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7. Hazlitt's My First Acquaintance with Poets

Life:

- William Hazlitt was an **English writer, drama and literary critic, painter, social commentator, and philosopher.**
- He is now considered one of the greatest critics and essayists in the history of the English language, placed in the company of Samuel Johnson and George Orwell.
- William Hazlitt was born on **10 April 1778 in Mitre Lane, Maidstone, England.**
- His father was **William Hazlitt Sr., a Unitarian minister** in England and Grace Loftus..
- He was educated **mainly at home and at a local school.**
- At 13 he debuted in writing with a letter, which was published in the '**Shrewsbury Chronicle**'.
- In 1793 he was sent to **the New College at Hackney, a Unitarian Seminary.**
- While studying at the college, Hazlitt had **a loss of faith** and returned home to Wem.
- **On 14 January 1798, Hazlitt met Samuel Taylor Coleridge** at the Unitarian Chapel in Shrewsbury.
- While visiting him at his residence in Nether Stowey, Hazlitt also came in contact with **William Wordsworth.**
- In 1808, Hazlitt married **Sarah Stoddart**, a friend of Mary Lamb and sister of John Stoddart, a journalist.
- Hazlitt took keen interest in **painting.**
- **A fallout** with Coleridge and Wordsworth happened **when he allegedly assaulted a woman** while visiting Lake District to paint the portraits of the two authors.
- He died on **18 September 1830.**
- **His last words** were reported to have been "**Well, I've had a happy life**".
- William Hazlitt was buried in **the churchyard of St Anne's Church, Soho** in London on 23 September 1830, **with only his son William, Charles Lamb, P.G. Patmore, and possibly a few other friends in attendance.**

Career:

- Hazlitt **moved to London in 1804** in order to shape up his writing career.
- On 19 July 1805, he published '**An Essay on the Principles of Human Action**' with the help of **William Godwin.**

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- In January 1812 Hazlitt began his career **as a lecturer** by delivering a series of talks on the British philosophers at the Russell Institution in London.
- In October 1812, he was hired by **'The Morning Chronicle'**, the Whig newspaper as a **parliamentary reporter**.
- In 1817, **'The Round Table'** was published.
- It was **a collection of forty essays** by Hazlitt and **a dozen by Leigh Hunt**.
- Hazlitt brought out **'Characters of Shakespeare's Plays'** in 1817.
- This book established him as a leading Shakespearean critic of the time.
- In the following years, a few of his lectures delivered in different universities came out in the form of books: **'Lectures on the English Poets' (1818)**, **'A View of the English Stage' (1818)** and **'Lectures on the English Comic Writers' (1819)**.
- He gave his last years were given to **an unsuccessful biography of Napoleon Bonaparte** in four volumes (1828–1830).

Major Works:

- **'Characters of Shakespeare's Plays' (1817)** is the representative of Hazlitt's literary criticism.
- The book contains subjective commentary on famous Shakespearean protagonists like **Macbeth and Hamlet**, and introduces his concept of **'gusto'**.
- **Table-Talk** (1821–22) and **The Round Table** (1817) are his two finest collections of essays, even though they received a lot of negative reviews at the time.
- **Libre Amoris**.

Other works:

- *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805).
- *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs* (1806).
- *A Reply to the Essay on Population, by the Rev. T. R. Malthus* (1807) *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners* (with Leigh Hunt; 1817)
- *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817).
- *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818)
- *A View of the English Stage* (1818)

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- *Lectures on the English Comic Writers (1819)*
- *Political Essays, with Sketches of Public Characters (1819)*
- *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth (1820)*
- *Table-Talk (1825)*
- *Liber Amoris: or, The New Pygmalion (1823)*
- *The Spirit of the Age (1825).*
- *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things (1826) – Volume I and Volume II*
- *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy (1826)*
- *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte (four volumes; 1828–1830).*

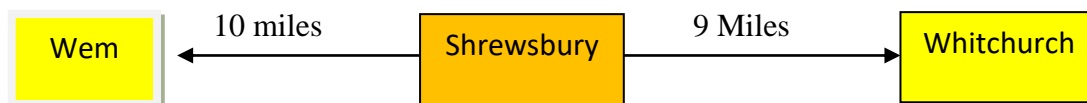
Quotes:

- **“The art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as of being heard.” - William Hazlitt, Selected Essays, 1778-1830**
- **“Love turns, with little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal.” - William Hazlitt, On the Pleasure of Hating**
- **“Life is the art of being well-deceived; and in order that the deception may succeed it must be habitual and uninterrupted.” - William Hazlitt, The Round Table.**
- **“The art of life is to know how to enjoy a little and to endure much.” - William Hazlitt.**
- **“The only impeccable writers are those who never wrote.” - William Hazlitt**
- **“Prejudice is the child of ignorance.” - William Hazlitt.**

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My First Acquaintance with Poets

Genre	:	Essay (Personal)
Full title	:	My First Acquaintance with Poets
Written and Published	:	April, 1823 - in the The Liberal
Source	:	On 14 January 1798 writer meets Coleridge and later Wordsworth in the spring
Speaker	:	Writer
Listener	:	General audience
Setting	:	Wem, Shrewsbury, Nether Stowey, Alfoxton
Theme	:	Reverence for the poets and their poetic genius
Main Characters	:	Hazlitt Sr. - Wem (10 miles from S.B) William Hazlitt - Wem S.T Coleridge - Nether Stowey John Chester - Nether Stowey Wordsworth - Alfoxton Dorothy - Alfoxton Mr. Rowe - Shrewsbury Mr. Jenkins - Whitchurch (9 miles fro S.B)



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My First Acquaintance with Poets

Text

My father was a Dissenting Minister, at Wem, in Shropshire; and in the year 1798 (the figures that compose the date are to me like the "dreaded name of Demogorgon"). Mr Coleridge came to Shrewsbury, to succeed Mr Rowe in the spiritual charge of a Unitarian Congregation there. He did not come till late on the Saturday afternoon before he was to preach; and Mr Rowe, who himself went down to the coach, in a state of anxiety and expectation, to look for the arrival of his successor, could find no one at all answering the description but a round-faced man, in a short black coat (like a shooting-jacket) which hardly seemed to have been made for him, but who seemed to be talking at a great rate to his fellow-passengers. Mr Rowe had scarce returned to give an account of his disappointment when the round-faced man in black entered, and dissipated all doubts on the subject by beginning to talk. He did not cease while he stayed; nor has he since, that I know of. He held the good town of Shrewsbury in delightful suspense for three weeks that he remained there, "fluttering the proud Salopians, like an eagle in a dove-cote"; and the Welsh mountains that skirt the horizon with their tempestuous confusion, agree to have heard no such mystic sound since the days of "High-born Hoel's harp or soft Llewellyn's lay."

