

Hazlitt's Illiberal Hatred

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WRITING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, Lionel Trilling—a pivotal if ambiguous interpreter of liberalism—looked back past Matthew Arnold, the prior liberal critic with whom he is most closely identified, to the early nineteenth century and to William Hazlitt, another dissident and contradictory figure who wrote at what was arguably the inception of liberal criticism, amid a stifling political reaction that eerily anticipates Trilling's own Cold War dilemma. What struck Trilling about Hazlitt was that he usefully disrupts a more inert contemporary sense of the claims of art. His notorious insistence that “the language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power” and is therefore “aristocratical” and “anti-levelling” sat uneasily with mid-twentieth-century liberal tendencies to distinguish poetry and the arts from social and political strife.¹ “We prefer to speak of art as if it lived in a white bungalow with a garden,” Trilling observed, “and were harmless and quiet and cooperative.”² Significantly, Trilling frames a wider problem of the relation between politics and the arts, hinting too, in his construction of the “harmless and quiet and cooperative” life of art, at the disruptive implications of Hazlitt's critical commitment to extreme emotional states. Intemperate in his animosities and his politics, Hazlitt was a fiercely polemical critic who nonetheless stood with his second-generation Romantic collaborators at the inception of the modern liberal tradition.³

¹ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 4:214. Hereafter, references to the Howe edition of Hazlitt's works will be given in parentheses in the text.

² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 82.

³ In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 179–80, Raymond Williams notes that “liberal” in its “political meaning is comparatively modern.” He identifies a shift first in the late eighteenth century from an older sense of a class of free men to a social sense of open-mindedness, and then after 1800 to a political sense, which was “proudly and even defiantly announced in the



To reopen the case of Hazlitt is to reconsider the critical history of liberalism and the emotions. In particular, it is to ask how intense political feelings might be reinscribed into our understanding of liberal literary studies in ways that move beyond liberalism's putative "disinterestedness."

This essay draws from my recent book on Hazlitt as political essayist,⁴ and while the book is not centrally about liberalism or the emotions, it does engage the topic of this collection of essays in *Occasion* in two ways that I will develop further in the pages that follow. First, on the matter of liberalism, I set out to align Hazlitt's political style, and to some extent the style and form of his criticism more generally, with the early nineteenth-century radical press and popular agitation for parliamentary reform. Working (to some extent) against E. P. Thompson's view that the "sustained and controlled rhythms" of Hazlitt's prose restrict him in manner and audience to "the polite culture of the essayist,"⁵ I make the case for a more heterogeneous, inconsistent, and fluidly oppositional line of prose development, a case that stands in productive tension with the Romanticist sense that liberal literary culture emerged with the second-generation cohort of Hazlitt, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Leigh Hunt. In so doing, I am suggesting that liberal literary culture in its formative years was deeply shaped by radical political passions in ways that histories focusing on post-Arnoldian "disinterestedness" have failed to draw out.

Hazlitt certainly engaged the polite traditions of the periodical and familiar essay and contributed signally to the *Liberal* of 1822–23, a paradigmatic second-generation coterie production of Shelley, Byron, and Hunt. Yet the *Liberal* was itself a complex and combative project, conceived, as Kim Wheatley reminds us, in an atmosphere of "hostile publicity" as a reformist response to the Tory *Quarterly Review* and marked, alongside coterie correspondence and "touches of familiarity, even intimacy," by what Jane Stabler terms "rapid shifts between place, language and form or genre" within a framework of "daringly pan-European identity."⁶ And it is often forgotten (or underappreciated) that, well before the *Liberal* enterprise, Hazlitt launched his career as a public writer in 1807 in the pages of Cobbett's illiberal and intemperate *Political Register*, with a series of anti-Malthusian letters on poor-law reform. Indeed, his partisan radical prose drew on a host of other, more combative resources: popular demonologies and contemptuous newspaper nicknames; the strenuous oral rhythms and opportunistic resistance of the *Political Register*; an exaggerated figural language of corruption, rooted in country party traditions of alienated opposition and pressed to catastrophic extremes by post-Napoleonic economic distress; the apocalyptic radical tendency to divide the world sharply between liberty and tyranny, between reform and legitimacy, between popular right and elite privilege; and the more measured (but no less oppositional) terms of an emerging radical political arithmetic, whose sums and calculations contested classical political economy and Malthusian population theory and were more fully developed in the era of Chartism. This sort of opportunistic journalism remained a consistent feature of Hazlitt's manner throughout his career, and it is striking that he often drew on the formal

periodical title, *The Liberal* (1822)." Hazlitt of course contributed to the *Liberal*, a vexed expatriate collaboration of Byron, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt.

⁴ Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to reprint elements of that book, in reworked form, for this essay.

⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 821–22.

⁶ Kim Wheatley, "Conceiving Disgust: Leigh Hunt, William Gifford and the *Quarterly Review*," in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Politics, Poetics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Routledge, 2003), 189; Jane Stabler, "Religious Liberty in *The Liberal*," *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=jane-stabler-religious-liberty-in-the-liberal.

conventions of the newspaper and magazine whether or not the occasion demanded it—arguing by way of review, for example, even when not directly commissioned to do so and mobilizing epistolary address and response within essays that were otherwise more abstractly voiced. Partisan position is similarly unstable, and while my own interests primarily involve Hazlitt's engagement with the popular radical press, commentators have plausibly identified him as everything from a Painite republican and disillusioned Jacobin to a secular libertarian or pragmatic constitutional Whig.⁷ If Cobbett's *Register* marks one end of his partisan range, at the other he contributed regularly over a number of years to Francis Jeffrey's Whig *Edinburgh Review*. Revisiting Hazlitt's critical method with politics more fully in view requires an openness to a range of political commitments, at times inconsistent and even contradictory, but always potentially infused with the combative strains of popular radical protest. In this sense, Hazlitt restores the neglected radical accent of early nineteenth-century liberal critique.

