</sup> Whether this extreme self-consciousness is considered as being deadly serious or less than serious, it is a defence-mechanism by which the mind ignores principle through an habitual over-use of psychic distancing. Recently, this tendency has been widely discussed in the debate on "commitment" and "engagement." Without some kind of commitment, actual or potential, worthwhile comedy is impossible. The Restoration rake may have been immoral (or amoral), but, as many critics of Restoration comedy have pointed out, this immorality or amorality is itself a principle, not simply a habit, and it is certainly not a form of mental illness. Man has changed, and if we take into account the limited psychological theory and knowledge at Hazlitt's disposal, we can credit him with a valuable suggestion toward the reason for the decline of comedy.

Hazlitt's preference for artificial comedy over the comedy of nature is based on his finding in the ridiculous a focus on moral principle that is lacking in the ludicrous. Yet to achieve this focus, artificial comedy forfeits verisimilitude, and for this reason

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<sup>1</sup>"On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," VI, 151.

<sup>2</sup>Romanticism and the Modern Ego (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), p. 169.

Hazlitt is at times very hard on such comic writers as Ben Jonson--

Shakspeare's characters are men; Ben Jonson's are more like machines, governed by mere routine, or by the convenience of the poet, whose property they are. In reading the one, we are let into the minds of his characters, we see the play of their thoughts, how their humours flow and work; the author takes a range over nature, and has an eye to every object or occasion that presents itself to set off and heighten the ludicrous character he is describing. His humour (so to speak) bubbles, sparkles, and finds its way in all directions, like a natural spring. In Ben Jonson it is, as it were, confined in a leaden cistern, where it stagnates and corrupts; or directed only through certain artificial pipes and conduits, to answer a given purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Another stricture on the comedy of manners is that it tends to degrade characters. Of Butler's Hudibras, for example, Hazlitt remarks "it is something revolting to see an author persecute his characters, the cherished offspring of his brain, in this manner, without mercy. Hudibras and Ralpho have immortalised Butler; and what has he done for them in return, but set them up to be 'pilloried on infamy's high and lasting stage?'"<sup>2</sup> If then the ridiculous can be excessively negative, the characteristic flaw of the ludicrous is that it can be insufficiently so. We have seen that Hazlitt thought Shakespeare's comedy too positive to be great comedy (although it qualifies, according to Hazlitt's own criteria, as great poetry); his remarks on Twelfth Night are typical:

This is justly considered as one of the most delightful of Shakespear's comedies. It is full of sweetness and pleasantry. It is perhaps too good-natured for comedy. It has little satire, and no spleen. It aims at the

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<sup>1</sup>"On Shakespear and Ben Jonson," VI, 39.

<sup>2</sup>"On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etherege, &c.," VI, 65.

ludicrous rather than the ridiculous. It makes us laugh at the follies of mankind, not despise them, and still less bear any ill-will towards them.<sup>1</sup>

It was indicated in the last chapter that this is an "eighteenth-century" observation, based upon the negative comic theory of the time. A comic character can never, of course, be as sympathetic as a tragic one can, for laughter implies a measure of rejection. Since, therefore, true comedy cannot hope to achieve its ends by developing the emotions or the imagination, it must address the intellect to be significant. To do so, it must deal with ideas and principles, the objects of the intellect, and to deal with them in a significant manner it must not approach them from the standpoint of the individual:

I am not for going so far as to pronounce Shakspeare's 'manners damnable, because he had not seen the court;' but I think that comedy does not find its richest harvest till individual infirmities have passed into general manners, and it is the example of courts, chiefly, that stamps folly with credit and currency, or glosses over vice with meretricious lustre. I conceive, therefore, that the golden period of our comedy was just after the age of Charles II. when the town first became tainted with the affectation of the manners and conversation of fashionable life, and before the distinction between rusticity and elegance, art and nature, was lost (as it afterwards was) in a general diffusion of knowledge, and the reciprocal advantages of civil intercourse.<sup>2</sup>

The need for "general manners" is a need for issues which really divide and "stratify" people. We feel the issues in tragedy insofar as we temporarily identify with the hero. But we do not identify to the same extent with even the most sympathetic of comic heroes, and it is

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<sup>1</sup>"Twelfth Night; or, What You Will," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 313.

<sup>2</sup>"On Shakspeare and Ben Jonson," VI, 36-37.

to forestall such identification that the usual comic hero is of a comparatively low social station. Hippolytus is a man whose only flaw is that he is too virtuous, and we can identify with him; Malvolio is a pushful servant who also is too virtuous, and we do not identify with him.