As we passed along between Wem and Shrewsbury, and I eyed their blue tops seen through the wintry branches, or the red rustling leaves of the sturdy oak-trees by the road-side, a sound was in my ears as of a Siren's song; I was stunned, startled with it, as from deep sleep; but I had no notion then that I should ever be able to express my admiration to others in motley imagery or quaint allusion, till the light of his genius shone into my soul, like the sun's rays glittering in the puddles of the road. I was at that time dumb, inarticulate, helpless, like a worm by the way-side, crushed, bleeding lifeless; but now, bursting from the deadly bands that "bound them, "With Styx nine times round them,"

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

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and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge. But this is not to my purpose.

My father lived ten miles from Shrewsbury, and was in the habit of exchanging visits with Mr Rowe, and with Mr Jenkins of Whitchurch (nine miles farther on), according to the custom of Dissenting Ministers in each other's neighbourhood. A line of communication is thus established, by which the flame of civil and religious liberty is kept alive, and nourishes its smouldering fire unquenchable, like the fires in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, placed at different stations, that waited for ten long years to announce with their blazing pyramids the destruction of Troy. Coleridge had agreed to come over and see my father, according to the courtesy of the country, as Mr Rowe's probable successor; but in the meantime, I had gone to hear him preach the Sunday after his arrival. A poet and a philosopher getting up into a Unitarian pulpit to preach the gospel, was a romance in these degenerate days, a sort or revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity, which was not to be resisted.

It was in January of 1798, that I rose one morning before day-light to walk ten miles in the mud, to hear this celebrated person preach. Never, the longest day I have to live, shall I have such another walk as this cold, raw, comfortless one, in the winter of the Year 1798. Il y a des impressions que ni le tems ni les circonstances peuvent effacer. Dusse-je vivre des siecles entiers, le doux tems de ma jeunesse ne peut renatre pour moi, ni s'effacer jamais dans ma memoire. When I got there, the organ was playing the 100th Psalm, and when it was done, Mr Coleridge rose and gave out his text, "And he went up into the mountain to pray, HIMSELF, ALONE." As he gave out this text, his voice "rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes," and when he came to the two last words, which he pronounced loud, deep, and distinct, it seemed to me, who was then young, as if the sounds had echoed from the bottom of the human heart, and as if that prayer might have floated in solemn silence through the universe. The idea of St. John came into my mind, "of one crying in the wilderness, who had his loins girt about, and whose food was locusts and wild honey." The preacher then launched into his subject, like an eagle dallying with the wind. The sermon was upon peace and war; upon church and state, not their alliance, but their separation -- on the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christianity, not the same, but as opposed to one another. He talked of those who had "inscribed the cross of Christ on banners dripping with human gore." He made a poetical and pastoral excursion -- and to

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show the fatal effects of war, drew a striking contrast between the simple shepherd-boy, driving his team afield, or sitting under the hawthorne, piping to his flock, "as though he should never been old," and the same poor country-lad, crimped, kidnapped, brought into town, made drunk at an alehouse, turned into a wretched drummer-boy, with his hair sticking on end with powder and pomatum, a long cue at his back, and tricked out in the loathsome finery of the profession of blood: "Such were the notes our once-loved poet sung."

And for myself, I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion. This was even beyond my hopes. I returned home well satisfied. The sun that was still labouring pale and wan through the sky, obscured by thick mists, seemed an emblem of the good cause; and the cold dank drops of dew, that hung half melted on the beard of the thistle, had something genial and refreshing in them; for there was a spirit of hope and youth in all nature, that turned everything into good. The face of nature had not then the brand of JUS DIVINUM on it: "Like to that a sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe."

On the Tuesday following, the half-inspired speaker came. I was called down into the room where he was, and went half-hoping, half-afraid. He received me very graciously, and I listened for a long time without uttering a word. I did not suffer in his opinion by my silence. "For those two hours, " he afterwards was pleased to say, "he was conversing with William Hazlitt's forehead!" His appearance was different from what I had anticipated from seeing him before. At a distance, and in the dim light of chapel, here was to me a strange wildness in his aspect, a dusky obscurity, and I thought him pitted with the small-box. His complexion was at that time clear, and even bright -- "As are the children of yon azure sheen."

His forehead was broad and high, light as if built on ivory, with large projecting eyebrows, and his eyes rolling beneath them, like a sea with darkened lustre. "A certain tender bloom his face o'erspread," a purple tinge as we see it in the pale thoughtful complexions of the Spanish portrait-painters, Murillo and Valesquez. His mouth was gross, voluptuous, open, eloquent; his chin good-humoured and round; but his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing -- like what he has done. It might seem that the genius of his face as from a height surveyed and projected him (with sufficient capacity and huge aspiration)

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into the world unknown of thought and imagination, with nothing to support or guide his veering purpose, as if Columbus had launched his adventurous course for the New World in a scallop, without oars or compass. So, at least, I comment on it after the event. Coleridge, in his person, was rather above the common size, inclining to be corpulent, or like Lord Hamlet, "somewhat fat and pury." His hair (now, alas! Grey) was then black and glossy as the raven's, and fell in smooth masses over his forehead. This long pendulous hair is peculiar to enthusiasts, to those whose minds tend heavenward; and is traditionally inseparable (though of a different colour) from the pictures of Christ. It ought to belong, as a character, to all who preach Christ crucified, and Coleridge was at that time one of those!

