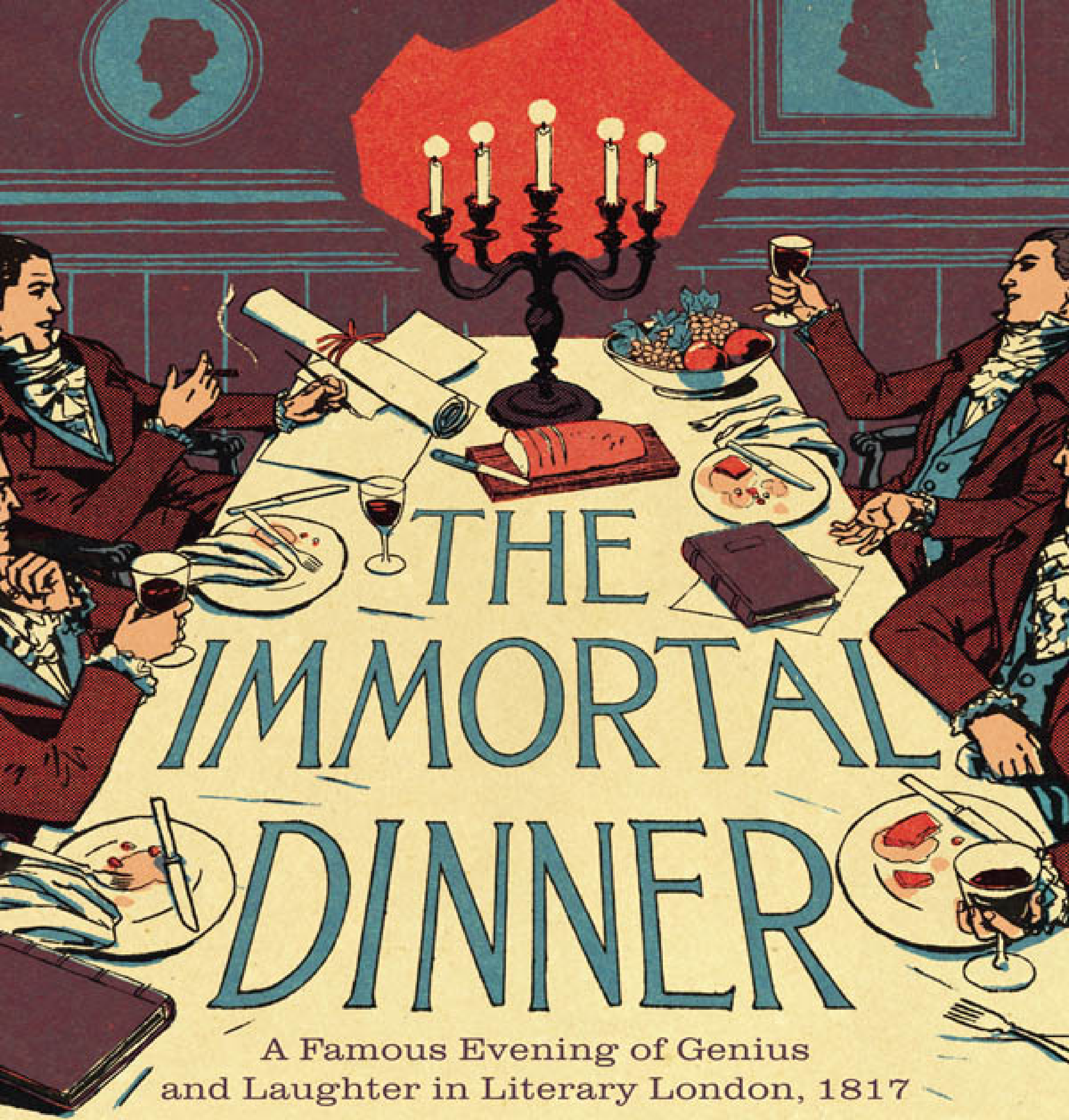

Penelope Hughes-Hallett

'POPULAR HISTORY AT ITS MOST DELICIOUS'
The Economist

VINTAGE

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About the Book

Between Christmas and new year of 1817 the eccentric painter, B.R. Haydon, gave a famous dinner party. His guests included three of the greatest literary stars of the age: the poets John Keats and William Wordsworth and the essayist and wit Charles Lamb. They recited poetry, took part in ridiculous antics, indulged in high-minded discussions – with such displays of brilliance that the party became known as the Immortal Dinner.