If comedy were sympathetic, Hazlitt would have few valid means of distinguishing it from tragedy, as we can see when he complains of Lamb's Reflector essay on Hogarth that it confounds the two.<sup>1</sup> Another reason for Hazlitt's preference for artificial comedy over natural comedy is that the former is, in a sense, closer to tragedy. And tragedy, because it is more ideal, is superior to any kind of comedy. One peculiarity of Hazlitt's argument for the superiority of tragedy to comedy is that the point of comparison which tells so heavily against comedy affects the artificial comedy more than the comedy of nature. Basically, comedy is inferior to tragedy because it withholds sympathy, yet the comedy of nature does not really do so--

It is easier to let down than to raise up, to weaken than to strengthen, to disconnect our sympathy from passion and power, than to attach and rivet it to any object of grandeur and interest, to startle and shock our preconceptions by incongruous and equivocal combinations, than to confirm, enforce, and expand them by powerful and lasting associations of ideas, or striking and true analogies. A slight cause is sufficient to produce a slight effect. To be indifferent or sceptical, requires no effort; to be enthusiastic and in earnest, requires a strong impulse, and collective power.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Hogarth and Fielding--Mr. Northcote's Opinions," Works, XX, 270.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 23.

Tragedy is great because it affirms the ideal. Artificial comedy is ranked immediately below it, since it is at least concerned with the ideal. The literary work which arouses sympathy is greater than that which completely forestalls it, but the latter is greater than that in which sympathy is only partial, or is imperfect.

When it is seen in this way, Hazlitt's preference for tragedy may be thought to rest on a quibble.<sup>1</sup> And though it will seem less of a quibble if we appreciate the great value which Hazlitt placed on the sympathetic imagination, we have perhaps just as much right to believe that the absence or presence of the sympathetic imagination itself is merely another form of quibbling. Then too, we may see in tragedy some negation--even of the ideal. Surely Oedipus Rex, though it affirms the inevitability and the value of intellectual curiosity, or pride, or that form of hubris which drives a man on regardless of consequences toward what he conceives as Truth, also negates this ideal to some extent? It is by no means entirely the right answer to say that comedy and tragedy are concerned with different forms of ideal--one would have to be rather more than subtle to find such a difference between the ideals held by Oedipus and by Mr. Shandy. The difference lies more in the type of negation which takes place. At any rate, Hazlitt sees a difference between what might be called the sanctions of tragedy and of comedy, and this difference is important, since it is one of his most original ideas on the comic:

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<sup>1</sup>See W. P. Albrecht's "Hazlitt's Preference for Tragedy," PMLA, LXXI (1956), 1042-1051, for a discussion of the question from a different point of view.

Before we can laugh at a thing, its absurdity must at least be open and palpable to common apprehension. Ridicule is necessarily built on certain supposed facts, whether true or false, and on their inconsistency with certain acknowledged maxims, whether right or wrong. It is, therefore, a fair test, if not of philosophical or abstract truth, at least of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense.<sup>1</sup>

This view is of course simply a deduction from the common notion that laughter is subjective and relative, but its aesthetic application is not a commonplace. Molière somewhere called comedy "the outward and palpable shape that a provision of nature has stamped on everything irrational," but for Hazlitt this would come closer to defining tragedy. The comic may represent the shape that a provision of human nature has stamped on everything irrational, but human nature and society are subject in some respects to change, and the nature which provides the sanction of tragedy is not. This is indeed a limitation on comedy, and Hazlitt deserves credit for noticing it, and for recognising it as a characteristic of comedy. Then, too, it is another way of saying that comedy is less ideal than tragedy, and that of course is what Hazlitt's argument for the superiority of tragedy is based upon.

It has already been noted that the eighteenth-century critics did not immediately succeed in creating an aesthetic of the ludicrous, and in fact most of them--Beattie is the outstanding exception--did not even try. Like Beattie, Hazlitt asserted in 1818 the aesthetic significance of the ludicrous, but he too did not really

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<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 20.

succeed. The trouble is that Hazlitt's aesthetic of sympathy deprives the ludicrous of a function. Insofar as the ludicrous character is sympathetic, the comedy of nature can affirm an ideal, just as tragedy does. But tragedy achieves this affirmation far more effectively because it does not undercut the ideal at the same time--at least not to the extent and in the same way that comedy does. On the other hand, insofar as the ludicrous character is not sympathised with, comedy is negating the ideal for which he stands. But artificial comedy can achieve this negation far more effectively because it does not uphold the ideal at the same time. Perhaps the root of the trouble is that the giving or withholding of sympathy is an either-or proposition: unlike the concept of distance, which Hazlitt could have made more of, it does not really admit of degree. One reason for Hazlitt's inability to handle degrees of sympathy is his faculty psychology, which frequently leads him to forget the oneness of the mind. If a character excites sympathy, he can arouse identification, appeal to the imagination, and become a positive moral force. If he does not arouse sympathy, he forfeits or inhibits identification, appeals to the reason, and becomes a negative force. But if he is both sympathetic and distanced to a degree somewhere between acceptance and rejection, there is no faculty of the mind to which he can appeal. He must appeal to the mind as a whole, and Hazlitt's psychology gives him no way to explain such a character.

