Divergent Radicalisms: Hazlitt and Shelley

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Summary

The Summary of ‘Divergent Radicalisms: Hazlitt and Shelley’

This paper deals with the unique relationship between Hazlitt and Shelley. Though the former is a critic, and the latter a poet, they were both brought up in a climate of enthusiasm for Godwinian doctrine in their youth, breathing the same intellectual air of the modern social sciences, and so they were on the same political side, that of republican and gradual reformer. As a young poet, Shelley owed much to Hazlitt, a successful critic, and admired him, despite Hazlitt’s strong criticisms of his work. In spite of this situation, Hazlitt joined Shelley’s last project; a radical political journal, The Liberal.

This paper describes Hazlitt’s criticism of Shelley, and the differences in their radicalisms.

Key Words: Shelley and Hazlitt

Both Shelley and Hazlitt were men of letters who supported equalitarian ideas in English social progress. As contemporaries, they were breathing the same air of an epoch which was confused and chaotic in its sense of values, the conflict between Burkean and Paine, aristocrat and democrat. Seeing the failure of the French Revolution, social opinion in England rapidly declined toward the conservative. While this reaction toward the French Revolution was taken for granted among intellectuals including Wordsworth and Coleridge, Hazlitt alone did not change his attitude toward the Revolution. As a poet of Romantic movement of the second generation, Shelley never had as much allergy to the cruel behavior during the Revolution as his elders did. He regarded the Revolution as liberating people, and respected Hazlitt as a brave critic of the age.

While admiring Hazlitt, strangely enough, Shelley was the object of violent attacks from Hazlitt during his lifetime. However Shelley didn’t seem to care about this. Even more strangely, The Liberal, Shelley’s last project, was started not only with Byron and Hunt, but also Hazlitt. What was Hazlitt’s criticism of Shelley? What is the relationship between them? It would be interesting to analyse it, and by doing so, the divergent radicalisms of that time emerge.
First of all, Hazlitt’s central criticisms of Shelley must be examined in detail, and discussed individually.

Hazlitt criticized Shelley in ‘On Paradox and Commonplace’\(^{(1)}\) in his *Table Talk* (1821–2) as follows,

(1) The author of *Prometheus Unbound* (to take an individual instance of the last character) has a fire in his eyes, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech, which mark out the philosophic fanatic. He is sanguine-complexioned, and shrilled-voiced. As is often observable in the case of religious enthusiasts, ... He is clogged by no dull system of realities, no earth-bound feeling, no rooted prejudice, ...but is drawn up by irresistible levity to regions of mere speculation and fancy, to the sphere of air and fire, ...

(2) Persons of this class...are not contented to lead the minds of men to an eminence overlooking the prospect of social amelioration, unless, by forcing them up slippery paths and to the utmost verge of possibility, they can dash them down the precipice the instant they reach the promised Pisgar. They think it nothing to hang up a beacon to guide or warn, if they do not at the same time frighten the community like a comet. They do not mind making their principles odious, provided they can make themselves notorious.

(3) To win over the public opinion by fair means is to them an insipid, commonplace mode of popularity: they would either force it by harsh methods, or seduce it by intoxicating potions. Egotism, petulance, licentiousness, levity of principle (whatever be the source) is a bad thing in any one, and most of all, in a philosophical reformer.

On account of this and similar criticisms,\(^{(2)}\) and despite remonstrating with, and even threatening, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt reported Hazlitt’s claim to Shelley: Hazlitt says that ‘Shelley provokes him by his going to a pernicious extreme on the liberal side, and so hurting it. I asked him what good he would do the said side by publicly abusing the supporters of it, and caricaturing them? To this he answers nothing.’\(^{(3)}\) Hunt, who could not understand such feelings towards a comrade, thought Shelley might have offended the sensitive, resentful Hazlitt by ‘cutting him up’ in conversation at Godwin’s table.\(^{(4)}\)

It seems to be at the end of 1816 that Shelley first met Hazlitt during his visit to Hunt, in a cottage in the Vale of Health, Hampstead. According to Mary’s journal,\(^{(5)}\) they later had a discussion concerning Monarchy and Republicanism. Hazlitt and Shel-
ley joined forces to argue in favour of Republicanism, while Hunt and Walter Coulson defended the monarchy. This discussion, which took place at Hunt’s cottage, lasted enough until 3 a. m. on February, 9, 1817. Shelley and Hazlitt dined again at Hunt’s or Godwin’s some time during Shelley’s stay in Marlow before Shelley left England in 1818. Shelley was impressed enough by Hazlitt to refer to him in A Philosophical View of Reform (1819) as a leading writer on the Reform side. Though Shelley knew of Hazlitt’s attack on him from Hunt, Shelley’s letters professed almost indifference to this criticism.