The second element of my book that engages the topic of liberalism and the emotions has to do with my interest in rehabilitating ways of feeling in criticism that are central to Hazlitt's political purposes but that have often been treated with embarrassment or dismissal by the critical tradition. This speaks to the difficulty that criticism, as an intellectual practice, has often had with intense emotional response, something that rarely troubled Hazlitt. One of his disruptive emotions is the distinctive tone of loss and regret that suffused his writing about the spiritual traditions of rational Dissent in which he was raised. Nostalgia typically resolves itself into elegiac tributes to the memory of his father, the Reverend William Hazlitt, a Unitarian minister who corresponded with the likes of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, and who represented for Hazlitt an austere Puritan radical tradition stretching back to Milton, Cromwell, and the revolutionary seventeenth century. Like Blake, Hazlitt struggled to sustain the creative and intellectual energy of the Dissenting tradition, but unlike Blake, he was deeply skeptical about its future and was particularly cautious about the prophetic and apocalyptic strands of contemporary radical discourse. To mourn the figure of his father was to commemorate Dissenting tradition at the moment of its diminishing political significance, a diminishment Hazlitt often risked overstating so as to amplify the tone of regret. In the book I argue that mourning Dissent was a deliberate and critically effective calculation within the restless contours of Hazlitt's contradictory prose style.

For my purposes here, the key point may be that nostalgic meditations on sectarian faith become a vector for Hazlitt's paradoxically skeptical and even retrospective political expectations. He can be aligned with second-generation liberal optimism through the progressive assumptions that shaped his account of the history of print and reading since the Protestant Reformation, which has become canonical in the recent turn to book history—witness the frequent invocation of his remark in *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* that “the French Revolution might be described as a remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing” (13:38). Yet what is less noticed about this claim is the way it gets worked out, not as a matter of present experience or future expectation, but rather through close historical argument reaching back to the Protestant Reformation and vernacular translation of the Bible. By contrast with second-generation liberal optimism, whether in Shelley's ecstatic or Hunt's more restrained register, Hazlitt's progressivism

⁷ For treatments along these lines, see Joseph Butwin, “Democracy and Popular Culture before Reform,” *Browning Institute Studies* 17 (1989): 5; Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789–1832* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 130–57; Mark Francis and John Morrow, *A History of Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 28; John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 107–8.

remained scrupulously retrospective. Improvement, he seemed to indicate, was a thing of the past, though (contra Malthus) since it got us where we are, its motive forces should be respected and sustained. Again, the disposition was more characteristic of the early nineteenth-century radical reform movement, whose political and economic discourse of corruption encouraged expectations of reversal and catastrophe that Hazlitt selectively shared. At the same time, it was in helping define second-generation Romanticism through his relentless attacks on first-generation apostasy (the conservative turn of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey) that Hazlitt most often mobilized Dissenting consistency as a critical weapon and expressed his enduring commitment to the Jacobin decade of the 1790s and to its present exemplar, Napoleon Bonaparte. Unlike Byron, Shelley, Hunt, and Keats, Hazlitt remained stubbornly Bonapartist, and while the recent trend has been to take this position seriously, as something more than mere idiosyncrasy, it is striking that interpretive impatience with his support for Napoleon again tends to stress emotion, dismissing the political position as an “aberrant ‘passion.’”⁸

Within literary studies, the faith Hazlitt kept, through Napoleon, with the radical 1790s, and the related break between first- and second-generation Romanticism, have involved a long-standing interpretive problem about radical disenchantment versus outright political default⁹ in what was arguably the first modern postrevolutionary generation of writers, artists, and intellectuals. For my purposes, with respect to political feeling, one consequence of taking Hazlitt seriously, through this era in which an engaged intellectual Left came to terms with a sharp reversal of political fortunes, is to view that bitter disappointment not just as an outcome of the encounter between liberal optimism and historical adversity but also as a core emotional disposition that shaped nineteenth-century liberalism from the outset and had roots in early modern revolutions (1649, 1688) and the enduring social circumstance of English Dissent as an excluded and therefore resistant spiritual community. In his remarkable study of Dissenting historiography in the eighteenth century, John Seed captures *as an emotion* a distinctively recalcitrant Nonconformist outlook that is as much a matter of political memory as political expectation, but no less committed for that. In ensuring “that the role of the Puritans and of the Dissenters would not be forgotten,” these neglected eighteenth-century historians “kept alive connections to the past for new generations of Dissenters to retrieve once more the memory of their forebears. And because memory is emotional, involving a degree of identification with those who are long dead, to remember is often to refuse forgiveness. It keeps alive the antagonisms of the past in the present and is faithful to what ought never to be forgotten.”¹⁰

To further complicate the ideological terrain, while I tend to consider the Dissenting tradition a key strand of Hazlitt’s radicalism, it was an ambiguously radical and moderate inheritance, capable of being construed in terms that are more consistent with later nineteenth-century liberalism—that is, less a belated spiritual legacy of Puritan revolutionary fervor than an

⁸ Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 83. For a full and nuanced exposition of Hazlitt’s Bonapartism, see Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 183–207; and for a broad reconsideration of Bonapartism in England, which discusses Hazlitt, see Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004). A less sympathetic recent treatment of Hazlitt’s Bonapartism can be found in Daniela Garofalo, *Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 71–93.

