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Readers and Writers: The role of the audience in the work of William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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The notion of the reading public underwent substantial changes during the period Hazlitt and Coleridge were writing. Three major shifts can be identified; firstly, the revolutions in America and particularly in France provided a momentum of democratising change and radical thought in England which made the notion of 'the people' a politically charged and intensely debated one. Secondly the reading public was growing at an unprecedented rate due to advances in print media and the introduction of circulating libraries. Finally, the connected increase in the number of journals led to the rise of the professional reader, the critic. These three changes will be explored in turn, in order to explore the ways in which two writers represent the reader in this period. It is my contention that the rapidity of the changes to the reading public in this period resulted in a highly contested and ambiguous representation of the reader, which was continually being reassessed and redefined by both Hazlitt and Coleridge.

A great democratising impulse in England, which drew hope and inspiration from the American and French Revolutions was contested by an increasingly repressive government during the Romantic period. One side of the debate is summarised by Jon Cook who describes 'a discourse, variously derived from Burke, Malthus and their followers, which identified 'the people' as the chief threat to social order'[1]. Burke, for example, wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that 'we are afraid to put men to live and trade on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small'[2]. In this kind of discourse, man is presented as essentially limited and not to be trusted. Conversely, the other side of the debate stressed the importance and value of the people in political systems. Thomas Paine, for example, wrote in *The Rights of Man* that 'Men are born and always continue free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility.'[3] The very idea of the public in this period was therefore a contested one; at the core of the debate is the notion of the people and the rights, freedoms and powers that ordinary citizens should be allowed. The debated concept of the people is clearly visible in the work of Hazlitt and Coleridge. Hazlitt, for example, was a passionately committed defender of the concepts of freedom and democracy. In 'What is the People' he writes 'It is an absurdity to suppose that there can be any better criterion of national grievances, or the proper remedies for them, than the aggregate amount of the actual, dear-bought experience, the honest feelings and heart-felt wishes of a whole people'.[4] Hazlitt here affirms the importance of the people, of the necessity of a government which is based upon

[1] Jon Cook 'Introduction' to William Hazlitt Selected Writings ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) P xvi
[2] Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France in Romanticism: An Anthology, 3rd edition, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) p 14
[3] Thomas Paine The Rights of Man Part 1 in Romanticism ed. by Wu p 26
[4] William Hazlitt, 'What is the People' in William Hazlitt Selected Writings, ed. by Jon Cook, p 13

the people and he emphasises that this relates to the 'whole people', not merely to an elite few. Coleridge's views in his *Lectures* of 1795 mirrored Hazlitt's in affirming the value of government which represented and reflected the people, and argued that through the 'Liberty of the Press...the whole nation becomes one grand Senate.'[5] Here Coleridge and Hazlitt both place great faith in the public, championing the cause of democracy and greater public involvement in the political sphere. However this view of the public becomes highly contested in other works by both writers, and these statements on democracy form a striking contrast with other representations of the people; the presentation of the reading public in particular becomes consequently ambiguous.

At the same time as political thinkers debated the public, the public was being given more intellectual and cultural access than ever before, due to advances in the print media and the introduction of circulating libraries. Kathryn Sutherland estimates that between 1780 and 1830 'the reading public' quintupled, from one to seven millions.[6] Stephen C. Behrendt summarises the situation thus: 'Romantic readers were increasingly *engaged* readers of texts of all sorts, readers whose exposure to print materials was growing at an astonishing rate, even in rural areas, and whose sophistication as readers and critics of what they read was growing daily.'[7] The growth of the reading public did not, of course, go unnoticed by literary practitioners. Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria* that 'now, finally, all men being supposed able to read and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous public, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism.'[8] Coleridge here identifies the same phenomena as Behrendt - the huge growth of the reading public, accompanied by a new exercising of critical powers by this new readership - but interprets it very differently. Coleridge focuses on the sheer numbers of this new reading public, describing them as 'multitudinous' and repeating the word 'all' and seems to identify, in the changes to the reading public, a change in the dynamic of power, figuring the public as 'judge'. Interestingly considering the nature of common political discourse in this period, with its focus on the rights of the people, Coleridge goes on to cast these changes in political terms – the public as 'despot'. Where the diffusion of reading materials throughout society might have more easily been seen as a democratising movement, creating liberty, Coleridge instead sees it as a limiting of freedom, the freedom of the writer. For him the rise of the reading public seems to wrest control of meaning from writers and critics of true understanding. He addresses a situation in which he sees 'the critic still rising as the author sank, the amateurs of literature collectively...erected into a municipality of judges.'[9] The rise of reading is viewed by Coleridge as a threat; the more important and influential the reader, the less powerful the writer.

