HAZLITT AND HABIT

HANNAH TRAN

PH.D IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
UCL

I, Hannah Tran's supervisor Gregory Dart, can confirm that this thesis, which has been prepared (referenced) for posthumous submission by Sarah Chambré, Harry Chancellor, Niall Ó Cuileagáin, Will Fleming, Jess Hannah, Naomi Hinds, Dana Key, Daniel Lewis, James Reath, Tymek Woodham and myself, is all her own work. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. A version of Chapter V 'Keeping Things Interesting: Hazlitt, the Essay and Repetition' appeared in the *Hazlitt Review* Volume 15 (2022) 21-30.

ABSTRACT

Hannah Tran's posthumous thesis 'Hazlitt and Habit' is an exploration of the peculiar intensity surrounding discussions of habit in the Romantic period, as seen particularly through the prism of William Hazlitt's writings. It begins by analysing habit in its philosophical aspect, looking at the way in which the idea was treated by the three eighteenth-century philosophers David Hume, William Godwin and Jeremy Bentham, using Hazlitt as an occasional commentator on their formulations. It then moves on to political habit – a key idea of the great counter-revolutionary statesman Edmund Burke. Having established the philosophical and political stakes in play in any discussion of habit in this period, the thesis then turns towards literature, and towards Hazlitt, exploring the way in which several different aspects of the theme are dramatized inside and outside his writings. These are: (1) 'character' (the psychology of habit); (2) habit and the city (the metropolis and mental life); (3) the relationship between habit and the essay form (the essay as a means of testing the stability or instability of opinions over time); and, lastly, (4) cultural habit, ideas of national character and characteristics, with particular reference to the politically ambivalent legacy of 'Merry England'.

Ms. Tran's plan was to 'block out' the thesis from the beginning, that is, to research and write each chapter sequentially, one after the other, and then, and only then, to go back and revise it extensively at the end. Tragically, she died before she could undertake this last phase of the process. The only section that was subjected to any kind of revision was Chapter V – on Hazlitt, the Essay and Repetition – which was reworked for publication in 2022. Still, it is thanks to Hannah's approach that what we have inherited from her is not a polished but ambiguous fragment but a complete first draft, a first draft in which the overall intended structure of the thesis, as well as each separate supporting element, can be clearly seen. The handling of the argument is, I think, more confident and thorough in the first half of the thesis; in the later chapters it is more speculative. This is particularly the case with the last chapter, which was written shortly before the author's death.

Gregory Dart July 2023

IMPACT STATEMENT

Hannah Tran's thesis 'Hazlitt and Habit' will be of great interest to the following persons: scholars of William Hazlitt the philosopher, painter, essayist and journalist; students and academics researching Romantic period literature more generally; Chapters I-III will particularly interest researchers thinking about the philosophy and/or politics of habit/custom/tradition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly insofar as such themes relate to the work of David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, William Godwin, Edmund Burke and Hazlitt; Chapter IV will be particularly interesting to readers, writers or researchers interested in the early nineteenth-century city; Chapter V to readers, writers or researchers interested in the familiar essay form; Chapter VI to writers or researchers interested in ideas of national character and national popular culture.

In a less historical sense, Ms. Tran's thesis will also be interesting to anybody interested in exploring the ambiguities of habit in any context at any time, specifically, the political and philosophical ramifications of the discourse of habit, psychological habit, and the comic relationship between habit (what is expected) and novelty or nonsense (what is not).

Ms. Tran did not live to revise her thesis, and so we cannot be sure that anything she says here of philosophical, political, literary or cultural habit was her final word on the matter. But perhaps for that very reason, her thesis is a more than usually suggestive piece. Ideas emerge here in their first flush, all clearly related to the main theme, but not always nailed to their destination in the way that one might expect of a fully completed thesis. Ms. Tran has, in effect, opened a rich and promising field which she herself was prevented from fully cultivating. Plenty still remains to be done. In mapping out the subject in the way that she has, however, she has bequeathed a legacy to future scholars.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: HAZLITT, HUME AND HABIT 5

CHAPTER I PART I: HAZLITT AND GODWIN 24

CHAPTER I PART II: BENTHAM AND THE UTILITY PRINCIPLE 36

CHAPTER I PART III: BURKE 52

CHAPTER II: POLITICAL HABIT 68

CHAPTER III: HABIT AND CHARACTER: ON BEING DISAGREEABLE 90

CHAPTER IV: HABIT AND THE CITY 112

CHAPTER V: KEEPING THINGS INTERESTING – HAZLITT, THE ESSAY AND REPETITION 148

CHAPTER VI: HABIT AND THE NOSTALGIC IMAGINATION 161

CODA 176

BIBLIOGRAPHY 185

INTRODUCTION: HAZLITT, HUME AND HABIT

> Life is the art of being well deceived; and in order that the deception may succeed, it must be habitual and uninterrupted. A constant examination of the value of our opinions and enjoyments, compared with those of others, may lessen our prejudices, but will leave nothing for our affections to rest upon [...] It is by means of habit that our intellectual employments mix like our food with the circulation of the blood, and go on like any other part of the animal functions. To take away the force of habit and prejudice entirely, is to strike at the root of our personal existence.[1]

In his essay 'On Pedantry', William Hazlitt strikes his characteristically ambivalent tone towards the force of habit in human life. Habit is both illusive and essential; it fools us into believing in the superiority of our opinions and cushions us from their inevitable fallibility; it narrows our field of vision yet allows us to retain interest in our own lives, which would otherwise be dissipated by the chaotic variety of everyday life. Habit gives warmth and vigour to cognition, converting thought into action and joining body to mind; in fact, Hazlitt argues, habit is an existential necessity. To understand this seemingly contradictory position, it is necessary to examine how Hazlitt's thinking was influenced by David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40), and the starring role that this work gave to habit as a part of the cognitive process.

When thinking back on his introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823), Hazlitt recalled their intense and wide-ranging discussion of British philosophy. One point of contention between them was the merits of Hume: 'I was not very much pleased at [Coleridge's] account of Hume', Hazlitt admitted, 'for I had just been reading, with infinite relish, that completest of all metaphysical *choke-pears*, his *Treatise on Human Nature*, to which the *Essays*, in

---

[1] William Hazlitt 'On Pedantry: The Same Subject Continued' (1816) in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1934), iv, 84. Unless specified, all further references to Hazlitt will be from Howe's edition and will be cited in the following format: Howe, volume number, page number.

point of scholastic subtlety and close reasoning, are mere elegant trifling, light summer-reading'.[2] The *Treatise*, Hume's first and most incendiary publication, was received with consternation or indifference in most quarters, with reviewers acknowledging the 'soaring Genius' of its precocious author, but generally rejecting the radicalism of its ideas.[3] This reception, which led Hume to label the *Treatise* 'dead-born from the press', would contribute to the author's turn towards a less abstruse, more polished and general style in the *Essays.* Yet for Hazlitt the budding *philosophe*, it was the *Treatise*'*s* very intractability that raised it above the latter's 'elegant trifling'. Many years previously, Hazlitt had described his own philosophical work, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), as a 'dry, tough, metaphysical *choke-pear*' – implicitly comparing it to the early work of Hume.[4] Echoing the Scottish philosopher, he portrayed his own *Essay* as falling 'still-born from the press', thus inviting a comparison between their later career paths, which saw both moving from the narrow field of metaphysics to the broader terrain of essay- and history-writing.[5] For both thinkers, habit played a central role in moral philosophy; but their contrasting attitudes towards it are instructive.

'All individuals (or all that we name such) are aggregates, and aggregates of dissimilar things'[6] : presented early in Hazlitt's *Essay* on human action, this conception of identity is a descendant of the one contained in Hume's *Treatise,* which put forward a radical notion of the mind as 'nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endow'd with a perfect similarity and identity'.[7] One's sense of self as a distinct, relatively cohesive whole is nothing but an illusion, argues Hume, brought about by habitual association between disparate perceptions centred on the feeling subject. In reality, all that truly constitutes 'self' is the parade of sensations that

---

[2] Howe, xvii, 113. Hume's *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* were published in 1758.