⁹ The classic expression of the problem is in E. P. Thompson’s 1969 essay “Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon,” reprinted in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New York: New Press, 1997), 33–74.

¹⁰ John Seed, *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 189.

anticipation of Victorian secular reform. So, for example, in a perceptive discussion of the ideological legacy of English Nonconformity, Alan Saunders maintains that “the Rational Dissenters earn their place in the ranks of radicalism” through a principle of candor in public controversy that “seems to have a gratifyingly modern air and can be seen as a plea for free speech, free inquiry and moderation.” At the same time, he observes, “these Dissenting principles are largely without positive content” and reached their fullest expression just as the French Revolution introduced more programmatic “Jacobin principles” that “were able comparatively easily to fill the vacuum in Rational Dissenting thought.”¹¹ It is telling that Hazlitt the contradictory essayist constructed his own anachronistic political identity as both twilight heir to Dissent and the last English Jacobin.

My title identifies another dominant political feeling in Hazlitt’s critical prose, famously announced in 1823 in his perverse self-fashioning essay “On the Pleasure of Hating.” Shot through with catalogs of antagonism, the essay allows its surfeit of hostility to recoil upon the essayist himself and closes with the critic and the world locked in mutual antipathy: “Have I not reason to hate and despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough” (12:136). What strikes me about interpretive responses to the essay, and the feeling it explores, is that the limited tolerance afforded “On the Pleasure of Hating” as a Romantic familiar essay—it was reprinted in Penguin’s Great Ideas series¹²—has not been extended to Hazlitt’s political prose. The sense that *partisan* hatred drives criticism to disabling, destructive, and even violent extremes has long obstructed any real engagement with Hazlitt’s political prose as a portion of his critical achievement. Here, it is worth considering how Hazlitt’s favorite emotion falls outside the genealogy of at least one prevailing strand of nineteenth-century liberal critique. In opening *Culture and Anarchy* with a case for “sweetness and light” as against confusion, fierceness, and partisan strife, Matthew Arnold famously insisted that “culture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light.” And he went on to map what culture must disavow through two coordinates that Hazlitt, by contrast, enthusiastically endorsed as resources for critically productive animosity: first, the “Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion,” and with it the longer history of English Puritanism, whose “jealousy of the Establishment” and fondness for sectarian controversy served (according to Arnold) to subvert any “ideal of complete harmonious human perfection”; and second, “the ways of Jacobinism,” a deliberately anachronistic term for extreme democratic commitment to “abstract systems of renovation” that encourage “violent indignation with the past.”¹³ While the line of cultural criticism shaped by Arnold can help account for a divergence from Hazlitt, Arnold’s precise sensitivity to the relevant vectors of offense—hatred, passion, jealousy, Dissent, Jacobinism—serves to confirm the persistent volatility of Hazlitt’s temperament.

My own approach to Hazlitt’s prose has been shaped by the resistance of others to what seem to me key dimensions of his critical practice, particularly the place of political feeling in that practice. One way of getting at the distorting effects of an assumption that political hatred subverts Hazlitt’s critical intelligence (or, put another way, via Arnold, that criticism ought to hate hatred and, above all, Jacobin hatred) is to recount how, in writing *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*, I found myself contending with a tradition of commentary that sought to manage

¹¹ Alan Saunders, “The State as Highwayman: From Candour to Rights,” in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 270.

¹² William Hazlitt, *On the Pleasure of Hating* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004).

¹³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42, 44, 49, 52.

Hazlitt's contradictions and unruly passions by clearing away what Kinnaird termed "the smoke of politics" from otherwise clear assessments of poetry, fiction, painting, and theater,¹⁴ a winnowing process that often requires an untenable distinction between essay writing and journalism and that finds ways to exclude the political prose from a literary canon on the grounds that it represents merely partisan journalism. For example, Hazlitt's 1819 volume *Political Essays* was gathered from more than a decade of work for such leading radical and liberal venues as the *Political Register*, the *Examiner*, and the *Yellow Dwarf*, as well as mainstream newspapers like the *Courier* and *Morning Chronicle*, yet very little of this writing has made its way into literary anthologies or the common currency of critical discussion.

The suppression of political feeling and, above all, angry radical feeling has been an enduring pattern. It can be traced back to the *Blackwood's* attacks on Hazlitt as the prose virtuoso of the "Cockney School" of literature and to Southey's strange Tory nightmare of an English Jacobin future in which Hazlitt (with Leigh Hunt) would be authorized to proceed from intemperate periodical reviewing to retributive state violence: "I know very well what I have at stake in the event of a Revolution, were the Hunts and Hazlitts to have the upper hand. There is no man whom the Whigs and the Anarchists hate more inveterately, because there is none whom they fear so much."¹⁵ The suppression of political hatred became more programmatic, if less paranoid, in university scholarship through the crucial mid-twentieth-century phase of Romantic canon formation. Herschel Baker's magisterial 1962 critical biography met the "sprawling and uneven work on politics" with intermittent distaste and found that the "angry and uneven" 1819 volume of *Political Essays*, regarded as "the last of his strictly journalistic works," compared unfavorably with the subsequent lectures and essays on English literature that were felt to secure his critical reputation¹⁶—and this from a sympathetic biographer who wrote thoughtfully about how the traditions of rational Dissent shaped Hazlitt's political development.