It was curious to observe the contrast between him and my father, who was a veteran in the cause, and then declining into the vale of years. He had been a poor Irish lad, carefully brought up by his parents, and sent to the University of Glasgow (where he studied under Adam Smith) to prepare him for his future destination. It was his mother's proudest wish to see her son a Dissenting Minister. So, if we look back to past generations (as far as eye can reach), we see the same hopes, fears, wishes, followed by the same disappointments, throbbing in the human heart; and so we may see them (if we look forward) rising up for ever, and disappearing, like vaporish bubbles in the human breast! After being tossed about from congregation to congregation in the heats of the Unitarian controversy, and squabbles about the American war, he had been relegated to an obscure village, where he was to spend the last thirty years of his life, far from the only converse that he loved, the talk about disputed texts of Scripture, and the cause of civil and religious liberty. Here he passed his days, repining, but resigned, in the study of the Bible and the perusal of the Commentators -- huge folios, not easily got through, one of which would outlast a winter! Why did he pore on these from morn to night (with the exception of a walk in the fields or a turn in the garden to gather broccoli-plants or kidney beans of his own rearing, with no small degree of pride and pleasure)? Here were "no figures nor no fantasies" -- neither poetry nor philosophy -- nothing to dazzle, nothing to excite modern curiosity; but to his lack-lustre eyes there appeared within the pages of the ponderous, unwieldy, neglected tomes, the sacred name of JEHOVAH in Hebrew capitals: pressed down by the weight of the style, worn to the last fading thinness of the understanding, there were glimpses, glimmering notions of the patriarchal wanderings, with plam-trees hovering in the horizon, and the processions of camels at the distance of three thousand years; there was Moses with the

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Burning Bush, the number of the Twelve Tribes, types, shadows, glosses on the law and the prophets; there were discussions (dull enough) on the age of Methuselah, a mighty speculation! There were outlines, rude guesses at the shape of Noah's Ark and the riches of Solomon's Temple; questions as to the date of the creation, predictions of the end of all things; the great lapses of time, the strange mutations of the globe were unfolded with the voluminous leaf, as it turned over; and though the soul might slumber with an hieroglyphic veil of inscrutable mysteries drawn over it, yet it was in a slumber ill-exchanged for all the sharpened realities of sense, wit, fancy, or reason. My father's life was comparatively a dream; but it was a dream of infinity and eternity, of death, the resurrection, and a judgment to come!

*No two individuals were ever more unlike than were the host and his guest. A poet was to my father a sort of nondescript; yet whatever added grace to the Unitarian cause was to him welcome. He could hardly have been more surprised or pleased, if our visitor had worn wings. Indeed, his thoughts had wings: and as the silken sound rustled round our little wainscoted parlour, my father threw back his spectacles over his forehead, his white hairs mixing with its sanguine hue; and a smile of delight beamed across his rugged, cordial face, to think that Truth had found a new ally in Fancy!² Besides, Coleridge seemed to take considerable notice of me, and that of itself was enough. He talked very familiarly, but agreeably, and glanced over a variety of subjects. At dinner-time he grew more animated, and dilated in a very edifying manner on Mary Wolstonecraft and Mackintosh.³ The last, he said, he considered (on my father's speaking of his *Vindiciae Gallicae* as a capital performance) as a clever, scholastic man -- a master of the topics -- or, as the ready warehouseman of letters, who knew exactly where to lay his hand on what he wanted, though the goods were not his own. He thought him no match for Burke, either in style or matter. Burke was a metaphysician, Mackintosh a mere logician. Burke was an orator (almost a poet) who reasoned in figures, because he had an eye for nature: Mackintosh, on the other hand, was a rhetorician, who had only an eye to common-places. On this I venture to say that I had always entertained a great opinion of Burke, and that (as far as I could find) the speaking of him with contempt might be made the test of a vulgar, democratical mind. This was the first observation I ever made to Coleridge, and he said it was a very just and striking one. I remember the leg of Welsh mutton and the turnips on the table that day had the finest flavour imaginable. Coleridge added that Mackintosh and Tom Wedgwood (or whom, however he spoke highly) had expressed a very indifferent opinion of his friend Mr Wordsworth,*

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on which he remarked to them -- "He strides on so far before you, that he dwindles in the distance!" Godwin had once boasted to him of having carried on an argument with Mackintosh for three hours with dubious success; Coleridge told him -- "If there had been a man of genius in the room, he would have settled the question in five minutes." He asked me if I had ever seen Mary Wolstonecraft, and I said, I had once for a few moments, and that she seemed to me to turn off Godwin's objections to something she advanced with quite a playful, easy air. He replied, that "this was only one instance of the ascendancy which people of imagination exercised over those of mere intellect." He did not rate Godwin very high (this was caprice or prejudice, real or affected), but he had a great idea of Mrs Wolstonecraft's powers of conversation; none at all of her talent for book-making. We talked a little about Holcroft. He had been asked if he was not much struck with him, and he said, he thought himself in more danger of being struck by him. I complained that he would not let me get on at all, for he required a definition of even the commonest word, exclaiming, "What do you mean by a sensation, Sir? What do you mean by an idea?" This, Coleridge said, was barricading the road to truth; it was setting up a turnpike-gate at every step we took. I forget a great number of things, many more than I remember; but the day passed off pleasantly, and the next morning Mr Coleridge was to return to Shrewsbury. When I came down to breakfast, I found that he had just received a letter from his friend, T. Wedgwood, making him an offer of 150L a-year if he chose to waive his present pursuit, and devote himself entirely to the study of poetry and philosophy. Coleridge seemed to make up his mind to close with this proposal in the act of tying on one of his shoes. It threw an additional damp on his departure. It took the wayward enthusiast quite from us to cast him into Deva's winding vales, or by the shores of old romance. Instead of living at ten miles' distance, of being a pastor of a Dissenting congregation at Shrewsbury, he was henceforth to inhabit the Hill of Parnassus, to be a Shepherd on the Delectable Mountains. Alas! I knew not the way thither, and felt very little gratitude for Mr Wedgwood's bounty. I was presently relived from this dilemma; for Mr Coleridge, asking for a pen and ink, and going to at table to write something on a bit of card, advanced towards me with undulating step, and giving me the precious document, said that that was his address, Mr Coleridge, Nether-Stowey, Somersetshire; and that he should be glad to see me there in a few weeks' time, and, if I chose, would come half-way to meet me. I was not less surprised than the shepherd-boy (this simile is to be found in Cassandra), when he sees a thunder-bolt fall close at his feet. I stammered out my acknowledgments and acceptance of this offer (I thought Mr Wedgwood's annuity a trifle to it) as well as I could; and this mighty business