However, if Hazlitt’s statement is examined closely, it proves to contain more than his personal resentment, which Hunt suspected was Hazlitt’s way of paying Shelley back for some fancied slight. Probably, what disgusted Hazlitt most was that Shelley faithfully followed Hazlitt’s thought. There is no doubt that Shelley had read Hazlitt’s An Essay on The Principle of Human Action (1805) when he wrote his treatise, Speculations of Morals (1817–21). The Essay was the work in which Hazlitt claimed a ‘metaphysical discovery’ which provided an answer to the controversy, raging in England since the time of Hobbes, over the inherent selfishness or benevolence of human nature. Hazlitt saw his “discovery” as rescuing the mind from the chains of selfishness, association and habit in which it had been imprisoned by the ‘materialistic philosophers’ of the eighteenth century. Hazlitt carefully and rigorously pursued his idea in a logical and illustrative way. Hazlitt doesn’t deny self-love or self-interest, and he conceives that “a man must be necessarily interested in his own actual feelings, whatever these may be, simply because he feels them.” In the theoretical background to this work, there is the Lockean ‘pleasure principle’, which Hazlitt adapts to his concept of self-love, observing that:

But if we admit that there is something in the very idea of good, or evil, which naturally excites desire or aversion, which is in itself the proper motives of action, which impels the mind to pursue the one and to avoid the other by a true moral necessity, then it cannot be indifferent to me whether I believe that any being will be made happy or miserable in consequence of my action, whether this may be mine or another.

I naturally desire and pursue my own good (in whatever this consists) simply from my having an idea of it sufficiently warm and vivid to excite in me an emotion of interest, or passion; and I love and pursue the good of others, of a relative, of a friend, of a family, community, or of mankind for just the same reason.

Hazlitt also says that the future alone “can be the object of rational or voluntary pursuit; for neither the past and present can be altered for the better, or worse by any
efforts of the will; "(12) but the future which does not yet exist cannot be acted upon without means of imagination. And, again, he makes it obvious that a man is an imaginative being:

Whereas when I sacrifice my present ease or convenience, for the sake of a greater good to myself at a future period, the same being who suffers afterwards enjoys, both the loss and gain are mine."(13)

Thus Hazlitt argues that the same faculty of imagination, by which we are thrown forward into our future beings, must carry us out of ourselves into the feelings of others, and therefore an interest in others. He goes on to argue that as “we are not born with a desire of we know not what, and good wishes for we know not whom,"(14) “A child is insensible to the good of others not from any want of goodwill towards them, or an exclusive attachment to self, but for want of knowing better.”(15) From this argument Hazlitt draws the conclusion that human “nature is originally and essentially disinterested,"(16) and defies the habitual and confused association which mixes up self-love with inherent selfishness. Through imagination, self-love becomes refined self-love, and love of good becomes love of justice, that is, virtue. Hazlitt sets up his theory saying that “I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others. Self-love, used in this sense, is in it’s [sic] fundamental principle the same with disinterested benevolence.”(17)

Shelley, likewise, argues in the chapter ‘Benevolence,’ in his Speculations on Morals that “If a child observes without motion its nurse or its mother suffering acute pain, it is attributable rather to ignorance than insensitivity,”(18) and “disinterested benevolence is the product of a cultivated imagination,”(19) and again “Virtue is thus entirely a refinement of civilized life.”(20) In Shelley’s case, there is no speculation, and it is obvious that he wrote his treatise using Hazlitt’s ideas as a basis, which evolved over eleven years of frustrating labour. Of course, Shelley’s argument occurs in a different context from Hazlitt’s, and Hazlitt didn’t know of this treatise because it was not published until some time after Shelley’s death. However, he must have felt that his doctrine of disinterested benevolence and other concepts were echoed in Shelley’s works.