This idea recurs in Hazlitt's essay 'Whether the fine arts are promoted by academies'. Hazlitt writes that 'it must happen in the first stages of the arts that...none but those who had a natural taste for them would pretend to judge of or criticise them...The principle of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government...is by no means applicable to matters of taste, which can only be decided on by the most refined understandings.'[10] The distinctions Hazlitt makes here are fascinating in light of his passionate advocacy of the rights of the people. Lucy Newlyn argues that Hazlitt makes a distinction here that Coleridge does

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[5] S.T. Coleridge, Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion, ed. by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton University Press, 1971) p 312-313

[6] Kathryn Sutherland 'Events...have made us a world of readers: Reader Relations 1780-1830' in The Penguin History of Literature V: The Romantic Period, ed. by David Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) p6

[7] Stephen C. Behrendt 'The Romantic Reader' in A Companion to Romanticism ed. by Duncan Wu, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) p 99

[8] S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. George Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920) p33

[9] Coleridge Biographia Literaria p 33

[10] William Hazlitt 'Whether the fine arts are promoted by academies' in Selected Essays p 262-263

not notice; that there is a distinction between 'the accessibility of knowledge' and 'the progressive refinement of taste'[11]; merely expanding the numbers of those who can read, does not necessarily increase the number of those who can read well; sensitively, with that elusive quality, 'taste'. However there still remains within this position a curious ambiguity; Hazlitt maintains that everybody should have the right to participate in democratic politics, but at the same time suggests that not everybody has the right to comment upon art. Behrendt suggests that the criticism of the new reading public by the 'literary elite' was driven by 'obvious self-interest'[12]. It could be seen in this way that in criticising the public's critical judgement Hazlitt clears a space for the professional critic, after all, his argument is not that reading literature should be restricted to the privileged few, merely that criticism of it should be, but the ambiguities and variations in his presentation of the reading public across his essays suggests less a strategy than a sense of the reader figured as the site of contested, paradoxical meanings, a sense that is mirrored in Coleridge's representations of the reader.

Newlyn's reading of the relation of Hazlitt's position to that of Coleridge does not address the latter's central problem with the rise of the reading public, which is rather a vividly perceived threat to the status of literature and to the status of writers; Coleridge is not concerned with rights of the reader here, he is instead determined to assert the primacy of the writer. Newlyn argues elsewhere that 'it is astonishing how literally, urgently and personally Romantic writers appear to have anticipated Roland Barthes claim, that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the writer."'[13] This seems to come closer to the core of Coleridge's argument; the threat to the writer posed by the ascendant reader. It is as a result of this perceived threat that Coleridge is led to attack the capabilities of this emergent reader. Discussing those who use the libraries, which according to the *Monthly Magazine* in 1821 numbered 6,500 in England, provided reading material for over 30,000 families[14], he writes 'I dare not compliment their *pass-time* or rather *kill-time* with the naming of reading. Call it rather a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness, and a little mawkish sensibility.'[15] In his critique of the new reader, Coleridge examines nothing less than the vary nature of reading itself. True reading is thought to extend only to certain types of books, and, by inference, certain types of readers. He attacks the intellectual effort involved in this new reading – it is merely 'day-dreaming', and the potential benefits – it produces nothing but 'laziness'. If the new class of readers can be attacked in this way, then their perspective on literature becomes irrelevant and the 'despot public' can be removed from their role as the judges of literature. This sense that the new class of readers is intellectually lazy reappears in Hazlitt's 'On Public Opinion', in which he imagines visiting an English reading room in France where 'I see a dozen or a score of my countrymen, with their faces fixed, and their eyes glued to a newspaper, a magazine, a review – reading, swallowing, profoundly ruminating on the lie, the cant, the sophism of the day! Why? It saves them the trouble of thinking; it gratifies their ill-humour, and keeps off *ennui*!...No, it is all passive faith and dull security; they cannot take their eyes from the page.'[16] Hazlitt is troubled in the same way as Coleridge by the reading practices he identifies in the new class of readers. He emphasises both the passivity of the readers and the extent to which they are gripped by what they read, highlighting the risk created by the credulity of the reading public. For both Coleridge and Hazlitt therefore, a lack of intellectual

