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### **‘Incorrigible Jacobins’: Hazlitt’s Engagement with German Literature**

The fact that William Hazlitt engaged closely with contemporary German literature throughout his life has so far not received any detailed attention in Hazlitt research. Like many of his contemporaries, Hazlitt had no German, so he was reliant on translations, but he was in close contact with individuals who took a keen interest in new German writing and thought, such as Henry Crabb Robinson, S. T. Coleridge, Thomas Holcroft, or John Scott and the set of the *London Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps more importantly, Hazlitt belonged to a generation of intellectuals who, in their formative years, had been gripped not just by the French Revolution, but also by the new exciting literature coming out of Germany. Their lives spanned the emergence of modern German literature on the European cultural stage, and its ideas were hard to ignore for radical or reform-minded thinkers. In this, Hazlitt, it seems, was no exception. The following focuses on the assessment of German drama that he put forward at the end of 1819.

I will argue that Hazlitt’s characterization of contemporary German drama as revolutionary and ‘paradoxical’ is intended to suggest to his audience that this kind of literature can function as a model for socially and politically progressive English literature. Its model function is facilitated by what Hazlitt outlines as the close kinship between the English and German literary traditions. Hazlitt’s argument that German literature is revolutionary is informed by key ideas from German *Sturm und Drang* and German Romantic cultural theory, which he appears to draw from August Wilhelm Schlegel. Hazlitt’s characterization of German literature as ‘paradoxical’, however, relies on his own definition of this term as describing possibly irresponsible, yet revolutionary effective, iconoclastic art and thought. This paradoxical quality of contemporary German literature derives, for Hazlitt, from its recent revolutionary heritage.

Hazlitt’s rather detailed comments on German literature, and on his own relationship with it, come in an initially perhaps unexpected context: in the final lecture of his third, and last, lecture series, given in December 1819. The lectures were a source of much needed income for Hazlitt. Speaking on Elizabethan drama, Hazlitt was again addressing a paying audience at the Surrey Institution and swiftly published the *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* in February

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<sup>1</sup> The first three all had German.

1820.<sup>2</sup> Especially the last lecture has not been found deserving of critical attention; Duncan Wu, for example, dismissed it as ‘not his [Hazlitt’s] finest hour’.<sup>3</sup> It is here, at the end of the last lecture of the series, that Hazlitt makes his most striking pronouncements on German literature.

In Germany, [...] there where, as we learn from the Sorrows of Werther, seven-and-twenty ranks in society, each raised above the other, and of which the one above did not speak to the one below it. Is it wonderful that the poets and philosophers of Germany, the discontented men of talent, who thought and mourned for themselves and their fellows, the Goethes, the Lessings, the Schillers, and the Kotzebues, felt a sudden and irresistible impulse by a convulsive effort to tear aside this factitious drapery of society, and to throw off that load of bloated prejudice, of maddening pride and superannuated folly, that pressed down every energy of their nature and stifled the breath of liberty, of truth and genius in their bosoms? These Titans of our days tried to throw off the dead weight that encumbered them, and in so doing, warred not against heaven, but against earth. The same writers (as far as I have seen) have made the only incorrigible Jacobins, and their school of poetry is the only real school of Radical Reform.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary reviews of the lectures were generally positive, albeit they came from sources that were largely friendly towards Hazlitt, e.g. John Hunt in the *Examiner*, John Scott in the (new) *London Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine*. Crabb Robinson, however, was – privately – critical.<sup>5</sup> One reason for Wu’s negative view of especially the last lecture may well be the relative obscurity of the context of its ‘German’ content for modern readers. For this reason alone, Hazlitt’s remarks are worth unpacking in greater detail. They reveal Hazlitt’s engagement with key aspects of German writing and thought throughout his life and they shine a light on the status of German literature, and its impact, on the London literary scene since the revolution in France.

By 1819 it had become more acceptable to speak positively of German literature and thought than in 1801 or 1806, when the *Anti-Jacobin Review*’s relentless branding of all new German writing as atheist or Jacobin, or both, was having its greatest impact. Hazlitt harks back with evident relish to an early 1790s notion of German writing as radically revolutionary, an interpretation his audience would be familiar with, but which since 1815 might have receded a little in their minds. As a radical who advocated political reform and never abjured his dedication to the ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, Hazlitt approved of ‘Radical Reform’ and applauds the courage and energy of

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<sup>2</sup> The lectures were held between 5 November and 24 December at the Surrey Institution in Blackfriars Road and where published simultaneously in London by Stoddard & Steu[w]art and in Edinburg by Bell & Bradfute. Regarding the time of the publication cf. Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 306.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 280. A. C. Grayling, in his biography of Hazlitt (cf. note 6), does not discuss the lectures themselves at all.