Despite this weakness in Hazlitt's theory, he does make two suggestions which, whether he recognised the fact or not, lie along the paths which an attempt to find a function for the ludicrous

might take. One, though not very creditable in the eyes of modern criticism, is escape. Restoration comedy, as Tave notes a little too sweepingly, is attractive to Hazlitt "for its romance-like qualities. He likes Farquhar because his heroes are romantic, not knavish, because we have more sympathy with them than with Vanbrugh's heroes, and because of what are evidently Farquhar's good-natured and good-humored Shakespearean traits in making us laugh from pleasure oftener than from malice."<sup>1</sup> Such an appeal, moreover, need not be limited to artificial comedy, though it is in connection with artificial comedy that Hazlitt often notes it: "in turning over the pages of the best comedies, we are almost transported to another world, and escape from this dull age to one that was all life, and whim, and mirth, and humour."<sup>2</sup> The weakness of an escape theory is that it explains only the conditions and circumstances under which significance might emerge. It does nothing to explain the nature of this significance.

Another possible function of the ludicrous in comedy might be arrived at by our apprehension that it can achieve something positive through a combination of acceptance and rejection, just as a scientific experiment accepts an hypothesis for the purpose of limiting it, but not necessarily annihilating it. Such an analogy is made in Hazlitt's lecture "On the Periodical Essayists":

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<sup>1</sup>The Amiable Humorist, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>"On Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar," VI, 70. This is essentially different from Lamb's contention that the Restoration audiences themselves saw in the plays a series of mirages. See "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century."

By this sort of writing, 'The act and practic part of life is thus made the mistress of our theorique.' It is the best and most natural course of study. It is in morals and manners what the experimental is in natural philosophy, as opposed to the dogmatical method. It does not deal in sweeping clauses of proscription and anathema, but in nice distinctions and liberal constructions. It makes up its general accounts from details, its few theories from many facts. It does not try to prove all black or all white as it wishes, but lays on the intermediate colours, (and most of them not unpleasing ones,) as it finds them blended with 'the web of our life, which is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.'<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt had, of course, favourably reviewed Schlegel's Lectures for the Edinburgh Review two years before he delivered his own series on the comic writers, and the passage quoted above may be regarded as an elaboration of the German critic's well-known and often-borrowed statement that "the whole moral of the New Comedy, just like that of the Fable, is nothing more than a theory of prudence."<sup>2</sup> But however that may be, it is the only passage of its kind in the Lectures on the English Comic Writers. Further elaboration had to wait for the 1829 "Definition of Wit."

The "Definition of Wit" was Hazlitt's last venture into comic theory, and partly because of its mode of publication, it is not a well-known essay. It is a product of Hazlitt's return to journalism after his completion in 1828 of the Life of Napoleon, and it was probably intended to form part of the series of essays "Specimens of a Dictionary of Definitions," many of which appeared in the Atlas.

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<sup>1</sup>Works, VI, 91-92.

<sup>2</sup>A. W. Schlegel, A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, tr. John Black (rev. ed.; London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846), p. 177.

The "Definition of Wit" was not published in Hazlitt's lifetime; it was first printed six years after his death in the Literary Remains, where it carries a note by his son to the effect that it had been written in 1829.<sup>1</sup> Since it was written at least six months prior to Hazlitt's death on September 18th, 1830, and at a time when he was desperately in need of money and when he was publishing similar pieces in the Atlas, it was perhaps not considered complete: this assumption is reinforced by the fact that Hazlitt's son printed it with a row of asterisks after its terminating sentence. Perhaps he was prevented from finishing it by the onset of the final stage of the illness--probably cancer of the stomach--which cut short his contributions to the Atlas in April, 1830, and killed him five months later.<sup>2</sup> The likelihood that it is unfinished may also explain why it is unclear on certain points--whether, for example, wit is negative or positive, and whether it is laughable. But probably a more fundamental reason for the essay's lack of final clarification of these problems is that Hazlitt was not simply repeating the formulations he had made in 1818, but was thinking the whole question through again, and arriving at somewhat different conclusions.

Generally, Hazlitt was nothing if not consistent in his opinions--he once told Coleridge that he, Hazlitt, did not seem to have altered any of his ideas since he was sixteen years old<sup>3</sup>--and

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<sup>1</sup>Literary Remains of the Late William Hazlitt, ed. W. Hazlitt. (2 vols.; London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), I, 36.

<sup>2</sup>See Baker, William Hazlitt, p. 467.