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being settled, the poet-preacher took leave, and I accompanied him six miles on the road. It was a fine morning in the middle of winter, and he talked the whole way. The scholar in Chaucer is described as going-----"Sounding on his way."

So Coleridge went on his. In digressing, in dilating, in passing from subject to subject, he appeared to me to float in air, to slide on ice. He told me in confidence (going along) that he should have preached two sermons before he accepted the situation at Shrewbury, one on Infant Baptism, the other on the Lord's Supper, showing that he could not administer either, which would have effectually disqualified him for the object in view. I observed that he continually crossed me on the way by shifting from one side of the foot-path to the other. This struck me as an odd movement; but I did not at that time connect it with an instability of purpose or involuntary change of principle, as I have done since. He seemed unable to keep on in a straight line. He spoke slightly of Hume (whose Essay on Miracles he said was stolen from an objection started in one of South's sermons -- Credat Judeaus Apella!) I was not very much pleased at this account of Hume, for I had just been reading, with infinite relish, that completest of all metaphysical choke-pears, his Treatise on Human Nature, to which the Essays, in point of scholastic subtlety and close reasoning are mere elegant trifling, light summer reading. Coleridge even denied the excellence of Hume's general style, which I think betrayed a want of taste or candour. He however, made me amends by the manner in which he spoke of Berkeley. He dwelt particularly on his Essay on Vision as a masterpiece of analytical reasoning. So it undoubtedly is. He was exceedingly angry with Dr Johnson for striking the stone with his foot, in allusion to this author's Theory of Matter and Spirit, and saying "Thus I confute him, Sir." Coleridge drew a parallel (I don't know how he brought about the connexion) between Bishop Berkeley and Tom Paine. He said the one was an instance of a subtle, the other of an acute mind, than which no two things could be more distinct. The one was a shop-boy's quality, the other the characteristic of a philosopher. He considered Bishop Butler [1774-1839] as a true philosopher, a profound and conscientious thinker, a genuine reader of nature and his own mind. He did not speak of his Analogy, but of his Sermons at the Rolls' Chapel, of which I had never heard. Coleridge somehow always contrived to prefer the unknown to the known. In this instance he was right. The Analogy is a tissue of sophistry, of wire-drawn, theological special-pleading; the Sermons (with the preface to them) are in a fine vein of deep, matured reflection, a candid appeal to our observation of human nature, without pedantry and without bias. I told Coleridge I

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had written a few remarks, and was sometimes foolish enough to believe that I had made a discovery on the same subject (The Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind) -- and I tried to explain my view of it to Coleridge, who listened with great willingness, but I did not succeed in making myself understood. I sat down to the task shortly afterwards for the twentieth time, got new pens and paper, determined to make clear work of it, wrote a few meagre sentences in the skeleton-style of a mathematical demonstration, stopped half-way down the second page; and after trying in vain to pump up any words, images, notions, apprehensions, facts or observations, from that gulph of abstraction in which I had plunged myself for four or five years preceding, gave up the attempt as labour in vain, and shed tears of helpless despondency on the blank unfinished paper. I can write fast enough now. Am I better than I was then? Or no! One truth discovered, one pang of regret at not being able to express it, is better than all the fluency and flippancy in the world. Would that I could go back to what I then was! Why can we not revive past times as we can revisit old places? If I had the quaint Muse of Sir Philip Sidney to assist me, I would write a Sonnet to the Road between Wem and Shrewsbury, and immortalise every step of it by some fond enigmatical conceit. I would swear that the very milestones had ears, and that Harmer-hill stooped with all its pines, to listen to a poet, as he passed! I remember but one other topic of discourse in this walk. He mentioned Paley, praised the naturalness and clearness of his style, but condemned his sentiments, thought him a mere time-serving casuist, and said that "the fact of his work on Moral and Political Philosophy being made a text book in our Universities was a disgrace to the natural character." We parted at the six-mile stone; and I returned homeward, pensive, but much pleased. I had met with unexpected notice from a person whom I believed to have been prejudiced against me. "Kind and affable to me had been his condescension and should be honoured ever with suitable regard." He was the first poet I had known, and he certainly answered to that inspired name. I had heard a great deal of his powers of conversation, and was not disappointed. In fact, I never met with anything at all like them, either before or since, I could easily credit the accounts which were circulated of his holding forth to a large party of ladies and gentlemen, an evening or two before, on the Berkeleyian Theory, when he made the whole material universe look like a transparency of fine words; and another story (which I believe he has somewhere told himself) of his being asked to a party at Birmingham, of his smoking tobacco and going to sleep after dinner on a sofa, where the company found him, to their no small surprise, which was increased to wonder when he started up of a sudden, and rubbing his eyes, looked about him, and launched into a three hours'

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description of the third heaven, of which he had had a dream, very different from Mr Southey's Vision of Judgment, and also from that other Vision of Judgment, which Mr Murray, the Secretary of the Bridge-street Junto, took into his especial keeping!