[3] Quoted in John P. Wright, 'The Treatise: Composition, Reception, and Response', in Saul Traiger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 5.

[4] Howe, xi, 102.

[5] Howe, xvii, 312.

[6] Howe, i, 34.

[7] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Second Edition), ed. Sir Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge, and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: OUP, 1888; 1978), 207. Hereafter cited as Hume, *Treatise,* followed by page number.

fleetingly play upon the mind, before disappearing. From one moment to the next, there is no vital essence that can be observed as ‘I’: when one probes into the constitution of this ‘I’, all one discovers is the interplay between internal sense and external stimuli.

Hume goes further: custom not only creates the illusory belief in a cohesive self, but also conditions all beliefs that rely on empirical evidence. This radically sceptical point-of-view, derived from the empiricism of John Locke, pushes the earlier philosophical idea to its limits. For Locke, association of ideas is a psychological aberration, leading to the farcical irrationalities later parodied in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). For Hume however, associative thinking acts as the bedrock of all beliefs: the only relation that ‘informs us of existences and objects, which we do not see or feel, is *causation*’.[8] Thus, if all beliefs derive solely from custom, ‘all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation’.[9] Our implicit belief that the sun will rise tomorrow rests not on rational deduction, but habitual induction from experience; as we observe its daily rise, we insensibly become accustomed to believing that it will always be so. Experience rather than reason lies at the heart of all knowledge, as it shows us the links between present and past sensation; and it is only habit that leads us to expect the same of the future.[10] Rationality is a self-deception, added after the fact to justify associations formed by the constant conjunction of certain impressions; such cognitive habits are in fact the opposite of ‘reasoned’ thought, their purpose being to facilitate transition between ideas without the need for reflection. As Hume writes, ‘If I believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, ‘tis only because it costs us too much pain to think otherwise’.[11]

This extreme form of scepticism causes certain epistemological difficulties. The *Treatise* demolishes the difference between supposed ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ beliefs, by demonstrating that taught prejudices are ‘built almost on the same foundation of custom and repetition as our reasoning from cause and effects’.[12] This places irrational prejudice, for example the eighteenth-century English prejudice that

---

[8] Hume, *Treatise,* 74.

[9] Hume, *Treatise,* 103.

[10] See Hume, *Treatise,* 134: ‘The supposition, that the future resembles the past, is not founded on arguments of any kind, but is deriv’d entirely from habit’.

[11] Hume, *Treatise,* 270.

[12] Hume, *Treatise,* 117.

all Irish people were dim-witted, on the same epistemological level as the cause-and-effect belief that walking into a river would make one wet. The only difference is the fallibility in connection between cause and effect – the mechanism of belief is essentially identical. Therefore, what Hume calls 'general rules' or prejudices, far from being aberrant instances of irrational thinking which can be corrected by application of reason, are the natural consequences of an intellect structured through associations – some correct, some less so. 'All those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustom'd from our infancy, take such deep root, that 'tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them': customs, habits, and prejudices are thus an inherent product of the associating brain.[13]

Custom 'gives a biass to the imagination': insensibly, one is led to prefer certain objects to others, not via reasoned thought, but merely the workings of habit.[14] Man is a changeable animal, constantly in thrall to the variety of external impressions and internal ideas that shape one's experience from moment to moment; and in Hume's opinion we have no choice but to reconcile oneself to this ceaseless current of emotions. This leads to difficulties when it comes to arguing the case for his philosophy above that of any previous system, but it also allows the reader an unusual level of freedom, for his own emphasis on the power of the passions over rational thought disables him from insisting too stridently on the truth of his own formulations; because as he has effectually admitted, his own beliefs must be driven by the same tangled motives of habit and custom as everyone else's. ''Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me', shrugs Hume.[15] Habit thus emerges as the basis, firstly of personal identity, and then of almost all knowledge: it is 'nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin'.[16] Hume's *Treatise*, notwithstanding its purportedly uncompromising style, argued for a move away from the empiricism of Locke, which retained faith in the potential for human reason to ultimately make sense of its surroundings; instead it framed rationality as

---

[13] Hume, *Treatise,* 116.

[14] Hume, *Treatise,* 148.

[15] Hume, *Treatise,* 103.

[16] Hume, *Treatise,* 179.

fundamentally limited, steering the pursuit of knowledge away from the metaphysical and towards the conversational, the sociable, the pragmatic and consensus-led. This rhetorical nonchalance foreshadows a movement away from philosophy towards that of the essay form, which would later become Hazlitt's own chosen genre.

In his important monograph *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*, David Bromwich classes Hazlitt as a 'thinking disciple of Hume', whose emphasis on imaginative sympathy as an *experience* of the mind naturally aligns him to the empiricists of the eighteenth century.[17] And it is true that his main philosophical achievement, the concept of disinterestedness or 'natural benevolence', can be traced back to Hume's demonstration of the discontinuity of the self through time. Unlike Hume, however, Hazlitt does persist in thinking that 'there is some deep inward principle which remains the same in spite of all particular accidental changes'; yet this concession to the concept of stable personal identity is left unexplained and unexplored.[18] But for the most part his argument has a distinctly Humean flavour: 'What is true of [man] at one time is *never* (that we know of) exactly and particularly true of him at any other time'.[19]

Explaining how the constant flux of personal experience can give the impression of coalescing around a single stable human subject, Hume suggests the metaphor of a river: 'Thus as the nature of a river consists in the motion and change of parts; tho' in less than four and twenty hours these be totally alter'd; this hinders not the river from continuing the same during several ages'.[20] Hazlitt's *Essay* re-uses this image, seemingly in corroboration of the *Treatise's* position: 'The size of the river as well as it's [*sic*] taste depends on the water that has already fallen into it'.[21] For Hazlitt, it is memory that is 'chiefly ... the source of personal identity', allowing a comparison between past and present experience that allows one to construct a continuous self; however, the general assumption that this identity stretches into a future that does not yet exist is, in his eyes, a fallacy brought about only by habit and reflection. As long as there exists 'an insurmountable barrier fixed between the present, and the future,

[17] David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1983), 18.

[18] Howe, i, 29.

[19] Howe, i, 30.

[20] Hume, *Treatise,* 258.

[21] Howe, i, 40.

so that I neither am, nor can possibly be affected at present by what I am to feel hereafter, I am not to any moral or practical purpose the *same* being'.[22] The desires and needs of one's future self are a projection of the imagination, identical to the imaginative action we take in sympathising with a relative, friend, or stranger. We cannot *know* the emotions of another, so in sympathising we construct them. So, by the same token, because we cannot *know* how we will feel or act in the future, our - 'self-interest' or 'self-love' is nothing but an imaginative construction of the same kind. 'We have no instinctive secret sympathy with our future sensations by which we are attracted either consciously or unconsciously to our greater good', argues Hazlitt; it is only long acquaintance and habit that makes us more attached to our own future good than the future good of others.[23] We are most habituated to sympathise with our own desires and emotions; the next circle of sympathy extends out to family and friends; the next to acquaintances; and so on until the idea of 'the nation' and eventually 'the whole human race' comes within the bounds of an ever more 'general' benevolence.

The final destination of this argument, in the *Essay*, is to contend that, as self-love and benevolence originate from the same imaginative root, it is false to assert that human nature is 'naturally' self-interested (as opposed to 'naturally' benevolent). On the contrary, it argues, the mind always has the freedom to choose between the self-interested and the benevolent path: a freedom that marks man out as a moral subject. General benevolence arises from 'an habitual cultivation of the natural disposition of the mind to sympathise with the feelings of others by constantly taking an interest in those which we know, and imagining others that we do not know', while self-interest is 'a long narrowing of the mind to our own particular feelings and interests'. Both are 'modifications from habit'.[24]

For Hazlitt, then, the role of habit in the action of the imagination is more troubling than it was for Hume. At first glance, habit appears diametrically opposed to the principle of disinterestedness that lies at the heart of Hazlitt's philosophy; disinterestedness requires the imagination to break the bounds of individual experience in an act of radical sympathy, whereas habit drives it back into the realm

---

[22] Howe, i, 11.