<sup>3</sup>"On Consistency of Opinion," Works, XVII, 22-23. Coleridge's rather devastating reply was "Why then, you are no wiser now than you were then!"

for this reason a search for important developments and changes in his thought is usually signally unsuccessful. In fact, there are a great many similarities between the Lectures of 1818 and the "Definition." Hazlitt's reliance on association of ideas is still evident, as is the distinction he draws from it between the serious and the ludicrous:

The serious is that which is closely cemented together by experience and prejudice, or by common sense: the ludicrous is the incoherent, or that which wants the cement of habit and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Also similar is his notion of the destructiveness of wit--"But while gravity and imposture not only exist, but reign triumphant; while the proud, obstinate, sacred tumours rear their heads on high, and are trying to get a new lease of for ever and a day; then oh! for the Frenchman's art ('Voltaire's?--the same') to break the torpid spell, and reduce the bloated mass to its native insignificance!"<sup>2</sup> It is this destructiveness, furthermore, which still distinguishes wit from imagination, and which still makes wit inferior to imagination: "the imagination is serious, even to passion, and exceeds truth by laying a greater stress on the object; wit has no feeling but contempt, and exceeds truth to make light of it."<sup>3</sup> The "Definition of Wit," then, does not so much repudiate the ideas which Hazlitt published in 1818, as it extends and develops them. In doing so it suggests new ideas which are both interesting and valuable.

In 1818, Hazlitt had found wit to be an agreeable surprise

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," Works, XX, 363n.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 360.

resulting primarily from the perception of some incongruity, and the intensification of that incongruity. Since the context of his characterisation of wit was at that time a series of lectures on comic literature, and since he was interested in the use of wit, his account was largely a descriptive one (except in the first lecture, "On Wit and Humour"). In 1829, however, his subject is wit itself, and Hazlitt's account is more psychological than aesthetic. Instead of emphasising the effect of wit, he tries to account for its genesis; instead of trying to relate it to literary meaning, he tries to isolate it. What he calls the "double problem" of wit in 1829 is "why the mind is at once surprised and not shocked [by the allusion which wit makes]." <sup>1</sup> In other words, why should the perception of an incongruity or the intensification of that incongruity, or both, cause an agreeable surprise? The solution to the problem lies in Hazlitt's conception of wit as a "mixture of sense and nonsense." <sup>2</sup> And this conception, although it is derived primarily as a matter of psychological interest, has some merit and place in aesthetic theory.

"Mere sense is not wit," <sup>3</sup> Hazlitt says, even though at times it may mimic wit.

Wit, then, according to this account of it, depends on the rapid analysis or solution of continuity in our ideas, which, by detaching, puts them into a condition to coalesce more readily with others, and form new and unexpected combinations: but does all analysis imply wit, or where is

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 361.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 363.

the difference? Does the examining the flowers and leaves in the cover of a chair-bottom, or the several squares in a marble pavement, constitute wit? . . . The mathematician abstracts in his reasonings, and considers the same line, now as forming the side of a triangle, now of a square figure; but does he laugh at the discovery, or tell it to any one else as a monstrous good jest?<sup>1</sup>

Even the special type of sense communicated by wit--the sense of absurdity--is not to be confused with wit. It is the material as well as the meaning of the wit-product, but wit itself is a "mode of viewing and representing nature or the differences and similitudes, harmonies and discords in the links and chains of our ideas of things at large."<sup>2</sup> Wit is to be thought of first and foremost as a technique, a point upon which Freud was later to insist. In fact the passage in which Hazlitt isolates sense from technique, and finds wit in the latter, sounds rather like Freud--

A gallant calling on a courtesan (for it is fair to illustrate these intricacies how we can) observed, 'he should only make her a present every other time.' She answered, 'Then come only every other time.' This appears to me to offer a sort of touchstone to the question. The sense here is, 'Don't come unless you pay.' There is no wit in this: the wit then consists in the mode of conveying the hint.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for this insistence is that the truly absurd is not laughable, even though it furnishes the material, motive, and meaning for wit, which may be laughable. Furthermore, the sense of wit is, to a degree, discovered, whereas wit itself is a process of creating.

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 354. There is a hint here of the language of Coleridge's definition of the imagination, but as I go on to explain, Hazlitt saw wit as a creative process similar to the imaginative process. See his explicit parallel in "On Poetry in General," Works, V, 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 359.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 358.

