

Štěpaník, Karel

Summary

In: Štěpaník, Karel. *William Hazlitt jako literární kritik*. Brno: Filosofická fakulta M.U. s podporou Ministerstva školství a osvěty, 1947, pp. [205]-208

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118881>

Access Date: 02. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

SUMMARY

The present study called *William Hazlitt as Critic of Literature* is an attempt to analyze and interpret Hazlitt's aesthetic theory and critical practice. Incidentally, to establish his position and significance in the history of English literary criticism. The inquiry is therefore limited to a discussion of only those works of Hazlitt which deal pre-eminently with problems of literary criticism or express Hazlitt's view on literature as art and on individual men of letters and their works.

Even a perfunctory glance at the monumental *Centenary Edition of Hazlitt's Complete Works*, edited by P. P. Howe in 1930, will clearly show that Hazlitt's literary output was by no means limited to literary reviewing and criticism. He was an extremely versatile writer and many of his philosophical, political, economic, historical, and other writings are of excellent merit. But the subject of this inquiry necessarily restricts the field of research, and excludes from our attention even such interesting and valuable works as Hazlitt's familiar essays or his theatre criticism.

In spite, however, of the manysidedness of Hazlitt's talents, there can be no doubt that he was first and foremost a critic, whatever the subject of his work might have been. The words of Iago *I am nothing if not critical*, which Hazlitt once used to sum up his own personality as man and writer, seem to me to be an inspired intuitive solution of the complexities of his character, and the best possible interpretation of his critical excellence. Criticism was in his blood. And a judicious training assisted by a few happy coincidences, such as his friendly relations with many eminent artists and writers of his time, enabled him to make the best use of

his natural gifts and inclinations, and to become one of the greatest critics of English literature.

The first two chapters of this study should be regarded as a general introduction, and they are principally intended for Czech readers, who may not be so well acquainted with Hazlitt's works as the English reading public. The first, *Hazlitt's Literary Legacy*, deals briefly with Hazlitt's various writings in order of their composition and publication. Many of the works are not included in the present inquiry owing to their different character, and are not discussed later. The second chapter, *Hazlitt's Education, Character and Opinions*, is more essential to our research. Some of the problems discussed in it have to be understood properly if a clear idea of Hazlitt's literary and critical achievements, his excellences and failures, is to be obtained. Contrary to a widespread opinion, Hazlitt's education, though irregular, was not a bad preparation for his future vocation as professional critic of literature, theatre and art. The lack of university training was more than adequately compensated for by his natural gifts and judicious self-education. Extensive and varied reading, an early acquired habit of thinking for himself, the fortunate circumstances of making friends with the right sort of people and learning from them the best sort of knowledge they could impart, his years of philosophical contemplation and of apprenticeship to painting, all this contributed to mould his character and build up his understanding, as well as to confirm his literary taste. The bitterness caused by personal disappointments, on the other hand, did not exercise any bad influence on his enjoyment of beauty wherever he found it, nor did it warp his critical judgment.

Chapters Three and Four discuss Hazlitt's aesthetics and theory of literature respectively. It is not easy to gain and formulate a general system of aesthetics from the many, often contradictory, statements on art and cognate problems, which are to be found dispersed unsystematically in Hazlitt's writings. He was naturally distrustful of generalizations and systems in questions of art. He refuses to adopt and pronounce dictatorial rules. As a realist and empiricist in philosophy and art he is rather sceptical of the capacity

of human understanding to discover the first principles, even if they exist. Unlike Coleridge, he was never keen on speculating about the metaphysics of art and preferred dealing with practical problems of expression or psychological problems of character-drawing etc. But if we are patient and careful in distinguishing between his paradoxes and his sincere beliefs, we can obtain from his few attempts at definition, his concrete appreciation of individual writers and books, and from his casual comments, a valid system of views on general and particular aspects of literature. We should remember, however, that though he used the terminology of dogmatic classical criticism, he gave a new meaning, sometimes an entirely opposed meaning, to such terms as "the imitation of nature", or "truth to nature", etc. A comparison of his aesthetics with the classicist aesthetics of Reynolds, for instance, though both use the same language, shows what a world of difference there is between the classical doctrine of art and Hazlitt's empirical aesthetics. It is not possible to discuss Hazlitt's different views in this brief synopsis, and I have to refer the reader to the full text. The principal points of discussion in Chapter Three are the nature and function of art, the question of the ideal, the idea of genius and of progress in artistic creation, the problem of taste, etc.

The Fourth Chapter deals with the more specific theoretical problems of poetry, its nature and function, the significance and use of metre and rhyme, the nature of imagination, etc. It also discusses the different literary kinds, such as tragedy, comedy, etc., and their respective merits. In all these problems Hazlitt has shown a rare sense of values and an intuitive understanding of the essentials.

The Fifth Chapter, *Hazlitt's Critical Theory and Practice*, proves that Hazlitt's surprisingly acute and mostly unsurpassed verdicts on authors and books have a much more solid foundation than mere intuition and an innate sense of beauty. It is true that he regarded good criticism as art and a critic as a creative artist; but he held, too, that a critic should never forget that his work must be subservient to the work he is criticizing. As a true artist imitates nature, so a true critic should be true to his inspiration, to the

work of art he enjoys and interprets, thus imparting his pleasure to others. The best critic is he whose taste, which is a natural capacity akin to genius and capable of improvement, is most catholic. Hazlitt himself, though he was too modest to say so, gives us in his ideal portrait of a good critic a picture of himself. Having learnt the best from the dogmatic classicist masters of criticism, he became one of the first masters of a new, intuitive and impressionist criticism. Besides the problem of criticism in general, this chapter discusses Hazlitt's own critical essays from the formal point of view. His masters were Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, and Rousseau, but the form of the critical essay, which was his favourite medium, has been brought by him almost to perfection. And as to his style, we may agree with Stevenson's famous saying that none could write as well as Hazlitt.

The last two chapters are devoted to a specific discussion of Hazlitt's critical essays, reviews, and lectures on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan dramatists (Chapter Six), and on his contemporaries (Chapter Seven). There may be many points on which we do not agree with Hazlitt when he discusses general problems of aesthetic and literary theory. But whenever he has a concrete author or a concrete work of art to deal with, he is seldom completely wrong. What is more, this applies not only to his appreciations of Shakespeare and other famous writers where his judgment may have been influenced or confirmed by generations of critics before him or by public opinion, but even to the major and minor living writers of his own time. That the cases where posterity has proved him to be wrong or mistaken in his judgment of a contemporary are so very few is in itself a sufficient evidence for the soundness of his critical work. Love and hate, personal friendship or enmity, political prejudice and party strife, did play a great part in his life; but in his critical work they never moved him either to extol ugliness or to deny praise to beauty.

Karel Štěpaník.