[23] Howe, i, 3.

[24] Howe, i, 14-15.

of familiar associations centred around the self. 'The chain of habit coils itself round the heart', he was to write in 'On the Past and Future', 'like a serpent, to gnaw and stifle it'.[25] Or, in David Bromwich's words, '[h]abit makes us repetitive, repetition makes us narrow, and our narrowness ends in self'.[26] Only by breaking the habits of association that inform custom and prejudice, it would seem, could the imagination be free to act disinterestedly. In this way, the *Essay*'s stance on habit and custom can appear inconsistent, with Hazlitt at times seeking to reduce its importance: 'even where association has the greatest influence, habit is at best but a half-worker with nature, for in proportion as the habit becomes inveterate, we must suppose a greater number of actual impressions to have concurred in producing it'.[27] Due to its indeterminate status between nature and artifice, the concept of habit becomes increasingly slippery and difficult to assign a role to. 'Whatever the force of habit may be, however subtle and universal it's [*sic*] influence, it is not every thing, not even the principle thing'. Here Hazlitt seems to suggest that bad habits can be overcome by rational debate, that one has the power to create a new habitual association by consciously 'giving the mind a different direction'.[28] Human nature's tendency to lapse into habit is turned around to argue a perpetual capacity for change. Habit enables the mind to move easily through the actions of either self-love or benevolence, in this case; yet it also indicates the potential for one long-versed in either to be diverted onto the other course – a note of hope, and of uncertainty.

The clear influence of the *Treatise* does not make Hazlitt a straightforward follower of Hume. Uttara Natarajan's *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense* (1998) aims to correct the widespread assumption of his affinity to the empiricist tradition, and his position as a 'directly Humean' philosopher by emphasising the ways in which the *Essay* is an argument against the mechanistic rule of the mind by sensation.[29] Hume defines 'power' (also called 'connexion', or 'necessity') as merely emerging out of the repetition of circumstances, with no basis in reality.[30] But Natarajan contends that

---

[25] Howe, viii, 29.

[26] Bromwich, *Mind of a Critic*, 58.

[27] Howe, i, 76.

[28] Howe, i 16, 17.

[29] Thomas Keymer, 'The Subjective Turn', in David Duff (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 324.

[30] Hume, *Treatise,* 162-63.

Hazlitt developed an alternative conception of power as generated by the intellect itself: 'the independence of the mind from sensory manipulation, or equivalently, from manipulation by the objects of an external material reality'.[31]

For Hume, '*power* has always reference to its *exercise*, either actual or probable ... we consider a person as endow'd with any ability when we find from past experience, that 'tis probable, or at least possible he may exert it' – even here, talking about human voluntary power, Hume makes it *observable* in an external body rather than showing its internal working.[32] Actions of will 'arise from necessity' because of hidden, unknown multiple causes within the mind: 'According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by removing necessity, removes also causes, and is the very same thing with chance'.[33] This stance is contested by Hazlitt, who insists on the imagination as an independent form of intellectual power: 'but for this faculty of multiplying, varying, extending, combining and comparing his original passive impressions [man] must be utterly blind to the future and indifferent to it': without it, he is 'the passive instrument of undreaded pain and unsought for pleasure', a mere automaton whose motives are purely sensational.[34] Like Hume, Hazlitt accepts that action is 'yield[ing] to the strongest inclination',[35] but unlike him he disputes that this inclination is only and always influenced by love of pleasure. In a note Hazlitt adds that '[t]he love of truth, and the love of power are I think distinct principles of action, and mix with, and modify all our pursuits'.[36] The *Essay* is concerned to restore agency and power to the individual will: to defend moral reasoning and choice against the necessitarianism that would reduce the mind to a mere instrument.

Imaginative power is what rescues the mind from this mechanical existence. The passive associationism of cause-and-effect must therefore be challenged: 'The difficulty I say is not in connecting the links in the chain of previously associated ideas, but in arriving at the first link – in passing from a present sensation to the

---

[31] Uttara Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

[32] Hume, *Treatise,* 313.

[33] Hume, *Treatise,* 407.

[34] Howe, i, 20, 21.

[35] Howe, i, 85.

[36] Howe, i, 85n.

recollection of a past object'. If it is logical to recognise that one phenomenon closely followed by another creates an association within the mind (such as walking into a river and getting wet), it is not logical for such an association (of getting wet by water) to then be associated with a new phenomenon (such as being splashed by a puddle) merely by the memory of cause-and-effect. There must be some faculty that is able to *imagine* a similarity between these two phenomena, and compare them: in its imaginative power, the mind is not passive but active. Habit is brought into an intermediary role between external sense and internal imagination, its ability to select and emphasise certain aspects of the former giving strength and shape to the latter. In other words, it is the store of past memory that gives imaginative power to apprehensions of the future, and therefore decides the voluntary action of the will.

Hazlitt's belief in the active power of the imagination to create reality also brings him into disagreement with Lockean empiricist philosophy, with its view of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a passive receptacle for external sense-impressions. The *Essay'*s argument is that, for such perceptions to make sense, there must be some *a priori* unifying power within the mind that prevents these impressions from becoming disordered and meaningless. Although it is empirical perception that informs one's understanding of the world, there must be a principle that arranges these sense-impressions and in effect *creates* the world of the self, so that the individual's perspective on their surroundings is shaped by the specific cast of their mental landscape. An instructive clue is the difference between Hume's imagination, which is 'conveyed' by the principles of cause-and-effect, resemblance, and contiguity, from one idea to the next, and Hazlitt's imagination, which is described as 'the immediate spring and guide of action', itself acting as the origin of momentum. In Hume, the central division in the brain is between the intentional power of reason, and the unintentional power of the passions, moved by memory, association, habit, and imagination; whereas for Hazlitt, all mental activity apart from that connected to present sensual stimulus comes under the banner of voluntary action, because it manifests the active power of the imagination. For Hume, '[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'; thus, what is commonly believed to be thinking is really a species of feeling.[37] Hazlitt reverses the emphasis to argue that to feel is to think: 'I believe that

---

[37] Hume, *Treatise,* 415.

this is true of the human mind, because the human mind is a thinking principle, it is natural to think, it cannot feel *without* thinking'.[38]

Natarajan convincingly argues that the core principle of Hazlitt's philosophy is power, in opposition to Hume's emphasis on the pleasure principle, and that this principle creates strong parallels with Kant's theory of 'formative power'. Drawing on Hazlitt's childhood as the son of a Unitarian minister, Natarajan suggests that the *Essay* secularises the concept of a divine unifying force and applies it to the individual imagination, which constantly creates a coherent world through the disparate perceptions of reality: 'The mind is one, or it is infinite'.[39] In *Some Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius* (which was published with the *Essay on Human Action*), Hazlitt reiterates the notion that things in nature 'only become one by being united in the same common principle of thought'. When Hazlitt says, 'All that we know, think of, or can admire, in a manner becomes ourselves', it is not the Humean subject being moulded by experience, but the Hazlittean imagination incorporating external circumstance into its unique vision. The power principle 'restores emphasis to the will ... [raising] man above the machine, by asserting his agency'.[40]

Natarajan's reading of Hazlitt is persuasive, but Hazlitt's attitude towards habit remains divided. The *Essay* does not draw a neat line between the mechanical perceptions of habit and sense and the creative faculty of the imagination. Habit instead figures as a strengthening aspect of imaginative power; indeed, without the habitual associations that place the self at the centre of the imagination, natural benevolence is not possible. Hume argues that '[c]ustom and relation make us enter deeply into the sentiments of others; and whatever fortune we suppose to attend them, is render'd present to us by the imagination'; and Hazlitt seems to agree when he says that '[t]he love of my own particular good must precede the particular good of others, because I am acquainted with it first: the love of particular must precede that of general good'.[41] Like Coleridge, who argued that '[b]enevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections', Hazlitt was sceptical of any

[38] Howe, i, 69.