[11] Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p 203
[12] Behrendt 'The Romantic Reader' in *A Companion to Romanticism,* p 95
[13] Lucy Newlyn, 'How Wordsworth keeps his audience fit' in *Placing and Displacing Romanticism* ed. Peter J. Kitson (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001) p 61
[14] Behrendt, 'The Romantic Reader' in *A Companion to Romanticism* p 45
[15] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* p 28
[16] Hazlitt, 'On Public Opinion' in *Selected Writings* p 146-147

effort is associated with the new class of readers. The representation of the reading public in the work of Hazlitt and Coleridge thus emerges as contested and ambiguous. Whilst both can be found to support the importance of 'the people' as the foundation for political systems, the broad mass of the reading public is associated by both with intellectual incompetence. Furthermore, other such fissures and ambiguities can be observed in the writers' representations of critics and professional readers.

In addition to political debates about the rights of the people and the growing access to texts, the increasing power of the professional critic was a third force in embedding the idea of the audience in Romantic texts. Both Coleridge and Hazlitt worked as professional critics and Seamus Perry contrasts Coleridge's 'gigantic attempt to construct a complete theory of literature based on fundamental principles' in *Biographia Literaria* with Hazlitt's 'brief, essayistic genius.'[17] The difference that Perry proposes, one of form and style, can be linked to some extent with the writers' differing perspectives on the role of the reader; where Coleridge is concerned to limit the threat of the reader to the writer he sets stringent standards for criticism. There is within Hazlitt's ideas however a sense of the writer's responsibility to the reader, which he expounds in his essays on Coleridge, which makes such principles like Coleridge's less important. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes that 'till reviews are conducted on far other principles and with far other motives; till in the place of arbitrary dictation and petulant sneers, the reviewers support their decisions by reference to fixed canons of criticism, previously established and deduced from the nature of man; reflecting minds will pronounce it arrogance in them thus to announce themselves to men of letters as the guides of their taste and judgement.'[18] Notable is Coleridge's perception of the importance of the writer, with the reader again figured as a threat to the writer's authority, an attack on normative systems of power; critics are pictured attempting to 'guide' the 'men of letters', a presumption considered 'arrogant'. Coleridge also criticises the lack of fixed standards used to judge literary works and the reliance instead on personal malice directed at poets, an idea which is mirrored in Hazlitt's work. In 'On Public Opinion' he writes that 'To Tory prejudice, sore as it is – to English imagination, morbid as it is, a nickname, a ludicrous epithet, a malignant falsehood (when it has once been propagated and taken to bosoms as a welcome consolation) becomes a precious property, a vested right.'[19] Taking the same idea as Coleridge – namely that critics have a tendency to use malice instead of reasoned critical opinion, Hazlitt uses the language of power too. Here however, critics are seen to support the established order, rather than to form an attack on it. Where for Coleridge critics upset the ideal balance of authority by seeking to 'guide' the writer, for Hazlitt the cheap use of insults is comparable to the way property and influence is held by the privileged in society. In this way both Coleridge and Hazlitt use the language of power to discuss the relationship between the writer and the reader, and Hazlitt especially draws on the language of democracy.

