LAMB'S UNPUBLISHED REVIEW OF HAZLITT'S *TABLE-TALK*

Charles Lamb's unpublished review of Vol. I of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* was composed in 1821. A fair copy of this review, unsigned but clearly in the author's hand, is currently in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. It consists of 20 pages (11 leaves), mostly clear and legible, but with a significant number of deletions and corrections.

Extracts from this review were printed in Sotheby's sale catalogue, 25-28 March 1929, Lot 635; in Lucas's 1935 edition of Lamb's *Letters*,[1]; in George Barnett's 1956 *MLQ* article 'An Unpublished Review by Lamb',[2]; and in his *Evolution of Elia*, (1964), 42-4. But it was not published in full until the 1980s, by Roy Park in *Lamb as Critic* (1980), by Robert Ready in *Hazlitt at Table* (1981), and by Adam Phillips in the Penguin *Selected Prose* (1985). In none of these instances, however, was a full transcript of the MS given, replete with cancellations and corrections, an omission that the present article will seek to amend. What follows then is a short introduction to Lamb's review, supplying a contemporary context for it, followed by the review itself, exactly as it appears in the MS.

To a greater degree than Coleridge, but for fundamentally the same reasons, Lamb was a genial critic, a critic who liked to engage sympathetically with particular works of art, not pass judgement upon them. This placed him very much at odds with the prevailing reviewing culture of his time – the aggressive, and often politically partisan habits of the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* reviews. 'O Coleridge,' he wrote to his old schoolfriend in June 1809, 'do kill those Reviews, or they will kill us, kill all we like. Be a Friend to all else,

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[1] Lamb, *Letters*, 3 vols. ed. E. V. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1935), ii, 300-1n.
[2] *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 17 (1956), 352-6.

but their Foe.—'.[3] Five years later, Lamb's prejudice was confirmed when the *Quarterly Review* editor William Gifford butchered his account of Wordsworth's new poem *The Excursion* (1814), an experience that almost put paid to his reviewing activities forever.[4] Almost, but not quite: for every so often he did find himself tempted back into the bear-pit – under certain conditions. The first was that the person he was reviewing must be a friend. Often this friend was an old one – such as James White, Charles Lloyd, Barron Field, all of whom he reviewed for *The Examiner* in 1819-20.[5] But sometimes they were new. During the same period he wrote several notices of the actress Fanny Kelly, and, in July 1820, a short but sympathetic piece on Keats's final collection *Lamia.*[6] Lamb's second condition, although this may never have been a conscious principle, was that he reviewed anonymously for newspapers. With one possible exception, his notices never appeared in magazines; mostly they were placed in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*, or, in a very few instances, John Stoddart's *New Times.*

Lamb's aversion to reviewing was not merely theoretical but practical. Not only did he dislike the review-article form, he also found it difficult. So it should be no surprise to discover, on investigating his criticism of *Table-Talk,* that it was done at the behest of another. 'I am here at Margate', Lamb wrote to John Taylor, his editor at the *London Magazine*, sometime in June 1821, in a letter that is otherwise taken up with Elia business, 'spoiling my holydays with a Review I have undertaken for a friend, which I

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[3] Lamb, *Letters*, 3 vols., ed. Edwin Marrs (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975-8) iii, 12.
[4] *Quarterly Review* (October 1814), p. 100-11.
[5] 'Falstaff's Letters', *The Examiner* (September 5, 1819) 'Charles Lloyd's Poems', (1819), *The Examiner* (October 24 1819), 'Barron Field's Poems', *The Examiner* (January 16, 1820).
[6] 'Miss Kelly at Bath', *The Examiner* (February 7, 1819), 'Richard Brome's *Jovial Crew*', *The Examiner* (July 4, 1819), (1874). 'Isaac Bickerstaff's *Hypocrite*', *The Examiner* (August 1, 1819). 'Keats's *Lamia*', *The New Times* (July 19, 1820).

shall barely get through before my return, for that sort of work is a hard task to me'.[7] Elliptical as this statement is, it is reasonably certain that the review mentioned here is the *Table-Talk* review, for it cannot really be anything else – the timing is right, and Lamb wrote no other review that year. All things considered, it seems likely that the friend is question is Leigh Hunt, the editor of the *Examiner*, although it could of course be Hazlitt himself.

Volume I of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* was published in April 1821, combining new essays with some that had already appeared, in the *London Magazine* and elsewhere. Notable among the novelties were 'On People with One Idea' and 'On Paradox and Commonplace', the first of which contained a covert attack on Leigh Hunt, the second an open assault on Shelley. So hurt was Hunt about the assault on Shelley in particular that he wrote to Hazlitt shortly after the appearance of the volume, in a letter dated 20 April [1821]:

> I think, Mr. Hazlitt, you might have found a better time, and place too, for assaulting me and my friends in this bitter manner. A criticism on 'Table-Talk' was to appear in next Sunday's *Examiner*, but I have thought it best, upon the whole, not to let it appear, for I must have added a quarrelsome note to it; and the sight of acquaintances and brother-reformers cutting and carbonadoing one another in public

[7] Lamb, *Letters*, ed. E. V. Lucas, ii, 299. All letters by Lamb written later than 1818 have to be cited from Lucas's 1935 edition, because Marrs' edition remains incomplete.

> is, I conceive, no advancement to the cause of Liberal opinion, however you may think they injure it in other respects.[8]

As George Barnett has pointed out, if the date of this letter is correct, then the review that Lamb was writing at Margate in June of the same year cannot have been the 'criticism' that Hunt refers to, 'unless, what is highly unlikely, Lamb had written the criticism and was asked by Hunt to revise it after a series of Hunt-Hazlitt letters served to placate the former'.[9]

In spite of this, the likelihood is that Lamb's piece was still intended for *The Examiner*. What is plausible is that Hunt originally intended to review the book himself, but then, after looking through it, recoiled from some of its contents, and passed it on to Lamb. Perhaps he passed it on at Hazlitt's suggestion, after they had patched up their differences; certainly this would give extra meaning to Lamb's indication that he had undertaken the notice 'for a friend'. Quite why the review was never published, however, we may never know. Perhaps Hunt's position hardened over the course of the summer – with him deciding, in the end, that *Table-Talk* was so disloyal to the cause of reform in certain places that it didn't deserve to be covered. 'Perhaps', as Roy Park speculates, 'Lamb did not want to stir up any more ill-feeling now that Hunt had been conciliated'.[10] Whatever the explanation, two facts remain which, coupled together, provide strong evidence of the review's original provenance. The first is that it was not published, the

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[8] *Memoirs of William Hazlitt,* 2 vols., ed. W. C. Hazlitt (London: Bentley, 1867) i, 305. The original of this letter is lost. See also Howe, *Life of Hazlitt,* 288.
[9] George Barnett, 'An Unpublished Review by Lamb', *MLQ,* Vol. 17 (1956), 355.
[10] *Lamb as Critic,* 299.

second is that there was no review of the first volume of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* published in *The Examiner* at all – an unusual outcome, given its extensive coverage of his previous volumes. Most likely, then, Lamb's piece was intended for the Hunts' weekly newspaper.

That this review, having missed its initial publication window, made no appearance during the rest of its author's lifetime, should not be particularly surprising. Lamb took little pride in such things; and, in direct contrast to Hazlitt, never reprinted them or collected them. None of the pieces in *Elia* (1823) or the *Last Essays of Elia* (1833) started out as a critical notice of a new work. What is puzzling, however, is that this *Table-Talk* review remained beyond the reach of Lamb scholars for so long. Only in the twentieth century did the manuscript resurface; and it was not until the 1980s that it was reprinted in full.

What is evident from reading this MS is that, notwithstanding its long neglect, Lamb's review of *Table-Talk* is one of its author's most characterful pieces of criticism, not much inferior to his famous pronouncements on Shakespeare and Hogarth, John Martin and George Wither. Firstly, this is because it contains a wealth of interesting thoughts about Hazlitt – the subtle meditations of one great familiar essayist on the art of another. But secondly it carries an abundance of more general ideas about the history and nature of the essay form. What makes this all the more fascinating is that it is coming from an author who had only recently forged the Elia persona, and was enjoying considerable success with it. As a piece of writing by Lamb on Hazlitt, the review has to be balanced against the more sweeping but also more general defence of his friend in the 'Letter from Elia to Robert Southey, Esq.' (*London Magazine,* October 1823), for the two are interestingly complementary. But as a series of meditations on the essay form, it is unique in Lamb's

oeuvre. For there is nothing else in his work, save the odd comment in a private letter, to compare with the brief history that he supplies in its opening paragraphs.

