

An Overview of Hazlitt's 'On the Love of Country'

'To me the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' -

William Wordsworth

William Hazlitt was one of the leading prose writers of the Romantic period. Influenced by the concise social commentary in Joseph Addison's eighteenth-century magazine, the Spectator, and by the personal tone of the essays of Michel de Montaigne, Hazlitt was one of the most celebrated practitioners of the "familiar" essay. Characterized by conversational diction and personal opinion on topics ranging from English poets to washerwomen, the style of Hazlitt's critical and autobiographical writings has greatly influenced methods of modern writing on aesthetics. His literary criticism, particularly on the Lake poets, has also provided readers with a lens through which to view the work of his Romantic contemporaries. Hazlitt was the son of a Unitarian minister. After a brief stay at America he returned to England where his literary genius ultimately flowered. Coleridge influenced his mind and art to a great extent. From 1814 till his death, he contributed to the Edinburgh Review, The Examiner, The Times and The London Magazine. His well-known essays were collected in the Round Table, Table Talk or Original Essays on Men and Manners and The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits. By his bold and radical views, Hazlitt attracted a lot of attention and criticism. But he always wrote undaunted. He was a keen observer of life. His sharp memory remembered the past incidents with astonishing vividness and detail. He was eager to inquire into human life with all its variety. Thus he wrote on a vast range of topics. His essay deals with the world of men and women. It records their action, assigns their motives and exhibits their whims. He writes on books of all kinds, politics, sports, stage etc. Hazlitt is more interested in ideas than form. A large number of his essays are on abstract ideas such as Egotism, Reason, Imagination, the Fear of Death etc. A leading idea is talked about. Thus new ideas are brought forward. This was the underlying practice in the two collections of essay 'The Round Table' and 'Table Talk'. But Hazlitt does not indulge in moralizing. According to critics he is rather a moral historian than a moral philosopher. Hazlitt puts his ideas in an informal manner. But it is not Lamb's informality. Hazlitt's informality depends upon systematic enquiry into the topic. Hazlitt is more interested in ideas than form. A large number of his essays are on abstract ideas such as Egotism, Reason, Imagination, the Fear of Death etc. A leading idea is talked about. Thus new ideas are brought forward. This was the underlying practice in the two collections of essay 'The Round Table' and 'Table Talk'. But Hazlitt does not indulge in moralizing. According to critics he is rather a moral historian than a moral philosopher. Hazlitt has conveyed his enjoyment and observation through his essays. Whatever the theme of his essays, each of them is a reflection on human nature. They are the reflections of a man who lived and loved life. With penetrating sympathy and feelings, Hazlitt observes life. The reflection that we

find in Hazlitt's essays are not the products of head, but come straight from the heart. His personal prejudices often vitiate his judgement. Hazlitt belongs to the group of personal essayists. In his hand essay became a means of self-expression. He puts himself in the centre whatever be the topic of the essay. He often glides into the past. He weaves the texture of his essays by the threads of memory. He, thus, reveals his life and mind. He is passionately alive to men and matters around him in the present. If he finds foible and frailties in them, he ridicules them. His writings are thus also employed for exposing the follies of the society and human life in general. Hazlitt's "On the Love of Life" was first published in the *The Examiner*, Jan. 15, 1815 and was one of the essays picked to go into his first book, *The Round Table* (1815-17). Originally *The Round Table* was a book, a collection of essays that had been published in the *Examiner* (edited by Leigh Hunt). The essays were written by a variety of people, quite a few by Hunt. The first edition of the book, consisting of two volumes, came out in 1817. My volume of *The Round Table* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, 1869) pretty much only contains essays written by Hazlitt, the editors having considered the rest to be "both inferior and dissimilar to him."

