

## **"Come and think on the way you done"**

When he was 42 years old, William Hazlitt, perhaps England's greatest literary critic, became wildly infatuated with Sarah Walker, the 19-year-old daughter of his landlord. Three years later he published, anonymously, an unvarnished – many would say appalling – account of his erotomania. He had a very good reason for writing *Liber Amoris*, one that has been more than adequate to explain a great many literary indiscretions: he needed money. He certainly bestowed little of his valuable time or talent on it: he hastily transcribed a few conversations with Sarah, as best he remembered them, as Part I; he then copied into the text, with almost no editorial changes, the letters that he wrote to his closest friends about his pursuit of her. The whole of it is mercifully brief, using up one hundred pages solely by means of large print and generous spacing.

I have read few first-person accounts characterized by so little self-awareness and so bereft of any inclination on the part of the author to subject his own behavior to any sort of analysis. So I cannot aver that he must have wanted to explore his feelings; nor does his text indicate that he wished to provide a cautionary tale about a common enough if richly humiliating human experience – one that has rarely if ever been treated with this degree of frankness. Hazlitt had sense enough to go through the motions of

hiding his identity – he feigned the impassive voice of an unnamed editor and attempted to foist on the public the pretense that the anonymous author of the manuscript was recently deceased. The "Advertisement" that stands in the place of a preface says simply of this person that "It was his wish that what had been his strongest feeling while living, should be preserved in this shape when he was no more." The advertisement bravely acknowledges that many things "either childish or redundant, might have been omitted; but a promise was given that not a word should be altered, and the pledge was held sacred."

Since his account is defamatory of the young woman in the case, as well as excruciating in its revelations of his own mortification, Hazlitt had every motive to avoid being identified as the author. London, however, was a small-enough town in that day and age, and Hazlitt was such a readily recognizable figure of consequence in it, that his authorship quickly became an open secret – not least because he had bored so many of his friends, acquaintances, and near-strangers with lengthy tellings and re-tellings of his obsession.

The book is by no means a "good read." Our embarrassment for Hazlitt, our boredom with the aforementioned childishness and redundancy, and our impatience with the lack of any philosophical reflection on the events or consideration of their psychological import, combine to make us experience the book primarily as a document in pathology. It is a case history of a species of delirium written by the patient instead of the doctor. But it does have the authenticity and morbid interest that a madman's deadpan account of his insanity would have. As to its veracity, such narratives can always be trusted – for the chief symptom of lunacy is the lunatic's unawareness of how

he appears to normal people. Therefore, the literary deficits of the book – it sold poorly in spite of the great attraction it must have had for Hazlitt's many enemies and for lovers of scandal, and it has never been more than a curiosity – are more than compensated by its value as a reliable first-person chronology of a protracted episode of sexual obsession.

The psychology of the infatuated male – it differs significantly from the psychology of the infatuated female – is encapsulated in two comments Hazlitt made to his male correspondents, the second after Sarah gave him yet another cold shoulder after a lengthy separation:

I deserve to call her mine; for nothing else can atone for what I've gone through for her.

I hardly knew how to bear this first reception after so long an absence, and so different from the one my sentiments towards her merited . . . .

In all Hazlitt's ruminations, there is never a single instance of his seeing an event from Sarah Walker's point of view. Least of all is any thought given to how she must have felt about the florid extravagance of his alleged love for her. Amid scrumpy accounts of their few encounters, many of them lasting no more than a minute or two – she worked at the boarding house and, among other household duties, delivered his breakfast to his room – Hazlitt expatiates endlessly on the theme of his love. He continually jumps over his actual dealings with the girl in order to treat the matter as an abstract question of how much a love such as his should have obligated any woman fortunate enough to have engendered it. He does not appear to recognize her as having any right of

refusal: her rejection of such devotion is incomprehensible to him and is eventually taken to be evidence of an evil nature.

With an air of implacable grievance, he does sometimes allude to her easygoing flirtation with him when they first met: it seems that early on, she allowed some adolescent kissing and hand-holding and sat upon his lap. These asseverations have, unsurprisingly, caused a long succession of (male) apologists for Hazlitt to damn her as a brazen hussy who was little better than a prostitute. But Hazlitt's own record of the relationship has the virtue of honesty and is a salutary refutation of this thesis. Any reader can tell within the first five pages that she never led him on. She tells him repeatedly that she cannot love him in the way that he wants. But at no time is he willing to credit this statement: he intends to change her mind by continually reminding her of how much he loves her; and he believes that he must succeed at last by the consistent application of this pressure. What she actually thinks and wants is hardly even a subject for his speculation – there has never been a book that is more "all about me." But with the radical innocence that is the most flabbergasting component of narcissism, Hazlitt would have been astonished at the imputation that he is self-absorbed. Is this not a book-length paean to *her*? Can so great a love *for another* be called narcissistic?