There are a few discursive essayists, important to Lamb, who do not get mentioned in this review – Francis Bacon, Robert Burton, Sir William Temple, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Abraham Cowley. But that is by the bye. More important than this is the fact that in this short space Lamb carves out a sub-genre within the essay form itself – a mode that he calls the 'Miscellaneous Essay' – the history of which he then proceeds to trace through Plutarch and Montaigne, Addison and Steele, right down to Johnson, Goldsmith, and finally Hazlitt. The line is a very broad-brush, but it has a powerful sweep to it, and tells us a great deal about how Lamb viewed and valued the genre. Most intriguing is the way in which the latter's comments approximate to, but also subtly deviate from, those of Hazlitt himself, who had already descanted at length on the periodical essay tradition in his 'Lectures on the English Comic Writers' (1819).

Many of Lamb's opinions chime with those of the author of *Table-Talk.* They both see Montaigne as the founder of the genre; they both prefer Steele to Addison, and *The Tatler* to *The Spectator.* They also prefer Boswell's Johnson to the Johnson of the *Rambler.* For both men, conversation was crucial to the workings of the familiar essay. In several of his early 'Table-Talks' for the *London Magazine* – 'On The Difference Between Writing And Speaking', 'On The Conversation Of Authors' and 'The Present State of Parliamentary Eloquence'[11] – Hazlitt had weighed the relative merits of writing and speaking – and surreptitiously explored the capacity of the familiar essay, as a form, to inhabit a kind of ideal middle ground between them. And Lamb's Elia essays – which

[11] These are 'Table-Talk No. 2', *London Magazine,* July 1820, 'Table-Talk No. 3', *LM,* September 1820, and 'Table-Talk No. 4', *LM,* October 1820, respectively.

began to appear in the *London* at precisely the same time, were shot through with the same ambition, their easy, informal but still thoroughly 'literary' register being perhaps the single most important factor in their popularity with his peers. Viewed in this context, Lamb's opening remarks on Hazlitt's essays are in fact far more enthusiastic than might initially appear. 'The tone of them is uniformly conversational', he writes, 'and they are not the less entertaining, that they resemble occasionally the talk of a very clever person, when he begins to be ~~a little extravagant after dinner~~ \animated in a convivial party/.' Given the two men's longstanding intellectual intimacy, not only the many evenings they had spent together talking art and literature in Lamb's rooms in the Temple, but the critical value that they placed on genial discourse of this kind, this is praise of the highest order – a really rather fulsome acknowledgment of essayistic achievement.

But there are also uniquely Lambian insights. The insinuation that Hazlitt himself is not merely an author of character – like Johnson – but one who is writing in a persona - like Steele, or Lamb himself – is highly suggestive, and invites us to think again about the *Table-Talker*'s way into his subjects: 'The Writer', he suggests, 'almost everywhere adopts the style of a discontented man'. Sometimes Lamb takes issue with the direct substance of Hazlitt's complaints, clearly taking a degree of private personal offence at the assertion, in 'On Living to One's Self', that 'old companions are like meats served up too often that lose their relish and their wholesomeness'. At others, however, he savours the essayist's laments, finding in one passage of 'On the Past and Future' 'an eloquence/ that approximates to the finest poetry'. For those in the know at the time, the passage referred to here explicitly referenced Hazlitt's unhappy obsession with his landlord's daughter Sarah Walker, which had begun in the following year. Many of the essayist's

friends could not help considering this affair, and the writing that came out of it, an embarrassment. But Lamb was clearly different – for here he quotes at length and with perfect approval one of Hazlitt's most plangent and self-pitying passages on the subject, a very telling gesture, from one who would never dream of being so emotionally candid himself.

Almost equally thought-provoking is Lamb's de-naturalisation of his friend's 'familiar' style: 'He may be said to paint caricatures on gauze or cobwebs', he writes, 'to explain the mysteries of the Cabbala by Egyptian hieroglyphics'. In the *London Magazine* for May 1821 Thomas Noon Talfourd was to lavish great praise upon Hazlitt's volume – with very few qualifications, or distinguishing remarks. In Lamb's piece, by contrast, the admiration is always spiced with misgivings. Towards the end he makes clear that his commendation is of the essayist, not the controversial (political) writer, or the literary critic. In spite or perhaps even because of the fact that he was writing anonymously, Lamb shows no inclination to defend every aspect of his friend's oeuvre. This closing statement must be contrasted, however, with the much more strident defence of Hazlitt that we get in his 'Letter from Elia to Robert Southey Esq.' written for the *London Magazine* two years later. For here we find that, after having being accused by Southey of a 'want of soundness' in his religious opinions, Lamb comes out all guns blazing, defending his own record, and then moving on to that of his friends. Of Hazlitt in particular he says this:

> But, protesting against much that he has written, and some things which he chooses to do; judging him by his conversation which I enjoyed so long, and relished so

> deeply; or by his books, in those places where no clouding passion intervenes—I should belie my own conscience, if I said less, than that I think W. H. to be, in his natural and healthy state, one of the wisest and finest spirits breathing. So far from being ashamed of that intimacy, which was betwixt us, it is my boast that I was able for so many years to have preserved it entire; and I think I shall go to my grave without finding, or expecting to find, such another companion.[12]

One final point of interest in this review is supplied by the fact that, in choosing which bits of Hazlitt to quote – and the MS shows him changing his mind about this on the job – Lamb is, to a degree, editing him, almost as a writer might edit himself. Probably in order to make the strongest case for Hazlitt the familiar essayist, and by extension, for the familiar essay as a form, he steers clear of Hazlitt on politics – there is no extract from 'On Paradox and Commonplace', nor from 'On the Character of Cobbett', although he does recommend the latter in the warmest of terms. Nor does he give any samples of literary criticism (in his review of the same volume, T. N. Talfourd had given a big chunk of 'On Genius and Common Sense' on the poetry of Wordsworth).[13] There is no doubt then that for his own purposes, or, perhaps more accurately, for the purposes of this review, the two Hazlitts that Lamb chooses to concentrate on here are (1) the sentimental essayist, the writer on love and the past, and (2) the humorous satirist, hence the interesting inclusion of what one might have been forgiven for thinking was a rather minor Hazlitt essay 'On Will-Making'. What may have drawn Lamb to the latter, we may conjecture, was that it was of all the essays in *Table-Talk* Volume I the one that most

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[12] 'Letter of Elia to Robert Southey, Esquire', *London Magazine* (October 1823), [400-407], 405.
[13] 'Hazlitt's Table Talk', *London magazine*, (May 1821), [545-550] 548.

resembled an Elia essay. It was not a 'Character' of a living being, or a piece of criticism; it was not a 'philosophical' essay based on an opposition between abstract principles, such as 'On Thought and Action', or 'On Vulgarity and Affectation'. It was, on the contrary, a meditation on a concrete social activity, conducted in a spirit of gentle irony, an essay rich in humour and anecdote, that appears to grow organically out of itself. That Lamb's taste should have drawn him to 'On Will-Making' was perhaps natural, but there may also have been a deeper critical rationale behind it, which was that in order to argue most effectively for the 'Miscellaneous' or familiar essay as a true literary genre, and not just a loose assemblage of impulses, critical, philosophical and otherwise, essays such as this one would have to be foregrounded – essays in which that open, casual, conversational mode that was particularly distinctive of the form had been allowed to shine forth most uncloudedly, essays, in short, which needed no external scaffolding to keep them up.

