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Exploring the Self: A Study of Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets*

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“My First Acquaintance with Poets” was first published in 1823 in a short-lived but a highly significant periodical of the Romantic Age, *The Liberal*. If we go by the generic distinction this document is primarily an essay based on the reminiscences of the author of the experience he had almost twenty five years back when he met a “poet” for the first time in life, a moment of “baptism”, as he says, in the world of poetry and philosophy (Hazlitt, *First Acquaintance*). The essay can be taken as a memoir because it moves round a particular incident in the author’s life, i.e., his meeting with Coleridge, the successive interactions they had had in course of getting acquainted with each other in the next few months, the impact of this acquaintance that the author bears in his mind and the inevitable although temporal separation between the two. This whole process of “acquaintance” not only with poet in singular but “poets” took place within the most significant year in the history of English Romanticism, 1798. As a memoir is expected to be, the essay documents a very important part in the author’s life relating to a life changing event and the author’s response to it.

In the hierarchy of the genre of life writing memoir comes in the lower order, regarded as a sub genre of autobiography since it involves a lesser degree of seriousness, as Laura Marcus puts it, “the autobiography/memoir distinction--ostensibly formal and generic--is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not” (p.21). Although if a memoir can be self-reflective or not is a matter debatable, the basic issue is that a memoir is required to be a more truthful and graphic representation of the past than autobiography is. And moreover autobiography is a developmental narrative involving a teleological progress to the end whereas a memoir puts a narrow focus on a particular incident of the author’s life, a synchronic study, “a story from a life” instead of “a story of life” (Wikipedia entry on memoir). Unlike the autobiography a memoir is not a self-story but a story of both self and other playing roles in it. So a memoir can be a documentation of a private or public event or sometimes even blurring the distinction between the two. What Hazlitt did in his *Familier Essays* as did Lamb is to use a public medium in order to convey some private emotions. And this particular document exemplifies this approach in the most remarkable way, occupying the border between public and private. “For Hazlitt”, as William Christie says, “it was no less true of our ideas and opinions than it was of our affections that they simply could not be disjoined. Indeed so intimately bound up with each other are our ideas, our experience and our feelings that for Hazlitt the only way of discussing a topic was autobiographically” (p.437).

The essay opens with Coleridge, his arrival in Shropshire in order to take charge as the new Dissenting Minister of the Unitarian Church there. Hazlitt, young then with all those anxieties and expectation of a young mind eagerly awaited and crossed ten miles in the mud to listen to the young Enthusiast, Coleridge. But being a religious skeptic or going through the period of

Hackney College where he had suffered the loss of faith Hazlitt could not have gone to simply hear the lecture of a Unitarian Minister but to see how “poetry and philosophy had met together. Truth and genius had embraced in his speech”(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance) :

A poet and philosopher getting up into an Unitarian pulpit to preach the gospel, was a romance in these degenerate days, a sort of revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity, which was not to be resisted. (ibid)

For a youth confronting the life as the son of a man “a veteran in the (Unitarian) cause” but now living a life of passivity and despair only to find consolation in the “pages of the ponderous, unwieldy, neglected tomes” and as someone sensitive enough to suffer the restless conflict of what to choose, how to proceed, Coleridge’s speech bears “a spirit of hope” that “turned everything into good”, thus the declaration;

This was beyond my hopes. I returned home well-satisfied. (Hazlitt, First Acquaintance)

Let’s stop here for a moment and look into the context of writing this essay in 1823. Coleridge has passed his radical days to turn into a conservative, a severe public critic of radicalism and a defender of the established church during the sustained revival of radical sentiments that began in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Parts of this particular essay, especially the third and fourth paragraph appeared in a letter of Hazlitt to the Examiner, 12 January, 1817 which was a reply to Coleridge’s attack on “Jacobinism” as Christie says , “Hazlitt’s letter recalls Coleridge in his younger, radical days expressing sentiments quite the reverse of those with which the now conservative polemicist is identified”. (p.437)