On my way back, I had a sound in my ears -- it was the voice of Fancy; I had a light before me -- it was the face of Poetry. The one still lingers there, the other has not quitted my side! Coleridge, in truth, met me half-way on the ground of philosophy, or I should not have been won over to his imaginative creed. I had an uneasy, pleasurable sensation all the time, till I was to visit him. During those months the chill breath of winter gave me a welcoming; the vernal air was balm and inspiration to me. The golden sun-sets, the silver star of evening, lighted me on my way to new hopes and prospects. I was to visit Coleridge in the Spring. This circumstance was never absent from my thoughts, and mingled with all my feelings. I wrote to him at the time proposed, and received an answer postponing my intended visit for a week or two, but very cordially urging me to complete my promise then. This delay did not damp, but rather increased my ardour. In the meantime, I went to Llangollen Vale, by way of initiating myself in the mysteries of natural scenery; and I must say I was enchanted with it. I had been reading Coleridge's description of England in his fine Ode on the Departing Year, and I applied it, con amore, to the objects before me. That valley was to me (in a manner) the cradle of a new existence: in the river that winds through it, my spirit was baptised in the waters of Helicon!

I returned home, and soon after set out on my journey with unworn heart, and untried feet. My way lay through Worcester and Gloucester, and by Upton, where I thought of Tom Jones and the adventure of the muff. I remember getting completely wet through one day, and stopping at an inn (I think it was at Tewkesbury) where I sat up all night to read Paul and Virginia. Sweet were the showers in early youth that drenched my body, and sweet the drops of pity that fell upon the books I read! I recollect a remark of Coleridge's upon this very book -- that nothing could show the gross indelicacy of French manners and the entire corruption of their imagination more strongly than the behaviour of the heroine in the last fatal scene, who turns away from a person on board the sinking vessel, that offers to save her life, because he has thrown off his clothes to assist him in swimming. Was this a time to think of such a circumstance? I once hinted to Wordsworth, as we were sailing in his boat on Grasmere lake, that I thought he had borrowed the idea of his Poems on the Naming of Places, from the local

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inscriptions of the same kind in Paul and Virginia. He did not own the obligation, and stated some distinction without a difference, in defense of his claim to originality. Any the slightest variation would be sufficient for this purpose in his mind; for whatever he added or altered would inevitably be worth all that any one else had done, and contain the marrow of the sentiment. -- I was still two days before the time fixed for my arrival, for I had taken care to set out early enough, I stopped these two days at Bridgewater; and when I was tired of sauntering on the banks of its muddy river, returned to the inn and read Camilla. So have I loitered my life away, reading books, looking at pictures, going to plays, hearing, thinking, writing on what pleased me best. I have wanted only one thing to make me happy; but wanting that, have wanted everything!

I arrived, and was well received. The country about Nether Stowey is beautiful, green and hilly, and near the sea-shore. I saw it but the other day, after an interval of twenty years, from a hill near Taunton. How was the map of my life spread out before me, as the map of the country lay at my feet!. In the afternoon, Coleridge took me over to All-Foxden, a romantic old family mansion of the St. Aubins, where Wordsworth lived. It was then in the possession of a friend of the poet's who gave him the free use of it. Somehow, that period (the time just after the French Revolution) was not a time when nothing was given for nothing. The mind opened and a softness might be perceived coming over the heart of individuals beneath "the scales that fence" our self-interest. Wordsworth himself was from home, but his sister kept house, and set before us a frugal repast; and we had free access to her brother's poems, the Lyrical Ballads, which were still in manuscript, or in the form of Sybilline Leaves. I dipped into a few of these with great satisfaction, and with the faith of a novice. I slept that night in an old room with blue hangings and covered with round-faced family-portraits of the age of George I and II, and from the wooded declivity of the adjoining park that overlooked my window, at the dawn of day, could ---"hear the loud stag speak."

In the outset of life (and particularly at this time I felt it so) our imagination has a body to it. We are in a state between sleeping and waking, and have indistinct but glorious glimpses of strange shapes, and there is always something to come better than what we see. As in our dreams the fullness of the blood gives warmth and reality to the coinage of the brain, so in youth our ideas are clothed, and fed, and pampered with our good sprits, we breathe thick with

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thoughtless happiness, the weight of future years presses on the strong pulses of the heart, and we repose with undisturbed faith in truth and good. As we advance, we exhaust our fund of enjoyment and of hope. We are no longer wrapped in lamb's-wool lulled in Elysium. As we taste the pleasures of life, their spirit evaporates, the sense palls; and nothing is left but the phantoms, the lifeless shadows of what has been!

That morning, as soon as breakfast was over, we strolled out into the park, and seating ourselves on the trunk of an old ash-tree that stretched along the ground, Coleridge read aloud with a sonorous and musical voice, the ballad of Betty Foy. I was not critically or sceptically inclined. I saw touches of truth and nature, and took the rest for granted. But in the Thorn, the Mad Mother, and the Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman, I felt that deeper power and pathos which have been since acknowledged, "In spite of pride, in erring reason's spite," as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to me something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of Spring; "While yet the trembling year is unconfirmed."

Coleridge and myself walked back to Stowey that evening, and his voice sounded high "Of Providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate, Fix'd fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute." as we passed through echoing grove, by fair stream or waterfall gleaming in the summer moonlight! He lamented that Wordsworth was not prone enough to believe in the traditional superstitions of the place and that there was something corporeal, a-matter-of-fact-ness, a clinging to the palpable, or often to the petty, in his poetry, in consequence. His genius was not a spirit that descended to him through the air; it sprung out of the ground like a flower, or unfolded itself from a green spray, on which the goldfinch sang. He said, however (if I remember right), that this objection must be confined to his descriptive pieces, that his philosophic poetry had a grand and comprehensive spirit, in it, so that his soul seemed to inhabit the universe like a palace, and to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction. The next day Wordsworth arrived from Bristol at Coleridge's cottage. I think I see him now. He answered in some degree to his friend's description of him, but was more quaint and Don Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed (according the costume of that unconstrained period) in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons. There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own Peter Bell. There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye (as if he