Shelley is supposed to have read Hazlitt’s review of Coriolanus,(21) when they first met, and later composed his Loan and Cythna (1817).(22) Coriolanus, a Shakespearean tragedy about the antagonism between the Roman aristocracy and the common people, features a riot of the starving populace in 5 B. C. Hazlitt praises the play, saying, “The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a
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philosopher.”(23) He goes on to express his opinion that poetry is a product of the aristocracy, not that of democracy, for people sympathize with the dominating hero, because “our vanity, or some other feelings, makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party. So we feel some concern for the poor citizens of Rome when they meet together to compare their wants and grievances, till Coriolanus comes in and with blows and big words drives this set of ‘poor rats’”(24) but “There is nothing heroical in the multitude of miserable rogues.”(25)

Hazlitt’s view might be representative of some of the controversy which arose during the early nineteen century. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge had declared that their new style of poetry was written in the “plainer and more emphatic language” of low and rustic life.(26)

In Laon and Cythna, Shelley tried to create the democratic hero in spite of Hazlitt’s views of it. However, although the eponymous hero and heroine are democratic, heroism is still dominating, that is, an enormous amount rests with the personal virtue of the hero, and the populace remain faceless and abstract. Scrivener defends Shelley, saying that he depicts the democratic hero, but not democracy itself.(27) It is certain that Shelley noticed the irony that an ideal fought for through violence results in another counter-product, new oppressors. That’s why Shelley’s story leads to Laon’s saving the tyrant’s life, and the hero and heroine’s voluntary martyrdom. For Hazlitt, Shelley, having created a useless and unrealistic story, must have appeared as a ‘fanatic’, having ‘a maggot in his brain.’ However, it should not be overlooked that Shelley’s conflict between heroism and democracy, a result of his Romantic persuasion, created a trial of ideal social progress, both non-violent and anti-enslavement, through which democracy, he believed, would be realized.

Hazlitt had a negative attitude towards poetry, while Shelley was a staunch defender of poetry. Though Shelley wrote his Defence of Poetry (1821) as a topical response to Peacock’s The Four Ages of Poetry (1820), again it is certain that Shelley expands his idea of imagination based on Hazlitt’s view of imagination as developed both in The Essay and in the review of Coriolanus.

Shelley starts the Defence by contrasting reason and imagination:

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced; and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.(28)
Hazlitt, however, in his review of *Coriolanus*, had already argued that:

> The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object. The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty: it judges of things, not according to their immediate impression on the mind, but according to their relations to one another.  

Though ‘the understanding’ replaces ‘reason,’ both statements was made with reference to poetry, and the concepts are very similar. Needless to say, Shelley’s description is more refined than Hazlitt’s, but Hazlitt claims priority. In trying to develope or modify Hazlitt’s views, Shelly should have acknowledged Hazlitt by name in his work.

There are other examples of Shelley’s debt to Hazlitt. C. E. Pulos points out in ‘Shelley and Malthus,’ that in *Prometheus Unbound*, Jupiter’s description of his offspring as ‘fatal child, the terror of the earth’ is strikingly similar to a remark on the first page of Hazlitt’s *Reply to Malthus* (1807): “The reputation of Malthus may, I fear, prove fatal to the poor of this country. His name hangs suspended over their head, in terror, like some baleful meteor.” Hazlitt’s attack on Malthus was one of the severest blows against Malthusians: “why does Mr Malthus practice his demonstration on the poor only?” Shelley’s argument is similar in his *A Philosophical View of Reform*: “If any new disadvantages are found to attack to the condition of social existence, those disadvantages ought not to be borne exclusively by one class of men.” Here he was not only attacking the weakest point of Malthus’ doctrine, which Hazlitt had already targeted, but was also expressing his fear that Malthus’ crippled doctrine might gather support nationwide.

Pulos goes on to say, “The allusion to Malthus in *Prometheus Unbound* is especially of significance,” because of “such a condition as Jupiter anticipates in *Prometheus Unbound*—the condition of tyranny made ‘omnipotent’ by ‘the fatal cihld.’” Again that *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1820) echoes Hazlitt’s interpretation of Malthus is pointed out by Pulos: “One of Malthusian characters is called ‘the arch-priest of Famine.’ Another describes himself to Swellfoot as ‘the keeper of your sacred conscience;’ while Hazlitt had referred to Malthus as the ‘high-priest of nature’ and the ‘conscience-keeper of the rich and great’ in his *Reply to Malthus*.

From Hazlitt’s point of view, Shelley must have appeared very bold in his adaption of the other’s idea, taken without permission; and in addition, drawn up “by irresistible levity to the regions of mere speculation and fancy.”