Other accounts of Hazlitt written in the formative decades of Romantic literary studies, even those that did not conceive of Romanticism as an imaginative transcendence of betrayed revolutionary expectations, found little use for a body of political writing that was formed under immediate journalistic pressures and that kept an abiding and prosaic faith with the French Revolution. R. L. Brett's 1977 pamphlet for the British Council's *Writers and Their Work* series is typical, particularly in the way it regrets the excesses of Hazlitt's "polemicism" and worries about the instances where "radical opinions throw a shadow across the page." A critic and editor of Coleridge and Wordsworth, Brett determined that "Hazlitt's achievement as a man of letters" was to be found "in his essays and literary criticism," which place him in a line of polite essayists that runs from Addison and Steele to Samuel Johnson and that was best exemplified in a detached observational manner "removed from polemics." Hazlitt's attacks on the Lake poets were considered "vituperative" in tone and "prejudiced" in judgment, evidence of a regrettable tendency "to view things through the spectacle of his own preconceptions" and, what was worse, "to confuse politics and poetry."¹⁷ For any attentive reader of Hazlitt, this last assessment is particularly baffling, for while politics and poetry can be distinct strands in his prose, the distinction is

¹⁴ Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 199.

¹⁵ *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849–50), 4:217.

¹⁶ Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 204, 320.

¹⁷ R. L. Brett, *Hazlitt* (Harlow: Longman, 1977), 13, 28–30.

imperfect, and here (as elsewhere) his critical method is centrally informed by deliberate efforts to mingle, fuse, and conflate distinct terms. This I take to be part of Trilling's point in conceiving of Hazlitt's association of poetry with oppressive power as a challenge to anodyne mid-twentieth-century conceptions of the arts as something "harmless and quiet and cooperative."

Relevant here is the selectively depolemized Hazlitt favored by M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and others in the 1970s as part of the narrow construction of a Romantic visionary company. Such a project set fact below imagination, and prose in the service of poetry, and distorted the sprawling "portrait gallery" of Hazlitt's great essay collection *The Spirit of the Age* as a volume that somehow privileged the genius of Wordsworth as "a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age" (11:8). A full response to this interpretive tradition involves recent work on Romantic historicism, which I won't go into here except to say that periodization in *The Spirit of the Age* is more fractured and kaleidoscopic than it is sequential and thus reflects Hazlitt's resistance to progressive optimism. Canonical values are at issue here, and "journalism"—political or otherwise—has too often become a code word for prosaic writing devoid of imaginative or aesthetic merit. There is evidence too of the pressure that literary hierarchies exert on estimations of Hazlitt's critical prose in the way the rescue operations that were once routinely performed on the scorched reputations of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Burke, and Shelley have not been extended to other political targets, so that there is little worrying over whether Hazlitt was (for example) a fair critic of William Cobbett, Robert Southey, Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Malthus, and Robert Owen—all revealing cases and touchstone figures throughout Hazlitt's career. Taken together they reinforce the sense of a heterogeneous political inheritance.

The New Historicism returned politics to literary scholarship, though it is striking that key studies by David Simpson, Marjorie Levinson, and James Chandler indicate the enduring claims of the old canon by taking Hazlitt as a way to gain critical and ideological leverage on Wordsworth.¹⁸ The implicit alignment of poetry with imagination and prose with fact suggests a different way of eliding partisan politics, one that goes back to M. H. Abrams's earlier sense of Hazlitt's treatment of Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age* as a "brilliant essay on the sociology of Wordsworth's poetry." Christina Root provides a thoughtful challenge to the New Historicist critique of Wordsworth by way of Hazlitt when she reminds us of his own ideological purposes and passions and insists that his "commentaries cannot be taken as themselves politically transparent."¹⁹ In the wake of the New Historicism, there has been much socially and politically informed work on Hazlitt, and my own approach draws on important studies by Seamus Deane, John Whale, Charles Mahoney, David Higgins, Phil Harling, Jon Mee, Greg Dart, and others.

Yet there are still ways in which politics, and particularly strong radical feeling, wind up being marginal to Hazlitt's highest purposes. This is evident in a line of "metaphysical Hazlitt" that runs from David Bromwich to Uttara Natarajan and others who take their cue from his early *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805). This metaphysical turn has been among the most

¹⁸ Instances of this appeal to Hazlitt in New Historicist studies of Wordsworth include James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5–6, 144–50, 156–57; Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 83–85; David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 185–90.