[39] Howe, xii, 139.

[40] Natarajan, *Reach of Sense*, 31.

[41] Hume, *Treatise,* 389; Howe, i, 13.

system of morality that sought to use reason to bypass local ties of affection: a criticism he generally levels at those of reformist tendencies.[42] Without this grounding in real associations, the imagination becomes untethered, merely abstract without substance, 'drawn up by irresistible levity to the regions of mere speculation and fancy'.[43] Such an imagination is described in the essay 'On Paradox and Commonplace' (1822), where Percy Bysshe Shelley is used as an archetype of the former set of mind: a man 'clogged by no dull system of realities, no earth-bound feelings, no rooted prejudices'; rather than being morally liberated, this leads to Shelley's mind becoming 'an overgrown child with the power of a man'.[44] Similarly, William Godwin's *Enquiring Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Moral and Happiness* (1793) is described as a failed attempt 'to pass the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions, where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections, nor fanned by the breeze of fancy'.[45] A very similar argument about crossing uncharted geography is used by Hazlitt against Bentham:

> Could our imagination take wing (with our speculative faculties) to the other side of the globe or to the ends of the universe, could our eyes behold whatever our reason teaches us to be possible, could our hands reach as far as our thoughts and wishes, we might then busy ourselves to advantage with the Hottentots, or hold intimate converse with the inhabitants of the Moon; but being as we are, our feelings evaporate in so large a space — we must draw the circle of our affections and duties somewhat closer — the heart hovers and fixes nearer home.[46]

A radical politics that disavows the influence of the habitual affections is not only impractical, for Hazlitt, but ethically meaningless. Habit, custom, and prejudice lead

---

[42] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Conciones ad Populum. Or, Addresses to the People* (Private print, Duke University Rare Books Collection, 1795), 29. Elsewhere, this criticism of excessive abstraction is one that Hazlitt levels at Coleridge himself, whose genius he describes as having 'angels wings; but neither hands nor feet' (Howe, vii, 117).

[43] Howe, viii, 149.

[44] Howe, viii, 149.

[45] Howe, xi, 23.

[46] Howe, xi, 10.

to the narrowing of the imagination in adulthood; but without it, one becomes trapped in a permanent pre-adolescence like Shelley, or in the frozen hinterland of utilitarian philosophy.

And yet, balanced against the figure of the paradoxical young poet is the figure of George Canning, an 'accomplished man of the world, a courtier, and a wit', whose rhetorical polish amount to nothing more than 'a finished *common-place*'. Setting Canning up in opposition to Shelley, Hazlitt criticises the politician's disavowal of future change, his conviction that the world, up to that point in a state of constant struggle and progress, ought to come to a halt in the present day.[47] Canning's position is presented as one of total habit: a severe narrowing that tips into illogicality, an obsessive devotion to the associations of the past.

Hazlitt's theory of disinterestedness makes it necessary for the imagination to be moved, and as habit is one of the primary movers of the imagination, it is inevitable, and natural, that the affections do not leap immediately to become a universal benevolence but must work gradually outwards from the self. Nevertheless, the double nature that the *Essay* assigns habit, as basis for both disinterested and self-interested action, voluntary and involuntary sympathy, makes it an intrinsically equivocal concept that is bound to prove troublesome, both politically and philosophically.

Hume's conviction that custom and habit are the foundations of practically all knowledge commits him to a highly individualised epistemology, each person's mind gradually accumulating habitual assumptions through the course of their personal experiences. This leads to an understanding of the world that is singularly subjective, namely that '[t]he efficacy or energy of causes is neither placed in the causes themselves, nor in the deity, nor in the concurrences of these two principles, but belongs entirely to the soul, which considers the union of two or more objects in all passing instances'.[48] The emphasis that the *Treatise* places on the limitations of the mind is neither nihilistic nor utilitarian, but acts as a sceptical weight to balance the brain's naturally partial and idiosyncratic understanding. Instead of retreating into solipsistic idealism, Hume's *oeuvre* constantly advocates for dialogue, discussion, and company to offset the imperfectness of individual knowledge, experience, and

---

[47] Howe, viii, 152.

[48] Hume, *Treatise,* 166.

opinion. The faculties, based on habit and probability are 'fallible and uncertain ... We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgement, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief'.[49] It is because of the powerful illusion of reality in subjective experience, because of the centrality of habit to cognition, because of its inevitable narrowing faculty, that such dialogue is required. *In extremis*, Hume affects to advocate for a complete abandonment of all belief as the only truly certain position: 'When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment I have less confidence in my opinions, than when I only consider the objects concerning which I reason; and when I proceed still farther, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of my faculties, all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence'. This eventually leads to the famous conclusion of the *Treatise's* first book, a *cri de cœur* of existential despair. 'Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return?'[50] Mischievously, the author turns from such weighty enquiries, not to further erudition, but to the purposefully lightweight distractions of the club and parlour: 'I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends'.[51] This is not a glib dismissal of the scholarly world, but an illustration of what Hume argues for as the true principles of moral and philosophical investigation, without which all dry erudition becomes irrelevant: sociable conversation, communication with others, and everyday life. Scepticism, rather than being isolationist, leads the reader back into the world – away from the intractable problems of interiority and towards a form of knowledge based on collective social experience.[52]

Hazlitt's *Essay*, too, puts forth a radical model of the mind that is essentially dialogic. 'Every thing is one in nature, and governed by an absolute impulse. The mind of man alone is relative to other things, it represents not itself but many things existing out of itself'.[53] The strain of idealism in Hazlitt's philosophy is not introverted but suggests a conversation between the mind's imaginative power and its

---

[49] Hume, *Treatise,* 180.

[50] Hume, *Treatise,* 269.

[51] Hume, *Treatise,* 269.

[52] Discussed in Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 53-58.

[53] Howe, i, 73.

experiences of reality. The epitome of this dialogic process is in the creation of poetry, 'the universal language that the heart holds with nature and itself'.[54] The poet's imagination shapes his individual perception of reality so convincingly that its particularity becomes universal:

> Objects must strike differently upon the mind, independently of what they are in themselves, as long as we have a different interest in them, as we see them in a different point of view, nearer or at a greater distance (morally or physically speaking) from novelty, from old acquaintance, from our ignorance of them, from our fear of their consequences, from contrast, from unexpected likeness.[55]

To Hazlitt, poetry is just the intense expression of that imaginative power native to all, which fashions perception of the world in terms of particular interests and circumstances. When I imagine my future interests, I make an imaginative leap into the mind of a future self that does not exist; I am able to do this easily because of habitual engrossment in my own emotions and experiences. The innovative argument of the *Essay* is that this habitual attachment to future self is neither innate nor necessary. Disinterestedness, in thinking of its future benefit, makes an association identical to that when thinking of others; there is thus no difference between self-interest and disinterestedness, as the self-in-the-future is no more connected to the current self than it is to other individuals. 'That which is future, which does not yet exist in itself can excite no interest in itself, nor act upon the mind in any way but by means of the *imagination,*' Hazlitt argues; and it is this projective function of the imagination that the mind uses in sympathy both with its future self, and with others. Despite its emphasis on innate power, Hazlitt's conception of imagination is extrinsic and collaborative; the mind is constantly reaching beyond itself, negotiating with the memory of past self and the projection of future. Like Hume, Hazlitt advocates for testing knowledge against experience, defending the legitimacy of common sense as the 'just result of the sum total of such unconscious impressions in the ordinary occurrences of life, as they are treasured up in the memory, and called out by the

[54] Howe, v, 1.