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-Two Volumes*, ed. by P. P. Howe (London & Toronto: Dent, 1930-34), VI (1931), 175-364; 362.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), p. 249.

‘these Titans of our days’. Why was it important for Hazlitt to continue to present German literature as ‘radical’ to a British audience and where did he get his German ideas from?

The whole lecture course, but especially the first and last lectures, show that Hazlitt had taken on board the notion that (ideally) culture evolves historically and that only such historically evolved culture, which has either developed out of its participants’ history or reflects their current situation, can engage an audience to the extent that allows them to derive the benefits that literature can offer. One such benefit is the potential to bring about cultural and social change. While the notion of the historicity of culture had been popularised over the past twenty years by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, it had been pioneeringly developed by Johann Gottfried Herder in the 1770s, during a decade when German literature and cultural theory were reconfigured.

During this period, traditionally labelled *Sturm und Drang*, young (middle-class) iconoclasts vociferously critiqued the social and cultural hierarchies of an aristocratic Francophile German society, which in their view was damaging individuals and society. In an effort to mitigate this damage, they set out to (re-)introduce historically grown popular culture into literature to make it relevant to a broad(er) communal audience. The movement was spear-headed by Herder and the young Goethe and is traditionally seen to peak and close with the emergence of Friedrich Schiller as the ‘author of the Robbers’ in the early 1780s. While Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is not generally considered a *Stürmer und Dränger*, his work was a key reference point for the young iconoclasts. An urgent and continuing effort to achieve ‘radical reform’ would have appeared imperative to Hazlitt in the autumn of 1819, after the Peterloo Massacre, when he was working on these lectures.<sup>6</sup>

At first sight, the last lecture appears as an outlier. The preceding seven lectures treat what their title suggests, the ‘Elizabethan’ period, which Hazlitt dates, rather broadly, from the Reformation to Charles I (VI, 192). They focus, as Hazlitt puts it, on the forgotten writers, who should be resurrected: Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Sidney, Webster, Dekker, Massinger, Middleton, and Bacon (VI, 176).<sup>7</sup> The last lecture, however, launches into a cultural history from antiquity to the present: ‘On the Spirit of Ancient and Modern Literature – on the German Drama, contrasted with that of the Age of Elizabeth’. Hazlitt’s intention is to conclude the series by contextualising contemporary German literature and Elizabethan literature within the grand sweep of history. This makes sense, given the plan of the whole. The lectures present drama as reflecting its historical conditions, as grown out of its time; they embrace the new historicist approach to culture, in which literature is taken to reflect

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<sup>6</sup> The lectures were commissioned in February 1819 and largely written at Winterslow in the late summer 1819. Cf. Jones, pp. 305-05.

<sup>7</sup> Hazlitt explains in the ‘Advertisement’ that he has dealt with the well-known figures, Shakespeare and Spenser, elsewhere (VI, 173).

and represent its time as well as 'its' people (whether these are contemporaries or nations is often undecided). The writers of the Elizabethan age 'operated to mould and stamp the poetry of the country and the period' (181), but at the same time they are determined by both. Speaking of Shakespeare, 'his age was necessary to him; nor could he have been wrenched from his place in the edifice of which he was so conspicuous a part, without equal injury to himself and it' (180). The Elizabethan writers represent their time and culture and are shaped by it. The 'minor' writers need to be recovered from 'the painted gew-gaws and foreign frippery of the reign of Charles II ', even if it is almost too late and 'we are only now recovering the scattered fragments and broken images' (176). This is the new approach that had come to such prominence in German thinking over the past 50 years, galvanised in Herder's work and developed by the Schlegels, but which built on mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century British and French ideas.

In Hazlitt's view, what is contemporary German literature like? A draft title of the last lecture from July 1819, which survives as a manuscript piece,<sup>8</sup> adds some specificity, and one of Hazlitt's signature words, 'paradox': 'German Drama and its connection with modern Philosophical *paradoxes*, contrasted with that of the Age of Elizabeth'. What are the characteristics of 'paradoxical' German drama and what does the contrast to Elizabethan drama consist of?