Hazlitt's style of personal essays is something like that of his contemporary Lamb, yet he is different from Lamb. Hazlitt is more interested in ideas than form. A large number of his essays are on abstract ideas such as Egotism, Reason, Imagination, the Fear of Death etc. A leading idea is talked about. Thus new ideas are brought forward. This was the underlying practice in the two collections of essays 'The Round Table' and 'Table Talk'. But Hazlitt does not indulge in moralizing. According to critics he is rather a moral historian than a moral philosopher. Hazlitt puts his ideas in an informal manner. But it is not Lamb's informality. Hazlitt's informality depends upon systematic enquiry into the topic. A leading idea is talked about. Thus new ideas are brought forward. This was the underlying practice in the two collections of essay '*The Round Table*' and '*Table Talk*'. But Hazlitt does not indulge in moralizing. According to critics he is rather a moral historian than a moral philosopher. Hazlitt has conveyed his enjoyment and observation through his essays. Whatever the theme of his essays, each of them is a reflection on human nature, in close association with the greater self of Nature.

The essay 'On the Love of Country' begins in an informal manner, saying that the author has not found one such person who can explain satisfactorily the true source of human beings' attachment to natural objects, and a natural love of the simple life of the countryside. He tries to find several reasons for that – some people are interested in natural beauty, some like the freedom from care associated with nature, the silence and tranquillity, others like to live among the healthy and innocent employments of a country life and manners – and owners. All these aspects are right, but Hazlitt goes on to explain why a combined effect of all these is so important.

Like other Romantics, Hazlitt shares the Rousseauian kind of 'back to nature'-call. He alludes to Rousseau's delight in finding "a little spot of green" from his window, when he took his room at Anncey. This reminded him of his lost childhood, spent in the

countryside. Such recollections are easy to relate to an instinctive feeling for the beauty of nature - the sky is beautiful; the clouds sail majestically along its bosom; the sun is cheering; ... the view from the top of a mountain is full of grandeur; nor can we behold the ocean with indifference." Such descriptions, however set in prose, in poetic in flavour, and this reminds one of other Romantic poets. Hazlitt himself shows his affinity of thought with other nature-loving poets by quoting pieces from their works.

His views are quite similar to that of Wordsworth that not only the beautiful and magnificent aspects of nature inspire a spontaneous surge of emotion with us, but also "the most insignificant and rudest objects" can move us to emotions. Natural objects have been associated with the sports of our childhood, with our feelings in solitude, and the pleasures we derive from nature seem to surround us in almost all situations in joy and in sorrow. Thus Nature becomes our guiding principle through life.

There is a further aspect so unique to nature. When we are comfortable with a person, it does not mean that we are always comfortable with anybody related to him/her. Again, a person may change over time. But nature never changes for one who loves her. So says Hazlitt, "There is neither hypocrisy, caprice, nor mental reservation in her favours. Our intercourse with her is not liable to accident or change, interruption or disappointment. She smiles on us still the same." He can feel the same sky, the same kind of trees while staying in France, as they had been in England. Thus nature embraces us everywhere like a never-altering friend, it becomes a kind of universal home, and here Hazlitt again quotes from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' --

"...Nature did ne'er betray
The heart that lov'd her, but through all the years
Of this our life, it is her privilege
To lead from joy to joy."

Hazlitt also puts up a difference between human art and Nature's creation. Art, however beautiful, is the work of human beings, belonging to those who are the authors or possessors of them. But in the vast bosom of nature, nothing belongs to any particular person, everything is for all – even human-made objects against the backdrop of nature, such as a cottage, or a village church, are generally viewed as a part of the holistic natural environment.

Nature, therefore attracts us with its openness, its free and associative spirit, and the country-life, being so close to nature, becomes pleasing to us with all its carefree and unaffected manners, simple lifestyle. Hazlitt's opinions in this essay, and his way of argument bring about his characteristics as an essayist. Whatever he says, is the reflection of a man who lived and loved life. With penetrating sympathy and feelings, Hazlitt observes life. The reflection that we find in Hazlitt's essays are intelligent, but in a greater degree, they come straight from the heart. His personal prejudices often vitiate his judgement. Hazlitt belongs to the group of personal essayists. In his hand essay became a means of self-expression. He puts himself in the centre whatever be

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