Penelope Hughes-Hallett celebrates this famous evening, setting it against a backdrop of change, reflected in the preoccupations of the illustrious diners. A compelling and sympathetic picture emerges of these rare spirits and the age which created them.

About the Author

Penelope Hughes-Hallett was born in 1927 and spent her childhood at Steventon, Hampshire, where Jane Austen was brought up. Her books include *‘My Dear Cassandra’: Illustrated Letters of Jane Austen* and *Home at Grasmere: The Wordsworths and the Lakes*. She was a tutor and lecturer with the Open University, subsequently becoming one of its governors, a patron of the Wordsworth Trust and trustee of the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. She died in 2010.

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Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem by Benjamin Robert Haydon

TO LUCY WITH LOVE

PENELOPE HUGHES-HALLETT

The Immortal Dinner

A Famous Evening of Genius and Laughter
in Literary London, 1817

V|NTAGE BOOKS
London

Prologue

This is the story of a dinner party. It was given by the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon in his painting room in Lisson Grove on 28 December 1817. The guests included two poets: Wordsworth and Keats; one essayist: Charles Lamb; one explorer: Joseph Ritchie; an uneasy civil servant; and a cast of walkers-on. At least three of those present possessed genius of some kind – and for once that word does not seem excessive. Between them they created an evening of rare brilliance, wit and high-minded discussion. Excitement and tension, conviviality and laughter alternated with noble declamations from both Wordsworth, in the full flow of his power, and Keats, barely twenty-two, on the threshold of his.

The diners' enthusiasms and experiences encompassed many of the burning topics of the day, ranging from the horrors of the operating theatre to the beauties of the new forms of poetry; from the magic of the rainbow seen by the light of the imagination to new advances in scientific discovery; from religion to exploration. Their conversation that evening was so diverse and inspirational as to make their gathering seem a microcosm of the intellectual life of the capital at a time of upheaval and change in a society two years after Waterloo, now adjusting with some difficulty to a state of peace.

At the end of the evening, as soon as his guests had departed into the night, Haydon described his party in one of the twenty-six vellum-bound volumes of his famous diary while every detail was still clear in his mind, even if a little

coloured by what he described as his ‘excellent port’. Such was the resonance of the occasion that many years later he could look back on it as one of the high points of his life, justifying the name he had given it: the Immortal Dinner.

1. The Host

In December Wordsworth was in town, and as Keats wished to know him I made up a party to dinner of Charles Lamb, Wordsworth, Keats and Monkhouse, his friend; and a very pleasant party we had.
I wrote to Lamb, and told him the address was '22 Lisson Grove, North, at Rossi's, half way up, right hand corner'. I received his characteristic reply: 'My dear Haydon, I will come with pleasure to 22 Lisson Grove, North, at Rossi's, half way up, right hand side, if I can find it. Yours C. Lamb. 20 Russel[*sic*] Court, Covent Garden East, half way up, next the corner, left hand side.'

Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Autobiography*[1]

BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON, history painter and host of the Immortal Dinner, was in no doubt as to his status: genius. In close partnership with the Almighty, whom he cajoled and pleaded with on page after page of the twenty-six volumes of his diaries, he would, he knew, succeed in his aims. These were clear-cut and precise: to restore the noble and sublime form of history painting – or High Art, as he preferred to call it – to its standing in the golden days of Raphael; to refine the public's taste in the visual arts; and to incite the government to play its part in this moral and elevated purpose by commissioning works of art –

preferably his – to decorate public buildings; and lastly, that he himself, Benjamin Robert Haydon, should paint the greatest pictures ever seen on the very grandest scale, and so lead the way towards making his country supreme in art throughout the civilized world. The inspiring size of his canvases made him tingle with excitement; he loved the challenge of their scale and the heightened emotion generated by their mythic or historically dramatic content. Looking at one of his paintings, he exclaimed, 'What fire, what magic! I bow and am grateful.' And of his *Judgment of Solomon*, 'that wonderful picture', he asked himself: 'Ought I to fear comparison of it with the Duke of Sutherland's Murillo, or any other picture? Certainly not!'[2]

The host of the Immortal Dinner arrived in London from Devonshire in 1804, aged eighteen, to study at the Royal Academy schools, the programme of his future career ready framed in his mind. He never wavered from it through the appalling vicissitudes of his life, which were to include imprisonment for debt on three separate occasions, the death of several of his children, and ostracism from the Royal Academy. In the realization of part of his dream – the government's setting of a competition for the decoration of the newly rebuilt House of Lords – his own designs were not even considered, and the humiliation of this blow was no doubt a factor in his eventual suicide. Posterity remembers him more for his friendships and his wonderful diary and autobiography than for his painting. Most of his vast and grandiose canvases are now rolled away and forgotten, while his early chalk drawing of Wordsworth's head recently reappeared on the market, selling for a considerable sum, so endorsing his patrons' disregarded advice to turn from history painting to portraiture. His campaigns against the art establishment tended to escalate into wearying Ancient Mariner-like naggings that his friends came to dread. But he was right after all. The

reforms for which he so persistently agitated are today the accepted norm.