[In German drama] [t]he principle of *contrast* and *contradiction* is made use of and no other. All qualities are reversed: virtue is always at odds with vice, [...]: the internal character and external situation, the actions and the sentiments, are never in accord. (361)

Hazlitt provides an example:

A young man turns robber and captain of a gang of banditti; and the wonder is to see the heroic ardour of his sentiments, the aspiration after the most godlike goodness and unsullied reputation, working their way through the repulsiveness of his situation. (361)

He claims that this drama is representative of the present time, its conditions, and its faults. This is why its audience readily relates to it.

The world and every thing in it is not just what it ought to be, or what it pretends to be; or such extravagant and prodigious paradoxes would be driven from the stage [...] Opinion is not truth; appearance is not reality, power is not beneficence: rank is not wisdom: nobility is not the only virtue: [...] actions do not always speak the character any more than words. We feel this and we do justice to the romantic extravagance of the German Muse. (361-62)

German drama reflects the secular and politicized nature of the current age:

There is something in the style [of these plays] that hits the temper of men's minds; [...] it embodies, it sets off and aggrandizes [...] the extreme opinions which are floating in our time, and which have struck their roots deep and wide below the surface of the public mind. We are no longer [...] heroes

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<sup>8</sup> Wu, p. 279.

in warlike enterprise; martyrs to religious faith; but we are all the partisans of a political system, and devotees to some system of moral sentiments. The modern style of tragedy [...] is a tissue of philosophical, political, moral paradoxes.

Hazlitt describes the extravagance of the German muse as 'romantic'. With this designation he alludes to its historical dimension, its rootedness in organically grown cultural history, implying all the shades of meaning which were beginning to accrue to this term by 1819 and which had, over the past twenty years, been defined by German 'Romanticists' building on *Sturm and Drang* ideas. Modern culture was fundamentally different from, but not inferior to, the culture of classical antiquity; its difference derived from its medieval heritage, which gives modern-Romantic culture its focus on sentiment, ideas, the imagination, and, through Christianity, especially through the Christian narrative of salvation, its focus on historical time.

The great difference, then, which we find between the classical and the romantic style, between ancient and modern poetry, is, that the one more frequently describes things as they are interesting in themselves, - the other for the sake of associations of ideas connected with them; that the one dwells more on the immediate impressions of objects on the senses - the other on the ideas which they suggest to the imagination. (350)

These lines (Hazlitt readily tells his readers) are lifted from a 'late number of the *Edinburgh Review*' (348), i.e. from his own 1816 review of John Black's translation of August Wilhelm Schlegel's lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, itself a course of lectures given in Vienna in 1808 and published between 1809 and 1811.<sup>9</sup> The 'German muse' is particularly representative of this kind of mentality and this kind of drama. Marked by its romantic heritage (which it shares with its English counterpart) and emerging at a time when aspects of classical maxims (neo-classicism) have been inappropriately re-introduced into modern culture and when a rigid system of social privilege (ancien régime) is doing its utmost to prevail, the German muse erupts in violent acts of cultural emancipation, which seek to and do destabilise established social structures. This revolutionary and liberating tendency grips its British audience, intoxicating them with an exaggerated vision of their own wishes and desires.

The German tragedy (and our own which is only a branch of it) aims at effect [...]; by going all the lengths not only of instinctive feeling, but of speculative opinion, and startling the hearer by overturning all the established maxims of society, and setting at nought all the received rules of composition. [...] It is an insult and defiance to Aristotle's definition of tragedy. The action is [...] extravagant: the language is a mixture of metaphysical jargon and flaring prose: the moral is immorality. In spite of all this, a German tragedy is a good thing. It is a fine hallucination: [...] there is

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<sup>9</sup> Anon. [William Hazlitt], 'Art. IV Lectures on Dramatic Literature [Schlegel on the Drama]. By W. A. [sic] Schlegel. Translated from the German, by John Black, Esq. 2 vol. Baldwin & Co', *Edinburgh Review* 26.1 (1816), 67-107. It has of course been noted that Hazlitt drew on his review of August Wilhelm Schlegel's work for this lecture, but no detailed attention has been given to this. Duncan Wu records that Hazlitt here 'cannibaliz[es] an essay of Greek drama written for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1816' (Wu, p. 280).

a pleasure in reading a German play to be found in no other. The world have thought so: they go to see the Stranger, [...] Lovers' Vows and Pizarro [all adaptations of August von Kotzebue's works], they have their eyes wide open all the time and almost cry them out before they come away, and therefore they go again. (360)

Hazlitt's repeated references in this context to the immensely popular German dramatist August von Kotzebue reflect the British view of Kotzebue as a social liberal, whose comedies undermined traditional social structures. In Hazlitt's use of 'all this' above, a historically evolved Romantic-modern culture is being conflated with contemporary political and cultural convulsion. German literature and the French Revolution have been a wake-up call to English writers.