¹⁹ See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 395; Christina Root, "Jacobin Poetics and Napoleonic Politics: Hazlitt's Critique of Wordsworth," *European Romantic Review* 6 (1996): 227.

distinctive and interpretively rewarding developments in Hazlitt studies in recent decades, and the one that (with attention to theater) does the most to align his career with wider developments in literary and cultural studies, particularly the renewed attention to the Scottish Enlightenment that has energized disciplines across the humanities. However, esteeming philosophical principle and intellectual system can make politics—and particularly the opportunistic popular reform movement of the early nineteenth century—seem ad hoc and disorganized by comparison, as evident in Natarajan’s contention that Hazlitt approached power “as a metaphysical rather than a political construct” that unified the range of his critical interests: “The true complexity of Hazlitt’s thought is to be found in its quite astonishing consistency, in the way in which a single metaphysical principle—power—brings politics, philosophy, and poetics into a unity that rises above the local ambiguities and apparent contradictions in his writings.” The political writings are found to be “far from adequate theoretically,” retaining limited virtue as “practical illustrations of Hazlitt’s theory” and as evidence of “a passionate commitment to the ‘common good’ that rarely, if ever, leads him astray.”²⁰

Even where political passions are recognized as constitutive features of Hazlitt’s literary method, his critical responses are often skewed and narrowed along partisan lines, notably where contradiction is at issue and he infuses his essays (as he often did) with internal dialogic energies. Edmund Burke was a leading object of Hazlitt’s literary devotion and political hatred, and among his earliest critical obsessions. (In this sense he inaugurates a line of vexed liberal fascination with Burke that continues to this day.) The more extravagantly Hazlitt admired Burke’s brilliance as a stylist and his wisdom as a moral and social observer, the more he condemned the author of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* for single-handedly turning British public opinion against the revolution and for motivating two decades of counterrevolutionary warfare that culminated in the post-Waterloo catastrophe of legitimate government. One of his best-known early accounts of disinterested critical imagination came by way of recollection in the *Liberal* in 1823 in the essay “My First Acquaintance with Poets,” in a remark he recalled making at the age of nineteen in conversation with his father and Samuel Taylor Coleridge about leading literary and political figures of the day: “I ventured to say that I had always entertained a great opinion of Burke, and that (as far as I could find) the speaking of him with contempt might be made the test of a vulgar democratical mind” (17:111). The gesture is shot through with competing impulses and is embedded within an essay composed between the two poles of fond recollection of the revolutionary 1790s and bitterness over its present betrayal. There is a telling ventriloquism in political style, which channels competing currents of political sympathy and antipathy, as Hazlitt slips into the language of Burkean counterrevolutionary loyalism (“vulgar democratical”) while praising the author of the *Reflections* from the contrary perspective of a rational Dissenting temperament that structures personal and historical recollection throughout the essay. Burke’s *Reflections* was after all triggered by an attack on the Nonconformist minister Richard Price, and the historian John Seed has recently shown how Burke revived more than a century of anti-Dissenting satire and polemic by summoning up “traditional fears of Dissenters as crypto-Puritans, fanatics and regicides.”²¹

Throughout Hazlitt’s career, Burke remained a pivot for expressions of critical sympathy and partisan outrage that are not easily disentangled. This multivalent response can be aligned

²⁰ Uttara Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and the Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 2–3, 179.

²¹ Seed, *Dissenting Histories*, 157–59.

with the emergence of disinterested liberal critique, but Hazlitt's own feelings were more fractured and divided, and again fraught with doubts about whether there was a way forward after Burke—doubts that complicate his affiliation with any politics of historical expectation, whether liberal or radical, reformist or revolutionary. The 1819 *Political Essays* contains a series of character sketches (Southey, Pitt, Fox) along the lines of *The Spirit of the Age*, but Burke requires two competing entries under the same title, "Character of Mr. Burke." The second of these is a sympathetic 1807 portrait composed, as Hazlitt put it in an apologetic footnote, "in a fit of extravagant candour, at a time when I thought I could do justice . . . to an enemy, without betraying a cause" (7:301). That time passed, and the initial character sketch reprinted in *Political Essays* (but first published in 1817) is more deeply ambivalent. Yet the contrary position against Burke is already embedded in the earlier essay, as an imagined countervoice: "I should not differ from any one who may . . . contend that the consequences of his writings as instruments of political power have been tremendous, fatal, such as no exertion of wit or knowledge or genius can ever counteract or atone for" (7:308–9). There are good reasons to take "any one" here as a portion of Hazlitt himself.

Critical self-division in response to Burke has an afterlife in scholarly commentary. David Bromwich and Tom Paulin are two of our most perceptive critics of Hazlitt, and they agree in insisting that his critical disinterestedness, unlike Arnold's, did not exclude personal interest or prejudice but rather involved a positioned openness to the unpredictable play of other interests and positions.²² Yet they disagree on the matter of Burke. Paulin dismisses the celebrated prose style of the *Reflections* as "a rickety and pretentious stage-set" and feels sure that Hazlitt "recognized the hollow, kitschy instability" of Burke's reactionary bluster. In this view, disinterested expressions of sympathy become a perversely coded critique, as Paulin maintains that Hazlitt's favorable treatment of Burke was a strategy for "provoking . . . readers into resisting the praise he so lavishly . . . heaps on him."²³ Bromwich, by contrast, is an avowed admirer of Burke and, recently, the advocate of a more liberal Burke, and he therefore proceeds on a very different rescue mission, which begins by blunting Hazlitt's attacks on the author of the *Reflections* as a "court sycophant" who betrayed his early Whig progressive principles. The worst abuse is written off as partisan opportunism or diverted onto less worthy targets: "Hazlitt's wish to read the *Reflections* as a conscious betrayal of what Burke knew to be the good cause probably had its source not in his deeper impressions of the book but rather in a well-earned scorn for those who claimed legitimate descent from it, and a willingness to fight them with any weapon that came to hand."²⁴ There's more to say about the figure of Burke as the catalyst for a contradictory critical method that brings together interpretive sympathy and partisan animosity, without resolving or deciding between them, as Paulin and Bromwich want to do. But for my purposes here it is worth insisting that Hazlitt's own divided early nineteenth-century affective response (sympathy, antipathy) is in dialogue with the way the *Reflections* itself mobilized counterrevolutionary political sympathies by sentimentalizing the old regime. In any case the sense, through Arnold, that disinterestedness was a key feature of nineteenth-century liberal critical practice needs to recognize, through Hazlitt, that the genealogy for disinterestedness includes a more fractured radical critique of counterrevolutionary argument.