Table Talk, or, Original Essays. By William Hazlitt.[14]

A series of Miscellaneous Essays, however well executed in the parts, if it have not some pervading character to give a unity to it, is ordinarily as tormenting to get through as a set of aphorisms, or a jest-book.—The fathers of Essay writing in ancient and modern times—Plutarch in a measure, and Montaigne without mercy or measure—imparted their own personal peculiarities to their themes. By this balm are they preserved. The Author of the Rambler, ~~perhaps without much original~~ \~~in a different way/~~ \in a less direct way/

[14] This piece is a review of the first edition of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk*, which was published in April 1821 by John Warren of Bond Street.

has attained the same effect.[15] Without professing egotism, his work is as essentially egotistical as theirs. He deals out opinion, which he would have you take for argument; and is perpetually obtruding his own particular views of life for universal truths. This is the ~~true~~ charm which binds us to his ~~work~~ \writings,/ and not any steady conviction we have of the solidity of his thinking. Possibly some of those Papers, which are generally understood to be failures in the Rambler—its ponderous levities \for instance,/ and ~~#####y~~ \unwieldy/ efforts at being sprightly—may detract less from the \general/ effect, than if something better in kind, but less in keeping, had been substituted in place of them. If the author had taken his friend Goldsmith into partnership, and they had furnished their quotas ~~by~~ \for/ alternate days, the world had been gainer by the arrangement, but what a heterogeneous mass the work ~~in~~ itself would have presented![16] ~~The bird of Athens pairing with \the/ light Tom Tit —— the graceful palfry helping the heavy ox to drag along his ponderous \cumbersome/ wain —— might be no inappropriate emblems of so perverse a co-operation.~~

Another class of Essayists, equally impressed with the advantages of his sort of appeal to the reader, but more dextrous at shifting off the invidiousness of a perpetual self-reference, substituted for themselves an ideal character; which left them a still further licence in the delivery of their peculiar humours and opinions, under the masqued battery of a fictitious appellation. Truths, which the world would have ~~kecked at~~ startled at from the lips of the gay Captain Steele, it readily accepted from the pen of old Isaac

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[15] *The Rambler*, by Samuel Johnson, was published twice weekly for two years between 1750 and 1752.
[16] Oliver Goldsmith's main contribution to the essay form is his *Citizen of the World, or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher, Residing in London, to his Friends in the East* (1760).

Bickerstaff.[17] But the breed of the Bickerstaffs, as it began, so alas! it expired with him. It shewed indeed a few feeble sparks of revival in Nestor Ironside, but soon went out.[18] Addison had stepped in with his wit, his criticism, his morality—the cold generalities which extinguish humour—and the Spectator, and its Successor, were little more indeed than bundles of Essays (valuable indeed, and elegant reading above our praise) but hanging together with very slender principles of bond or union. In fact we use the word Spectator, and mean a Book. At mention of the Tatler we sigh, and think of Isaac Bickerstaff. Sir Roger de Coverly, Will Wimble, Will Honeycomb, live for ever in memory—but who is their silent Friend?—Except that he never opens his mouth, we know nothing about him.[19] He writes finely ~~about everything but himself~~ \upon all subjects—but himself./ ~~He has no more personal existence to us than an automaton~~. He ~~sets~~ sets everything in a proper light—but we do not ~~read~~ \see/ through his spectacles. He colours nothing with his own hues. The Lucubrations come as from an old man, an old bachelor to boot, and a~~n~~ humourist.[20] The Spectator too, we are told, is all this. But a young man, a young married man moreover, or any description of man, or woman, with no sort of character beyond general shrewdness, \and a power of observation,/ might have strung together all that discordant assemblage of Papers, which call the Spectator father. They describe indeed with the utmost felicity all ages and conditions of men, but they themselves smack of no peculiar age or condition. He writes, we are told, because he

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[17] *The Tatler* (1709-11), which was initiated by Richard Steele and then continued in collaboration with Joseph Addison, was written in the persona of an old astrologer, Isaac Bickerstaff.
[18] Nestor Ironside, the conductor of *The Guardian*, the periodical which succeeded *The Spectator* in 1713, is presented as a retired private tutor, 'a healthy old Fellow, that is not a Fool' (*The Guardian,* No. 26, 10 April 1713).
[19] In *The Spectator* No. 2 (2 March 1710-1), Steele had introduced his readers to the *Spectator* club. Of these, Sir Roger de Coverley, Will Wimble, and Will Honeycomb were among the most prominent.
[20] When the *Tatler* papers were first collected together in book form, they were presented as *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff* (1710), 'lucubration' being the act of reading or writing by night.

cannot bring himself to speak, but why he cannot bring himself \to speak/ is the riddle.[21] He is used to good company. Why he should conceal his name, while he lavishly proclaims that of his companions, is equally a secret. Was it to remove him still further from any possibility of our ~~apprehension?~~ sympathies? —or wherein, we would be informed, lurks the mystery of his short chin?[22]—As ~~an associate to the Club~~ \a visitor at the Club (a sort of umbra)/ he might have ~~appeared~~ \shewn/ to advantage among those short but masterly sketches—but the mass of matter, ~~is~~ \spread through eight volumes, is really somewhat/ too miscellaneous and ~~diffusive~~ diffuse, to hang together for ~~fraternity~~ \identity/ upon such a shade, such a tenuity!

~~Succeeding Since the failure of classical~~ \Since the days of the Spectator and the Guardian,/ Essayists, who have appeared under a fictitious ~~character~~ appellation, have for the most part contented themselves with a brief description of their character and ~~pretensions~~ \story/ in the opening Paper; after which they dismiss the Phantom of an Editor, and let the work ~~run on by~~ shift for itself, as wisely and wittily as ~~they are able~~ \it is able,/ unsupported by any ~~further~~ characteristic pretences, or individual colouring.—In one particular indeed the followers of Addison were long and grievously misled. For ~~a century~~ \many years/ after the publication of his celebrated Vision of Mirza,[23] no book of Essays was thought complete without a Vision. It ########## set the world ~~a~~ dreaming. Take up any one of the volumes of this description, published ~~within these last hundred years~~ \in the last century;-/ you will possibly alight upon two or three successive papers, depicting, with more or less gravity, sober views of life as it is—when—pop—you come

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[21] *The Spectator* No. 1 (1 March 1710-1).
[22] *The Spectator* No. 17 (20 March 1710-1).
[23] Addison's 'Visions of Mirza', *The Spectator* No. 159 (1 September 1711), is a mock-Oriental allegory of life.

upon a Vision, which you trembled at beforehand from a glimpse you caught at certain abstractions in Capitals, Fame, Riches, Long Life, Loss of Friends, Punishment by Exile—a ~~Gentry~~ \set of denominations/ part simple, part compounded—existing in single, double, and triple hypostases.—~~substantively \simpliciter/ substantively cum adjectiva, twi-substantively propositione interposita—names that puzzle beyond Praise God Barebones interpositi~~ You cannot ~~describe~~ \think on/ their fantastic essences without giddiness, or describe them short of a solecism.—These authors seem not to have been content to entertain you with their day-light fancies, but you must ~~########## ##########~~ share their ~~stupid~~ \vacant/ slumbers & common-place reveries. The ~~trad~~ humour, \thank Heaven,/ is pretty well past. These Visions, ~~dreams~~, any thing but ~~dream-like~~ \visionary/—(for who ever ~~dreamed~~ dreamt of Fame, but by metaphor, some mad Orientalist perhaps excepted?)—so tamely extravagant, so gothically classical—these inspirations by downright malice aforethought—these heartless, bloodless literalities—these 'thin consistencies', dependent for their ~~existence~~ \personality/ upon Great Letters—for~~,~~ write them ~~small~~ small, and the tender essences fade into abstractions—have at length happily melted away ~~bef~~ ~~for good and all~~ before the progress of good sense; or the absurdity has worn itself out. We might else have still to lament, that the purer taste of ~~the~~ their inventor should have so often wandered \aside/ into these caprices; or to wish, if ~~that~~ he had chosen ~~for once~~ to indulge in an imitation of Eastern extravagance, that he had confined himself to that least obnoxious specimen of his skill, the Allegory of Mirza.—

The Author before us is, in this respect at least, no visionary. He talks to you in broad day-light. He comes in no imaginary character. He is of the class of Essayists first

mentioned. He attracts, or repels, by strong realities of individual observation, humour, and feeling.