Up to the present reign, and during the best part of it [...] tragedy wore the face of the Goddess of Dulness in the Dunciad, serene, sickly, lethargic, and affected, till it was roused from its trance by the French Revolution, and the loud trampling of the German Pegasus on the English stage, which now appeared as pawing to get free from its ancient trammels, and rampant shook off the incumbrance of all former examples, opinions, prejudices, and principles. (359-60)

It appears that the German literary Pegasus was, in conjunction with the French Revolution, achieving what the 'discontented men of talent' had been attempting for a while.

Rather than contrasting, Hazlitt describes English drama as closely related to the German muse ('our own [tragedy] is only a branch of [the German]'). Hence the German muse was able to 'rouse [English drama] from its [neo-classical] trance'. This picks up on what Hazlitt had said in the first lecture of this series, where the reader had learnt that English literature partook fully of the romantic (and medieval) heritage of modernity.

Our literature, in a word, is Gothic and grotesque; unequal and irregular; not cast in a previous mould, nor of one uniform texture, but of great weight in the whole. [...] It aims at an excess of beauty and power, it hits or misses, and is either very good or good for nothing. This character applies in particular to our literature in the age of Elizabeth, which is its best period. (192)

In the last lecture the reader re-encounters the qualities of excess, extravagance, irregularity and intensity. They are reminded that 'the ages of chivalry and romance [...] have stamped their character on modern genius and literature' (352). This 'Gothic' Elizabethan tragedy has been ruined by French influences. English literature was 'best', Hazlitt says, 'before the introduction of a rage of French rules and French models', its own original style was 'better than our second-hand imitations of others' (192). The link between English and German literature is their shared 'modern-Romantic' heritage, encapsulated in Hazlitt's use of the term 'Gothic', which from the mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century was closely associated with the Germanic and medieval heritages of (Northern) Europe.

Hazlitt uses the last lecture to explore this connection between English and German literature based on a shared modern culture, and the place of this culture in history, by contrasting 'classical' and 'romantic' in a way found in the Schlegels. Here he also returns to the term Gothic. 'The classical

appeals to sense and habit, while the Gothic or romantic strikes from novelty, strangeness and contrast.' (348) The 'classical style' of 'ancient poetry', as we heard, 'more frequently describes things as they are interesting in themselves' and 'dwells more on the immediate impressions of objects on the senses' while the 'romantic style' of 'modern poetry' describes things 'for the sake of associations of ideas connected with them' and focuses on 'ideas which they suggest to the imagination' (350). Both are different, yet equal.

Both are founded in essential and indestructible principles of human nature. We may prefer one to the other, as we chuse, but to set up an arbitrary and bigoted standard of excellence in consequence of that preference, and to exclude either one or the other from poetry or art, is to deny the existence of the first principles of the human mind, and war with nature. (348)

While Hazlitt frequently uses 'modern' in the sense of 'contemporary', the title of his lecture suggests otherwise, echoing the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns and, more specifically, its use in the histories of literature by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, and in Herder's work, especially in Herder's writings from the 1770s. In his seminal essays on Shakespeare and Ossian, which appeared in the 1773 'programme' of *Sturm und Drang, Von deutscher Art und Kunst*, Herder compared Homer with Ossian and Sophocles with Shakespeare and proposed that both halves of each pair are equal but fundamentally different, each representing the ancient viz the modern genius. To summarise this difference-cum-equality, Hazlitt directly draws on A. W. Schlegel: with 'Sophocles differs from Shakespeare as a Doric Portico does from Westminster Abbey' (247), he paraphrases Schlegel's 'Das Pantheon ist nicht verschiedener von der Westminster Abtey oder der St. Stephanskirche in Wien als der Bau einer Tragödie des Sophokles von dem eines Schauspiels von Shakespear [sic]'.<sup>10</sup> This comparison of Sophocles and Shakespeare as different but equal 'brothers', however, originates in Herder's Shakespeare-essay, the entire point of which is to explain the difference between the two dramatists historically.<sup>11</sup>

Hazlitt proceeds to locate the place of German tragedy within the history of tragedy from classical antiquity to the modern age. To this end, he identifies four historically distinct schools (347). Three of them he found in Schlegel,<sup>12</sup> they were, however, prefigured in Herder's Shakespeare-essay.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur. Vorlesungen von August Wilhelm Schlegel*, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1809), I, p. 16. [The Pantheon is no more different from Westminster Abbey or St. Stephen's in Vienna than the structure of a tragedy by Sophocles is from that of a play by Shakespeare.]