Haydon had a large head (an *intellectual* head, he felt) and looked, as Aldous Huxley put it, ‘as if Mussolini had been strangely blended with Cardinal Newman’. In some portraits, however, the Mussolini element is absent and he appears gentle and kindly. His fellow artist and friend David Wilkie drew him in 1815, for example, showing him asleep and vulnerable, spectacles on his nose, his hairline already receding. He suffered from very poor eyesight and had even been blind for a short period after a childhood illness, and when painting he wore several pairs of strong concave spectacles balanced one upon another, removing and replacing them as he moved close up to his canvas or stood back to consider its progress. Distortions in his work are probably due to this frustrating routine. As he painted he whispered rapidly and incessantly to himself.

Self-portrait by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1816, drawn the year before his dinner.

Because Haydon was so sure of his genius, and because he did possess many of the attributes of that status, including the defining infinite capacity for taking pains, and because his tremendous energy and conviction were so compelling and magnetic, his friends accepted his estimate of himself. And when he was overcome, as later he increasingly was, by bouts of despair, their confidence in him succeeded again and again in restoring his equilibrium, so that he would bounce back triumphantly, his astonishing vanity seemingly undented. That Wordsworth should address a number of sonnets to him – Haydon was well aware of the honour this represented, but did not question its appropriateness – and that Keats at the very outset of his career also wrote a fine sonnet 'Great spirits now on earth are sojourning' partly in his honour, and that Leigh Hunt and several others fêted him in laudatory verse, is a measure of his impact on the literary world of the day.

Two years after his arrival in London the twenty-year-old Haydon was commissioned by Lord Mulgrave, the influential connoisseur and patron of the arts, to paint a picture on the subject of the death of the warrior Dentatus, known as the Roman Achilles, showing him at the moment of his assassins' attack. The young artist was overjoyed: the recognition he felt to be his right had come early. With a fine sense of occasion he knelt down and prayed for blessings on his career:

> I poured forth my gratitude for His kind protection during my preparatory studies and for early directing me in the right way, and implored Him in His mercy to continue that protection which had hitherto been granted me. I arose with that peculiar calm which in me always accompanies such expressions of deep gratitude, and looking fearlessly at my unblemished canvas, in a species of spasmodic fury I dashed down the first touch. I stopped, and said: 'Now I have begun; never can that last moment be recalled.'[3]

Every Wednesday, as he worked on this first canvas, he mixed his paints on a piece of pasteboard which he then

carried down to Lord Stafford's gallery to compare his colours with those of Stafford's Titians.

Haydon enjoyed working on a commission for a lord because, it has to be said, he was a terrific snob. Unfortunately this did not lead to him to behave with a suitably flexible attitude to his patron's pronouncements. If he felt he knew more about the subject, then he said so, often causing offence to Lord Mulgrave or Sir George Beaumont, the two most important patrons of the arts who were to come his way. John Constable warned him to be more tactful, and events would show the wisdom of this caution; but he was incapable of moderating his behaviour, even though it might endanger those forays into high society he so much enjoyed. He wrote in an ecstasy of bliss about one such visit, later in his life, to Lord Egremont at Petworth, where he was warmly welcomed and shown to a magnificent bedroom:

> I really never saw such a character as Lord Egremont. 'Live and let live' seems to be his motto. He has placed me in one of the most magnificent bedrooms I ever saw. It speaks more for what he thinks of my talents than anything that ever happened to me. Over the chimney is a nobleman kneeling. A lady of high rank to the right. Opposite, Queen Mary. On the right of the cabinet, Sir Somebody. The bed curtains are of different coloured velvets let in on white satin.
>
> What a destiny is mine! One year in the Bench,[4] the companion of gamblers and scoundrels – sleeping in wretchedness and dirt, on a flock bed low and filthy, with black worms crawling over my hands – another, in a splendid house, the guest of rank, and fashion and beauty! As I laid my head on my down pillow the first night I was deeply affected, and could hardly sleep.