The title, which Mr. Hazlitt has chosen, is characteristic enough of his ~~#########~~ \Essays./ The tone of them is uniformly conversational; and they are not the less entertaining, that they resemble occasionally the talk of a very clever person, when he begins to be ~~a little extravagant after dinner~~ \animated in a convivial party/. You fancy that a disputant is always present, and feel a disposition to take up the cudgels yourself in behalf of the other side of the question. Table-Talk is not calculated for cold or squeamish readers. The average thinker will find his common notions ~~sometimes~~ a little \too/ roughly disturbed. He must brace up his ears to the reception of some novelties. Strong traits of character stand out in the work; and it is not so much a series of well argued treatises, as a bold confession, or exposition, of Mr. Hazlitt's own ways of feeling upon the subjects treated of. It is in fact a piece of Autobiography; and, in our minds, a vigorous & well-executed one. The Writer almost everywhere adopts the style of a discontented man. This assumption of a character, if it be not truly (as we are inclined to believe) his own, is that which gives force & life to his writing. He ~~grumbles very interestingly~~ \murmurs most musically/ through fourteen \ample/ Essays. He quarrels with People that have but one idea, and with the Learned that are ~~stuffed~~ \oppressed/ with many; with the man of Paradox, and the man of Common~~-Sense~~ \Place/; with ~~Gentlefolk~~ \the Fashionable/, and with the Vulgar; with Dying Men that make a Will, and those who die & leave none behind them; with Sir Joshua Reynolds for setting up study above genius, and with the same person for disparaging study in respect of genius; lastly, he quarrels with himself, with ~~his own~~ book-making, with his friends, with the present time~~s~~,

and future—(the last he has an especial grudge to, and strives hard to prove that it has no existence)— in short, with everything in the world, ~~except past time (which perhaps is out of it); the Indian~~ *except what he likes*[24]— his past recollections which he describes in a way to make every one else like them too; the Indian/ Jugglers; Cavanagh, the Fives-Player; the noble art and practice of Painting, which he contends will make men both healthy and wise; ~~(vide the two first Essays)~~ and ~~the~~ Old Masters.—[25]

He thus describes ########## \(*con amore*)/ \his/ first visit to the Louvre, ~~in~~ at its golden ~~days~~ period before Taste had cause to lament the interposition of ~~Restitutive Justice~~ ruthless Destiny.—[26]

> I had made some progress in Painting, when I went to the Louvre to study; and I never did any thing afterwards. I never shall forget conning over the Catalogue which a friend lent me just before I set out. The pictures, the names of the painters, seemed to relish in the mouth. There was one of Titian's 'Mistress at her toilette'. Even the cobwebs with which the painter had adorned her hair were not more golden, more amiable to sight, than those which played round & tantalised my fancy ere I saw the picture. There were two Portraits by the same hand—'A young Nobleman with a glove'; another, 'a companion to it'—I read the description over and over with fond expectancy, and filled up the imaginary outline with whatever I could conceive of grace, and dignity, and an antique gusto[27]. There was the Transfiguration too. With what awe I saw it in my mind's eye, and was overshadowed with the spirit of the artist! Not to have been disappointed with these works afterwards, was the highest compliment I can pay to their transcendent merits.[28]—The first day I

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[24] The essays referred to here are 'On People with one Idea', 'On the Ignorance of the Learned', 'On Paradox and Common-place', 'On Vulgarity and Affectation', 'On Will-making', 'On Certain Inconsistencies in Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses', 'On the Pleasure of Painting [I and II]', 'On Living to One's Self' and 'On the Past and Future'.
[25] The essays referred to here are 'The Indian Jugglers' and the two linked essays 'On the Pleasure of Painting'.
[26] The ensuing quotation is from 'On the Pleasure of Painting' (*Table-Talk,* i, 28-30).
[27] Lamb has omitted Hazlitt's closing phrase: '—all but equal to the original' (*Table-Talk,* i, 28)
[28] A full sentence has been cut here by Lamb: 'Indeed, it was from seeing other works of the same great masters that I had formed a vague, but no disparaging idea of these' (*Table-Talk,* i, 29)

got there, I was kept for some time in the French Exhibition-room, and thought I should not be able to get a sight of the old masters. I just caught a peep at them through the door (vile hindrance!) like looking out of purgatory into paradise—from Poussin's noble mellow-looking landscapes to where Rubens hung out his gaudy banner, and down the glimmering vista to the rich jewels of Titian and the Italian school. At last, by much importunity, I was admitted, and lost not an instant in making use of my new privilege. It was un beau jour to me. I marched delighted through a quarter of a mile of the proudest efforts of the mind of man, a whole creation of genius, a universe of art! I ran the gauntlet of all the schools from the bottom to the top; and in the end got admitted into the inner room, where they had been repairing some of their greatest works. Here the Transfiguration, the St. Peter Martyr, and the St. Jerome of Domenichino stood on the floor, as if they had bent their knees, like camels stooping, to unlade their riches to the spectator. On one side, on an easel, stood Hippolito de Medici (a portrait by Titian) with a boar-spear in his hand, looking through those he saw, till you turned away from the keen glance; and thrown together in heaps were landscapes of the same hand, green pastoral hills and valleys,[29] and shepherds piping to their mild mistresses underneath the flowering shade. Reader, 'if thou hast not seen the Louvre, thou art damned!'—for thou hast not seen the choicest remains of the works of art; or thou hast not seen all these together, with their mutually reflected glories.[30] Here, for four months together, I strolled and studied, and daily heard the warning sound—'Quatres heures passées, il faut fermer, Citoyens'—(Ah ! why did they ever change their style ?) muttered in coarse provincial French; and brought away with me some loose draughts and fragments, which I have been forced to part with, like drops of life-blood, for 'hard money'. How often, thou tenantless mansion of godlike magnificence—how often has my heart since gone a pilgrimage to thee!

~~####################.~~ With all this enthusiasm for the Art, and the intense application which at one time he seems to have been disposed to give to it, the wonder is,

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[29] It is 'green pastoral hills and vales' in Hazlitt (*Table-Talk,* i, 30).
[30] Lamb has omitted a sentence here: 'I say nothing of the statues; for I know but little of sculpture, and never liked any till I saw the Elgin marbles' (*Table-Talk,* i, 30).

that Mr. Hazlitt did not turn out a fine painter, rather than ~~a~~ writer. Did he lack encouragement? or did his powers of application fail him from some doubt of ultimate success?

> One of my first attempts was a picture of my Father, who was then in a green old age, with strong-marked features, and scarred with the small-pox. I drew it with a broad light crossing the face, looking down, with spectacles on, reading. The book was Shaftesbury's Characteristics, in a fine old binding, with Gribelin's etchings. My father would as lieve it had been any other book; but for him to read was to be content, was 'riches fineless'. The sketch promised well; and I set to work to finish it, determined to spare no time nor pains. My father was willing to sit as long as I pleased; for there is a natural desire in the mind of man to sit for one's picture, to be the object of continued attention, to have one's likeness multiplied ; and besides his satisfaction in the picture, he had some pride in the artist, though he would rather I should have written a sermon than painted like Rembrandt or like Raphael. Those winter days, with the gleams of sunshine coming through the chapel windows, and cheered by the notes of the robin-redbreast in our garden (that 'ever in the haunch of winter sings')—as my afternoon's work drew to a close,—were among the happiest of my life. When I gave the effect I intended to any part of the picture for which I had prepared my colours, when I imitated the roughness of the skin, when I hit the clear pearly tone of a vein,[31] when I gave the ruddy complexion of health, the blood circulating under the broad shadows of one side of the face, I thought my fortune made; or rather it was already more than made, in my fancying that I might one day be able to say with Correggio, 'I also am a painter'.—It was an idle thought, a boy's conceit; but it did not make me less happy at the time. I used regularly to set my work in the chair to look at it through the long evenings; and many a time did I return to take leave of it before I could go to bed at night. I remember sending it with a throbbing heart to the Exhibition, and seeing it hung up there by the side of one of the Honourable Mr. Skeffington (now Sir George). There was nothing in common between them, but that they were the portraits of two

[31] In the original it is 'when I imitated the roughness of the skin by a lucky stroke of the pencil, when I hit the clear pearly tone of a vein' (*Table-Talk*, i, 20).