However, Shelley always developed in his own way, and successfully extended ideas
which attracted him, including that of Hazlitt. For example, if we compare Hazlitt’s attitude towards imagination with Shelley’s, the former feared its power, whereas the latter was strong in its defence and thus differences between them would therefore inevitably arise. Hazlitt continues his argument thus:

The one (imagination) is a monopolizing faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other (understanding) is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion. The one is an aristocratic, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-leveling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crime. It presents a dazzling appearance.\(^{(36)}\)

Hazlitt who once discovered that the imagination is the faculty which enables us to go out of ourselves into others’ feelings, that is, sympathy, now has a fear of the imagination when it is connected with poetry. For Hazlitt, the imagination is only a faculty of the mind. While, for Shelley, the imagination is the central moral faculty: “The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, ... 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.”\(^{(37)}\) For Hazlitt the imagination is neutral, while, for Shelley, it is a good in itself. However different they are, according to O’Neill, it is owing to his awareness of Hazlitt’s ‘sympathetic imagination’ that Shelley escaped “the limitations of Benthamite utilitarianism and Godwinian scientific rationalism.”\(^{(38)}\)

Hazlitt’s metaphysical aid seems to have been important for Shelley who at that time had almost outgrown the discipline of Godwin.

What is noticeable in Hazlitt’s view of the imagination in his essay on *Coriolanus* is that he alludes to poetry as ‘aristocratic.’ As one brought up within a strict Unitarian background throughout his youth, Hazlitt has a strong egalitarian bias against aristocracy. “Persons of this class,” in the second of Hazlitt’s criticisms of Shelley quoted earlier, would include Shelley’s friend Byron. Byron’s hero, Childe Harold, a most melancholic scoundrel, might lead minds of men “up to slippery paths,” or another hero, Manfred, could “dash them down the precipice” of the Alps. Again, Shelley’s hero poet of *Alastor*, who seemed to go into untrodden woods only to die, must have been for Hazlitt ‘perplexing.’\(^{(39)}\) And in addition to this, the Shelleys dared to join Byron at Diodati in spite of the scandal surrounding the latter, as if they found amusement in “making themselves notorious.” Anything like that seemed to Hazlitt merely an aristocratic
pastime. He said the same thing about Byron as about Shelley: “Lord Byron, who in his politics a liberal, in his genius is haughty and aristocratic.”

Truly Shelley is a democrat and a republican, who refused to be a Member of Parliament as a Whig, abhorring “the same machinery of oppression.” The Whig party looked liberal, advocating reform, but he was already aware that their aim lay in strengthening their Parliamentary influence both against the Crown and the people. As Dawson points out, “Shelley was very conscious that he had been born and bred to be one of the rulers.” However, Shelley was still remarked to have “occasional aristocratic sallies,” in his manner, and people in Hunt’s circle “agreed that in general it is the aristocracy of superior with regard to inferior intellect.” It seemed to Hunt “to be due largely to Keats’ excessive consciousness of their different social situations that Keats rather avoided Shelley,” as well as “to the great difference in their poetic styles and interests.” This situation might explain the fact that Hazlitt makes himself Keats’s natural ally.

Though Hazlitt and Shelley appear to have been on the same political side, that of the republican and the gradual reformer, they were quite different from each other in their actions. Shelley published a pamphlet, *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote Throughout the Kingdom* (1817), under the pseudonym of the ‘Hermit of Marlow,’ in which his main proposal was to call a meeting to discuss a canvassing of opinion throughout the nation to see whether there existed a majority in favour of parliamentary reform. Though it passed unnoticed except by Hunt, Shelley urged Ollier, the publisher, to distribute the pamphlet to radical and liberal groups and leaders such as Humpden Clubs, Burdett, Brougham, Cobbett, Francis Place and Major Cartright. Although Shelley was aware of the danger of divergence among radicals, it seemed to him “trivial to discuss.” Hazlitt, meanwhile, a speculative critic, perceived the gulf between radicals as serious, and based on want of, or inconsistency in, their moral principle as shown in his criticism of his contemporaries. It is not surprising that Hazlitt should attack Shelley for “levity of principle” which “is a bad thing in any one, and most of all, in a philosophical reformer.” Dawson sees a connection between this situation and Hazlitt’s answer to Hunt’s inquiry, that Shelley provoked him “by his going to a pernicious extreme on the liberal side, and so hurting it.” In fact, according to Scriver, Shelley’s proposal “is not only threatening and bold in its theory of representation, but its practical features lay the fundations for an eventual seizure of power if Parliament refuses to grant a reform.