²² See David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 79–80, 86–88; Tom Paulin, "The Vernacular City," *Irish Pages* 1 (2002): 66.

²³ Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 123, 125, 168.

²⁴ Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 298.

Although I introduced “My First Acquaintance with Poets” as a way into Burke and critical disinterestedness, the essay also reveals what commentators sometimes deny: that polemical and journalistic energies work their way through Hazlitt’s best critical prose. Regarded now as an important essay largely with respect to the literary canon—for its treatment of Coleridge and its discovery of a gap between two creative generations—“My First Acquaintance” opens with the very different strains of a vivid character sketch of the elder William Hazlitt as an austere and otherworldly “Dissenting Minister” whose sectarian political consistency is set against the counterrevolutionary turn of apostate Lake poetry. Hazlitt maintained elsewhere that “the antithesis of a Presbyterian Divine of the old school is the Poet-laureate of the new” (7:241), and the spiritual and political convictions underlying this claim are very much at issue in “My First Acquaintance,” though by 1823 Hazlitt was writing with a bitterly ironic sense that both were becoming outmoded. The germ of what became the *Liberal* essay, a memory of having heard Coleridge preach in Shropshire in 1798 immediately before he abandoned an intended career as a Unitarian minister, can be found in a pseudonymous letter to the editor of Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* newspaper in January 1817. Though substantially shorter in form, barely filling a column in the *Examiner*’s two-column weekly format, the newspaper letter is in its complexity and critical intensity evidence against those who would restrict Hazlitt’s partisan writing to anger and prejudice on the way to devaluing it as mere journalism.²⁵

Addressed to the editor of the *Examiner*, Hazlitt’s friend Leigh Hunt, and printed under the title “Mr. Coleridge’s Lay Sermon,” the letter was tucked between public correspondence on poor relief and predatory taxation and Hazlitt’s own ongoing assault on the stridently Francophobic *Times* newspaper in the *Examiner*’s “Literary Notices” department.²⁶ It began by mischievously referring back, as if to the work of another writer, to his own recent negative *Examiner* review of Coleridge’s *Lay Sermon*, a review that itself gathered satirical force from the fact that the book under review was advertised but not yet published. Epistolary form conveys a more lively sense of occasion and address than is possible in the later essay and affords a more immediate if less acutely nostalgic emotional register, even as the weekly-newspaper format sets recollected experience against other time frames: in working back through personal memory and the traumatic inevitability of historical change, Hazlitt seems to work with and against the steady forward movement of periodical time. The difference between the Unitarian radical Coleridge in 1798 and the Anglican reactionary Coleridge in 1817 is equally a matter of outrage and of bitter resignation: “That sermon, like this Sermon, was upon peace and war; upon church and state—not their alliance, but their separation—on the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christianity, not as the same, but as opposed to one another” (7:128). Dividing Coleridge against his own earlier self requires self-division on the part of the critical correspondent, though by comparison with his engagement with Burke the effect is less violent and more satirical, even playful. In interrogating Coleridge and distinguishing the present lay sermonizer from his Unitarian predecessor, Hazlitt disputes his own recent review. The opening allusion to that review could not be more routinely periodical—“SIR, Your last Sunday’s ‘Literary Notice’ has given me some

²⁵ Against these tendencies, and for an astute reading of the letter with an eye toward “the anomalous position of Hazlitt’s review-criticism within traditional literary history,” see Robert Lapp, *Contest for Cultural Authority: Hazlitt, Coleridge, and the Distresses of the Regency* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 17–22; and for a suggestive account of it as an “ironic version” of the Greater Romantic Lyric, see David Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 111–13.

²⁶ For the first publication of the letter, see *Examiner* 472 (12 January 1817): 28–29.

uneasiness on two points" (7:128)—yet it sets up a dizzyingly comic interrogative sequence in which Hazlitt the *Examiner* correspondent confronts Leigh Hunt the *Examiner* editor as proxy for Hazlitt the *Examiner* reviewer, in order to work himself into a fit of bewildered irritation with editor, reviewer, and author alike: "Now, Sir, what I have to complain of is this, that from reading your account of the 'Lay-Sermon,' I begin to suspect that my notions formerly must have been little better than a deception: that my faith in Mr. Coleridge's great powers must have been a vision of my youth, that, like other such visions, must pass away from me. . . . Again, Sir, I ask Mr. Coleridge, why, having preached such a sermon as I have described, he has published such a sermon as you have described?" (7:129).