Apart from the conflict of political or ethical ideals, there is also a huge amount of bitterness grown at the personal level between the two. Against this background when Hazlitt is purported to writing this essay which would have been a severe critique on the public level about Coleridge’s ultimate compromise to the demands of the age Hazlitt was unexpectedly silent about it. There was hardly any direct reference to the incident which affected him so much. Instead, we can find him accepting his indebtedness to the poet:

My ideas float on winged words and as they expand their plumes, catch the golden light of other years. My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longing infinite and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge.(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance)

Surprisingly, in the whole essay if we hear someone speak, it is Coleridge. Perhaps it is Hazlitt’s strategy to establish Coleridge as a man of words only, not of action. As in another essay on Coleridge in the collection, “The Spirit of the Age: Contemporary Portraits” Hazlitt says, “The present age is an age of talkers, not of doers” (p.1) clearly hinting on the poet’s lack of action. In this present essay too, ‘talking’ is an interesting trope used against Coleridge; in the beginning, he first makes his appearance, “talking at a great rate to his fellow passengers” , then as a preacher in the church, again at author’s home he talked everywhere and almost everything, from Wollstonecraft to Holcroft, from Wordsworth to Burke, to Mackintosh, “he talked very familiarly...and glanced over a variety of subjects” and Hazlitt admits “I forget a great number of

things, many more than I remember” (Hazlitt, First Acquaintance). Some exclusion and inclusion is natural in a memoir though Hazlitt’s bibliographer Elizabeth Schneider has suggested: “Wherever Hazlitt’s recollections can be tested against other evidence, they show almost no distortion and very few errors” (Dibley,35).

The essay graphs well the intensity of Hazlitt’s infatuation with Coleridge and the process of disillusionment as well. It might be taken as a journey from appearance to reality, taken together with and into Coleridge. There is a sequence when Coleridge was leaving for Shropshire from Wem with Hazlitt accompanying him halfway just to relish his company a little more as his engrossed auditor. There again Coleridge is reported to be talking the whole way and while talking he was continually crossing Hazlitt on the way by shifting from one side of the footpath to the other. Why this odd movement? For Hazlitt it was an indication of the “instability of purpose or involuntary change of principle” which he could only connect now as a mature observer with the apostasy of Coleridge (Hazlitt, First Acquaintance). This inability to keep on in a straight line affected the essay itself for some unknown reason. For we found a sudden change in the temperament where Coleridge the apostle of freedom turned into a human being with all those vices and prejudices of a human heart and Hazlitt, the *semper ego auditor*, ‘the charmed listener’ suddenly turned into a critique of “great speaker”:

He [Coleridge] spoke slightly of Hume. I was not very much pleased at this account of Hume...Coleridge even denied the excellence of Hume’s general style, which I think betrayed a want of taste or candour. (Hazlitt, First Acquaintance)

Here he makes an attempt to explain before Coleridge his own ‘discovery’ regarding the theory of “the Natural Disinterestedness of Human Mind” but failed. The mature self ruminating on the “helpless despondency” discovered a truth, “one pang of regret at not being able to express it, is better than all the fluency and flippancy of the world”(ibid)--this was a realization came at the cost of much, both in the private and professional life. In Hazlitt’s words, “Would that I could go back to what I then was! Why can we not revive past times as we can revisit old places?”(ibid) -- the same romantic yearning to go back to the past and rueing over the loss of innocence which is irretrievable now, to revivify the moments whose importance one realizes only when they become past. The object of writing such a piece, be it a recollection or a memoir, is quite the same. It is “a story of restoration...a means of restoring what has been lost”(*Autobiography*,54). It is an attempt to go back and revive the past, impossible in reality; a journey through which the past being recomposed within the present time of writing.

