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William Hazlitt (1737–1820) and the Unitarian Controversy

‘One of the fathers of the modern Unitarian church’

One of my first attempts was a picture of my father, who was then in a green old age, with strong marked features, and scarred with the small-pox. I drew it with a broad light crossing the face, looking down, with spectacles on, reading. The book was Shaftesbury’s Characteristics, in a fine old binding, with Gribelin’s etchings […] Those winter days, with the gleams of sunshine coming through the chapel-windows, and cheered by the notes of the robin-redbreast in our garden (that ‘ever in the haunch of winter sings’) […] were among the happiest of my life […] The picture is left: the table, the chair, the window where I learned to construe Livy, the chapel where my father preached, remain where they were; but he himself is gone to rest, full of years, of faith, of hope, and charity!¹

When invited to write an obituary of his father, Hazlitt instead composed ‘On the Pleasure of Painting’, the essay which opened his 1821 volume Table-Talk. It concludes with a poignant elegy that evokes a scene from the winter of 1801 in the old school room in the Presbyterian Chapel in Wem, a small market town in rural Shropshire. Hazlitt stood before his father – brush in hand, easel at his side – to paint his father’s portrait. The picture, which is now held at Maidstone Museum, was a success for the aspiring artist: it formed part of the Royal Academy exhibition at Somerset House in 1802 where the image of the 68-year-old Dissenting minister hung rather oddly alongside that of the playwright and baronet, Sir Lumley St George Skeffington (1771–1850).

The portrait, and the account of its composition in the subsequent essay, offer an important insight into Hazlitt’s reverence for his father

¹ S. Burley, Hazlitt the Dissenter © Stephen Burley 2014
and the depth of his admiration for what he had achieved. Yet the popularity of Hazlitt’s essay, and the resonant image of the ageing, bespectacled, benevolent minister, has had the effect of eliding the more combative, aggressive, and polemical nature of Hazlitt Sr’s personality. George Thatcher (1754–1824), an American congressman who had befriended the Hazlitts in the 1780s, remarked that Hazlitt Sr was ‘a plain-spoken, unreserved man, who does not possess much of the sneaking virtue, commonly called discretion’. In 1782 Richard Price, the Dissenting minister at Newington Green in London, warned that he was ‘too open in his declarations and too imprudent in his conduct’; and in 1787 Theophilus Lindsey, the founder of the first Unitarian chapel in England, observed that he was ‘not one that has sacrificed much to the

Figure 1  William Hazlitt’s portrait of his father reading from Shaftesbury’s Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (2nd edn, 1714), c.1801. Reproduced by permission of Maidstone Museum & Bentlif Art Gallery