This is mock outrage and irritated memory that only hints at the rich emotional vein of loss and regret ("a vision of my youth, that . . . must pass away from me") with which Hazlitt often filled the gap between the radical 1790s and the reactionary present. Yet it amply indicates the way emotion and specifically political emotion could be mobilized in critical response and toward calculated polemical ends. The most compelling political expression of hatred in Hazlitt's prose, his definition of the "true Jacobin" as a "good hater," also took shape in journalistic exchange and accommodated a range of historically inflected emotions that extended from fond memory to present outrage. The definition involves a host of intertextual engagements and subsequent interpretive responses, which I won't attempt to cover here, though in taking Jacobin hatred seriously I should acknowledge my debt to Seamus Deane's "Jacobin Profile" of Hazlitt in his 1988 study, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England*, a chapter that is exceptional not only in commending Jacobin impulses but also in uncovering, through the figure of Rousseau, their complex emotional and literary roots.²⁷ E. P. Thompson also considered Hazlitt "the most 'Jacobin' of the middle-class Radicals" of the early nineteenth century and "the one who—over a long period of years—came closest to the same movement as that of the artisans." Taken in conjunction with the way he imperfectly shadows his father as the last English Puritan, Hazlitt's ironic treatment of himself as the last English Jacobin suggests a different historical position than the one registered in Duncan Wu's ambitiously titled biography, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man*.²⁸

One way to frame the difficulty that Hazlitt poses for nineteenth-century liberal genealogy may be through these eighteenth-century spiritual and radical commitments. The case can be made for Hazlitt as the last eighteenth-century man. He did after all draw the phrase "good hater" from Samuel Johnson's account of an ideal Tory,²⁹ again reaching across party lines as well as back to a previous century. At the same time, this was all self-fashioning, in a climate of fiercely polemical journalism and reviewing, so that in assuming outmoded ideological guises—Jacobin, Puritan, Bonapartist, Rousseauist—Hazlitt also arguably helped inaugurate a modern type, the disenchanting postrevolutionary intellectual, consistent in principle but betrayed by history, by human nature, and by a host of once like-minded writers and intellectuals who abandoned the cause of liberty.

Hazlitt's Jacobinized version of the "good hater" took shape, along with his recollection of Coleridge's 1798 sermon, in the "Literary Notices" department of the *Examiner* in December 1816 and January 1817, through a series of bitter skirmishes with John Stoddart, a well-connected London attorney who became editorial writer for the *Times* after 1812, and editor after 1814, and

²⁷ Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England*, 130–57.

²⁸ Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁹ See Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (London, 1786), 83.

who took the paper on a sharply pro-war and anti-Napoleonic course. (John Walter, owner of the *Times*, fired Stoddart during the controversy with Hazlitt, in part out of impatience with his politics.) Hazlitt attacked Stoddart through a mixed medium of *Examiner* editorials, reviews, serial articles, and letters to the editor, most of which were gathered in his 1819 volume *Political Essays*. This was a characteristically heterogeneous form of late-war and postwar popular radical journalism, traversing British motivations for the war with France and plausible terms for peace, along with the social and economic costs of war and its aftermath, and ranging from abstract principle to sharp personal invective, with argument regularly spilling over to other issues and antagonists, notably Coleridge and Southey and the apostasy of the Lake school. Individual combat certainly encouraged the kind of embattled self-dramatization that Marilyn Butler associated with Hazlitt as idiosyncratic loner driven back upon “wholly notional opposition,”³⁰ a condition that she considered distinctively Romantic and in most respects liberal but that was also characteristic of the way radical newspapermen like Cobbett, T. J. Wooler, and Richard Carlile refined and personalized their public animosities. And despite the distractions of a wounded ego, Hazlitt’s *Times* series returned again and again to a strenuous opposition to established power and to clear affiliations with the radical reform movement.

In working through the later stages of the *Examiner* controversy with the *Times*, and toward his climactic definition of the true Jacobin as a “good hater,” Hazlitt at one point revisited an editorial he wrote for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1814, in which he first challenged Stoddart with a more sentimental (and ambiguously prospective and retrospective) definition of the true Jacobin as one “who had seen the evening star set over a poor man’s cottage, and connected it with the hope of future human happiness.” When the “city-politician” at the *Times* “laughed this pastoral definition to scorn,” Hazlitt, with “imagination . . . grown a little less romantic” (7:151), advanced the controversy by positing instead the true Jacobin as a good hater. Restless movement back and forth in time was characteristic of Hazlitt’s political criticism, and the pattern intensified in his later years as he struggled to coordinate the shared language of popular radicalism with bitter recollections of the 1790s and deepening personal disenchantment, as well as a more sober estimate of the prospects for parliamentary reform. One literary yield of this method was the unstable and contradictory periodizing of *The Spirit of the Age*, a chronological dimension of what James Chandler has termed the “prismatic” portrait gallery form.³¹ Sentimental retrospection for Hazlitt was at once historical and acutely personal and, in this sense, not divorced from the revealing “fragments of one man’s consciousness” privileged by those who admire him as a Romantic familiar essayist.³² Indeed, the traumatic pressures of history often dislodged such personal fragments and made them available for literary representation, as evident in the movement from the withering review of Coleridge through the *Examiner* letter recollecting his 1798 sermon to the essay “My First Acquaintance with Poets.”

Hazlitt reinforced the connection between personal memory and historical experience in December 1820 in the *London Magazine* essay “The Pleasure of Painting,” when he revisited the image of the cottage and evening star first deployed against Stoddard. This version was triggered

³⁰ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 169–73.