[55] Howe, v, 8-9.

occasion'.[56] However, rooted as it is in personal circumstance, it is also necessarily incomplete: truth is not one thing, but many. Hazlitt suggests conversation and sociability as effective antidotes to the partiality of individual understanding, noting that

> when I had written or thought upon a particular topic, and afterwards had occasion to speak of it with a friend, the conversation generally took a much wider range, and branched off into a number of indirect and collateral questions ... which often threw a curious and striking light upon it, or upon human life in general.[57]

In a letter to Macvey Napier of 1816, Hazlitt excused the paradoxical tone of his essays: 'The opinions themselves I believe to be true, but like all abstract principles, they require deductions, which it is often best to leave the public to find out.'[58] Although Hazlitt's style is very different to Hume's urbane scepticism, both demonstrate an approach to enquiry that is open-ended and suggestive rather than homiletic: a conversation between acquaintances rather than a sermon from on high. However, the conclusions that this approach leads to for each writer are different. Fred Parker notes that while Hume's *Treatise* is theoretically radical, its practical outcome is conservative. As our minds are too guided by the passions to reach anything such as objective truth, Hume argues, the most valid course of action is to rely on the conclusions of habit and custom.[59] Legitimacy rests on continuity with past experience, as it is 'on opinion only that government is founded ... Antiquity always begets the opinion of right'.[60] This has not only political, but personal consequences. 'I may, nay I must, yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my

---

[56] Howe, viii, 32.

[57] Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things*, ed. by William Carew Hazlitt (London: Bell & Daldry, 1870), v. This 'Preface' is not included in Howe's *Complete Works*.

[58] Letter to Macvey Napier, April 2, 1816, in Herschel Moreland Sikes (ed.), *The Letters of William Hazlitt* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 158.

[59] Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144.

[60] David Hume, 'Of the First Principles of Government', in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects ... Containing Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 2 vols (London: J. Jones, 1822), i, 24.

senses and understanding'.[61] Parker finds in Hume's inconclusiveness a sociable gesture – a performance of politeness embodied in the virtues of cordiality, dissimulation, and clubbability. Let us not disagree, Hume seems to say to the reader, but instead accept the foibles of our own and each other's opinions and experiences. By instructing the reader to 'follow his inclination', Hume makes space both for individual habits, and the broader social habits of tolerance, demurral and politesse.[62] If social instinct is to arbitrate where reason cannot, it necessitates a reliance on existing standards and public opinion, in both civic and private life.

This is a world away from the sociability as Hazlitt conceived it, for whom conversation is only made possible by the difference between individuals; but it is this difference that is always threatening to derail it, returning the subject to his lonely alienation. The disinterested man, far from finding philosophical solace, cuts an awkward, lonely figure in Hazlitt's writing, constantly losing out to the more emollient charms of the self-interested flatterer. Those judged disagreeable by society, he wrote in 'On Good Nature' (1816), are in truth 'the only persons who feel an interest in what does not concern them', and it is this very disinterestedness that leaves them vulnerable to conversation: words 'afflict' their ears; things 'lacerate' their souls; '[t]hey would sooner forgive a blow in the face than a wanton attack on acknowledged reputation'.[63] The good-natured man, by contrast, pursues a path of indolent ease, refusing to 'make himself uncomfortable about things he cannot mend'. Immediately one can observe the similarity between this portrait and that of Canning in 'On Paradox and Commonplace'.[64] Hazlitt neatly reverses expectations to reveal the brooding loner as suffering not from a dearth but an excess of sociable feeling, while the plenitudes of good nature mask a deep-seated egotism that threatens to destroy the principles upon which society stands: 'vice loses its sting, and corruption its poison, in the oily gentleness of his disposition'.[65] In such oiliness one might detect traces of the Humean persona, for whom the pleasure principle neatly elides with the principles of polite society: 'gross and injurious language', for

[61] Hume, *Treatise,* 269.

[62] Hume, *Treatise,* 273.

[63] Howe, iv, 101-2.

[64] Howe, iv, 101.

[65] Howe, iv, 103.

example, are naturally painful to well-bred humanity, and 'the rules of good-breeding condemn whatever is openly disobliging'.[66] For Hazlitt, friction and conflict are essential for the spark of truth to be struck out from the flint; he takes Hume's notion of enlightened conversation out of the realm of eighteenth-century bourgeois sociablity, and into a more combative and fiercely individualistic arena. Polite conversation, he argues, has its limits, because '[t]he fear of giving offence destroys sincerity, and without sincerity there can be no true enjoyment of society, nor unfettered exertion of intellectual activity'.[67]

In such moods, Gregory Dart also identifies an implicit rebellion in Hazlitt against the sociable virtues promoted by Joseph Addison in the *Spectator*, a model of sociability that, like Hume, existed in a now-distant social and political context.[68] Such virtues had by the early nineteenth century ossified into a cliché of gentility that rested on ineffectual politics and social complacency, a general timidity of the sort that Leigh Hunt called a 'flimsy sameness'.[69] This was consensus at the expense of candour, Hazlitt thought, for to him true sociability entailed an acknowledgment of difference, in fact an honouring of difference. 'The mind strikes out truth by collision, as steel strikes fire from the flint!'[70] This analogy – mentioned earlier - emphasises the latent violence in Hazlitt's ideal sociability. For its focus is less on societal cohesion than the individual exercise of sympathetic imagination. The essayistic voice it authorises, indeed, is not authoritative, like Addison's, but argumentative, restless, highly personal, staking no claim on public opinion. Writing at a time of growing conservatism in England, and in the aftermath of the Revolution's descent into violence in France, Hazlitt did not share Hume's (or Addison's) belief that public opinion would naturally direct political discourse towards the general good – nor that it was the essayist's role to embody it.

Clearly, the intractable presence of habit in human nature caused Hazlitt some pain. His portrayal of the typical Tory sensibility, in the Preface to his *Political*

---

[66] Hume, *Treatise,* 152.

[67] Howe, xii, 30.

[68] Gregory Dart, 'Addison and the Romantics', in Paul Davis (ed.), *Joseph Addison: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[69] Quoted in Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra (eds.), *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, 6 vols (London: Routledge, 2003), ii. 11.

[70] Howe, viii, 208.

Essays (1819), has common ground with the 'good-natured man', but it is pushed to hyperbolic excess until the Tory is not simply immoral but almost bestial in his devotion to material comforts:

> He does not trouble himself to inquire which is the best form of government – but he knows that the reigning monarch is 'the best of kings.' He does not, like a fool, contest for modes of faith; but like a wise man, swears by that which is by law established [...] He is styed in his prejudices – he wallows in the mire of his senses – he cannot get beyond the trough of his sordid appetites, whether it is of gold or wood. Truth and falsehood are, to him, something to buy and sell; principle and conscience, something to eat and drink.[71]

Despite his lack of moral imagination and collective spirit, the Tory inevitably treads the path of success: 'How much easier is it to smell out a job than to hit upon a scheme for the good of mankind! [...] How strong are the ties that bind men together for their own advantage, compared with those that bind them to the good of their country or of their kind!'[72] Buttressed by precedent and habit, conservative causes invariably prove stronger than radical ones, because the call of self-interest pulls Tories together, while progressive speculation drives radicals apart. Rather pessimistically, the 'Preface' seems to question why anyone would be radical, when they have not just political power but the essential disposition of human nature stacked against them. Those qualities that enable the reformer's independence of mind also render him unpopular in society and marginalised by the system, while on the other side of the political spectrum mediocre talents can rise through a specious agreeableness arising from complacency and acquiescence to things as they are.

David Bromwich is therefore correct to designate Hazlitt as a *thinking* disciple of Hume, who took up the earlier philosopher's ideas on habit and custom at a time when their virtue was no longer assured. Habit became a charged concept during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: for radicals such as William Godwin and Tom Paine, the French Revolution heralded a definitive break from the complacent habits of a corrupt society; for Edmund Burke, by contrast, it was the disregard of

[71] Howe, vii, 17-18.