Specifically, wit is the process of creating nonsense, although Hazlitt insists that it is not to be confused with nonsense. In 1818 he spoke of wit as "illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity,"<sup>1</sup> and his metaphor of contrast from painting has already been discussed. In the "Definition" he develops this idea---

First of all, wit implies a jest, that is, the bringing forward a pretended or counterfeit illustration of a thing; which, being presently withdrawn, makes the naked truth more apparent by contrast. It is lessening and undermining our faith in any thing (in which the serious consists) by heightening or exaggerating the vividness of our idea of it, so as by carrying it to extremes to show the error in the first concoction.<sup>2</sup>

Wit is then a kind of reductio ad absurdum in which what is absurd in fact, becomes embodied in what is literally absurd; sense, in other words, is embodied in nonsense: "You give that which is stupid in itself the additional accompaniments of what is still more stupid, to enhance and verify the idea by a falsehood."<sup>3</sup>

Wit then is the action or process of relating sense to nonsense, and in the "Definition of Wit" Hazlitt is frequently concerned with this relationship. In one of his most extended statements of it he says

Wit is the conjuring up in the fancy any illustration of an idea by likeness, combination of other images, or by a form of words, that being intended to point out the eccentricity or departure of the original idea from the class to which it belongs, does so by referring it contingently and obliquely to a totally opposite class,

<sup>1</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 15.

<sup>2</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 359-360.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 359.

where the surprise and mere possibility of finding it, proves the inherent want of congruity.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that the product of wit is a "falsehood," there must be congruence between the sense and the nonsense: "the ridicule must be just and pointed from this very circumstance, that is, from the coincidence in that one particular only, which is the flaw and singularity of the first object."<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to compare this with Hazlitt's statement of 1818, to the effect that "mere wit, as opposed to reason or argument, consists in striking out some casual and partial coincidence which has nothing to do, or at least implies no necessary connection with the nature of the things . . ."<sup>3</sup> Although these passages express essentially the same idea, the emphasis in the earlier is on the lack of connection, and in the later it is on connection.

One of Hazlitt's examples may help to clarify the point-- "Compagnons du lys, may mean either the companions of the order of the flower-de-luce, or the companions of Ulysses--who were transformed into swine--according as you lay the emphasis. The French wits, at the restoration of Louis XVIII., with admirable point and truth, applied it in this latter sense."<sup>4</sup> The first step in creating wit is for the "prosing judgment" to discover a serious absurdity or incongruity in the Compagnons du lys. This incongruity, which forms the "sense" of the wit, consists in the failure of the object to be

<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 360.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"On Wit and Humour," VI, 19.

<sup>4</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 355.

true to its own nature. Here, the honourable society has become a dishonourable one. Then, because of the homophony, the Compagnons du Lys are forced into a mock identity with the Compagnons d'Ulysse. If the similarity in sound were the only similarity, nonsense alone would result, and this nonsense would be unrelated to the sense present at the beginning of the process. But the similarity in sound discloses another similarity, which Hazlitt calls the moral similarity, and this is what is important for congruence. The statement "the Compagnons du lys are swine" is both absurd and untrue, but it expresses the absurdity which is truly to be found in the Compagnons du lys. This is how Hazlitt solves the problem of explaining how the mind is at once surprised and not shocked by wit. The literal dissimilarity causes a surprise which, because of the moral similarity, does not shock. Sense and nonsense go together to make up the product of wit:

Wit consists in two things, the perceiving an incongruity between an object and the class to which it generally belongs, and secondly, the pointing out or making this incongruity more manifest, by transposing it to a totally different class of objects in which it is prescriptively found in perfection. The medium or link of connexion between the opposite classes of ideas is in the unlikeness of one of the things in question to itself, i.e. the class it belongs to: this peculiarity is the narrow bridge or line along which the fancy runs to link it to a set of objects in all other respects different from the first, and having no sort of communication, either in fact or inclination, with it, and in which the pointedness and brilliancy, or the surprise and contrast of wit consists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 361-362. Professor Albrecht's recent article, "Hazlitt on the Poetry of Wit," PMLA, LXXV (1960), 245-249, makes no reference to the "Definition" and aims more at an explanation of Hazlitt's reasons for placing the poetry of wit below the poetry of nature in his scale of poetic value. But the

The process of wit may be likened to the process of symbolisation; in fact, as Freud has shown, it is just such a process. In both, there is a literal dissimilarity between reference and referent, and a "moral" similarity, so that the literally untrue is accepted for the sake of the morally true. There is congruence, but not identity--"this is the perfection of wit, when the physical sound is the same, the physical sense totally unlike, and the moral sense absolutely identical."<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt assigns to wit the purpose of verifying ideas, so that if he ever developed his 1818 analogy between comedy and scientific experiment, he did so in the "Definition." This verification, like an experiment, may serve two purposes: to illustrate and to clarify ideas. In the first case, it tells us no more than our "prosing judgments." It is merely a rhetorical device to convince the imagination of that which the understanding already knows. It tends to enlist the passions on the side of reason, and Hazlitt considered the main problem of morality to be the means of achieving such an enlistment. It operates on that which the understanding has already

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article does deal with some points which would otherwise have to be discussed at length in the present study. Professor Albrecht shows, for example, that Hazlitt admires wit because it does achieve a "kind of internal order . . . at the expense of external congruity," and because it is objective in its detachment--although the detachment can imply the severance of sympathy. He also points out that Wellek is justified in calling Hazlitt's attitude to "witty and conceited poetry" "on the whole . . . quite negative." (Wellek, II, 204.) Like Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt felt that the metaphysicals "spoiled nature by art," applying to serious poetry a style which suits only the light and ludicrous. Albrecht also shows that while the poetry of wit is not, for Hazlitt, in the first rank, its practitioners in the 18th century, led by Dryden and Pope, gave it a very high rank indeed.