<sup>11</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Shakespear', in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst. Einige fliegende Blätter* (1st 1773), ed. by Hans Dietrich Irmscher (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988), pp. 65-91.

<sup>12</sup> A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, 3rd edn, ed. by Eduard Böcking, 2 vols (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846), I, pp. 12-19, for French neo-classicism in detail cf. II, 51-52, and below.

<sup>13</sup> Herder, pp. 67-70 (ancient drama), pp. 76-84 (the modern drama of Shakespeare), and pp. 70-74 (French neo-classical drama); also see below.

The first [school] is the antique or classical. [... introducing] persons on the stage, speaking, feeling and acting in accordance with the natural, that is, according to the impression of given circumstances on the passions and mind of man in those circumstances, but limited by the physical conditions of time and place' [...].

The key aspects here are naturalness in an immediate context and the fact that under such conditions the Aristotelian unities make sense.

The second is the Gothic or romantic, [...] the historical or poetical tragedy, and it differs from the former only in having a larger scope in the design and boldness in the execution; [...] it is the dramatic representation of nature and passion emancipated from the precise imitation of an actual event in place and time. [...] This is particularly the style or school of Shakespear [sic] and of the best writers of the age of Elizabeth.

The key aspect here is that a historically different 'nature', which exists in larger and more complex spaces, has been liberated from the unities, which no longer make sense.

The third sort is the French or common-place rhetorical style, which is founded on the antique as to its form and subject-matter; but instead of individual nature, real passion or imagination growing out of real passion and the circumstances of the speaker, it deals only in vague, imposing and laboured declamations, or descriptions of nature, dissertations on the passions, and pompous flourishes which never entered any head but the author's.

The key characteristics of this 'school' are an un-engaging affectation and rhetoric, summarising a view of French neo-classicism that had already been proposed by Herder.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth is the German or paradoxical style, which differs from the others in representing men as acting not from the impulse of feeling, or as debating common-place questions of morality, but as the organs and mouthpieces [...] of certain extravagant speculative opinions, abstracted from all existing customs, prejudices and institutions. (347)

It is this libertarian, wildly speculative content on a grand philosophical scale that questions all tradition and boundaries, which makes the German style truly revolutionary. While Hazlitt's description of German writing echoes common prejudices against German literature and thought that have been current since the later 1790s – that it is marked by metaphysical speculation and jargon –, this description is also commensurate with the drama of revolution, or 'the poetry of radical reform'.

Like the juxtaposition of ancient Greek culture and modern culture, the first three types of ancient and modern tragedy were put forward by Herder in his Shakespeare-essay. The German variant, or 'fourth' type, that Hazlitt discusses had of course not yet fully emerged in 1773, when Herder was writing. By then only Lessing, among Hazlitt's 'discontented men of talent', had written most of his works, while Herder was at that point hoping to urge along a new wave of German drama,

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. footnote 14.



specifically Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*.<sup>15</sup> Herder's descriptions of the 'good' ancient, the 'good' modern (Shakespearian) tragedy, and the somewhat pointless French tragedy return, broadly, in A. W. Schlegel's lectures. Schlegel criticises the French for following the classical rules too slavishly while at the same time importing too much polished French court culture into the drama of existential crisis, cancelling any truly tragic effect.<sup>16</sup> Hazlitt's description, however, of the faults of French neo-classical drama, which 'instead of individual nature, real passion or imagination growing out of real passion and the circumstances of the speaker, [...] deals only in vague, imposing and laboured declamations, or descriptions of nature, dissertations on the passions, and pompous flourishes', is strikingly close to Herder's.

Es sind Gemählde der Empfindung von dritter fremder Hand, nie aber oder selten die unmittelbaren, ersten, ungeschminkten Regungen, wie sie Worte suchen und endlich finden. [...] Ein schönes Stück, [...] eine Reihe artiger, wohlgekleideter Herrn und Dames schöne Reden, auch die schönste, nützlichste Philosophie in schönen Versen vortragen zu lassen. [...] wohlgeübte Herrn und Dames, [...] die wirklich viel auf Deklamation, Stelzengang der Sentenzen und Aussenwerke der Empfindung [...] anwenden. (Herder, pp. 72-73)

[They are paintings of third-hand sentiments, but never, or rarely, the immediate, first, naked emotions searching for words and eventually finding them. A pretty piece/play: to let a line of well-mannered, well-dressed gentlemen and ladies declaim pretty speeches, or possibly even allow them to present the most useful philosophy in pretty verses. Well-versed gentlemen and ladies who really make an effort with their declamation, their pompous sentences on stilts and the exterior manifestations of feeling.]