Shortly before Hazlitt’s criticism of Shelley appeared in 1821, Shelley’s early revolutionary poem, *Queen Mab*, had begun to draw the attention of the public, as a result of a pirated edition brought out earlier in the year by a radical bookseller. *Queen Mab* was
selling in the thousands as a salient document for sans-culottish workmen. However Shelley was himself annoyed by this, realizing as he did that Queen Mab was immature and provocative, its argument being that evil is brought about by the crippling effects of social institutions. So Hazlitt’s timely attack on Shelley might have been a warning to the people as well as to Shelley. As a poet, Shelley speaks of an ideal and soon becomes enthusiastic about it, and then tries to adapt it to reality. This must have seemed very dangerous to Hazlitt, who detested abstraction among intellectuals above all else.

Thus the differences between Hazlitt and Shelley can be seen: from the extremes in their political attitudes to the quality of their literary sense. These in turn might stem from their social differences of class, a plebeian and an aristocrat, and their different viewpoints as critic and poet. These different postions would have produced the divergent radicalisms between them, similar to that between Hazlitt himself and Coleridge, and Bentham, the targets of his strong objection to abstraction.

As both Hazlitt and Shelley were brought up in a climate of enthusiasm for Godwinian doctrine in their youth, and they also lived in the same mental context of the philosophical science developed throughout the eighteenth century, it might be difficult to define the extent of Hazlitt’s actual influence on Shelley. However, even though what Shelley might have heard from Hazlitt or have read in his works could have been another version of ideas already encountered in his own reading of philosophy, he must have learnt from Hazlitt, a vigorous opponent of established authority, in his incisive judgement of contemporary ideas. As Cameron says, “In the early nineteenth century the social orientation of literary theory had its beginnings in Hazlitt’s ‘Spirit of Age’ approach.” In this social context, both Shelley and Hazlitt took it for granted that Hazlitt would join The Liberal, a radical political journal, in which Shelley played a central part when the new project started, in spite of his recent attack on Shelley. Unfortunately, The Liberal’s life was cut short mainly by Shelley’s death.

Hazlitt, while criticizing his literary contemporaries, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, even Hunt, calling him ‘a butterfly,’ as well as his political contemporaries, was by no means the misanthrope he was often assumed to be. Hunt replied to the Utilitarian criticism that Hazlitt was ‘at feud with the world,’ pointing out, “Love, hate, business, pleasure, books or laughter and tears nothing was indifferent to him that affected mankind… Mr Hazlitt was ‘at feud with the world’ out of his infinite sympathy with them. …His regard for human nature, and his power to love truth and loveliness in their humble shapes, survived his subtlest detections of human pride and folly.”

What is common between Shelley and Hazlitt is their rejection of compromise. Due to this, Shelley was always torn between ideology and reality throughout his life, and Hazlitt died friendless. For that reason alone, they are worthy of being called Roman-
tics. Hazlitt wrote, in his review of ‘Shelley’s Posthumous Poems’ (1824) in the *Edinburgh Review*, “Mr Shelley, with all his faults, was a man of genius; and further on reiterated, “With all his faults, Mr Shelley was an honest man.” Hazlitt was not the kind of man to describe someone thus because he was threatened by Hunt, or requested to by Mary, Shelley’s widow, the editor of *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1824). The review is full of criticism in spite of his praise of Shelley, as a ‘genius’ and ‘honest,’ and leaves a complex, conflicting and awkward impression. It is as if it symbolized the complex relationship between them.

Notes

(7) ibid., x, p. 351.
(10) ibid., i, p. 12.
(11) ibid., i, p. 12.
(12) ibid., i, p. 1.
(13) ibid., i, p. 2.
(14) ibid., i, p. 12.
(15) ibid., i, p. 12.
(16) ibid., i, p. 7.
(17) ibid., i, p. 2.
(19) ibid., vii, p. 76.
(20) ibid., vii, p. 76.
(22) Scrivener, M. H. *Radical Shelley*, (Princeton University Press 1989) p. 120.
(24) ibid., p. 348.
(25) ibid., p. 348.
(26) Though first published in 1800, the *Preface* was revised and expanded for the 1820 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.
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(31) Hazlitt, Works, i, p. 181.

(32) ibid., i, p. 356.

(33) Shelley, Works, vii, p. 33.

(34) 'Shelley and Malthus,' ibid.

(36) Hazlitt, Works, p. 347.

(37) Shelley, Works, i, p. 118.


(39) Hazlitt, Works, xvi, p. 270.

(40) ibid., i, p. 70.

(41) ibid., p. 75.

(42) Dawson, Unacknowledged Legister, p. 47.

(43) ibid., p. 47.


(49) Scrivener, Radical Shelley, p. 114.

(50) White, Shelley, p. 304.


(54) ibid., pp. 29–49, also see p. 211.


(57) Hazlitt, Works, xvi, p. 266.