<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 355.

adjudged absurd: "from a received practical truth and object of grave assent, to turn it into a laughing stock to the fancy."<sup>1</sup> In this sense, presumably, the basic absurdity is only suspected, and the process of wit is as much a test as an illustration. Hazlitt's example is Swift's "The house of brother Van I spy, / In shape resembling a goose-pie." He comments

Here, if the satire was just, the characteristics of want of solidity, of incongruity, and fantastical arrangement were inherent in the building, and written on its front to the discerning eye, and only required to be brought out by the simile of the goose-pie, which is an immediate test and illustration (being an extreme case) of those qualities. The absurdity, which before was either admired, or only suspected, now stands revealed, and is turned into a laughing-stock, by the new version of the building into a goose-pie (as much as if the metamorphosis had been effected by a play of words, combining the most opposite things), for the mind in this case having narrowly escaped being imposed upon by taking a trumpery edifice for a stately pile, and perceiving the cheat, naturally wishes to cut short the dispute by finding out the most discordant object possible, and nicknames the building after it.<sup>2</sup>

What is essential here is that wit puts the mind at ease by forcing ideas which are not entirely conscious into the consciousness and testing them. Hazlitt's theory of wit is more intellectual than Freud's, but this satisfaction which wit brings to the mind by symbol formation makes their theories similar on an important point.

The use of wit to clarify ideas can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, wit is essentially a poetic process, as Hazlitt indicates: "The putting a wig on a stupid face and setting it on a barber's pole is wit or humour:--the fixing a pair of wings on a

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 360.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 357.

beautiful figure to make it look more like an angel is poetry; so that the grotesque is either serious or ludicrous, as it professes to exalt or degrade."<sup>1</sup> Since wit clarifies through rejection, however, it performs an essentially negative rôle. But if we consider the clarified idea which results, we can think of wit as achieving something positive. And certainly when this rejection is thought of merely as a tool to which little attention is paid, we are at some remove from the folly-and-vice theory of comedy:

This I think is the cause of the delightful nature of wit, and of its relieving, instead of aggravating, the pains of defect or deformity, by pointing it out in the most glaring colours, inasmuch as by so doing, we, as it were, completely detach the peccant part and restore the sense of propriety which, in its undetected and unprobed state, it was beginning to disturb. It is like taking a grain of sand out of the eye, a thorn out of the foot. We have discharged our mental reckoning, and had our revenge. Thus, when we say of a snub-nose, that it is like an ace of clubs, it is less out of spite to the individual than to vindicate and place beyond a doubt the propriety of our notions of form in general.<sup>2</sup>

Hazlitt is also much closer to a "modern" formulation of the "relief" theory than he was in 1818, and he has moved toward a position from which the "comedy of sentiment" of his day would no longer appear to be "no comedy at all."

The wit which holds little spite against the individual laughed at is certainly not the only kind of wit in Hazlitt's theory, but it is the kind which over the years came to be the most important for him. He sees it as meaningful, and he tries to show how it is

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<sup>1</sup>"Definition of Wit," XX, 362.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 356-357.

meaningful through both its positive and its negative characteristics. In 1818 he had given no indication of seeing anything in wit but the annihilation of the ideal. In 1829 he has turned over the coin, and he sees that it can vindicate the ideal. His final excursion into comic theory places wit quite clearly in the service of the imagination.

CONCLUSION

## CHAPTER XI

The Drama . . . is the most substantial and real of all things. It represents not only looks, but motion and speech. The painter gives only the former, looks without action or speech, and the mere writer only the latter, words without looks or action. Its business and its use is to express the thoughts and character in the most striking and instantaneous manner, in the manner most like reality. It conveys them in all their truth and subtlety, but in all their force and with all possible effect. It brings them into action, obtrudes them on the sight, embodies them in habits, in gestures, in dress, in circumstances, and in speech. It renders everything overt and ostensible, and presents human nature not in its elementary principles or by general reflections, but exhibits its essential quality in all their variety of combination, and furnishes subjects for perpetual reflection.

"On Modern Comedy," Works, XX, 9-10.

