

Personal Essays of the 19th Century/Non-fictional Prose of the Romantic Age/ (Part-2)

[BA (Hons.), Part-1, Paper-1]

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Though Lamb's ability to make fun has achieved for him the tag of being callous, his is actually a martyr's heart beneath motley. In an effort to reduce the crude moralising factor in literature for children, he, along with Mary his sister, brought out *Tales from Shakespeare* which gave many young readers of the age their first acquaintance with a great poet through prose. The *Adventures of Ulysses*, though less popular than *Tales*, is a finer book.

Hazlitt was less mannered and more rigorous than Lamb, and he maintained an inherent radicalism throughout. In whatever he wrote, he combined ease and colloquialism with a highly aphoristic style. He was also fond of giving quotations. Yet, though he took a middle style, between the normal and the plain, he was not lacking in originality. His range of subjects was greater than Lamb's: he could write on painting as well as literature, on a prize fight, on natural landscape, on going a journey, on 'coffee-house politicians', as well as on more formal topics like Milton's sonnets and the fear of death. Hazlitt turned to literary journalism after an unsuccessful stint with philosophy. His first collection of literary sketches, *The Round Table*, came out in 1817. *Characters in Shakespeare's Plays* discusses Shakespeare's characters as independent psychological entities. Like most other romantic critics, he liked to see Shakespeare's plays as closet plays: 'We do not like to see our author's

lays acted...’ his characteristic energy and enthusiasm are exhibited in his three collections of lectures, *On the English Poets*, *On the English Comic Writers* and *On the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Shakespeare*. His criticism of his contemporaries in *The Spirit of the Age* is in accord with his boldness on all occasions.

Thomas De Quincey’s essays show a general idealism and a love of the picturesque, and his criticism also alternates between the gushingly emotional and the penetrating. His autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* is a study of addiction and hallucination, a work of considerable psychological daring using Freudian theories, and is a personal apologia. His sense of the disturbing and revealing relations between the ordinary experiences and the violent and the grotesque is communicated with considerable virtuosity in *On the Knocking at the Gate in ‘Macbeth’*, and with a mocking humour in *Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*. He can also reconstruct historical senses and incidents (e.g., *Flight of a Tartar Tribe*) and also the ordinary (e.g., *The English Mail-Coach*). William Savage Landor, who deserves a mention with De Quincey, sought a classical form to express a romantic Hellenism. *Imaginary Conversations* combines with carefully contrived dramatic prose an aristocratic feeling and a passion for liberty.

It can thus be seen that the transition from Baconian and Augustan egotism to a Romantic informality was not a sudden one even in the Romantic Age itself. One can trace a line beginning with the middle style of Southey and Hazlitt, passing through the mannered, half-humoured ornateness of Lamb and finally to the dithyrambic prose of De Quincey.