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saw something in objects more than the outward appearance), an intense, high, narrow forehead, a Roman nose cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a conclusive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face. Chantrey's bust wants the marking traits; but he was teased into making it regular and heavy: Haydon's head of him, introduced into the Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, is the most like his drooping weight of thought and expression. He sat down and talked very naturally and freely, with a mixture of clear, gushing accents in his voice, a deep guttural intonation, and a strong tincture of the northern burr, like the crust on wine. He instantly began to make havoc of the half of a Cheshire cheese on the table, and said, triumphantly, that "his marriage with experience had not been so productive as Mr Southey's in teaching him a knowledge of the good things of this life." He had been to see the Castle Spectre by Monk Lewis, while at Bristol, and described it very well. He said "it fitted the taste of the audience like a glove." This ad captandum merit was however by no means a recommendation of it, according to the severe principles of the new school, which reject rather than court popular effect. Wordsworth, looking out of the low, latticed window, said, "How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank!" I thought within myself, "With what eyes these poets see nature!" and ever after, when I saw the sun-set stream upon the objects facing it, conceived I had made a discovery, or thanked Mr Wordsworth for having made one for me! We went over to All-Foxden again the day following, and Wordsworth read us the story of Peter Bell in the open air; and the comment made upon it by his face and voice was very different from that of some later critics! Whatever might be thought of the poem, "His face was as a book where men might read strange matters," and he announced the fate of his hero in prophetic tones. There was a chaunt in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgment. Perhaps they have deceived themselves by making habitual use of this ambiguous accompaniment. Coleridge's manner is more full, animated, and varied; Wordsworth's more equable, sustained, and internal. The one might be termed more dramatic, the other more lyrical. Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the stragglng branches of a copse-wood, whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruptions. Returning that same evening, I got into a metaphysical argument with Wordsworth, while Coleridge was explaining the different notes of the nightingale to his sister, which we neither of us succeeded in making ourselves perfectly

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clear and intelligible. Thus I passed three weeks at Nether Stowey and in the neighborhood, generally devoting the afternoons to a delightful chat in an arbour made of bark by the poet's friend Tom Poole, sitting under to fine elm trees, and listening to the bees humming round us, while we quaffed our flip. It was agreed, among other things, that we should make a jaunt down the Bristol Channel, as far as Linton. We set off together on foot, Coleridge, John Chester, and I. This Chester was a native of Nether Stowey, one of those who were attracted to Coleridge's discourse as flies are to honey, or bees in swarming-time to the sound of a brass pan. He "followed in the chace like a dog who hunts, not like one that made up the cry." He had on a brown cloth coat, boots, and corduroy breeches, was low in stature, bow-legged, had a drag on his walk like a drover, which he assisted by a hazel switch, and kept on a sort of trot by the side of Coleridge, like a running footman by a state coach, that he might not lose a syllable or sound that fell from Coleridge's lips. He told me his private opinion that Coleridge was a wonderful man. He scarcely opened his lips, much less offered an opinion the whole way: yet of the three, had I to choose during the journey, I would be John Chester. He afterwards followed Coleridge into Germany, were the Kantean philosophers were puzzled how to bring him under any of their categories. When he sat down at table with his idol, John's felicity was complete; Sir Walter Scot's or Mr Blackwood's when they sat down at the same table with the King, was not more so. We passed Dunster on our right, a small town between the brow of the a hill and the sea. I remember eyeing it wistfully as it lay below us: contrasted with the woody scene around, it looked as clear, as pure, as embrowned and ideal as any landscape I have seen since, of Gaspar Poussin's or Domenichino's. We had a long day's march -- (our feet kept time to the echoes of Coleridge's tongue) -- through Minehead and by the Blue Anchor, and on to Linton, which we did not reach till near midnight, and where we had some difficulty in making a lodgment. We, however, knocked the people of the house up at last, and we were repaid for our apprehensions and fatigue by some excellent rashers of fried bacon and eggs. The view in coming along had been splended. We walked for miles and miles on dark brown heaths overlooking the Channel, with the Welsh hills beyond, and at times descended into little sheltered valleys close by the sea-side, with a smuggler's face scowling by us, and then had to ascend conical hills with a path winding up through a coppice to a barren top, like a monk's shaven crown, from one of which I pointed out to Coleridge's notice the bare masts of a vessel on the very edge of the horizon, and within the red-orbed disk of the setting sun, like his own spectre-ship in the Ancient Mariner. At Linton the character of the sea-coast becomes more marked and rugged. There is a place called the

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Valley of Rocks (I suspect this was only the poetical name for it,) bedded among precipices overhanging the sea, with rocky caverns beneath, into which the waves dash, and where the sea-gull for ever wheels its screaming flight. On the tops of these are huge stones thrown transverse, as if an earthquake had tossed them there, and behind these is a fretwork of perpendicular rocks, something like the Giant's Causeway. A thunderstorm came on while we were at the inn, and Coleridge was running out bare-headed to enjoy the commotion of the elements in the Valley of Rocks, but as if in spite, the clouds only muttered a few angry sounds, and let fall a few refreshing drops. Coleridge told me that he and Wordsworth were to have made this place the scene of a prose-tale, which was to have been in the manner of, but far superior to, the Death of Abel, but they had relinquished the design. In the morning of the second day, we breakfasted luxuriously in an old-fashioned parlour on tea, toast, eggs, and honey, in the very sight of the bee-hives from which it had been taken, and a garden full of thyme and wildflowers that had produced it. On this occasion Coleridge spoke of Virgil's Georgics, but not well. I do not think he had much feeling for the classical or elegant. It was in this room that we found a little worn-out copy of the Seasons, lying in a window-seat, on which Coleridge exclaimed, "That is true fame!" He said Thomson was a great poet, rather than a good one; his style was as meretricious as his thoughts were natural. He spoke of Cowper as the best modern poet. He said the Lyrical Ballads were an experiment about to be tried by him and Wordsworth, to see how far the public taste would endure poetry written in a more natural and simple style than had hitherto been attempted; totally discarding the artifices of poetical diction, and making use only of such words as had probably been common in the most ordinary language since the days of Henry II. Some comparison was introduced between Shakspeare and Milton. He said "he hardly knew which to prefer. Shakspeare appeared to him a mere stripling in the art, he was as tall and as strong, with infinitely more activity than Milton, but he never appeared to have come to man's estate; of if he had, he would not have been a man, but a monster." He spoke with contempt for Gray, and with intolerance of Pope. He did not like the versification of the latter. He observed that "the ears of these couplet-writers might be charged with having short memories that could not retain the harmony of whole passages." He thought little of Junius as a writer, he had a dislike of Dr Johnson; and much higher opinion of Burke as an orator and politician, than of Fox or Pitt. He, however, thought him very inferior in richness of style and imagery to some of our elder prose-writers, particularly Jeremy Taylor. He liked Richardson, but not Fielding; nor could I get him to enter in the merits of Caleb Williams.⁵ In short, he was profound and discriminating with