Hazlitt's critical position has a four-fold basis: in nature, in the artist, in the spirit of the age, and in the reader's response to the work of art. All these elements overlap and shape each other, and ideally all are involved in the total harmony of the greatest art. Nature includes the inner, balanced, perceptive, feeling and thinking harmony of a human being, and its complement, the informing principle in the visible world. On the basis of this human and external nature, the artist creates with force, clarity, and precision, achieving a work of art which is harmonious and integrated in itself, and which catches and communicates the fundamental harmony of nature. That harmony differs according to the period in

which the artist lives; it involves both the permanent and universal, and the historically particular. The great artist's productions will exhibit a combination of nature and the spirit of his age. He will find his materials in his store of "common sense," and in the creative moment, which is characterised by a distinctive emotional and intellectual excitement, he will fuse them into a reality which will be unique and true. Imagination is his associating, perceiving, synthesising and selecting instrument; it is immediate and intuitive in its operation; and in the greatest artists, it is the faculty of mind by which personal identity is obliterated and sympathetic identification with the essence of his subject achieved. Gusto, the peculiar heightening of the imagination which is available only to the greatest artists, enables the writer or painter to express in the most telling manner that essence, that distinguishing character which informs the subject. The work of art will arouse the imagination of the alert and sensitive reader, who in turn will feel and comprehend the truth and force of the work, imaginatively re-creating in his own mind the excitement experienced by the artist. The critic's function is to help express the artist's experience of nature, his skill, the truth of the work to nature and to the age; he will evaluate the work of art on the standard of its effectiveness for the general mass of readers. His real task is to grasp the unity which is the work, and to aid the reader to comprehend it.

The highest form of art, in Hazlitt's view, is drama, and the highest form of drama is tragedy. Both tragedy and comedy depend upon incongruity and discontinuity: tragedy detaches its

audience from an obscure first cause and from an equally obscure and frighteningly capricious scheme of things, and enlists its sympathies for a protagonist whose fate is incongruous with his great moral qualities, whose suffering and destruction are tragically ironic; comedy enlists its audience's sympathies with a moral scheme of things, and detaches them from the follies and egotistical affectations, in their very nature defying that scheme, indulged in by the protagonist. Sympathetic identification with others is the foundation of Hazlitt's aesthetic and moral systems; he gives tragedy pride of place over comedy not because the latter depends for its effect on a measure of detachment or distance--both forms, as we have seen, imply detachment--but because comedy demands detachment from, and a severance of sympathy with, human beings, while tragedy brings us closer to man, makes us suffer with him, enlarges our sympathy, and directs our desires to the good. Comedy, in short, does nothing to diminish our selfishness; tragedy enables us to realise our potential benevolence. Both tragedy and comedy are "true"; but the truth of comedy is by definition downgraded from that of tragedy, which is a collateral reason for tragedy's superiority. Comedy's truth is internal consistency of structure, "keeping" in the intrinsic relationships of its characters, and faithful imitation of the nature of the society it portrays. The truth of tragedy includes all this, but transcends it in its fidelity to the permanent and universal qualities of humanity which are its substance.

Hazlitt's insistence upon sympathetic identification

with the dramatic character, and his natural interest in humanity, lead him toward a theory of drama in which plot and action are subordinate. "Lead" I use advisedly, because we have seen that he does not by any means ignore plot and action; in fact, at bottom, his theory assumes that character is shaped by the two. But to say that drama is character in action, or character developed by action, is to focus the emphasis upon one aspect of drama at the expense of others, with the result that the unity and distance required of drama for our appreciation of it as an aesthetic form are rejected as unnecessary or are ignored. Such a theory as Hazlitt's is built upon a conviction, express or implied, that dramatic plot and action are in reality little more than occasions for the semi-autonomous development of the characters. What becomes important to the critic holding this view is the skill with which the dramatist creates character, the verisimilitude of the events in which the character is involved, the vraisemblance of the characters themselves. What fades into the background is the view that drama is meaningful as art--as controlled and organised experience. (It is unfortunate that a good many of the critics who do see drama's significance as inhering in the fact that drama is art, yet do not see that what men have always praised as the very greatest art cannot be divorced from its moral centre. In art there is no such thing--and this applies especially to dramatic art--as form without content, or content without form.) If sympathetic identification, immediate and intuitive as it is, constitutes our dominant mode of attention to a play, then we must see the play

as a not-very-far-from-fortuitous framework for the display of the character's personality, and we will come to explain the events and situations set on the stage in terms of the light they cast upon that personality.