Where Coleridge's perception of the critic's threat to the writer leads him to call for criticism to be based upon fundamental principles, Hazlitt presents an alternative view of the relationship between reader and writer; specifically, between the reader and Coleridge. In 'My first acquaintance with poets' and 'Mr Coleridge' the writer examines his responses to Coleridge, both as an individual whom he met and talked with and as a writer. There emerges from the essays a deep admiration for the poet, a sense of his genius and abilities and yet a sense that he ultimately failed to live up to the promise of his towering intellect. Running through the essay is the idea that poets have a responsibility to their audience; for Hazlitt it appears that Coleridge's failure is a lack of engagement with this responsibility. Hazlitt compares Coleridge with William Godwin and where Godwin 'is blind, deaf, insensible to all

[17] Seamus Perry, 'Romantic Literary Criticism' in A Companion to Romanticism p 371
[18] Coleridge, Biographia Literaria p 35
[19] Hazlitt, 'On Public Opinion' Selected Writings p 148

but the trump of fame' Coleridge by 'dallying with every subject by turns, has done little or nothing to justify to the world or to posterity the high opinion which all who have ever converse...with one accord entertain of him.'[20] Hazlitt expounds at length Coleridge's great genius but here he argues that being a genius is not enough, that Coleridge has failed to leave enough trace of his genius of the world. In a bracing recognition of the importance of the audience, Hazlitt here contends that Coleridge has not done enough to diffuse his genius amongst the audience at large. Hazlitt identifies in Godwin an awareness of the importance of posterity – he pursues only 'fame', recognition of his poetry. Coleridge on the other hand has ignored both 'posterity' and 'the world', synonyms for the audience, to pursue various subjects which take his fancy; Hazlitt thus affirms the importance of the audience, the importance of reception. While 'all who have ever heard him converse' may think Coleridge a genius, if 'the world' do not then Coleridge's abilities have been wasted, to some extent.

Importantly, this places the fault for lack of appreciation with the poet rather than the readership; for Hazlitt here it isn't that the audience is not intelligent enough to appreciate Coleridge, it is that his publications have not presented the world with enough account of his genius. This forms a striking comparison to the way the reader is presented in Coleridge's own work where ultimately the primacy of the writer is held to be all-important; the central problem with criticism he identifies is that its lack of fundamental principles lead to an attempt to guide the writer in any way which the critic sees fit. For Hazlitt there is an additional dynamic which must also be observed however: the responsibility of the writer to the reader. Hazlitt at once affirms the importance of the audience in ultimately assessing the work of great writers, but elsewhere also bemoans the intellectual capacity of this reading audience. What emerges in the representations of the audience in the work of Hazlitt and Coleridge then is a complex and uncertain relational dynamic, where the power balance between reader and writer and the value and importance of the great mass of the reading public is subject to continued contradiction.

In this way it can be seen that the way writers during the Romantic period presented the reader were highly varied; the reader became a contested figure, subject to many interpretations and meanings, even within the work of two writers. For Hazlitt a strong democratic impulse is contrasted with a perception of the intellectual laziness of much of the new class of readers. Coleridge's early beliefs in the importance of a free press soon turned to dismay at the consequent rise of a new reading public, which he saw as a threat to the authority of the writer. This belief in the writer's supreme power contrasts strongly with Hazlitt's idea that the writer has a responsibility to the reader, which is a responsibility that for Hazlitt, Coleridge did not fulfil. Therefore, the representation of the reader was continually being reassessed in the writings of Hazlitt and Coleridge, gaining new meanings and being understood differently in a climate of great change to the reading public.

[20] Hazlitt, William 'Mr Coleridge' in Romanticism p 790-791

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