Sarah is indeed omnipresent, because he dwells perpetually upon her looks, her voice, her walk, her ways. He is entranced by her, and therefore all that she does is intensely expressive and communicative to him. That she does not intend this effect upon him, that she has no intention of acting upon it in any way other than to enjoy some leisure time in his presence, she makes perfectly plain from first to last. But what

*she* wants out of life, what her aspirations are, what her concerns are, make up no part of Hazlitt's conception of her other than as they conduce to bring her momentarily closer to him or to take her away. It is also no subject for his authorial scrutiny whether his looks, his voice, his walk, his ways are or should be pleasing to her. She is to be compelled to love him solely by his love for her. She is reduced in *Liber Amoris* to a repertoire of physical characteristics bewitching to him; she is the literary precursor of the life-sized inflatable dolls that began to be widely sold in the late 20th century.

All that matters to Hazlitt about her as a human being is the panoply of emotions that she engenders in him. He pictures sharing all his tastes with her, showing her his favorite paintings in Italy, but it is her hand in his that constitutes the whole charm of his fantasy – he does not even pretend that she has anything to teach *him* on any subject in the world. We learn nothing of *her* taste. When he reminisces fondly and foolishly about taking her and her mother to see *Romeo and Juliet*, he does not remember anything about her response to Shakespeare's artistry or the effect of the drama on her mind – there remains only the dear memory of her allowing him to escort her, and of his supreme gratification at having her in tow. Writing to her from Scotland, where he had gone in the vain hope that a Scottish divorce from his wife would clear the path to Sarah's acceptance of a marriage proposal from him, he relives the precious occasion, their only "date":

Can I forget it for a moment – your sweet modest looks, your infinite propriety of behavior, all your sweet winning ways – your hesitating about taking my arm as we came out till your mother did – your laughing about nearly losing your cloak – your stepping into the coach without my being able to make the slightest discovery – and oh! my sitting down beside you there, you whom I had loved so long, so well, and your assuring me I had

not lessened your pleasure at the play by being with you, and giving me your dear hand to press in mine!

After a few more sentences in this style, which so nauseated his readers that the book almost immediately became a byword for unmanly confession, he almost owns a fault: "I ought to beg pardon for behaving so ill afterwards . . . ." But in his mind, his grossest misbehaviors toward her, replete with unfounded accusations and vicious insults, can or should be excused upon a simple word of apology from him – or even, in the absence of an apology, by his continued ardor. She should be the quicker to forgive him, in light of the gravity of his fears and how they grow naturally out of his immense love for her. What could be more inevitable, and more creditable to him as a lover, than his jealousy and his requiring the minutest explanations from her to allay his suspicions?

Logically, a man doing everything in his power to instill love in a woman might think of asking her to list ten Herculean labors that he would perform at her command, the better to impress her with the boundlessness of his devotion. This would indicate a willingness to make some sacrifices for her and demonstrate some interest in her interests. Not a note of this finds its way into Hazlitt's book-length declaration of love. In its place is a boundless suspicion that her favors are being bestowed on others and a tendency to give way to rage when she professes an inability to reciprocate his idolatrous love for her. When she writes no answer to the letter just quoted, he cycles through all the emotions of the self-absorbed patriarchal lover: he is puzzled, bereft, inconsolable; but over time he comes to see her behavior to him as maleficent. To know that he was suffering so! And to do nothing to assuage it! By such progressions

of thought, the incomparable beloved is reconfigured into a monster.

Here we edge close to the intimate enmeshment of infatuation and misogyny. They are the yin and yang of romantic pathology. Consider the lyrics of an old folk song popularized by Joan Baez:

I was born in East Virginia;  
North Carolina I did roam.  
There I met a fair pretty maiden;  
Her name and age, I do not know.

Her hair it was of a brightsome color,  
And her lips of a ruby-red;  
On her breast she wore white lilies.  
There I longed to lay my head.

Well, in my heart you are my darling,  
At my door, you're welcome in;  
At my gate, I'll meet you my darling,  
If your love I could only win.

I'd rather be in some dark holler  
Where the sun refused to shine  
Than to see you be another man's darling  
And to know that you'll never be mine.

Well, in the night I'm dreaming about you;  
In the day, I find no rest.  
Just the thought of you, my darling,  
Sends aching pains all through my breast.

Well, when I'm dead and in my coffin  
With my feet turned toward the sun,  
Come and sit beside me, darling;  
Come and think on the way you done.

We are told why he loves her – hair, lips, breast. We are told nothing as to why she should love him back. The song does not even pretend that she encouraged him. But she had a moral responsibility to reciprocate so great a love. She murdered his soul

out of unaccountable female waywardness.