As to Egremont himself, Haydon found him 'literally like the sun' shining on one and all, so that 'the very flies at Petworth seem to know there is room for their existence, that the windows are theirs'.

> At breakfast in walks Lord Egremont; first comes a grandchild, whom he sends away happy. Outside the window moan a dozen black spaniels, who are let in, and to them he distributes cakes and comfits, giving all equal shares. After chatting with one guest, and proposing some scheme of pleasure to others, his

leathern gaiters are buttoned on, and away he walks, leaving everybody to take care of themselves. At seventy-four he still shoots daily, comes home wet through and is as active and looks as well as many men of fifty … I never saw such a character, or such a man, nor were there ever many.[5]

On leaving Petworth he copied his bread-and-butter letter into his diary, ending: 'In earnestly hoping your lordship may live long, I only add my voice to the voices of thousands, who never utter your lordship's name without a blessing.'[6] But in spite of this effusion Haydon was never invited again. Perhaps he tried to borrow money from his host, or perhaps his exclusion was due to his eccentric behaviour with his bedclothes. Dinner had been served on the first day of his visit, but no Haydon appeared. Presently he was discovered in his room, his evening coat folded neatly over a chair, his greatcoat buttoned up to his chin, busily engaged in hanging his sheets and blankets on chairs around the room, the window flung wide and a huge fire alight in the grate, as he indulged his mania for fresh air and his suspicions of the possible dampness of strange bedlinen.[7]

For much of his life Haydon was tormented by the fickle behaviour of those of 'rank, fashion and beauty' who crowded his studio on his regular weekly open day and often at other times as well to chatter and exclaim, only to desert him at the first hint of a setback. Charles Lamb left him a note describing an encounter with one such pair:

Dear Raffaele Haydon, Did the maid tell you I came to see your picture, not on Sunday but the day before? I think the face and bearing of the Bucephalus tamer very noble, his flesh too effeminate or painty. The skin of the female's back kneeling is much more carnous. I had small time to pick out praise or blame, for two lord-like Bucks came in, upon whose strictures my presence seemed to impose restraint. I plebeian'd off therefore. Yours in haste (salt fish waiting) C. Lamb.[8]

In keeping with the scale of his other attributes, Haydon's capacity for suffering was immense, and he was bewildered and hurt by the disloyal behaviour of his society

acquaintances; but discouragement alternated with moods of elation. ‘I have been,’ he wrote during a period of success, ‘like a man with air balloons under his armpits and ether in his soul. While I was painting, walking or thinking, beaming flashes of energy followed and impressed me.’[9] Once, after contemplating a Raphael cartoon for three hours at a stretch, he felt as if a spirit had dipped him in ‘racy nectar’; and sometimes his sensations of epiphany lifted him into a mystic dimension when he experienced Blakeian visions of angels and archangels, ‘with their terrific hands’, floating in the clouds. His ebullience was infectious: William Hazlitt said that ‘he set one upon one’s legs better than a glass of champagne’.[10] His laughter was famous. Leigh Hunt, poet, essayist and radical editor, serving a two-year sentence for libelling the Prince Regent, to whom he referred in words to the effect that he was a fat Adonis of fifty, remembered of one of Haydon’s visits to him in prison that he called before he was up, demanded breakfast, and made the place echo with his laughter that sounded like the trumpets of Jericho.

When the fat Adonis came to be crowned in the summer of 1821, Haydon’s loyalty to the Hunts did not extend to refusing a ticket for the occasion. The event, which finally took place at the end of July, had been planned down to the last detail by the Prince Regent himself, and postponed for fear of disruption from his wife, as determined to be crowned queen as he was to prevent it. Caroline appeared at the Abbey magnificently dressed for the occasion and attended by her ladies, only to be barred from each entrance and finally having the great door of Westminster Hall slammed in her face. More than 900 invitations had been sent out, and Haydon was delighted to have a seat in Westminster Hall. Pageantry on such a scale was ambrosia to his soul, and in line with the scale of his own pictures, and, besides, he had a great sense of the mystique of the monarchy. He was not to be disappointed. The first priority

was to get all the necessary adjuncts to his costume: ‘I only got my ticket on Wednesday at two, and dearest Mary and I drove about to get all I wanted. Sir George Beaumont lent me ruffles and frill, another a blue velvet coat, a third a sword; I bought buckles, and the rest I had, and we returned to dinner exhausted.’