The striking overlap between Hazlitt's wording and Herder's original ideas put forward in 'Shakespear' is puzzling, as Herder's essay was not translated into English until the twentieth century. One has to assume that this is a case of mediated transmission, which would merit more research. There is, to date, no evidence that Hazlitt read any Herder, although he may have known of him and may have read other works by him in translation. Catherine Angerson has shown that as early as the 1780s some of Herder's work was known in British dissenting circles, especially among Unitarians, so Hazlitt's father, as a Unitarian clergyman, may have been familiar with Herder.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Herder, 'Shakespear', p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> 'Vieles war schon durch den längst hergebrachten engen Zuschnitt verdorben, und das Vorurtheil, welches auf die Beobachtung äußerlicher Regeln und Schicklichkeiten eine ganz unverhältnismäßige Wichtigkeit legt, hatte sich [...] unwiderruflich festgesetzt. Nächst der Regeln über den äußeren Mechanismus, die man von den Alten auf Glauben angenommen hatte, waren es besonders die herrschenden einheimischen Begriffe von geselliger Schicklichkeit, was die französischen Dichter bei der Ausübung ihres Talentes hemmte, und ihnen in vielen Fällen die höchste tragische Wirkung unerreichbar machte. [...] Nur eine gewisse sorgfältige geputzte Schönheit verträgt sich nicht mit dem wahrsten Ausdruck. Und diese Schönheit wird doch gerade von dem Stil des französischen Trauerspiels gefordert.' A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, 3rd edn, ed. by Eduard Böcking, 2 vols (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846), II, pp. 51-52.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Angerson, 'A Friend to Rational Piety': The Early Herder Reception by Protestant Dissenters in Britain' *German Life and Letters* 69.1 (2016), 1468-0483 online.

However, as Hazlitt was reliant on translations, he would not have been able to access the relevant essays by Herder directly; only his *Ideen*, his work on Hebrew Poetry, his essay on the origins of language and the *Humanitätsbriefe* had been translated into English by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Candidates for facilitating a mediated transmission were, in addition to August Wilhelm Schlegel, Schlegel's brother Friedrich and Mme de Staël, although none of their texts share the striking closeness noted above. Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, which was published in London in 1813, shepherded through the press by Hazlitt's friend Charles Lamb, presents the general drift of the Schlegel-brothers' views regarding ancient and modern culture, classical and romantic literature, and French and German (and English) drama.<sup>18</sup> August Wilhelm was Mme de Staël's intellectual companion from 1804 until her death in 1817. Friedrich Schlegel's *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1814) was translated into English by John G. Lockhart, its first edition of 1818 was swiftly followed with a second in 1819. The book may have interested Hazlitt, who had taken an evident interest in his brother's effort on this topic. In Friedrich Schlegel Hazlitt would have (re-)encountered the view that French tragedy is too reliant on antiquity for its own, and France's gifted dramatists', good, who labour under 'the enslaving influence of the mistaken Greek models'.<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, too, notes the 'overdone' 'rhetoric of the passions' (297-98), considering this an expression of French national culture, which suits them, but no-one else (297-98). In Friedrich Schlegel there is, however, none of the satirical venom that characterizes both Hazlitt's and Herder's descriptions. But, intriguingly, in his chapter on recent German literature Schlegel suggests that the key characteristic of German writing around 1800 is its thoroughly 'revolutionary' nature (372), although he spends the next two pages explaining that by this he does not mean any 'democratic frenzy' (372). While the generation which Schlegel suggests are revolutionaries (those maturing in the last fifteen years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) does not quite fit Hazlitt's list of names of 'incorrigible Jacobins', Schlegel, too, chooses Schiller as an example of a young revolutionary who 'breathes the full confidence of all those visionary hopes and violent opposition to existing institutions which were the immediate harbingers of the revolution' and who even in maturity 'comprehends and compassionates the universal convulsions of the time' (373).

Another source of Hazlitt's observations on 'revolutionary' German literature was probably his own experience of it. In this lecture Hazlitt vividly commemorates his first reading of Schiller's *Robbers*,

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<sup>18</sup> Gemaine de Staël, *Über Deutschland*, translated by Robert Habs, ed. by Siegrid Metken (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1963), cf. pp. 135-41 (Warum lassen die Franzosen der deutschen Literatur nicht Gerechtigkeit widerfahren?), pp. 162-67 (Über die klassische und romantische Poesie), pp. 193-203 (Über die dramatische Kunst).