³¹ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 174.

³² The phrase is from Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, 172.

by the fading memory of having painted the portrait of his father at the Unitarian meetinghouse in Wem in 1805, while still pursuing an early career as a painter: "I think, but I am not sure, that I finished this portrait (or another afterwards) on the same day that the news of the battle of Austerlitz came; I walked out in the afternoon, and, as I returned, saw the evening star set over a poor man's cottage with other thoughts and feelings than I shall ever have again. Oh for the revolution of the great Platonic year, that those times might come over again!" (8:13). Here, the figure of the Reverend William Hazlitt and the Dissenting tradition he represents trigger an acutely sentimental response, intensified by uncertain memory (this portrait or another? this day or another?) and by an impossible yearning for the revolutionary optimism of an earlier decade at the signal moment of Napoleon's triumph over the Third Coalition. What is confounding about the tone and temporal structure of the passage is the way radical conviction is avowed even as it gets attached to a setting star and left to seem as irretrievable as the promise of Austerlitz. In his account of the essay, Paulin nicely captures the competing strains of expectation and loss, of fulfillment and denial, and of intimacy and distance. "In a moment of victory, Hazlitt's hero Napoleon completes this elegy for his outspoken father—an elegy that also celebrates and mourns his own youthful idealism, as well as catching the closeness shared by father and son while the portrait was in progress in the chapel at Wem."³³ Yet it would be a mistake to read the return of the setting-star image, even in the late *Table-Talk* essay, as somehow shedding the political commitment announced in the *Morning Chronicle* when the true Jacobin was first defined as one who "has seen the evening-star set over a poor man's cottage, or has connected the feeling of hope with the heart of man, and who, though he may have lost the feeling, has never ceased to reverence it" (7:370). The lapse of feeling and the potential drift into disenchantment were clearly registered well before the first definition became contaminated by Stoddart's scorn, and there was enough outrage left in the later stages of the controversy to secure radical commitment as well as nostalgic reverence. In this sense, the later *Examiner* definition of the Jacobin as a good hater required even as it superseded the earlier sentimental response: Hazlitt would not have found his way to the more pointed assertion if he had not met with Stoddart's contemptuous laughter in the first instance.

Here then is Hazlitt's climactic and essentially antagonistic representation of the true Jacobin as good hater:

A true Jacobin, then, is one who does not believe in the divine right of kings, or in any other alias for it, which implies that they reign "in contempt of the will of the people"; and he holds all such kings to be tyrants, and their subjects slaves. To be a true Jacobin, a man must be a good hater; but this is the most difficult and the least amiable of all the virtues: the most trying and the most thankless of all tasks. The love of liberty consists in the hatred of tyrants. The true Jacobin hates the enemies of liberty as they hate liberty, with all his strength and with all his might, and with all his heart and with all his soul. His memory is as long, and his will as strong as theirs, though his hands are shorter. He never forgets or forgives an injury done to the people, for tyrants never forget or forgive one done to themselves. There is no love lost between them. (7:151–52)

Against the sense that angry partisanship compromises Hazlitt's literary style, I would argue that we need look no further for evidence of the vigor and intensity of his best political prose. And what we find here is less a theory of political animosity than politics reduced to animosity: "The

³³ Paulin, *Day-Star of Liberty*, 5.

love of liberty consists in the hatred of tyrants.” Where disinterested criticism requires sympathy, even against personal disposition, Jacobin criticism stringently refuses it at every turn. Yet there is evidence of Hazlitt’s mobility even in this recalcitrant expression of hatred. While the true Jacobin is indisputably a self-portrait, the third-person construction is no accident, since Hazlitt was pursuing a characteristic strategy of self-fashioning through an intermediate figure. There are shades here of William Cobbett in the image of a combative partisan who takes animosity as first principle, and shades too, if not of Napoleon, then of what might be called the Napoleon effect, the capacity of “one man” to save the author and all the world from “the lie of Legitimacy” (7:10–11). What Hazlitt achieves brilliantly here, and what helps account for the way the performative “I” becomes “one,” “he,” and “a man,” is to assert his own supposedly repugnant Jacobin principles against the repugnant principles of another. If legitimate British sovereignty is exercised “in contempt of the will of the people” (7:151), as Stoddart (slavishly following Burke) would contend, then such sovereignty is tyranny. Against it Hazlitt cannot help but assume the subversive, archaic, and alien posture of a Jacobin enemy.

Put another way, what does Hazlitt’s political self-conception as England’s last Jacobin have to do with his literary reputation as one of England’s first liberal critics? Does his political hatred and the definition of the true Jacobin as a good hater lie outside the genealogy of liberal feeling in the nineteenth century, as a countertradition, or is it part of that genealogy, so that we should learn to recognize emotional and ideological extremes within a liberal tradition that is more typically construed in moderate and measured terms? To be sure, the radical reform movement in the era of Peterloo represented a rare historical opening for coordinated middle-class and plebeian protest, so it may be that Hazlitt’s mixed political-critical discourse, which drew on the conventions of the late Georgian radical press but was not restricted by those conventions, became less sustainable moving forward through the Reform Act of 1832 to the era of Chartism. My own inclination, following Hazlitt, is to allow rather than resolve the contradictions in play and to consider the ways in which the true Jacobin as a good hater can be examined with and against the subsequent literary and critical development of liberal emotion. A