In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes introduces the character of the breathtakingly beautiful Marcela to counter the "argument" of this song when she appears to a bevy of anguished and angered males who are blaming her for the lovesick suicide of their friend:

Heaven has made me, so you say, beautiful, and so much so that in spite of yourselves my beauty leads you to love me; and for the love you show me you say, and even urge, that I am bound to love you. By that natural understanding which God has given me I know that everything beautiful attracts love, but I cannot see how, by reason of being loved, that which is loved for its beauty is bound to love that which loves it . . . .

It is exhilarating to read so clear a rebuttal, put in the mouth of a 16th century female character in a book that was written for the ultra-masculinist culture of medieval Spain.

It may be that some readers feel that my imputation of misogyny is heavy-handed. After all, infatuations are common, especially among the young. Who has never been singed by the lightning of sexual allure? In the words of a character in a Tom Stoppard play – a scientist with a steel-trap mind when it comes to particle physics:

There is something appalling about love. It uses up all one's moral judgment. Afterwards it is like returning to a system of values, or at least to the attempt.

For an earthier pronouncement, we might quote internationally renowned movie director Roman Polanski from an interview with Martin Amis the year after he became a permanent fugitive from American justice for drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl:

"If I had killed somebody, it wouldn't have had so much appeal to the press, you see? But . . . fucking, you see, and the young girls. Judges want to fuck young girls. Juries want to fuck young girls. Everyone wants to fuck young girls!"

In a cynical moment, we might almost concur with the sentiment. Even judges? King Lear says *especially* judges. But we simply don't do all the things we want to do, and most juries, journalists, and judges recognize that. David Buss, a fatuous evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas, was taken aback to discover that 91% of his male students and 84% of his female students furnished him, at his request, with vivid, detailed fantasies of killing assorted miscreants who had disrupted their lives. He rushed into print with this evidence of human depravity but failed to underline the pertinent finding, which is that 0% of his students had enacted any of these scenarios. Polanski, however, acted out his rape fantasy and that made him a 43-year-old man who criminally violated a 13-year-old girl for his own selfish pleasure.

Thought is free; feelings are personal and subjective and harm no one. Misogyny does not inhere in male sexual desire, even at its most exigent; it inheres only in behavior that devalues women. Let us examine the classic misogyny of the "Lamborghini ambulance chaser" Alan Dershowitz, the attorney-at-law who has defended some of the richest, most famous, and most despicable people in the history of American jurisprudence: the notorious tax-evader Leona Helmsley, the rapists Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, and Mike Tyson, and the murderer O. J. Simpson. As part of his mandate to do his best for his client, he attacked the credibility of Epstein's accusers when he knew very well – having been one of Epstein's frequent

guests – that they were telling the truth. But in defending Epstein's predilection for under-age girls, Dershowitz was being true to his principles, as enunciated in an odious 1997 op-ed column for the *Los Angeles Times*: "There must be criminal sanctions against sex with very young children, but it is doubtful whether such sanctions should apply to teenagers above the age of puberty, since voluntary sex is so common in their age group." He suggested that fifteen was a reasonable age of consent, no matter how old the partner was. In a 1985 article, in the *Gainesville Sun*, he had proposed that the man "who occasionally seeks to taste the forbidden fruit of sex for hire" should not be arrested. However, a student in his law class remembered that he did not extend this magnanimity to the sex worker. She quoted him as saying "Prostitutes know what they're doing – they should be prosecuted. But you shouldn't ruin the john's life over that."

The misogyny is not in the desire for women's bodies, even when it grows to a terrible compulsion. Polanski's language is offensive not because it is vulgar in describing a natural drive but because it emphasizes the objectification of the sexual partner. Had he said that "everyone wants to make love to young girls," readers would have laughed him to scorn – the very notion of an equal love between a middle-aged man and a girl just past puberty is preposterous. But we might still grudgingly allow that he is expressing an unvarnished truth about a biological urge that is hardwired for the good of the human race – reproduction requires sex, not love, and the replication of genes is as likely if the man treats the woman as a piece of meat and feels nothing for her as if he loves her. The misogyny is in living down to this lowest common denominator of lust; it is in discounting the girl as anything *other than* a receptacle for

male sexual appetite. It is in Polanski's massive indifference to any human quality in the girl other than her usefulness as a vessel for his physical gratification.

Returning to Hazlitt, we have to see that his sort of infatuation – which, in his elaborately chivalrous pursuit of an ostensible life partner, so differs on the surface from Polanski's brutally exploitative behavior – is contaminated by a misogyny that is just as pronounced as Polanski's but merely less callous and overt. He wants more from the girl than Polanski wants, and seems to offer more; but it is none the less what *he* wants. What the girl wants does not come into it.