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern. From the German of Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Langley, 1841), p. 297.

which was also his first experience of reading dramatic literature, as a sixteen-year-old at the dissenting academy New College in Hackney.

The Robbers was the first play I ever read; and the effect it produced on me was the greatest. It stunned me like a blow, and I have not recovered enough from it to describe how it was. [...] Twenty-five years have elapsed since I first read the translation of the Robbers, but still they have not blotted the impression from my mind. (362)

The revolutionary content and the powerful language, conveyed in Alexander Fraser Tytler's translation of 1792, clearly made an impression. Without naming names (which was probably not necessary), Hazlitt had used the protagonist's character and actions as a typical example of German drama earlier on in the lecture, which I have quoted above (p. 4).

Hazlitt had of course not been alone in his reaction to this play. The young, still pro-Revolution Coleridge famously asked his similarly radical friend Southey after having read through the play in a single night, 'who is this Schiller – this convulser of the heart?'<sup>20</sup>

Hazlitt was also well versed in Goethe's *Werther*, which is in itself not surprising, bearing in mind the huge reception of Goethe's novel in Britain. What is more striking is the wistful way in which he quotes passages from the English translation in the lecture.

Of all his [Goethe's] works I like his Werter [sic] best, nor would I part with it at a venture [...]; nor ever cease to think of the times 'when in the fine summer evenings they saw the frank, noble-minded enthusiast coming up from the valley' (from Werther's last letter to Charlotte), nor of 'the high grass that by the light of the departing sun waved in the breeze over his grave'. (363)

On a personal level, *Werther's* merit would only have been increased by its strong and well-known endorsement by Hazlitt's hero Napoleon.

Clearly, Hazlitt engaged very closely with especially the literature and thought of German *Sturm und Drang*, of which Schiller's *Räuber* and Goethe's *Leiden des jungen Werther* are the most famous and most widely disseminated examples. But as a critic, Hazlitt also took on board some of the insights and approaches from *Sturm und Drang's* more theoretical literary programme, as his close convergence with Herder's ideas demonstrates, even if this largely came to him mediated by August Wilhelm Schlegel. Tellingly, Hazlitt is less complimentary about the mature works of both Schiller (but especially) Goethe. While the fate and words of 'the injured bride' in Schiller's *Don Carlos* have 'given [him] a deep sense of suffering and a strong desire after good, which has haunted [him] ever since', he does 'not like Schiller's later style so well'. *Wallenstein*, for example, lacks 'the throbbing of hope and fear, the mortal struggle between the passions' (363). Goethe's *Egmont* and *Stella*, even

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<sup>20</sup> *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-1971), I (1956), p. 122.

worse, are 'constructed upon [...] a design to avoid all possible effect and interest, and this object is completely accomplished' (363). Hazlitt bridles at the more stately measure of Weimar classicism. Tellingly (again), Hazlitt's favourite part of Goethe's *Iphigenie*, arguably Goethe's most 'classical' play, is a ballad, a *Kunstballade* imbued with the *Sturm und Drang* spirit of reviving folk legends and mythology. It is, Hazlitt explains, 'a song, which the Furies are supposed to sing to Tantalus in hell', and 'truly sublime' (363). Hazlitt's recollections of his youthful reading of (the young) Schiller and Goethe make clear that Hazlitt's interest in German writing goes right back to his teenage days and that he was not prompted to think about new German literature by his review of A. W. Schlegel's lectures in 1816.

Kotzebue, so often included in lists of great German dramatists at this time, not just Hazlitt's, but now consigned to mediocrity, has for Hazlitt an important function too. Not only does he present emotional dissatisfaction with life exceedingly well ('[his] best work [...] [features] that style of sentiment which seems to make of life itself a long-drawn endless sigh, has something in it that pleases me' (361)), the pleasure afforded is like 'no other' (360); Hazlitt made Kotzebue's works stand in for German plays in general.<sup>21</sup> And these German plays and their style are especially representative of the risks and potentials of the current moment, "[they] shew the very age and body of the time its form and pressure" (360).