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respect to those authors whom he liked, and where he gave his judgment fair play; capricious, perverse, and prejudiced in his antipathies and distastes. We loitered on the "ribbed sea-sands," in such talk as this a whole morning, and, I recollect, met with a curious sea-weed, of which John Chester told us the country name! A fisherman gave Coleridge an account of a boy that had been drowned the day before, and that they had tried to save him at the risk of their own lives. He said "he did not know how it was that they ventured, but Sir, we have a nature towards one another." This expression Coleridge remarked to me, was a fine illustration of that theory of disinterestedness which I (in common with Butler) had adopted. I broached to him an argument of mine to prove that likeness was not mere association of ideas. I said the mark in the sand put one in mind of a man's foot, not because it was part of a former impression of a man's foot (for it was quite new), but because it was like the shape of a man's foot. He assented to the justness of this distinction (which I have explained at length elsewhere, for the benefit of the curious) and John Chester listened; not from any interest in the subject, but because he was astonished that I should be able to suggest anything to Coleridge that he did not already know. We returned on the third morning, and Coleridge remarked the silent cottage-smoke curling up the valleys where, a few evenings before we had seen the lights gleaming through the dark.

In a day or two after we arrived at Stowey, we set out, I on my return home, and he for Germany. It was a Sunday morning, and he was to preach that day for Dr Toulmin of Taunton. I asked him if he had prepared anything for the occasion? He said he had not even thought of the text, but should as soon as we parted. I did not go to hear him -- this was a fault -- but we met in the evening at Bridgewater. The next day we had a long day's walk to Bristol, and sat down, I recollect, by a well-side on the road, to cool ourselves and satisfy our thirst, when Coleridge repeated to me some descriptive lines of his tragedy of Remorse; which I must say became his mouth and that occasion better than they, some years after, did Mr Ellistons' and the Drury-lane boards –

"Oh, memory! Shield me from the world's poor strife,
And give these scenes thine everlasting life."

I saw no more of him for a year or two, during which period he had been wandering in the Hartz Forest, in Germany; and his return was cometary, meteorous, unlike his setting out. It was not till some time after that I knew of his friends Lamb and Southey. The last always appears

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to me (as I first saw him) with a commonplace book under his arm, and the first with a bon-mot in his mouth. It was at Godwin's that I met with Holcroft and Coleridge, where they were disputing fiercely which was the best -- Man as he was, or man as he is to be. "Give me," says Lamb, "man as he is not to be." This saying was the beginning of a friendship between us, which I believe still continues. -- Enough of this for the present.

*"But there is matter for another rhyme,
And I to this may add a second tale."*

My First Acquaintance with Poets - Summary:

1. Hazlitt's father was a clergy man who does not conform to the Established Church. In 1798, Coleridge came to Shrewsbury to preach a sermon and to take charge of the Unitarian Congregation from Mr. Rowe. At that time Hazlitt was a young man. He wanted to listen to the sermon. He got up early in the morning and walked ten miles to reach the destination. The subject of Coleridge's sermon could be described as Peace and War, the Church and the State, and the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christianity. Coleridge explained the fatal effects of war, the separation of the Church from the State and the separation of the spirit of Christianity from the modes of practical living. Hazlitt had the deepest admiration for Coleridge. In Coleridge's sermon Hazlitt found a meeting between poetry and philosophy and an embrace between truth and genius. Hazlitt was well satisfied. On the following Tuesday, Coleridge had come to Wem to meet Hazlitt's father. Hazlitt had another opportunity to meet Coleridge at close quarters. Coleridge treated Hazlitt graciously. Hazlitt listened to him without uttering a single word.

2. Coleridge's mouth was gross, voluptuous and eloquent. His forehead was broad and high, his chin was round and his nose small and feeble. He was more than common size in height. He was a corpulent figure. His hair was black and glossy like a raven's. It fell upon his forehead.

3. Hazlitt's father was a poor Irish boy. He was sent to the University of Glasgow. He studied under Adam Smith there. Hazlitt's father was posted to Wem where he spent the last thirty years of his life. There he spent his days in the study of the Bible and the commentaries on the Bible. His life was a dream of eternity, infinity, death, resurrection and of the judgment to

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come. This was the man to whom Coleridge visited. No two individuals are more unlike than Coleridge and Hazlitt's father. Coleridge was a poet. Hazlitt's father regarded poets as nonentities. Coleridge was a supporter of the Unitarian cause. Hazlitt's father too was a strong supporter. So Hazlitt's father smiled delightfully on meeting Coleridge.

4. Coleridge talked about a number of subjects. He took greater interest in Hazlitt. This pleased Hazlitt. Coleridge talked at length about the works of Mary Wolstonecraft, a leader of the feminist movement and Sir James Mackintosh, a strong supporter of human rights. He had high opinion on Mackintosh's 'Vindicae Galliae', a-defender of French Revolution. Coleridge compared Mackintosh with Burke and said that Burke was a metaphysician and Mackintosh, a logician. Hazlitt expressed his opinion on Burke which Coleridge endorsed. Hazlitt was pleased much. Coleridge did not have high opinion of Godwin; He had great idea of Wolstonecraft's power of Conversation not of book-making

5. The next morning Coleridge, received a letter at Shrewsbury from his friend T. Wedgwood. He offered him one hundred and fifty pounds a year if he were to devote entirely to the study of poetry and philosophy. Coleridge inclined to accept that offer. Hazlitt became depressed. Coleridge gave Hazlitt his address and asked him to visit him in a few week's time. Hazlitt felt honoured by this invitation. It was a fine morning in the mid winter. Coleridge took leave of them. Hazlitt accompanied him over about six miles. Coleridge talked the whole way passing from one subject to another. While walking, Coleridge was often shifting from one side of the foot-path to the other. Hazlitt felt that it was strange. He did not think that Coleridge would be unstable in his views and purposes.