Haydon went to bed at ten o’clock in the evening, got up again at midnight, not having slept a wink, and by half past one in the morning he was at Westminster Hall, and other than three ladies he was the first to arrive. When the doors were finally opened at four o’clock he seized an eminently desirable front place in the Chamberlain’s box, between the door and the throne. Many of the doorkeepers, he noticed, were tipsy, and quarrels broke out:

The sun began to light up the old gothic windows, the peers to stroll in, and the company to crowd in, of all descriptions; elegant young men tripping along in silken grace with elegant girls trembling in feathers and diamonds, old peers and old peeresses, some in one dress and some in another, many with swords, whose awkwardness in managing them showed how unused their sides had been to the graceful encumbrance, and many with coats, velvet and satin, of all ages, all courts, and all times … all happy, eager, smiling, and anticipating. Some took seats they had not any right to occupy, and were obliged to leave them after sturdy disputes. Others lost their tickets. The Hall occasionally echoed with the hollow roar of voices at the great door, till at last the galleries were filled.

Numbered ticket for George IV's coronation in Westminster Abbey.

Haydon was entranced by all he saw, until at last the time came for the entry of the king:

> The appearance of a Monarch has something of the air of a rising sun; there are indications which announce his approach, a streak of light, the tipping of a cloud, the singing of a lark, the brilliance of the sky, till the edges get brighter and brighter, and he rises majestically into the heavens. So was the King's advance. A whisper of mystery turns all eyes to the throne! Suddenly two or three run; others fall back; some talk, direct, hurry, stand still, or disappear. Then three or four of high rank appear from behind the Throne; an interval is left; the crowds scarce breathe! Something rustles, and a being buried in satin, feathers and diamonds rolls gracefully into his seat. The room rises with a sort of feathered, silken thunder! Plumes wave, eyes sparkle, glasses are out, mouths smile, and one man becomes the prime object of attraction to thousands! The way in which the King bowed was really monarchic! As he looked towards the peeresses and foreign ambassadors, he looked like some gorgeous bird of the east.

The king then proceeded to his crowning and there was a wait of several hours, during which his unfortunate and discarded wife made her vain attempt to gain entry. Young girls strewed flowers on the ground over which the new monarch would walk. And after the banquet was over came what Haydon felt was the finest sight of the day, when the great doors of the Hall were opened for the ritual entry of the King's Champion in full armour, escorted by Wellington and Howard, all three on horseback. A herald read the challenge to any enemy of the new king, the Champion's glove was thrown down, and the hieratic figures moved forward to the throne:

> My imagination got so intoxicated that I came out with a great contempt for the plebs, and as I walked by with my sword, I said to myself '*odi profanum* etc'.[11] I got home quite well, and thought sacred subjects insipid things. How soon I should be ruined in luxurious society! [12]

Before embarking on a new piece of work Haydon prayed earnestly, on one occasion asking that he might be granted the energy to create a new era in art and to rouse the

people and the influential patrons of the arts to a just estimate of the moral value of historical painting. Such compendium and specific prayers recur throughout his diaries, and, if they were satisfactorily answered, the Almighty was rewarded with a blanket letter of thanks on the last day of each year. Although it may be easy to mock his brand of religion, to him it was very real, a necessary sustenance in the daily battle of his life, and he became restless and unhappy if deprived of its observance. Once he missed church because he had promised to take an acquaintance to see Wilkie's picture *The Cut Finger*, but 'he did not come at the time; and as I never wait for anybody I made calls and idled the day. No church. No religious meditation. Very bad.'[13]

A few years after his arrival in London from Devonshire, Haydon embarked on a course of borrowing money, first from his friends, later from moneylenders, which was eventually to wreck his life. The mystery is that people continued to lend him funds when experience must have warned them they would never be repaid, but this is partly explained by the fact that he was regarded by his contemporaries as a very great painter indeed. And this was Haydon's own justification: that he was owed a reasonable living after all he had done for English art. Many of his friends agreed with his assessment, so that in paying Haydon's debts they felt they were making a contribution to the furtherance of the cause. Besides, he was attractive: the magnetism that made him such irresistible company also helped him raise a loan. Later in his life Mary Russell Mitford declared that she had never known anything so rapid, so brilliant or so vigorous as his talk, and many others came similarly under his spell. He borrowed copiously, indiscriminately and ruthlessly, even from his own pupils. Nor were tradesmen safe from his importunities. He coaxed his wine merchant to supply him free, asking if the man thought it right he should be