But what really *does* Hazlitt make of German drama, from *Sturm und Drang* via Kotzebue to the mature works of the heroes of his youth? This depends largely on how one interprets his use of the term 'paradoxical', *that* defining characteristic of German literature in his view, which summarizes his assessment of this writing. Soon after these lectures, Hazlitt devotes an essay to this term: 'On Paradox and Common-Place' discusses the difference between the two, it was published in *Table Talk* (1821-1822) and is a political polemic directed against both fanciful (paradoxical) poets or reformers and selfishly ruthless (common-place) politicians. For Hazlitt, the two terms describe the two poles of the current intellectual and political landscape. 'Common-place' represents the conservative aversion to change and reform, holding on to received tradition for the sake of it or for preserving established power structures, while 'paradox' represents the highly abstract and extravagant, and often irresponsible, schemes of theoretical reformers and political poets.<sup>22</sup> Both terms feature in the last lecture, French drama has a 'common-place rhetorical style' (347). So while in the essay 'paradoxical' denotes a socially and intellectually irresponsible excess of abstraction from 'real life', in the lecture it describes an implausibility in thought and language that is exciting

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<sup>21</sup> *The Stranger*, *Lovers' Vows* and *Pizarro* are used as typical examples of 'German plays' (360), cf. also above pp. 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> 'On Paradox and Common-Place', *Complete Works*, VIII, pp. 146-56.

because its extravagant and exaggerated flights of fancy dare to imagine what is prohibited, not spoken of politely or rationally. Hazlitt speaks of 'metaphysical jargon and flaring prose' (360) in this context. This double aspect of irresponsible uselessness and extreme excitement applies to German drama as Hazlitt defines it: extravagant and excessive, it transports its audience beyond the ordinarily possible and condoned. Even more importantly, at this moment this is entirely relatable: it captures the current public atmosphere, its style 'hits the temper of men's minds'.

Attacking German writing for its irresponsible flights of metaphysical and revolutionary fancy had for over twenty years been a staple of conservative critics. Hazlitt alludes to this view and at the same time, paradoxically, suggests that this way of thinking, writing, and representing the world is not just current but socially and politically necessary. 'Paradoxical' German drama, like German speculation, goes to revolutionary, destructive extremes, bringing established notions crashing down, as the 'German Pegasus [...] rampant shook off the incumbrance of all former examples'. "'There is some soul of goodness in things evil'" (361) Hazlitt quotes teasingly immediately after his description of German drama.

While the foreword of his collection of *Political Essays* suggests that in early 1819 Hazlitt had decided to 'quit' the fray of political debate,<sup>23</sup> the events on St. Peter's Field, Manchester, in August 1819 may have changed his mind. On Christmas Eve 1819, the date of the last lecture, the revolutionary nature of paradoxical German drama was suggestively presented to his audience as a potential model. It appears that in the months after the Peterloo Massacre 'incorrigible Jacobins' with their true 'school of Radical Reform' were required more than ever.<sup>24</sup>

Hazlitt introduces his reveries about reading Schiller and Goethe with a confession, impressing on his listeners his deep attachment to the 'romantic extravagance of the German muse'. This literature has moved him so deeply that he cannot find the words to describe it properly, which is an unexpected admission from someone so rightly famous for his expressive prose. Immediately following the passage about those 'incorrigible Jacobins', Hazlitt declares his love for the social and cultural iconoclasm of contemporary German literature, its revolutionary turning everything on its head with its philosophical, political, and moral paradoxes, opening vistas of a different future:

In the works of the imagination, novelty has the advantage over prejudice; that which is striking and unheard of, over that which is trite and known before, and that which gives unlimited scope to the indulgence of the feelings and the passions (whether erroneous or not) over that which imposes a

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Grayling, pp. 245-47.

<sup>24</sup> There appears to be only one *direct* reference in Hazlitt's oeuvre to the events in Manchester, his ridiculing of the suggestion by John Walter II, the editor of *The Times*, that he [Walter] was taking huge risks to speak out about 'abuses of power' (Grayling, p. 246).

restraint on them. I have trifled with this subject; [...] because I despaired of finding a language for some old rooted feelings I have about it, which a theory could neither give or can it take away. (362)

The position of these words, following 'the only school of Radical Reform' and preceding his confessional intimations about the effect of Schiller and other German writers on him, is highly suggestive. There is a good chance Hazlitt meant what he said when he wrote: 'a German tragedy [thus defined] is a good thing', because there was still a need for 'Radical Reform' and 'incorrigible' radicals working to 'throw off the dead weight that encumbered' society. That for Hazlitt 'incorrigible' was connoted positively, especially in the political sense, is made clear in his preface to *Political Essays*, completed in January 1819, when he summarises his political beliefs:

I deny that liberty and slavery are convertible terms, that right and wrong, truth and falsehood, plenty and famine, the comforts or wretchedness of a people, are a matter of perfect indifference. This is all I know of the matter; but on these points I am likely to remain incorrigible.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Grayling, p. 245.