
William Hazlitt, essay in
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A Ruin is poetical. Because it is a work of art, says Lord Byron. No, but because it is a work of art o'erthrown. In it we see, as in a mirror, the life, the hopes, the labour of man defeated, and crumbling away under the slow hand of time; and all that he has done reduced to nothing, or to a useless mockery. Or as one of the bread-and-butter poets³⁸ has described the same thing a little differently, in his tale of Peter Bell³⁹ the potter,—

³⁷ *Abora*: possibly the false *Abyssinian* paradise described in *Milton's Paradise Lost*.

³⁸ *one of the bread-and-butter poets*: William Wordsworth, so-called here for his preference for simple style and domestic subject-matter.

³⁹ *Peter Bell*: Wordsworth's poem of the same title.

‘—The stones and tower
Seem’d fading fast away
From human thoughts and purposes,
To yield to some transforming power,
And blend with the surrounding trees.’

If this is what Lord Byron means by artificial objects and interests [viewed as a possible subject for poetry], there is an end of the question, for he will get no critic, no school to differ with him. But a fairer instance would be a snug citizen’s box by the road-side, newly painted, plastered and furnished, with every thing in the newest fashion and gloss, not an article the worse for wear, and a lease of one-and-twenty years to run, and then let us see what Lord Byron, or his friend and ‘host of Human Life’ will make of it, compared with the desolation, and the waste of all these comforts, arts, and elegances. Or let him take—not the pyramids of Egypt, but the pavilion at Brighton, and make a poetical description of it in prose or verse. We defy him. The poetical interest, in his Lordship’s transposed cases, arises out of the imaginary interest. But the truth is, that where art flourishes and attains its object, imagination droops, and poetry along with it. It ceases, or takes a different and ambiguous shape; it may be elegant, ingenious, pleasing, instructive, but if it aspires to the semblance of a higher interest, or the ornaments of the highest fancy, it necessarily becomes burlesque, as for instance, in the Rape of the Lock. As novels end with marriage, poetry ends with the consummation and success of art. And the reason (if Lord Byron would attend to it) is pretty obvious. Where all the wishes and wants are supplied, anticipated by art, there can be no strong cravings after ideal good, nor dread of unimaginable evils; the sources of terror and pity must be dried up: where the hand has done every thing, nothing is left for the imagination to do or to attempt: where all is regulated by conventional indifference, the full workings, the involuntary, uncontrollable emotions of the heart cease: property is not a poetical, but a practical prosaic idea, to those who possess and clutch it; and cuts off others from cordial sympathy; but nature is common property, the unenvied idol of all eyes, the fairy ground where fancy plays her tricks and feats; and the passions, the workings of the heart (which Mr. Bowles very properly distinguishes from manners, inasmuch as they are not in the power of the will to regulate or satisfy) are still left as a subject for something very different from didactic or mock-heroic poetry. By *art* and *artificial*, as these terms are applied to poetry or human life, we mean those objects and feelings which depend for their subsistence and perfection on the will and arbitrary conventions of man and society; and by nature, and natural subjects, we mean those objects which exist in the universe at large, without,

or in spite of, the interference of human power and contrivance, and those interests and affections which are not amenable to the human will. That we are to exclude art, or the operation of the human will, from poetry altogether, is what we do not affirm; but we mean to say, that where this operation is the most complete and manifest, as in the creation of given objects, or regulation of certain feelings, there the spring of poetry, *i.e.* of passion and imagination, is proportionably and much impaired. We are masters of Art, Nature is our master; and it is to this greater power that we find working above, about, and within us, that the genius of poetry bows and offers up its highest homage. If the infusion of art were not a natural disqualifier for poetry, the most artificial objects and manners would be the most poetical: on the contrary, it is only the rude beginnings, or the ruinous decay of objects of art, or the simplest modes of life and manners, that admit of, or harmonize kindly with, the tone and language of poetry.

[. . .]

What is the difference between the feeling with which we contemplate a gas-light in one of the squares, and the crescent moon beside it, but this—that though the brightness, the beauty perhaps, to the mere sense, is the same or greater; yet we know that when we are out of the square we shall lose sight of the lamp, but that the moon will lend us its tributary light wherever we go; it streams over green valley or blue ocean alike; it is hung up in air, a part of the pageant of the universe; it steals with gradual, softened state into the soul, and hovers, a fairy apparition over our existence! It is this which makes it a more poetical object than a patent-lamp, or a Chinese lanthorn, or the chandelier at Covent-garden, brilliant as it is, and which, though it were made ten times more so, would still only dazzle and scorch the sight so much the more; it would not be attended with a mild train of reflected glory; it would ‘denote no foregone conclusion,’ would touch no chord of imagination or the heart; it would have nothing romantic about it.—A man can make any thing, but he cannot make a sentiment! It is a thing of inveterate prejudice, of old association, of common feelings, and so is poetry, as far as it is serious. A ‘pack of cards,’ a silver bodkin, a paste buckle, ‘may be imbued’ with as much mock poetry as you please, by lending false associations to it; but real poetry, or poetry of the highest order, can only be produced by unravelling the real web of associations, which have been wound round any subject by nature, and the unavoidable conditions of humanity.

[. . .]

‘How far that little candle throws its beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.’

The image here is one of artificial life; but it is connected with natural circumstances and romantic interests, with darkness, with silence, with distance, with privation, and uncertain danger: it is common, obvious, without pretension or boast, and therefore the poetry founded upon it is natural, because the feelings are so. It is not the splendour of the candle itself, but the contrast to the gloom without,—the comfort, the relief it holds out from afar to the benighted traveller,—the conflict between nature and the first and cheapest resources of art, that constitutes the romantic and imaginary, that is, the poetical interest, in that familiar but striking image. There is more art in the lamp or chandelier; but for that very reason, there is less poetry. A light in a watch-tower, a beacon at sea, is sublime for the same cause; because the natural circumstances and associations set it off; it warns us against danger, it reminds us of common calamity, it promises safety and hope: it has to do with the broad feelings and circumstances of human life, and its interest does not assuredly turn upon the vanity or pretensions of the maker or proprietor of it. This sort of art is co-ordinate with nature, and comes into the first-class of poetry, but no one ever dreamt of the contrary. The features of nature are great leading land-marks, not near and little, or confined to a spot, or an individual claimant; they are spread out everywhere the same, and are of universal interest. The true poet has therefore been described as

‘Creation’s tenant, he is nature’s heir.’

What has been thus said of the man of genius might be said of the man of no genius. The spirit of poetry, and the spirit of humanity are the same. The productions of nature are not locked up in the cabinets of the curious, but spread out on the green lap of earth. The flowers return with the cuckoo in the spring; the daisy for ever looks bright in the sun; the rainbow still lifts its head above the storm to the eye of infancy or age—

‘So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man,
So shall it be till I grow old and die;’

but Lord Byron does not understand this, for he does not understand Mr. Wordsworth’s poetry, and we cannot make him. His Lordship’s nature, as well as his poetry, is something arabesque and outlandish.

Source: P. P. Howe, ed., The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes, London and Toronto, 1933, vol. 19, pp. 73–6.