deprived of the wine necessary for his health, whereupon his victim sent him a dozen bottles; his landlord waited indefinitely for the rent; the owner of the eating house he frequented said it would be an honour to supply free dinners until times were better, and the pretty waitresses, hearing he was bankrupt, eyed him, he said, 'with a lustrous regret'. He was frugal and lived simply, working hard most of the time; but if it was a question of paying for the best models, or for the quantities of expensive paints he needed to cover his gigantic canvases, then it was a different matter, and as time went on he became more and more reckless about such expenses. Commissioned to paint a portrait of the Duke of Wellington, who refused to lend his uniforms or equipment, Haydon had replicas made by the duke's own saddler, heavily worked saddle-cloths and so forth, then decided at the last moment that the effect was unpleasing and threw a dark cloth over the whole, only revealing a little corner of the expensive glitter beneath.

Haydon had a great weakness for pretty girls. 'What a delightful moment is that of declaring a passion which has long possessed one to a pure, delicious girl,' he declared in his diary:

> In a silent evening, accidentally alone with her, the flutterings of heart, the longing for disclosure, the trembling approaches! She sits – you venture to sit near her! … an involuntary sigh; you put your arm on the back of her chair without daring to touch her lovely shoulder – awed, for fear of offending, you dare, agitated and shaken, to touch her soft hand! She withdraws it not! You press with a start of passion the gentle, helpless hand to your full and burning lips! O God! with the look of an Angel she turns up her exquisite mouth, and as you kiss it, your lips cling, with a lingering at every little separation and you suck ecstasy till your brain is steeped in steam. Does not this speak all a man would wish? No cant, no dropping on knees, no speaking to Fathers, or consulting cold blooded, brutal brothers – not even a word to her dear self![14]

Later his romantic dreams seem to have become more domestic:

> What a delight it is after a week's successful labour to sit on a Sunday morning at breakfast, with a bright sky that promises a glowing day, with a good appetite and smoking tea, a clean cloth, a sparkling fire, Shakespeare, Homer, Milton, Tasso, Ariosto or Spenser to dip in by turns lying at your side; alternately reading and looking at your Picture, firing with urgings of greatness and anticipations of immortality, or beaming with fancy and searchings of spirit, shaking off the little troubles of life like drops from a Lion, and then to look opposite and see reflected in a lovely face, your own feelings, mingled with love and devotion to yourself.

But lack of funds impinged on the delicious vision: 'There is nothing complete in this World without a woman, a true, shrinking, gentle, devoted woman, but of what use is my thinking so now? I had better not give way to such feelings.'[15]

The catalogue of impressive authors listed above sounds a little like window-dressing, but this was not so, Haydon's passion for great literature being a central factor in his life. It stemmed from his early years in his father's Plymouth bookshop, where he was a reluctant apprentice, and where he took advantage of his situation to immerse himself in whatever books were to hand, an appetite first stimulated by masters at the local grammar school, of which he became head boy. When in later years he was forced on more than one occasion to sell his belongings to satisfy his creditors, his precious books were the objects he held on to with the fiercest determination, taking precedence even over his paints, the tools of his trade. He had a working knowledge of Greek and Latin, wrote fluent French and a little German and Italian, and was perfectly able to hold his own in debate with the other guests at his party, and even with that great intellect of the early nineteenth century, the critic William Hazlitt.

The opening of Waterloo Bridge in 1817 was of especial significance to the fiercely patriotic Haydon, as he looked back on the excitement of hearing the first news of the battle two years earlier, after dining with the liberal editor and critic John Scott in the Edgware Road. On his way

home, rather late, he was crossing Portman Square when a Foreign Office messenger rushed up to him, asking which was Lord Harrowby's house, as he was taking him the news that 'the Duke has beat Napoleon, taken one hundred and fifty pieces of cannon, and is marching to Paris'. Haydon was bewildered:

> 'Is it true?' I asked. 'True!' said he; 'which is Lord Harrowby's?' Forgetting in my joy this was not Grosvenor Square, I said: 'There,' pointing to the same spot in Portman Square as Lord Harrowby's house occupies in Grosvenor Square, which happened to be Mrs Boehm's, where there was actually a rout. In rushed the messenger through servants and all, and I ran back again to Scott's. They were gone to bed but I knocked them up and said: 'The Duke has beat Napoleon, taken one hundred and fifty pieces of cannon, and is marching to Paris.' Scott began to ask questions. I said, 'None of your questions; it's a fact,' and both of us said 'Huzza!'[16]