The first part of the essay ends here with Hazlitt seeing off the departing Coleridge with a promise to see him soon a few months later at his home in Nether Stowe. There is a paragraph written in between the end of the first visit and beginning of the second which captured the most autobiographical moment in the whole essay. Self reflective in a way, a sense of suspense, anxiety, anticipation works in the narrative. As the intended visit is deferred by a week or two the deferment adds up to more. The soul not only get regenerated ‘in the cradle of new existence’ but finds an application of his new insights “to the objects before...[the] spirit was baptized in the waters of Helicon!”(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance).

The essay could have ended here, but is yet to justify the phrase “acquaintance with poets.” Hazlitt gets acquainted with a number of personas there in Nether Stowe such as Wordsworth, Tom Poole and many more. In this part too we find Coleridge speaks “of providence,

foreknowledge, will and fate, fix'd fate freewill, foreknowledge absolute...[and speaks] as we passed through the echoing grove”(ibid). But the charisma is much faded out. The incomparable speaker is now comparable to Wordsworth where “Coleridge’s manner is more full, animated and varied; Wordsworth’s more equable, sustained and internal, the one might be termed more dramatic, the other more lyrical”(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance). Moreover Hazlitt now sees himself almost on the equal plane with the two where he even engaged into a metaphysical argument with Wordsworth.

And now he could distance himself in a way to comment on John Chester as “one of those who were attracted to Coleridge’s discourse as flies are to honey or bees in swarming time to the sound of a brass pan”(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance). John Chester acts as the mirroring other of Hazlitt. Hazlitt sees him and distances himself more from Coleridge. He dislikes Coleridge’s speaking of Virgil’s Georgics and says, “I do not think he had much feeling for the classical or elegant”(ibid). Hazlitt gives an assessment of Coleridge as a critic where he questions his objectivity, “ He was profound and discriminating with respect to those authors whom he liked, and where he gave his judgment fair play; capricious, perverse, and prejudiced in his antipathies and distastes”(Hazlitt, First Acquaintance.). There is a chance of misinterpretation on the part of the reader over who is speaking and when? Is it the response of Hazlitt the young scholar mesmerized with Coleridge’s knowledge and personality but now going through a process of disillusionment or of Hazlitt a mature intellectual now ruminating over the past experience? There is always a possibility of overlapping of the two selves, the two personas. Since the essay is the end product of a process of recollection twenty five years later, a tension can clearly be discernible from this duality of responses of the younger self of the author vis-à-vis his mature self in the act of composition.

The journey ends with Hazlitt’s success in establishing and acquiring a selfhood that he has so long been struggling to achieve through establishing one of his land mark philosophical idea “the theory of disinterestedness” before Coleridge and being able to suggest something to Coleridge “that he did not already know”(ibid) . He was greeted not only with Chester’s Surprise and astonishment but also by the early morning’s silent cottage smoke “curling up the valleys”.

Once this process of disillusionment and attaining selfhood is complete the moment of return comes, “I, on my return home, he for Germany”. This is a moment of re-turn too, re-turning to new acquaintances which gives the prospect of new friendships. So the process goes on.

The essay can be considered as Hazlitt’s way of writing back to Coleridge. In the beginning he has built an almost godlike image of Coleridge which by the end has completely been destroyed by him in an almost frankensteinian way. It might be taken as an act of killing the father rhetorically or getting out of the influence of a predecessor and writing a story of his own. The conflict that can be seen through the lines of the essay is not only between the two personalities as such but between two different poetics that Hazlitt and Coleridge did follow. Hazlitt’s theory of disinterestedness which anticipates Keats’s idea of “Negative Capability” is perhaps an answer to Coleridge’s extreme subjectivity or egocentricity as reflected through his poems and later propounded through his theory of Imagination.

Regarded as one of the most eloquent essays of English literature this can be taken as Hazlitt’s act of self assertion in an age when poetry overpowers the literary cultural scenario. As he himself says, “What is the use of doing anything unless we could do better than all those who

have been gone before us”(Coleridge, p.1). Thus he wrote essays instead of poetry and helped to evolve this genre in a completely new form.

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