[72] Howe, vii, 18.

virtuous national habits (of chivalry, of feudal deference) that caused the violence in France. Later in the 1790s William Wordsworth would construct a literary aesthetic around the habitual affections of time and place; and yet at the same time S. T. Coleridge would praise his friend's poetry for 'awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom'.[73] As London grew, so too did a new class of writers who peopled the suburbs and wrote for the 'young attorneys and embryo-barristers about town'; such changes elicited anxiety about social legitimacy, cultural vulgarisation, and the loss of the past. Hazlitt's continued fascination with habit, his simultaneous attraction and repulsion to its effects, is traceable throughout his writing. It is observable in his status as a political radical who could speak sentimentally about the feudalism of 'Merry England'; as a staunch supporter of Napoleon who also praised Burke as the finest prose writer in England; as a writer who could portray the 'many-headed mass' of industrial London in terms of both hostility and nostalgic reverie. These ambivalences resonate through Hazlitt's work, with the author at various points taking all sides; of all the Romantic writers, it is Hazlitt, I would argue, who gives habit its most thorough hearing, teasing out its paradoxical, problematic nature. And it is this key internal tension, between narrowness and abstraction, inner agency and capitulation to external circumstance, self-definition and self-forgetting, that I will examine in the following chapters.

[73] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), ii. 7. Hereafter cited as *Biographia*.

CHAPTER I PART I: HAZLITT AND GODWIN

William Godwin's (1756-1836) major philosophical work, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793) (henceforth *Political Justice*), sets out the precepts upon which his philosophical anarchism rests. Truth and virtue are made synonymous in *Political Justice.* One comes to recognise virtuous from vicious conduct through the acquisition of knowledge; vice is the result not of wilful immoral action, but of moral ignorance. Because Godwin (unlike David Hume) believes that man is essentially rational, he argues confidently for the eventual victory of truth over false belief, and, therefore, the gradual improvement of man's material and moral conditions over time. Far from being trapped within the confines of a fundamentally limited understanding ruled over by the passions, Godwin sees the human condition as one of aggregative improvement, a gradual ascent to perfect understanding. The source of this steady enlightenment is reason: knowledge 'contributes two ways to our happiness: first by the new sources of enjoyment which it opens upon us, next by furnishing us with a clue in the selection of all other pleasures.'[74] Further to this, later in *Political Justice*, Godwin explains:

> Man is the creature of habit and judgement; and the empire of the former of these, though not perhaps more absolute, is at least more conspicuous. The most efficacious instrument I can possess for changing a man's habits is to change his judgments. (559)

This is a reversal of Hume's doctrine, in which reason 'is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions'.[75] For Godwin, habits are able, and ought to be, mastered by the rational mind in pursuit of virtue.

Such rigorous adherence to the dictates of reason is matched by an iron sense of moral duty. In his book *Godwin's Political Justice* (1986), Mark Philp discusses how

---

[74] William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness,* ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 298. All further references to Godwin's *Political Justice* will be to this edition unless otherwise stated, and page numbers will be given in parenthesis within the main text.

[75] Hume, *Treatise,* 415.

Political Justice seems unwilling to give ground to the concept of absolute rights, emphasising instead the role of duty in conduct.[76] As Godwin puts it in the 'Summary of Principles' which prefaces the *Political Justice*: 'Right is the claim of the individual to his share of the benefit arising from his neighbours' discharge of their several duties' (77). Rather than Godwin having an absolute right to life, it is the duty of his fellow citizens not to murder or maim him; consequently, 'If the extraordinary case should occur in which I can promote the general good by my death more than by my life, justice requires that I should be content to die' (174). In Godwin's *Political Justice*, duty thus comes to have a grip over the conscience that is total and inescapable: 'What has the society a right to require from me? The question is already answered: everything that it is my duty to do' (176). While rights remain stable, duty changes over time, subject to constant reflection and revision. In a perfect society, each citizen acts according to the dictates of her individual duty, as determined by the standard of absolute Truth. In Godwin's universe, truth is what unites mankind towards a cohesive destination: simple, objective, and decipherable through reason.

Godwin's belief in the perfectibility of man is the reason for his philosophical anarchism. As humanity progresses towards perfect rationality, he argues, it will require the edifice of government less and less. *Contra* John Locke (1632-1704) and other social contractarians, who considered governments as created by societies as a brake on the vicious behaviour of man left in a state of total nature, Godwin believes that it is government itself that corrupts human nature, which is otherwise travelling inexorably towards virtue.[77] The insidious character of government means that its influence is inescapable; instead, it 'insinuates itself into our personal dispositions, and insensibly communicates its own spirit to our private transactions' (81). Thus, government takes away from the independence of the understanding, by insensibly shaping it towards its own ends.

For Godwin, government fundamentally limits the ability of its citizens to develop as rational beings, instead forcing them to rely on laws as indications of right behaviour instead of the personal dictates of duty and justice. He notes: 'Countries

---

[76] See Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1986), in particular 17-18.

[77] For Locke and his circle, see Leslie Stephen, 'Locke, John (1632-1704)', in *ODNB*.

exposed to the perpetual interference of decrees, instead of arguments, exhibit within their boundaries the mere phantoms of men' – the central values of individuality and independence are subsumed in an unreflective uniformity (205). The social contract is a confidence trick, in which the tacit consent of a government's subjects enables it to create laws well after the point at which consent is given. Thus, for Godwin, the government gains power to regulate the behaviour of individuals ('What can be more contrary to all liberal principles of human intercourse than the inquisitorial spirit which such regulations imply?') and punish what it regards as aberrations, without regard for the true decree of justice (560). Such punishments are made to fit through an overarching legal system that subsumes the individuality of cases into meaningless categories: 'No two crimes were ever alike; and therefore the reducing them, explicitly or implicitly, to general classes... is absurd' (649). This, furthermore, begets moral laziness on the part of the citizen, who becomes accustomed to the idea of justice as a form of coercion, rather than as self-generated judgment: 'The tendency of all false systems of political institution is to render the mind lethargic and torpid' (602). In *Political Justice*, government, 'the perpetual enemy of change', thus habituates certain values and modes of behaviour, which in the progress of time will inevitably become obsolete:

> Law tends, no less than creeds, catechisms, and tests, to fix the human mind in a stagnant condition, and to substitute a principle of permanence in the room of that unceasing progress which is the only salubrious element of mind. (688)

Yet the iniquities of government are not merely abstract; Godwin notes that the inequality of poverty leads to disparities in the justice system, formed as it is by, and for the benefit of, the élite. Godwin also foresees the dangers of governors becoming fixed in a sphere abstract and distant from the governed, an inevitable consequence of such inequality, wherein social differences become exponentially wider as governors become motivated by a defensive *esprit de corps* against their subjects. More generally, in *Political Justice*, Godwin is distrustful of any principle that leads to co-operation not based on rational purposes, including party loyalty and patriotism: on the former, he writes that rather than 'making each man an individual... [party] resolves all understandings into one common mass, and subtracts from each the

varieties that could alone distinguish him from a brute machine' (284-5); and on the latter, suggests that '[the] love of our country has often been found to be a deceitful principle, as its direct tendency is to set the interest of one division of mankind in opposition to another, and to establish a preference built upon accidental relations, and not upon reason' (509). For Godwin, such unthinking alliances subsume individual judgment into mass opinion, creating from men mere cogs in the machine of party or state.

In *Political Justice*, private judgment only ought to determine behaviour, without interference either from governments or other private individuals. 'Every man has a certain sphere of discretion which he has a right to expect shall not be infringed by his neighbours', writes Godwin; 'No man must encroach upon my province, nor I upon his... He may exercise a republican boldness in judging, but he must not be peremptory and imperious in prescribing' (198). The sanctity of this 'sphere of discretion' is such that it leads to nearly the only right to which Godwin gives any weight: that of private property, founded on 'the sacred and indefeasible right of private judgment' (722). For Godwin, if one is not permitted the exercise of his discretion over his own property, 'there can be no independence, no improvement, no virtue and no happiness' (722). Universal private judgment is a doctrine 'unspeakably beautiful' (208); however, such pioneering individualism is balanced by Godwin's emphasis on the virtues of public discussion.