> very good-natured men. I think, but am not sure, that I finished this portrait (or another afterwards) on the same day that the news of the battle of Austerlitz came; I walked out in the afternoon, and, as I returned, saw the evening star set over a poor man's cottage with other thoughts & feelings than I shall ever have again. Oh for the revolution of the great Platonic year, that those times might come over again! I could sleep out the three hundred and sixty-five thousand intervening years very contentedly! —The picture is left: the table, the chair, the window where I learned to construe Livy, the chapel where my father preached, remain where they were; but he himself is gone to rest, full of years, of faith, of hope, and charity![32]

There is a naivete ~~of levity~~ commingled with pathos in this little scene, which cannot be enough admired. The old dissenting ~~minister's~~ \clergyman's/ pride at his son's getting on in his profession as an artist, still with a wish rather that he had taken to his own calling; and then an under-vanity of his own in 'having his picture drawn' coming in to comfort him; the preference he would have given to some more orthodox book, with some sort of satisfaction still that he was drawn with a book—above all, the tenderness in the close—make us almost think we are perusing ~~a strain of~~ ~~\a passage in/~~ \some strain of/ Mackenzie; or some of the better (because \the /more pathetic) parts of the Tatler.[33] Indeed such passages are not infrequent in this writer; and break in upon us, amidst the spleen and ~~moroseness~~ \severity/ of his commoner tone, like springs bursting out in the desart. The \author's/ wayward humour, turning inwards from the contemplation of real or imagined grievances—or ~~expressing~~ \exhausting/ itself in gall and ~~dissatisfaction~~ \bitterness/ at the things that be—reverts for its solace, with a mournfully contrasting spirit of satisfaction, to the past. The corruption of Hope quickens into life again the

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[32] 'On the Pleasure of Painting', *Table-Talk*, (i, 19-21).

[33] It is possible that Lamb is referring to Henry Mackenzie's periodical writing here – his papers for *The Mirror* (1779-80) or *The Lounger* (1785-7). But more likely it is the Scotsman's fiction, either *The Man of Feeling* (1771) or, more likely *Julie de Roubigné* (1777), which was a particular favourite of his, and served as the model for his own early novel *Rosamund Gray* (1798).

perishing flowers of the Memory.—In this spirit, in ~~his~~ the third, and \the/ most valuable of his Essays, \that/ ‘On the Past and Future’,[34]—in which he maintains the reality of the former as a possession \in hand,/ against those who ~~maintain~~ \pretend/ that the future ~~alone is worth consideration~~ i\s everything and the past nothing/—after some reasoning, rather too subtle and metaphysical for the general reader—he exclaims ~~in a stream~~ \with an eloquence/ that approximates to the finest poetry—[35]

> Is it nothing to have been, and to have been happy or miserable ? Or is it a matter of no moment to think whether I have been one or the other? Do I delude myself, do I build upon a shadow or a dream, do I dress up in the gaudy garb of idleness and folly a pure fiction, with nothing answering to it in the universe of things and the records of truth, when I look back with fond delight or with tender regret to that which was at one time to me my ~~all~~, when I revive the glowing image of some bright reality,
>
> ‘The thoughts of which can never from my heart’?
>
> Do I then muse on nothing, when I turn back in fancy[36] to ‘those suns and skies so pure’ that lighted up my early path? Is it to think of nothing, to set an idle value upon nothing—to think of all that has happened to me, and of all that can ever interest me?[37]
>
> ‘What though the radiance which was once so bright
>
> Be now for ever vanished from my sight,
>
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
>
> Of glory in the grass, of splendour in the flower’—
>
> yet am I mocked with a lie, when I venture to think of it? Or do I not drink in and breathe again the air of heavenly truth, when I but ‘retrace its footsteps, and its skirts far off adore?’[38]—What to

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[34] ‘On the Past and Future’ owes much to Lamb’s own ‘New Year’s Eve’ published four months earlier in the *London.*

[35] The passage is from *Table-Talk,* i, 50-1.

[36] In the original it is: ‘Do I then muse on nothing, do I bend my eyes on nothing, when I turn back in fancy’ (*Table-Talk,* i, 48).

[37] In the original the quotation from Wordsworth is then introduced by the sentence: ‘Or, to use the language of a fine poet (who is himself among my earliest and not least painful recollections)’ (*Table-Talk,* i, 49).

me constitutes the great charm of the Confessions of Rousseau is their turning so much upon this feeling. He seems to gather up the past moments of his being like drops of honey-dew to distil a precious liquor from them; his alternate pleasures & pains are the bead-roll that he tells over, and piously worships; he makes a rosary of the flowers of hope and fancy that strewed his earliest years. When he begins the last of the Reveries of a Solitary Walker, 'II y a aujourdhui, jour des Pâques Fleuris, cinquante ans depuis que j'ai premier vu Madame Warens' what a yearning of the soul is implied in that short sentence! Was all that had happened to him, all that he had thought and felt in that sad interval of time, to be accounted nothing? Was that long, dim, faded retrospect of years happy or miserable, a blank that was not to make his eyes fail and his heart faint within him in trying to grasp all that had once filled it and that had since vanished,—because it was not a prospect into futurity? Was he wrong in finding more to interest him in it than in the next fifty years—which he did not live to see; or if he had, what then? Would they have been worth thinking of, compared with the times of his youth, of his first meeting with Madame Warens, with those times which he has traced with such truth and pure delight 'in our heart's tables?' When 'all the life of life was flown', was he not to live the first & best part of it over again, and once more be all that he then was?—Ye woods that crown the clear lone brow of Norman Court, why do I revisit ye so oft, & feel a soothing consciousness of your presence, but that your high tops waving in the wind recal to me the hours & years that are for ever fled, that ye renew in ceaseless murmurs the story of long-cherished hopes & bitter disappointment, that in your solitudes & tangled wilds I can wander and lose myself as I wander on & am lost in the solitude of my own heart; and that as your rustling branches give the loud blast to the waste below — borne on the thoughts of other years, I can look down with patient anguish at the cheerless desolation which I feel within! Without that face pale as the primrose with hyacinthine locks, for ever shunning & for ever haunting me, mocking my waking thoughts as in a dream, without that smile which my heart could never turn to

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[38] In the original Hazlitt continues: 'I cannot say with the same poet—

> And see how dark the backward stream,
> A little moment past so smiling

for it is the past that gives me most delight and most assurance of reality. (*Table-Talk*, i, 49).

> scorn, without those eyes dark with their own lustre, still bent on mine, and drawing the soul into their liquid mazes like a sea of love, without that name trembling in fancy's ear, without that form gliding before me like Oread or Dryad in fabled groves, what should I do, how pass away the listless leaden-footed hours? —Then wave, wave on, ye woods of ~~Tuderley~~ Tuderley, and lift your high tops in the air; my sighs & vows uttered by your mystic voice breathe into me my former being, and enable me to bear the thing I am!

The Tenth Essay, <u>On Living to One's Self</u>, ~~contains a~~ has this singular passage.