Haydon went home, but rose the next morning with his brains still whirling with the news. Sammons, his favourite model, six foot three inches tall and corporal of the Life Guards (later to become his general factotum) arrived for a sitting, and Haydon tried to work, but both men were in too much of a state to continue. Sammons rushed off to find out more news from his fellow soldiers, while Haydon, 'in a steam of feeling', went in search of newspapers. He read the *Gazette*, ordered a *Courier* for a month, called at a confectioner's and 'read all the papers until I was faint'. Not all his friends were such fervent patriots. For Leigh Hunt, Napoleon's fall represented the end of hope for a republican France and the probable return of an incompetent and repressive monarchy. Haydon dined with him two days after the news broke, and found him quiet and despondent, 'but knowing it must come by and by and putting on an air of indifference, he said: "Terrible battle this, Haydon." "A glorious one, Hunt." "Oh, yes, certainly," and to it we went.'[17] Hazlitt, for whom Napoleon was the towering hero of the era, felt in despair; his belief, Haydon said, being that 'crimes, want of honour, want of faith, or

want of every virtue on earth, were nothing on the part of an individual raised from the middle classes to the throne, if they forwarded the victory of the popular principle whilst he remained there'.[18] After this crash of all the hopes stimulated by Napoleon's escape from Elba, he can have been in no mood to put up with an overexcited, jubilant Haydon, who found him 'prostrated in mind and body: he walked about unwashed, unshaved, hardly sober by day, and always intoxicated by night, literally, without exaggeration, for weeks; until at length wakening as it were from his stupor, he at once left off all stimulating liquors, and never touched them after'.[19] Haydon's own view of Napoleon was of a fiendish tyrant who richly deserved his downfall; and this was also Wordsworth's, for whom he was a satanic figure, 'that audacious charlatan and remorseless desperado'.[20] Wordsworth remained constant to this judgement, but Haydon sometimes had sneaking feelings of admiration for the fallen emperor, for his charisma and for the glamour of his days of absolute power. His feelings for Wellington since the battle of Vimiero 'amounted to the supernatural', although he regretted his hero's apparent lack of warmth and sympathy, linked in his mind no doubt to Wellington's lack of cooperation with the painter about sitting for a portrait.

Corporal Sammons, 2nd Regiment of Life Guards, Haydon's servant and favourite model, *c*. 1820. 'Pity he proved a villain,' Haydon wrote later on the drawing, after dismissing the married Sammons on account of some misdemeanour with a young woman. He was soon reinstated.

For a while after Waterloo, Napoleon seemed to have disappeared, and speculation about his whereabouts raged. On 8 July *The Times* published rumours of a large American vessel waiting for a special passenger at Le Havre, but another source of information had it that the emperor had already been arrested. *The Times* meanwhile took this early opportunity of raising the subject of looted works of art:

> The French Government will be inconsistent, and therefore weak, if, in condemning the crimes of the Revolution, it wishes to keep the fruit of those crimes, if it does not restore every statue, and every picture, and every medal, and every manuscript which the robbers who now await punishment tore from their unoffending owners.

But by August Napoleon was in Plymouth harbour, a prisoner on board the *Bellerophon*, the veteran of Trafalgar, known in the fleet as the *Billy Ruffian*, 'cheered by thousands' and still hoping to find asylum in England. Haydon longed to witness this extraordinary scene in his home town, but restrained himself in favour of working on his current picture. His sister, Mrs Harriet Haviland, sent him an account from Plymouth on 2 August of having seen the emperor:

> On Friday I went out to see Buonaparte, but the guard boats kept us at such a great distance I was rather disappointed, as it was impossible to clearly distinguish his features. He seems a good figure and dignified; and to the disgrace of the Plymouthians be it said, yesterday, as he withdrew, the people rose up in their boats and applauded him. There is so much that is mysterious and prepossessing about him, and now in his great misfortunes so much pity is felt, that it is dangerous, I think, to the loyalty of the people to keep him here long; they all seem fascinated. Napoleon has a large stomach, though not otherwise fat. He walks the deck between five and six.[21]

Sketching the scene was the then unknown Charles Eastlake, Haydon's first pupil. The young artist later

worked his drawings up into a canvas entitled *Napoleon on Board the Bellerophon*, which he sold to a group of five Plymouth businessmen who bought it as a speculation and made a fortune from touring it round the country. Eastlake's share of the profits came to £1,000. Part of this he wisely spent on some months in Italy, painting and acquiring a knowledge of classical work, upon which his future success was founded: later in life he became president of the Royal Academy and head of the National Gallery.