At the bottom of even the most ardently romantic infatuation of this type is narcissism, defined here as the impossibility of understanding the other person or of crediting what she wants if it conflicts with what the narcissist wants. Hazlitt projects upon Walker all that he desires – having made her in the image of his ideal, he does not even need to get to know her. He then treats her as his sole possession.

Sigmund Freud was such another. Ready for marriage, he decided on a brief acquaintance that Martha Bernays was all things womanly – hair, lips, breast – and initiated a long engagement that was conducted mostly by letter. He knew very little about her and cared even less. His own misogyny was so pronounced that as a psychoanalyst he diagnosed women as naturally narcissistic but said of men who are in the grip of romantic feelings that "love puts a check upon narcissism." He missed the profound self-absorption of "falling in love." In his courtship of Martha, the correspondence gives us only, in the words of Erich Fromm, "the narcissistic image of the great lover so typical of nineteenth-century love letters." She was his "sweet darling," his "darling girl," his "beloved girl," his "sweet girl," his "sweet treasure," his

"sweet little bride," his "sweet little woman," and most telling of all, his "sweet child."

He wrote to her, no doubt sincerely – sincerity being one of the hallmarks of narcissism – "I am quite prepared to be completely ruled by my princess. One willingly lets oneself be dominated by the person one loves." But on the *first* Friday night of their marriage, he refused to allow her to light the Sabbath candles – the religion of Judaism would be forevermore barred from *his* hearth and *his* home regardless of the feelings of his sweet little bride. The memory was forever painful to Martha. In Fromm's words, after he married her, Freud showed "a marked lack of interest in her erotically, intellectually, and affectively." Freud later took Martha's sister to bed.

As a final example of a 19th century man in love putting a check on his narcissism, I will mention Gustav Mahler. After a long bachelorhood enlivened by many dalliances, he plucked from the tree of Viennese femininity a beautiful and talented blossom named Alma Schindler, who was exactly half his age. She was a promising composer, which is how she came to his attention. He ordered her to give up her music – she must live only for him and *his* music. Here are excerpts from an outraged letter:

You, however, have only *one* profession from now on: *to make me happy*. Do you understand what I mean, Alma? . . . You've got to know *what* I desire and expect from you, what I can offer you and what *you must be to me*. . . . You must give yourself to me *unconditionally*, shape your future life, in every detail, entirely in accordance with my needs and desire nothing in return save my *love*! [Emphases in the original]

The 20-year-old girl complied. Understandably, throughout her life she was susceptible to the romantic attentions paid to her by other equally self-centered men. Had Sarah Walker accepted Hazlitt, she could have expected the same turning-on-a-dime that

Freud and Mahler exhibited.

Hazlitt's defenders grasp at one more straw in extenuation: Walker did find another boarder at her parents' rooming house more to her liking and eventually bore his child and lived with him (unmarried) for ten years. It seems that she was reluctant to admit this to Hazlitt, and instead fabricated the existence of a previous suitor to whose memory, she said, she was determined to remain forever true. Anyone reading Hazlitt's own transcripts of his conversations with Sarah is massively unsurprised by this revelation. No person of any experience at all in matters of romance would fail to suspect that the former suitor was a convenient decoy for a current love-interest, and that Sarah was endeavoring to dampen Hazlitt's ardor by means of a confession less incendiary than the identification of an immediate rival would have been. Given Hazlitt's pathological state, she would have had good reason to worry that telling him the truth would precipitate an act of impulsive violence on his part.

From outside the text, we know that Hazlitt sank so low as to urge, from his outpost in Scotland, one of his friends to attempt Sarah's virtue and report back to him. He wanted to satisfy himself once and for all whether she was playing him for an utter fool. This vile experiment was duly performed and Sarah, in keeping with her character, allowed the would-be seducer, just as she had allowed Hazlitt, to get to first base and no further. She was perhaps freer and easier than other girls of her era, saying at one point to Hazlitt, "I am no prude." This was, needless to say, an added attraction for a man who did not mind how many months the foreplay lasted, as long as the consummation followed. But she was also firm about the line that she would not

cross. In short, she was always what she said she was: completely unavailable to him as a future wife or as a partner in a seriously erotic undertaking. Her mild misrepresentation of her attraction elsewhere is best understood as her tactful attempt to deliver the message "I'm just not that into you" in a manner calculated to least mortify Hazlitt's feelings. And given her age, her class, and her education, it is hardly discreditable to her that she failed to grasp that he, in his infatuation, would twist every emphatic "No" she uttered into a "Maybe" and sometimes almost into a "Yes." She delivered the message at every opportunity in language that would have sufficed to discourage 999 men out of a thousand. She lacked, as most people would have, the psychological acuity to detect Hazlitt as one-in-a-thousand.