In emphasising these virtues in *Political Justice*, Godwin notes that conversation 'accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our disquisitions' (289). Thus, individual reflection enters into what Philp has described as a dialectic with group discussion – for all Godwin's criticism of society, he never saw humankind as living naturally without it.[78] Unreserved communication would contribute to the general pattern of gradual improvement, as the ties of society and the claims of universal benevolence were strengthened: 'The man whose heart overflows with kindness for his species will habituate himself to consider, in each successive occasion of social intercourse, how that occasion may be most beneficently improved' (288). Indeed, although Godwin decries the corruption of society, he is no Rousseauvian: the 'natural society' of Godwin is not an isolated and innocent Eden, but a public arena

[78] See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 128.

in which different thoughts, theories and beliefs are tested robustly against each other: 'From the collision of disagreeing accounts, justice and reason will be produced' (598).[79]

This ideal has parallels with the circles of Rational Dissent with which Godwin was already associated at the time. Many scholars have traced the roots of *Political Justice* to Godwin's Nonconformist childhood.[80] Godwin's father was a Congregationalist minister, a denomination deriving from orthodox Calvinism that stressed the independence of congregations to conduct services how they wished.[81] Although the numerous sects under the umbrella of Nonconformism were various (and at times in conflict with each other), general doctrinal themes included a reliance on the dictates of private conscience, and an emphasis on faith as an individual experience, rather than one conditioned by the externalised religious rites and offices of Catholicism or Anglicanism. As for William Hazlitt, who we shall come to shortly, this atmosphere of free inquiry and intellectual stimulation shaped the contours of his later thought. There are echoes of Godwin's former beliefs in one essay's insistence that government by intrinsic motives is 'the pure and genuine condition of a rational being... the creature, not of implicit faith, but of his own understanding'.[82] As a child, Godwin was educated under the prominent Sandemanian Samuel Newton, in whose congregation disputes were debated until everyone had eventually come to mutual

[79] For a general overview of Rousseau's political philosophy, see Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986 [repr. 2015]), especially chapter 3.

[80] See W. Stafford, 'Dissenting Religion Translated into Politics – Godwin's "Political Justice"', *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 1 (2), 1980, 279-99; Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, *passim*; and Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). A helpful overview to Protestant traditions of religious dissent is provided in Felicity James, 'Protestant Dissent', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31-49.

[81] For Godwin's father as a dissenting minister, see Leslie Stephen, 'Godwin, William, the elder (1756-1836)', in *ODNB*.

[82] See William Godwin, 'Of the Communication of Knowledge', in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (New York, NY: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965), 77.

agreement; the privileging of judgment, discussion and understanding over rule and decree had a marked effect on Godwin's thinking.[83]

Particularly in the more austere Nonconformist schools, there was also a rejection of luxury and excess sensuality that is repeated in Godwin's political thought:

> It is by our wants that we are held down, and linked in a thousand ways, to human society. They render the man who is devoted to them, the slave of every creature that breathes.[84]

Thus, aided by reason and virtue, the individual is freed from the vicissitudes of fortune and desire: they teach us 'to look upon events, not absolutely with indifference, but at least with tranquillity'.[85]

Godwin also shares with his Nonconformist forebears a strong, and at times uncompromising, belief in sincerity. Promises are prohibited as tacit confessions of imperfect sincerity, as is the seemingly harmless lie of telling one's servant that he is not at home when guests call, and he does not feel like entertaining. Yet, for Godwin, only through absolute sincerity can trust be built between man and man, the foundation of rational discourse: without sincerity, one may be reduced to the antagonistic suspicion portrayed in Godwin's three-volume novel *Caleb Williams* (1794).[86] With perfect sincerity, in *Political Justice*, the 'link which binds together the inward and the outer man is indissoluble', resulting in a transparency of motive (315). Further to this, conversation would gain a 'Roman boldness and fervour' (312). In similar fashion, in 'On the Aristocracy of Letters' (1822), Hazlitt writes of discussion as fundamental to knowledge: 'The mind strikes out truth through collision, as steel strikes out fire from the flint!'[87] The necessity of relying on external forms of government will cease, as disputes are resolved between rational

[83] For a short overview of Sandemanian beliefs, see 'Glasites (also Sandemanians)', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 [third edition]).
[84] See Godwin, 'Of Self-Denial', in *The Enquirer*, 248.
[85] 'Of Self-Denial', 249.
[86] For a discussion of *Caleb Williams* and how it relates to Godwin's doctrine of sincerity, see Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 103-17.
[87] See Hazlitt, 'On the Aristocracy of Letters' (Howe, viii, 208).

interlocutors in the same fashion as Samuel Newton's Sandemanian congregation. In such a society, the social niceties of politeness, dissimulation, and prudence (as prescribed by Hume) are rejected. In a further *Enquirer* essay, 'On Personal Reputation', Godwin deplores that 'certain coldness of character... not subject to the fervours and shocks of humanity' that passes for honesty in contemporary social life.[88] For Godwin, this is nothing but

> a sort of pride of soul, which, while its regards are exclusively centred at home, will not merit the person in whom it exists, to do any thing that might afford materials for ridicule, or opportunity for censure.[89]

This bears similarity to Hazlitt's own essay 'On Good Nature' (1816), with its sense of the qualities prized by society, and their disparity with real virtue of character. In both essays' insistence on honesty, strength of opinion and frankness of delivery, there is a Nonconformist flavour.

Godwin also shares with Hazlitt a conviction that action is always motivated, yet that this motivation does not preclude moral behaviour. In *Political Justice* he avers, like Hume, that:

> Man is in no case, strictly speaking, the beginner of any event or series of events that takes place in the universe... Mind is a real principle, an indispensable link in the great chain of the universe; but not, as has sometimes been supposed, a principle of that paramount description as to supersede all necessities and be itself subject to no laws and methods of operation. (351-2)

However, for Godwin, such necessity of action does not release one from acting according to justice; rather, 'as far as we are independent of motives, our conduct is as independent of morality as it is of reason' (350).[90] Without motive, the mind is not moved to make a choice and no action can be taken: power is not the power to act

---

[88] See Godwin, 'On Personal Reputation', in *The Enquirer*, 256.

[89] Godwin, 'Of Personal Reputation', 256.

without motive, but simply the capacity to produce happiness. As in Hazlitt's 'An Essay on the Principles of Human Action' (1805), this lays the basis for the claim in *Political Justice* that '[the] question... of self-love and benevolence, is a question of voluntary action' (377). Godwin uses the example of an avaricious man, who begins with behaviour designed to accumulate wealth, which will in turn bring him power, but eventually comes to love the wealth for itself; in terms of benevolence, through a habituation to the pleasure of promoting the happiness of one's child, family, neighbours, and country, 'we are at length brought to approve and desire their happiness without retrospect to ourselves' until benevolence spreads to encompass the world (381).

Like Hazlitt, Godwin argues for natural benevolence, not as the default of human nature but as a possibility that is not foreclosed by the native shape of the human mind; men undoubtedly do act selfishly, 'but this preference arises from a combination of circumstances and is not the necessary and inviolable law of our nature' (386). As we are sensual beings, Godwin argues, the infant naturally begins with the self: a love of pleasurable sensation and a hatred of pain. Yet as the consciousness grows, it is able to undertake 'voluntary transmigration' of the senses to understand the thoughts of another.[91] This, if one substitutes preference for pleasure with the more general 'love of good', is Hazlitt's own argument for imaginative sympathy in 'Principles of Human Action':

> The love of my own particular good must precede the particular good of others, because I am acquainted with it first: the love of particular must precede that of general good.[92]

In both Godwin and Hazlitt, books become loci of creative impersonation, so that (for Godwin) 'When I read Thomson, I become Thomson; when I read Milton, I become Milton'.[93] However, in *Political Justice*, this must not counteract the absolute primacy of private judgment and individual character: 'He that resigns himself wholly to sympathy and imitation can possess little of mental strength or accuracy...

[91] See Godwin, 'On Difference of Opinion', in *The Enquirer*, 298.

[92] Howe, i, 13.

[93] Godwin, 'Of an Early Taste for Reading', *The Enquirer*, 33.