To cheer himself up for having missed such a historic sight, Haydon organized a party in his rooms of David Wilkie, John Scott and Corporal Sammons, the latter producing several of the Waterloo wounded to tell their stories. Sammons also brought a letter from a comrade still in Brussels, which Haydon read out. It included a nice little glimpse of Wellington cheering his men: 'I saw many of my comrades fall, before I got the wound, but we got three eagles, and Lord Wellington said that gained the applause of the whole of the British.' Sammons, who had fought all through the Peninsula campaign, to Haydon's amusement 'always seemed astounded that the battle of Waterloo had been gained and he not present' and he now underlined his authority as corporal over the mere privates by explaining military jargon to the assembled company as the moving tales of the battle were told. Haydon was fond of his model but not blind to his faults:

> He would have brought a million safe and sound from Portsmouth to the King's Mint, but he popped his hand into King Joseph's coaches at Vittoria and brought away a silver pepper-box. He was an old satyr, very like Socrates in face, faithful to me, his colonel, and his King; but let a pretty girl come in the way and the Lord have mercy on her![22]

David Wilkie was always amused by Sammons, and Hazlitt, Haydon said, held regular discussions with him about Spain

and Napoleon, ‘but Sammons was proof, and always maintained the Duke was the better man’.[23]

In early May 1815, a month before Waterloo, William Wordsworth and his wife Mary were in London, staying in lodgings off Cavendish Square, and shortly after his arrival the poet met Haydon with Sir George Beaumont and his wife at their North Audley Street house. The Beaumonts and the Wordsworths had been close friends for some years, since Coleridge had introduced the poet to Beaumont, the generous patron of artists and writers, having first told Wordsworth that he had described him to Sir George as ‘a great poet by inspirations and in the moments of revelation, but that you were a thinking feeling philosopher habitually – that your poetry was your philosophy under the action of strong winds of feeling – a sea rolling high’;[24] and further that Lady Beaumont, given to excesses of sensibility, had declared on reading one of Wordsworth’s poems that had he entered the room she would have fallen at his feet. The friendship, begun with such auspicious brio, continued for the rest of their lives. Beaumont, himself a talented amateur landscape painter, had also been a wonderfully kind patron and friend to Haydon, including him in the circle of rising young stars such as John Constable and David Wilkie whom he liked to gather around him.

In such a sympathetic atmosphere both Wordsworth and Haydon could feel relaxed and receptive; there was an immediate rapport between the poet at the height of his acclaim and the young painter beginning to enjoy success, and during the following weeks the two continued to build on their first acquaintance. A warm relationship began to develop between the disparate pair, fuelled partly by their high-minded dedication to their work and conviction of the special nature of their destinies. On 23 May they breakfasted together, spending, Haydon said, two delightful hours. By 13 June he had coaxed his new friend to submit

to having a plaster cast made of his face. This was a preliminary for his portrait in Haydon's gigantic work in progress. The picture was to be entitled *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*, and the artist planned to include portraits of his friends in the crowd pressing round the central figure.

The process of making a plaster mask was not without hazard. In 1810 Haydon had attempted to make a cast of the entire torso of an exceptionally beautiful negro from Boston, 'a perfect antique figure alive'.[25] After making many drawings of this man, whose name was Wilson, and taking casts of various joints, Haydon decided to attempt a cast of his entire torso. This was a difficult and also dangerous procedure. Haydon evolved a strategy of building a wall around Wilson, the plaster then to be poured in encasing him, making for an even effect:

> Seven bushels of plaster were mixed at once and poured in till it floated him up to the neck. The moment it set, it pressed so equally upon him that his ribs had no room to expand for his lungs to play and he gasped out, 'I – I – I die.' Terrified at his appearance, for he had actually dropped his head, I seized with the workmen the front part of the mould and by one supernatural effort split it in three large pieces and pulled the man out, who, almost gone, lay on the ground senseless and streaming with perspiration.[26]

Wilson recovered, though the surgeon called in to restore him said he would have died in another few seconds, and the mould was brilliantly successful, but Haydon had learnt his lesson and did not venture on any more such experiments. On a later occasion he was present at an attempt to take a cast of the face of Francis Jeffrey, the powerful editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, in front of an admiring circle including his fellow editor, the cleric Sidney Smith, once described as the most playful, impudent, careless cassocked infidel ever met with:

> Breakfast was ready and visitors began to drop in. By this time Jeffrey's coat was off, his chin towelled, the plaster ready, his face greased, and the ladies looking with a mixture of interest and quiz that was funny. Mrs Jeffrey began to look anxious, for casting a face has something of the air of cutting off a man's