> Even in the common affairs of life, in love, friendship, and marriage, how little security have we when we trust our happiness in the hands of others! Most of the friends I have seen have turned out the bitterest enemies or cold, uncomfortable acquaintance. Old companions are like meats served up too often that lose their relish and their wholesomeness.[39]

We hope that this is more dramatically than truly ~~spoken~~ \written./ We recognize nothing like it in our ~~old~~ \own/ circle. We had always thought that Old Friends, and Old Wine —— ~~the proverb is something musty~~ —— \were the ~~best~~ best./—We should conjecture that Mr. Hazlitt has been singularly unfortunate, or injudicious, in the choice of his acquaintance, did not one phenomenon stagger us. We every now & then encounter in his Essays with a <u>character</u>, apparently from \the/ life, too mildly drawn for an enemy, too sharply for a friend. We suspect that Mr. Hazlitt does not \always/ play quite fairly with his associates. There is a class of critics—and he may be of them—who pry into men with 'too respective eyes'.[40] They will 'anatomize ~~Goneril~~ \Regan',/ when Cordelia would hardly bear such dissection.[41] We are not acquainted with Mr. Hazlitt's 'familiar faces',[42] but when we see certain <u>C</u>haracters exposed & hung up, not in Satire—for the exaggerations

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[39] *Table-Talk*, i, 223.
[40] Thomas Heywood, *Troia Britannica* (1609), Canto V, Stanza 18, line 7.
[41] *King Lear* III. iv. 33-4.
[42] A reference to Lamb's own poem of 1798 'The Old Familiar Faces'.

of that ~~temper~~ cure themselves by their excess, as we make allowance for ~~an~~ \the/ over-charged features \in a caricature/—but certain poor whole-length figures dangling with all the best and worst \of humanity/ about them displayed ~~in wor~~ \with cool/ and unsparing impartiality—Mr. Hazlitt must excuse us if we cannot help suspecting some of them to be the ~~carcases~~ \shadows/ of defunct ~~friendships~~ Friendships.~~— Does this Knight of the Round Table \our dispassionate spectator/ hang his walls with flayed skins of his acquaintances in terrorem? Or does he keep a room, like Bluebeard's, for his friends?~~[43] This would be a recipe indeed, a pretty sure one, for converting friends 'into the bitterest enemies or cold, uncomfortable acquaintance.'—The ~~most exquisite~~ most expert at drawing Characters, are the very persons most likely to be deceived in individual & home instances. They will seize an infirmity, which irritates them deservedly in ~~an associa~~ \a/ companion, and ~~go~~ go on piling up every kindred weakness they have found by experience ~~occasionally~~ \apt/ to coalesce with that failing (~~through~~ \gathered from/ a thousand instances) till they have built up in their ~~fancy~~ fancies an Abstract, ~~as~~ widely differing ~~in truth~~\indeed/ from their poor concrete friend! ~~as the abstract idea of the ########################## differs in dimension from that of the terriblest actually existent Caliph on record~~. What blunders Steele, or Sterne, may not \in this way/ have made at home!—But we forget. Our business is with books. We profess not, with Mr. Hazlitt, to be Reviewers of Men.~~— It is high time to put our readers into~~ We are willing to give ~~the~~ our readers a specimen of what ~~Mr. Hazlitt~~ this writer can do, when the moody fit is off him. One of the pleasantest and lightest of his Essays is 'On People with one i

[43] Before thinking better of it, Lamb refers to Hazlitt as a 'Knight of the Round Table' because the latter had been a major contributor to the 'Round Table' series that ran in the *Examiner* newspaper between 1815 and 1817.

Idea'. We quote ~~from the beginning~~ his first instance.[44]

> There is Major C— : he has but one idea or subject of discourse, Parliamentary Reform.[45] Now Parliamentary Reform is (as far as I know) a very good thing, a very good idea, and a very good subject to talk about: ~~by~~ but why should it be the only one? To hear the worthy and gallant Major resume his favourite topic, is like law-business, or a person who has a suit in Chancery going on. Nothing can be attended to, nothing can be talked of but that. Now it is getting on, now again it is standing still; at one time the Master has promised to pass judgment by a certain day, at another he has put it off again and called for more papers, & both are equally reasons for speaking of it. Like the piece of packthread in the barrister's hands, he turns & twists it all ways, and cannot proceed a step without it. Some school-boys cannot read but in their own book: and the man of one idea cannot converse out of his own subject. Conversation it is not; but a sort of recital of the preamble of a bill, or a collection of grave arguments for a man's being of opinion with himself. It would be well if there was any thing of character, of eccentricity in all this; but that is not the case. It is a political homily personified, a walking commonplace we have to encounter & listen to. It is just as if a man were[46] to insist on your hearing him go through the fifth chapter of the Book of Judges every time you meet, or like the story of the Cosmogony in the Vicar of Wakefield. It is a tune played on a barrel-organ. It is a common vehicle of discourse into which they get & are set down when they please, without any pains or trouble to themselves. Neither is it professional pedantry or trading quackery: it has no excuse. The man has no more to do with the question which he saddles on all his hearers than you have. This is what makes the matter hopeless. If a farmer talks to you about his pigs or his poultry, or a physician about his patients, or a lawyer about his briefs, or a merchant about stock, or an author about himself, you know how to account for this, it is a common infirmity, you have a laugh at his expense, and there is no more to be said. But here is a man who goes out of his way to be absurd, & is troublesome by a romantic effort of generosity. You cannot say to him 'All this may be interesting to you, but I have no concern in it': you cannot

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[44] *Table-Talk*, i, 137-141.
[45] Major John Cartwright (17 September 1740 – 23 September 1824) was an English naval officer, Nottinghamshire militia major, and prominent campaigner for parliamentary reform.
[46] were] Hazlitt wrote 'was' in the original (*Table-Talk*, i, 138).

put him off in that way. He retorts the Latin adage upon you Nihil humani a me alienum puto. He has got possession of a subject which is of universal and paramount interest (not 'a fee-grief, due to some single breast')—& on that plea may hold you by the button as long as he chooses. His delight is to harangue on what nowise regards himself: how then can you refuse to listen to what as little amuses you? Time & tide wait for no man. The business of the State admits of no delay. The question of Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments stands first on the order of the day—takes precedence in its own right of every other question. Any other topic, grave or gay, is looked upon in the light of impertinence, & sent to Coventry. Business is an interruption; pleasure a digression from it. It is the question before every company where the Major comes, which immediately resolves itself into a committee of the whole world upon it, is carried on by means of a perpetual virtual adjournment, & it is presumed that no other is entertained while this is pending—a determination which gives its persevering advocate a fair prospect of expatiating on it to his dying day. As Cicero says of study, it follows him into the country, it stays with him at home: it sits with him at breakfast, and goes out with him to dinner. It is like a part of his dress, of the costume of his person, without which he would be at a loss what to do. If he meets you in the street, he accosts you with it as a form of salutation: if you see him at his own house, it is supposed you come upon that. If you happen to remark, 'It is a fine day or the town is full', it is considered as a temporary compromise of the question; you are suspected of not going the whole length of the principle. As Sancho when reprimanded for mentioning his homely favourite in the Duke's kitchen, defended himself by saying—'There I thought of Dapple, & there I spoke of him'—so the true stickler for Reform neglects no opportunity of introducing the subject wherever he is. Place its veteran champion under the frozen north, & he will celebrate sweet smiling Reform: place him under the mid-day Afric suns, & he will talk of nothing but Reform—Reform so sweetly smiling & so sweetly promising for the last forty years—

Dulce ridentem Lalagen,

Dulce loquentem!

This is all extremely clever, and about as true as it is necessary for such half-imaginary sketches to be. The veteran subject of it has had his name bandied to & fro, for praise &

blame, the better part of a century, and has learned to stand harder knocks than these. He will laugh, we dare say, very heartily at this Chimaera of himself from the ~~pencil~~ pen of a brother-reformer. We would venture a wager that the writer of it, with all his appearance of drawing from the life, never ~~nor~~ spent a day in company with the Major. We have passed many, & can assure the Essayist, that Major C——, has many things in his head, and in his mouth too, besides Parliamentary Reform.[47] We know that he is more solicitous to evade the question, than to obtrude it, in private company; and will chuse to turn the conversation purposely to topics of philology and polite literature, of which he is no common master. He will not shun a metaphysical point even if it come in his way, though he professes not to enter into that sort of science ~~(if, as Cowley seems inclined to doubt, 'it be a science at all')~~[48] so deeply as Mr. Hazlitt; and will discuss any point 'at sight' from history and chronology, his favourite subjects, down to the merits of his scarcely less darling Norfolk dumpling. ~~The fact we suspect to be~~ We suspect that Mr. Hazlitt knows nothing of the veteran beyond his political speeches, which to be sure are pretty monotonous upon one subject, and has carved the rest out of his own brain. But to ~~infer~~ \deduce/ a man's general conversation from what falls from him in public meetings, expressly convened to discuss a particular topic, is about as good logic, as it would be in the case of another sort of Reformer, who, like Major C——, but in an humbler sphere, goes about professing to remove nuisances[49]—if we should infer, that the good man's

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[47] Though there is no biographical record of Lamb and Cartwright meeting, they did have several mutual friends, including William Godwin, John Thelwall, Thomas Holcroft and William Hone.