We might, when faced with Hamlet, explain the play itself by analysing Hamlet's character. We might believe that "he seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect."<sup>1</sup>

At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act 'that has no relish of salvation in it.'<sup>2</sup>

Hamlet's soliloquies, which presumably explained to the Elizabethan audiences much of the moral context in which the play is set and Hamlet's own relationship vis-à-vis that context, become intricate "refinements in malice," "pretences," "excuses." Because we sympathise with Hamlet, and understand him so well, we see that these revelations are actually "speculations," attempts to reason himself out of his "own infirmity," rationalisations of that infirmity which "only afford him another occasion for indulging it."<sup>3</sup> Because everything the character says is, on our theory, character-

<sup>1</sup>"Hamlet," Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Works, IV, 234.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. My italics.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 235.

istic, seemingly contradictory or uncharacteristic statements made by him must contain some hidden key to their correct interpretation. Our theory will tend to blind us to the fact that in every dramatic soliloquy there might be an alternation of two kinds of discourse--the characteristic or confessional, and the revelatory, in which the speaker steps out of himself, so to speak, and sets that self and its actions more clearly for the audience in the general moral context of the play. Our psychological examination of the dramatic character will also make us focus our attention on his progress through the plot, not on his progress in the plot, so that we will tend to lose sight of "action" as the totality of the play and will see it rather as "business."

The Aristotelian concept of drama may be said to have been augmented or to have been degraded--according to the degree of one's conservatism in matters dramatic--since the rise of the doctrine of sympathy in the eighteenth century. There can be little doubt that Aristotle's definitions are inadequate when applied to much modern drama; there can be equally little doubt that an appreciable measure of the change is directly attributable to the importance accorded character at the expense of plot and action by the influential theories of Hazlitt, his contemporaries, and his immediate predecessors. It would be ridiculous, of course, to say that Hazlitt is wrong any more than it would be ridiculous to say that Aristotle is wrong: their theories are conditioned by the spirit of the age and the spirit of the drama which informed them. The point is, rather, that no theory of drama or of art in general can be absolutely

inclusive. Drama, because it is a living art, is dynamic; like the English language, it continually explores new possibilities, entombs worn-out cliché, and derives its vitality from a blend of the traditional with the contemporary and the avant-garde. If men as disparate as Aristotle and Hazlitt would have found much to admire and much to deplore in an anthology which printed, say, plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Pirandello, Ionesco, Miller, Eliot, O'Casey, Osborne, Pinter, Wesker, O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Odets, and Tennessee Williams, they would also have been heartened, one hopes, by the richness and diversity which it would afford. And in spite of the fact that we might disagree with much of what Aristotle and Hazlitt say, it is instructive to remember that they took as models of dramatic art those plays which are still regarded and esteemed as such today.

It is for its relevance to the drama of our own day that Hazlitt's dramatic theory is valuable. It is hoped that some of the reasons for the permanent value and significance of the criticism which he wrote on the basis of this theory have been indicated in the present essay. Few critics have been blessed with such a happy combination of unmercenary disinterestedness, common sense, and sympathy. His remarkably unified sensibility, by which he fused thought and feeling and kept his head in an emotional age, his capacity for synthesising and balancing complex elements--all these qualities make him a major critic. It is not presumptuous to say that in many respects he resembles and, indeed, rivals Dr. Johnson.

Apart from the fact that they both wrote for a living, they both had a strong sense of tradition and their criticism is remarkably English. They are both able to stand outside and above personal frailties, and to write as men of taste and common sense. They both speak with public voices.

Johnson's criticisms are more objectively formulated; they take the character of judgments. Hazlitt's are written in a more personal, less formal, style. As a result, they are more inspiring. It might be said that what Coleridge did for Hazlitt as a young man, Hazlitt was able through his writing to do for others: to inspire them, to make them responsive, articulate, and humane. He wrote for the average intelligent reader; he is anti-provincial, supremely English and yet more than English, literary but also concerned with philosophy, art, music, and life in general; a man of his period, yet concerned with traditional values and with the perspectives of history. Because of these perspectives, he is able to put an authoritative finger on defects as well as on merits, and what he pointed to as bad is usually what we see as bad also.

His doctrine of the sympathetic imagination, his conviction that the true artist expresses not merely what he imagines, but what he knows and sees and feels intimately in the world of thought within him and the world of sense without him, and that he presents all of this in a manner which broadens his readers--his doctrine was pertinent not only for his contemporaries, but remains so for writers and readers in the twentieth century. It has validity for all arts and for all periods, particularly for those which are characterised

by a strong emphasis on individuality, uniqueness, and originality. His trust in the imagination and in the truth which art embodies is accompanied, in his practical criticism, by a meticulous fidelity to the text before him; together, his practice and the theory upon which it is based illustrate and affirm that

in art, in taste, in life, in speech, you decide from feeling, and not from reason; that is, from the impression of a number of things on the mind, which impression is true and well-founded, though you may not be able to analyse or account for it in the several particulars.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Works, VIII, 31.

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