6. Hazlitt had read the works of Hume with great relish. But Coleridge spoke scornfully of Hume, which Hazlitt did not enjoy. Coleridge even denied the excellence of Hume. Coleridge spoke high of Berkeley, especially his 'Essay on vision'. This pleased Hazlitt. Then Coleridge spoke of Bishop Butler as a true philosopher, a deep thinker and a genuine reader of Nature. Hazlitt had written a few comments on Bishop Butler. He explained it to Coleridge but failed to make his ideas clear.

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7. Hazlitt felt stimulated and exhilarated by Coleridge's company on the six-mile walk. If Hazlitt had been blessed with the gift of poetry, he would have written a sonnet in honour of that road. It seemed to Hazlitt that the milestones on the way had ears and the trees could hear Coleridge talking.

8. On the way Coleridge praised the naturalness and clearness of Paley's style but condemned his sentiments. He said that if Paley's works have been prescribed as a text-book in English Universities, it will be a disgrace.

9. At the end of the sixth mile Hazlitt parted from Coleridge. He felt happy and honoured. He felt that Coleridge had been kind and courteous to him. Coleridge was the first poet he had acquainted. He believed Coleridge was a true poet and came to know of his powers of conversation. He felt he himself had such powers. He did never come across a man with such powers. Hazlitt believed that on one occasion Coleridge would keep a large gathering of ladies and gentlemen spell bound with his talk on the Berkeleyian theory.

10. On the day of the walk, Coleridge's talk had been a blend of fancy and poetry. It seemed to Hazlitt that Coleridge had met him half-way on the ground of philosophy. Hazlitt waited for the time to visit Coleridge. He felt an uneasy, pleasurable sensation. The idea of visiting Coleridge got mingled with all his feelings.

11. Coleridge lived at Nether Stowey. Hazlitt visited him at the appointed time. The countryside around Stowey was green, hilly and beautiful. Coleridge took Hazlitt over to All Foxden, a mansion where Wordsworth was living. Wordsworth had gone to Bristol. He had gone to see the 'Castle of Spectre' by Monk Lewist, a writer of horror stories. Wordsworth's sister Dorothy showed them Wordsworth's poems in the 'Lyrical Ballads' which had not been published. Hazlitt was pleased. The next day Wordsworth visited Coleridge; Wordsworth was dressed strangely. There was a roll in the manner of his walking. It was similar to Peter Bell, a character in one of Wordsworth's poems. Wordsworth talked naturally and freely. While talking he ate the cheese on the table greedily. The taste for cheese he had acquired from Southey. Looking out of the window, he saw the sunset. He said that it was simply beautiful. Hazlitt felt the beauty of the sunset. On the next day, Coleridge and Hazlitt visited Wordsworth.

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Wordsworth read out the story of Peter Bell to them in the open air. Critics did not have high opinion about that poem. But Hazlitt felt deeply interested in the recitation of Wordsworth. Hazlitt felt there was a chant in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth. The chant acted as a spell upon the listeners. The manner of Coleridge's reciting a poem was animated, varied and dramatic, but that of Wordsworth was equable, sustained and lyrical. That evening Hazlitt had metaphysical discussion with Wordsworth. Coleridge conversed with Dorothy.

12. Hazlitt spent three weeks with Coleridge. Then they decided to go on a long walk down the Bristol Channel as far as Linton. They set out that expedition. John Chester, a native of Nether Stowey and one of the admirers of Coleridge joined them. Chester was attracted to the conversation of Coleridge. Later Chester went to Germany following Coleridge.

13. Coleridge, Hazlitt and Chester walked for miles overlooking the Channel, beyond the Welsh Hills. At times they descended into little sheltered valleys. There was Valley of Rocks. Coleridge and Wordsworth had planned to write a story by taking this valley as the background, but they had given up the plan. On the second day morning of their expedition, they took a sumptuous breakfast. Coleridge spoke of Virgil's 'Georgics'. Hazlitt felt that Coleridge had no appreciation of classical literature. Coleridge spoke of Thomson, the author of 'Seasons' as a great poet rather than a good poet. He said that the expression of Thomson was natural but the style was false. Then Coleridge described Cowper as the best modern poet.

14. Then Coleridge spoke of the 'Lyrical Ballads'. In the Lyrical Ballads Coleridge and Wordsworth had completely discarded the artifices of poetical diction. They made use of very common words in the most ordinary language. They were written in a natural and simple style to find out the reaction of the public.

15. Then Coleridge compared Shakespeare with Milton and puzzled to know which of them to prefer. He spoke contemptuously of Gray. He did not tolerate the versification of Pope and express a high opinion of Burke than of Fox or Pitt as an orator and politician. He liked Richardson but not Fielding; Hazlitt came to the conclusion that Coleridge was profound but discriminating in his judgments. He was capricious, perverse and prejudiced in his opinions about authors.

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It was a Sunday. All returned from the expedition. Coleridge had to preach a sermon in a nearby church. When Hazlitt asked if he had prepared his sermon, Coleridge replied that he had not even thought of. Then he went and delivered the sermon which Hazlitt did not attend. On the next day, again they took long walk as far as Bristol. They sat down on the road side. There Coleridge readout some of the passages from his tragic play '**Remorse**'. Then Hazlitt returned to his house. Coleridge left for Germany. They did not meet for a year or two. After some time Hazlitt became acquainted with Coleridge's friends Charles Lamb and Robert Southey.