[48] Of metaphysics Abraham Cowley wrote in his essay 'Of Agriculture' that he did 'not know whether it be any thing or no', (*Essays*, ed. A. Gough [Oxford: OUP, 1915], 146).

[49] This is a topical reference to the M.P. Michael Angelo Taylor, who was a campaigner against smoke pollution in the House Of Commons. On April 18, 1821 Taylor had risen to move for leave to bring in a bill with respect to the law as it affected nuisances by smoke issuing from Steam-engines (Hansard, v, col. 440). In this speech alone, Taylor had used the word 'nuisance' fourteen times.

whole discourse, at bed & board, in the ale-house & by the roadside, was confined to two cuckoo syllables, because in the exercise of his public function we had never heard him utter anything beyond Dust ~~ho~~ \HO/![50]

The 'Character of Cobbett' (Sixth Essay) comes nearer the mark. It has the freedom of a sketch, and the truth of an elaborated portrait. Nothing is extenuated, nothing overdone. It is 'without overflowing full'.[51] It may be read with advantage by the partisans & opponents of the most extraordinary political personage that has appeared in modern times. It is too long to quote, too good for abridgement. We prefer closing our ~~article~~ \extracts/ with a portion of the Twelfth Essay, both for variety-sake, and because it seems no inappropriate ~~selection~~ \conclusion/ to leave off with that which is ~~commonly~~ \ordinarily/ the latest of human actions—\'the last infirmity of common/ —~~the last infirmity —~~ minds'[52]—the making of a Will.[53]

> ~~On Will-making~~.–Few things show the human character in a more ridiculous light than the circumstance of will-making. It is the latest opportunity we have of exercising the natural perversity of the disposition, & we take care to make a good use of it. We husband it with jealousy, put it off as long as we can, & then use every precaution that the world shall be no gainer by our deaths. This last act of our lives seldom belies the former tenor of them, for stupidity, caprice, & unmeaning spite. All that we seem to think of is to manage matters so (in settling accounts with those who are so unmannerly as to survive us) as to do as little good, and to plague and disappoint as many people as possible.
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> ########## Many persons have a superstition on the subject of making their last will and testament, and think that when every thing is ready signed and sealed, there is nothing farther left

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[50] 'Dust ho!' was the distinctive cry of metropolitan dustmen in this period, touting for business in the streets.
[51] Denham, 'Cooper's Hill', line 192 (see *Poetry and Revolution: An Anthology of British and Irish Verse 1625–1660*, ed. Peter Davidson (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 270).
[52] Milton, *Lycidas*, 71.
[53] This is the twelfth essay in the volume, 'On Will-making' (*Table-Talk*, i, 267-285).

to delay their departure.[54] If there is any pressing reason for it, that is, if any particular person would be relieved from a state of harassing uncertainty, or materially benefited by their making a will, the old & infirm (who do not like to be put out of their way) generally make this an excuse to themselves for putting it off to the very last moment, probably till it is too late: or where this is sure to make the greatest number of blank faces, contrive to give their friends the slip, without signifying their final determination in their favour. Where some unfortunate individual has been kept long in suspense, who was perhaps sought out[55] for that very purpose, & who may be in a great measure dependent on this as a last resource, it is nearly a certainty that there will be no Will to be found; no trace, ~~to~~ no sign to discover whether the person dying thus intestate ever had any intention of the sort, or why they relinquished it. This it is to bespeak the thoughts and imaginations of others for victims after we are dead, as well as their persons and expectations for hangers-on while we are living. A celebrated Beauty of the middle of the last century, towards its close sought out a female relative, the friend and companion of her youth, who had lived during the forty years of their separation in rather straitened circumstances, and in a situation which admitted of some alleviations. Twice they met after that long lapse of time—once her relation visited her in the splendour of a rich old family-mansion, & once she crossed the country to become an inmate of the humble dwelling of her early and only remaining friend. What was this for? Was it to revive the image of her youth in the pale and care-worn face of her friend? Or was it to display the decay of her charms and recal her long-forgotten triumphs to the memory of the only person who could bear witness to them? Was it to show the proud remains of herself to those who remembered or had often heard what she was—her skin like shrivelled alabaster, her emaciated features chiseled by nature's finest hand, her eyes that when a smile lighted them up, still shone like diamonds, the vermilion hues that still bloomed among wrinkles? Was it to talk of bone-lace, of the flounces and brocades of the last century, of race-balls in the year 62, & of the scores of lovers that had died at her feet, & to set whole counties in a flame again, only with a dream of faded beauty? Whether it was for this, or whether she meant to leave her friend any thing (as was

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[54] Omitted by Lamb at this point is a passage about people who 'fell ill with pure apprehension' at the prospect of making a will (*Table-Talk*, i, 268-9).
[55] In Hazlitt this is 'who has been perhaps sought out' (*Table-Talk*, i, 269).

indeed expected, all things considered, not without reason) nobody knows — for she never breathed a syllable on the subject herself, & died without a Will. The accomplished coquet of twenty, who had pampered hopes only to kill them, who had kindled rapture with a look & extinguished it with a breath, could find no better employment at seventy than to revive the fond recollections & raise up the drooping hopes of her kinswoman only to let them fall—to rise no more. Such is the delight we have in trifling with & tantalising the feelings of others by the exquisite refinements, the studied sleights of love or friendship!

Where a property is actually bequeathed, supposing the circumstances of the case and the usages of society to leave a practical discretion to the testator, it is most frequently in such portions as can be of the least service. Where there is much already, much is given; where much is wanted, little or nothing. Poverty invites a sort of pity, a miserable dole of assistance; necessity, neglect & scorn ; wealth attracts & allures to itself more wealth, by natural association of ideas, or by that innate love of inequality and injustice, which is the favourite principle of the imagination. Men like to collect money into large heaps in their life-time: they like to leave it in large heaps after they are dead. They grasp it into their own hands, not to use it for their own good, but to hoard, to lock it up, to make an object, an idol, and a wonder of it. Do you expect them to distribute it so as to do others good; that they will like those who come after them better than themselves; that if they were willing to starve themselves,[56] they will not deliberately defraud their sworn friends and nearest kindred of what would be of the utmost use to them? ~~No, they will thrust their heaps of gold and silver into the hands of others (as their proxies) to keep for them untouched, still increasing, still of no use to any one, but to pamper pride and avarice, to glitter in~~[57] ++++ ~~Their~~ There was a remarkable instance of this tendency <u>to the heap</u>, this desire to cultivate an abstract passion for wealth, in a will of one of the Thellusons some time back. This will went to keep the greater part of a large property from the use of the natural heirs and next-of-kin for a length of time, and to let it accumulate at compound interest in such a way & so long, that it would at last mount up in value to the purchase-money of a whole county. The interest accruing from the funded property or the rent of the lands at certain periods was to be employed to

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[56] In Hazlitt this is ‘that if they were willing to pinch and starve themselves’ (*Table-Talk*, i, 272).
[57] Here Lamb considered citing the next section of the essay, on misers, before deciding against it.

purchase other estates, other parks and manors in the neighbourhood or farther off, so that the prospect of the future desmesne that was to devolve at some distant time to the unborn lord of acres, swelled and enlarged itself, like a sea, circle without circle, vista beyond vista, till the imagination was staggered, and the mind exhausted. Nowhere was a ~~st~~ scheme for the accumulation of wealth and for laying the foundation of family-aggrandisement purely imaginary, romantic—one might almost say, disinterested. The vagueness, the magnitude, the remoteness of the object, the resolute sacrifice of all immediate and gross advantages, clothe it with the privileges of an abstract idea, so that the project has the air of a fiction or of a story in a novel. It was an instance of what might be called posthumous avarice, like the love of posthumous fame. It had little more to do with selfishness than if the testator had appropriated the same sums in the same way to build a pyramid. +++[58] ######## He wished to heap up a pile of wealth (millions of acres) in the dim horizon of future years, that could be of no use to him or to those with whom he was ~~com~~ connected by positive and personal ties, but as a crotchet of the brain, a gewgaw of the fancy. Yet to enable himself to put this scheme in execution, he had perhaps toiled & watched all his life, denied himself rest, food, pleasure, liberty, society, and persevered with the patience and self-denial of a martyr. I have insisted on this point the more, to shew how much of the imaginary & speculative there is interfused even in those passions and purposes which have not the good of others for their object, and how little reason this honest citizen and builder of castles in the air would have had to treat those who devoted themselves to the pursuit of fame, to obloquy & persecution for the sake of truth & liberty, or who sacrificed their lives for their country in a just cause, as visionaries and enthusiasts, who did not understand what was properly due to their own interest & the securing of the main chance. Man is not the creature of sense & selfishness, even in those pursuits which grow up out of that origin, so much as of imagination, custom, passion, whim, and humour. ++++[59] The art of will-making chiefly consists in baffling the importunity of expectation. I do not so much find fault with this when it is done as a punishment &

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[58] In Hazlitt the sentence continues: 'the same sums in the same way to build a pyramid, to construct an aqueduct, to endow an hospital, or effect any other patriotic or merely fantastic purpose' (*Table-Talk*, i, 274).

[59] Here Hazlitt has an anecdote about a person who was addicted to lying. (*Table-Talk*, i, 275-6).

oblique satire on servility and selfishness.[60] The cringing toad-eater, the ######## officious tale-bearer, is perhaps well paid for years of obsequious attendance with a bare mention & a mourning-ring.[61] Yet it is hardly right, after all, to encourage this kind of pitiful, bare-faced intercourse, without meaning to pay for it.[62] Flattery & submission are marketable commodities like any other, have their price, & ought scarcely to be obtained under false pretences. If we see through & despise the wretched creature that attempts to impose on our credulity, we can at any time dispense with his services: if we are soothed by this mockery of respect & friendship, why not pay him like any other drudge, or as we satisfy the actor who performs a part in a play by our particular desire?— But often these premeditated disappointments are as unjust as they are cruel, and are marked with circumstances of indignity, in proportion to the worth of the object. The suspecting, the taking it for granted that your name is down in the will, is sufficient provoca- tion to have it struck out: the hinting at an obligation, the consciousness of it on the part of the testator, will make him determined to avoid the formal acknowledgment of it, at any expence. The disinheriting of relations is mostly for venial offences, not for base actions: we punish out of pique, to revenge some case in which we have been disappointed of our wills, some act of disobedience to what had no reasonable ground to go upon; and we are obstinate in adhering to our resolution, as it was sudden and rash, and doubly bent on asserting our authority in what we have least right to interfere in. ++++++ [63] One might suppose that if any thing could, the approach and contemplation of death might bring men to a sense of reason and self-knowledge. On the contrary, it seems only to deprive them of the little wit they had, and to make them

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[60] Lamb omits a sentence here: 'It is in that case *Diamond cut Diamond*—a trial of skill between the legacy-hunter and the legacy-maker which shall fool the other' (*Table-Talk,* i, 277).
[61] There is another little omission here: 'nor can I think that Gil Blas' library was not quite as much as the coxcombry of his pretensions deserved. There are some admirable scenes in Ben Jonson's Volpone, shewing the humours of a legacy-hunter, and the different ways of fobbing him off with excuses and assurances of not being forgotten' (*Table-Talk,* i, 277).
[62] In the original this is 'without meaning to pay for it, as the coquet has no right to jilt the lovers she has trifled with' (*Table-Talk,* i, 277).
[63] Lamb makes a substantial cut here, omitting a whole section in which Hazlitt quotes generously from the 'Will of a Virtuoso' in *The Tatler* No. 216 (26 August 1710), and then indulges in further ruminations on Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), Thomas Dyot, Lord Camelford, Sir Francis Bourgeois, and thieves (*Table-*Talk, i, 278-284).

> even more the sport of their wilfulness and short-sightedness. +++++[64] An old man is twice a child: the dying man becomes the property of his family. He has no choice left, and his voluntary power is merged in old saws and prescriptive usages. The property we have derived from our kindred reverts tacitly to them: and not to let it take its course, is a sort of violence done to nature as well as custom. The idea of property, of something in common, does not mix cordially with friendship, but is inseparable from near relationship. We owe a return in kind, where we feel no obligation for a favour; and consign our possessions to our next of kin as mechanically as we lean our heads on the pillow, and go out of the world in the same state of stupid amazement that we came into it![65]

We cannot take leave of this agreeable and spirited volume without bearing our decided testimony to Mr. Hazlitt's general merits as a writer. He is (we have no hesitation in saying) one of the ablest prose-writers of the age. To an extraordinary power of original observation he adds an equal power of familiar and striking expression. There is a ground-work of patient and curious thinking in almost every one of these Essays, which the execution is in a high degree brilliant and animated. The train of reasoning or line of distinction on which he insists is often so fine as to escape common observation; at the same time that the quantity of picturesque and novel illustration is such as to dazzle and overpower common attention. He is however a writer perfectly free from affectation, and never rises into that tone of rapid and glowing eloquence of which he is a master, but when the occasion warrants it. Hence there is nothing more directly opposite to his usual style than what is understood by poetical prose. —If we were to hazard an analytical conjecture on this point, we should incline to think that Mr. H as a critic and an Essayist

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[64] The original continues: 'Some men think that because they are going to be hanged, they are fully authorised to declare a future state of rewards and punishments. All either indulge their caprices or cling to their prejudices. They make a desperate attempt to escape from reflection by taking hold of any whim or fancy that crosses their minds, or by throwing themselves implicitly on old habits and attachments' (*Table-Talk,* i, 284).

[65] In the original Hazlitt ends the essay with the phrase: '*Cætera desunt*'(the rest is missing) (*Table-Talk,* i, 285).

has blended two very different lines of study and pursuit, a life of internal reflection, and a life of external observation, together; or has, in other words, engrafted the Painter on the Metaphysician; and in our minds, the union, if not complete or in all respects harmonious, presents a result not less singular than delightful. If Mr. H. criticizes an author, he paints him. If he draws a character, he dissects it; and some of his characters 'look a little the worse' (as Swift says) 'for having the skin taken off'.[66] If he describes a feeling, he is not satisfied till he embodies it as a real sensation in all its individuality and with all the circumstances that give it interest. If he enters upon some distinction too subtle and recondite to be immediately understood, he relieves it by some palpable and popular illustration. In fact, he all along acts as his own interpreter, and is continually translating his thoughts out of their original metaphysical obscurity into the language of the senses and of common observation. This appears to us to constitute the excellence and to account for the defects of his writings. There is a display (to profusion) of various and striking powers; but they do not ~~always~~ tend to the same object. The thought and the illustration do not always hang well together: the one puzzles, the other startles. From this circumstance it is that to many people Mr. Hazlitt appears an obscure and unconnected and to others a forced and extravagant writer. He may be said to paint caricatures on gauze or cobwebs; to explain the mysteries of the Cabbala by Egyptian hieroglyphics. Another fault is that he ~~is too original: he~~ draws too entirely on his own resources. He never refers to the opinions of other authors (ancient or modern) or to the common opinions afloat on any subject, or if he does, it is to treat them with summary or elaborate contempt. Neither does he consider a subject in all its possible or most prominent

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[66] Swift, ' Digression concerning Madness', *A Tale of a Tub* (London: Nutt, 1710), 188.

bearings, but merely in those points (sometimes minute and extraneous, at other times more broad and general) in which it happens to have pressed close on his own mind or to have suggested some ingenious solution. He follows out of his own view of a question, however, fearlessly and patiently; and puts the reader in possession without reserve of all he has thought upon it. There is no writer who seems to pay less attention to the common prejudices of the vulgar; or the common-places of the learned; and who has consequently given greater offence to the bigoted, the self-sufficient, and the dull. We have nothing to do with Mr. Hazlitt as a controversial writer; and even as a critic, he is perhaps too much of a partisan, he is too eager and exclusive in his panegyrics or invectives; but as an Essayist, his writings can hardly fail to be read with general satisfaction and with the greatest by those who are most able to appreciate characteristic thought and felicitous expression.—