He lives forgetting and forgot' (757). This ambivalence is later repeated in Hazlitt's portrait of Joseph Fawcett, who in judging literature had 'no flaw nor mist in the clear mirror of his mind', yet in his own style was 'laboured and artificial to a fault' (Howe, viii, 224-5).

Godwin did not believe in *a priori* knowledge or character. 'Who is there in the present state of scientifical improvement', he demands, 'that will believe that the vast chain of perceptions and notions is something that we bring into the world with us... shut up in the human embryo…?' (101). Instead, the child, an 'unformed mass', is made into the man through experience and education.[94] As the child learns connections between actions and circumstances, and thus gains motives for action, it becomes a thinking person and moral agent; thus, all cognitive function, and therefore morality, is based on the creation and repeated confirmation of mental habits. While Godwin does admit 'the necessity of resting places for the mind' so that one is not constantly involved in repeating chains of deduction and conduction, there is an awareness of the connection between such perceptual habits and the habitual assumptions of custom (323). Education based on experience is individual and unstable, as perceptions are invariably affected by preceding perceptions, as Godwin notes in the *Political Justice*:

> It is this circumstance that constitutes the insensible empire of prejudice; and causes every object which is exhibited to a number of individuals to assume as many forms in their mind as there are individuals who view it. (372)

How, then, can there be a united, uniting standard of Truth in the context of man's varied being? *Political Justice* remains steadfast in its conviction that while the understanding is constrained by experience, true reason has the ability to reach beyond it towards disinterested and rational existence. Social and political life shapes the mind, but not completely; they are mere 'epiphenomena of the moral world', and their habits can be defeated by thorough education.[95]

[94] Godwin, 'Of Awakening the Mind', *The Enquirer*, 3.

[95] See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 56.

The importance of education to Godwin, in *Political Justice*, is paramount. Human character is formed completely by 'moral considerations', rather than physical circumstances such as climate and crop (108). The Gascons are thus 'the gayest people in France' – yet pass through the Pyrenees, and one immediately encounters the 'serious and saturnine character of the Spaniard' (150). The difference between ancient and modern Greeks or Romans also speaks to the discontinuity of provincial character, and therefore its formation by factors other than geography. Only plants and animals are formed by incidental details of air and soil; man is an intellectually active being, 'not a vegetable to be governed by sensations of heat and cold, dryness and moisture'; he is shaped (and shapes himself) through reflection (135). The model of education put forward in Godwin's essays, therefore, places less emphasis on the content of knowledge imparted than the training of young minds to 'acquire habits of intellectual activity'.[96] Thus, geometry is prized not for only for its technical aspect of teaching how to calculate, but for its training of the mind in habits of analysis, logical thinking, and deduction.[97] Once the pupil is a rational being, they can transcend the bounds of actual knowledge to aspire towards the standard of objective justice.

Intellect, reflection, and active thought are therefore positioned as essential to virtue. Benevolence not based on active thought, for example, does not endear itself to Godwin:

> the virtues of a weak and ignorant man scarcely deserve the name [...] I call such a man good, somewhat in the same way as I would call my dog good. My dog seems attached to me; but change his condition and he would be as much attached to the stupidest dunce, or the most cankered villain. His attachment has no discrimination in it; it is merely the creature of habit.[98]

As we have seen before, vice and ignorance are synonymous in the Godwinian universe, and are strictly opposed to reason and virtue. The habit of acting virtuously is the product of a stagnant intellect that, since having no basis in rational

---

[96] Godwin, 'Of Awakening the Mind', *The Enquirer*, 5.

[97] See Godwin, 'Of the Study of the Classics', *The Enquirer*, 48.

[98] Godwin, 'Of Awakening the Mind', 9.

understanding, can easily be swayed towards vicious behaviour. 'Let us not from a mistaken compassion to infant years', warns Godwin, 'suffer the mind to grow up in habits of inattention and irresolution'.[99] Contrary to the Lake Romantics whose radicalism would be partly stirred by the publication of *Political Justice*, Godwin places no value on childhood naïveté, wise fools, or natural education. A state of ignorance can be nothing but an evil, which is part of his argument against poverty and inequality. Without leisure time for educative pursuits, the poor 'merely vegetate': this is not just a hardship, but an existential threat, consigning them to a 'neutral existence'.[100] The collectivisation of labour worsens the problem, as it 'reduces the exertions of a human being to the level of a piece of mechanism, prompted by no personal motives, compensated and alleviated by no genuine passions'.[101] Like Hazlitt, Godwin emphasises the mind's liberty from automatism: its freedom to choose. 'We should remove ourselves to the furthest distance from the state of mere inanimate machines, acted upon by causes of which they have no understanding', argues Godwin in *Political Justice* (127-8). Although *Political Justice* follows a Humean scepticism over the ability to understand truly the first causes of motives, it rejects the claim that this negates voluntary action. It is one's duty as an actively thinking subject to ascertain, as far as possible, the causes and effects of potential acts, and ascertain the just course: 'The more certain is the conjunction between antecedents and consequents, the more cheerfulness should I feel in yielding to painful and laborious employments' (356). Unthinking fatalism is a surrender to habit that undermines the native independence of the understanding.

Godwin is not consistent on how far habit ought to shape voluntary action. In the 1793 version of *Political Justice,* there is an absolute division between involuntary and voluntary action. Voluntary action is prompted by perception, rather than sensation, and is the basis for rational benevolence. Conversely, action deriving from pure sensation is involuntary, inherently self-interested, and irrational. By the time he came to publish his first revision in 1795, however, Godwin had conceded to the idea of partially voluntary act, in which an indirect motive can influence the course of

[99] Godwin, 'Of the Study of the Classics', 53.

[100] Godwin, 'Of Riches and Poverty', *The Enquirer*, 164-5.

[101] Godwin, 'Of Riches and Poverty', 168.

action. One can no longer be certain, even when acting consciously, that some unconscious force is not also affecting the choice. As Godwin put it:

> So much as proceeds upon a motive, out of sight, and the operation of which depends upon habit, is imperfectly voluntary... the perfection of the human character consists in approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state. (127)

Ideally, then, the rational man will not rely on habits of thought at all. Actions ought to derive from reflection, not convention; a truly rational understanding will transcend the vicissitudes of particular circumstance to attain knowledge of universal truth. Yet, Godwin's model of cognition is utterly reliant on the function of habit. As the infant comes to understand the conjunction between certain means and ends, it begins to act voluntarily towards certain ends: yet even this desire cannot be purely voluntary, conditioned as it is by custom: it is founded in 'actions originally involuntary and mechanical, and modifies after various methods such of our actions as are voluntary' (125). From then, the mind enlarges to encompass a more various scope of action, in which situation is compared with situation, to create associations of similarity; 'Thus the understanding fixes for itself resting places, is no longer a novice... [and] acquires habits from which it is very difficult to wean him' (ibid.). This appears to be a magnification only of the infant's processes, yet Godwin condemns this as 'the history of prepossession and prejudice' (126). Take for example a man who is accustomed, through childhood routine, decorum and a sense of propriety, to attend church on Sunday. Yet when his motives are examined, this is found to be an act rather of habit than conviction. Godwin's censure of such behaviour expands from individual to societal behaviour. 'Nothing must be sustained because it is ancient, because we have been accustomed to regard it as sacred, or because it has been unusual to bring its validity into question': to cling to habit is to halt the unceasing progress of humanity towards perfection (139). In this and other passages, Godwin acts as a photographic negative to Burke, often following similar patterns of reasoning yet coming to opposite conclusions. Through introducing the grey area of imperfectly voluntary action, Godwin muddies the waters concerning habit's role and its proper influence over action.

CHAPTER I PART II: BENTHAM AND THE UTILITY PRINCIPLE

Actions are motivated not by the understanding but by the passions, argued Hume. In this, he does not mean that all actions are the consequences of unthinking impulse, or that they cannot be mediated by reason; but to take a course of action, one must have a desire to do it – and under Hume's definition all feelings (desire, revulsion, sympathy, antipathy) are passions. What, then, prompts these passions? For Hume, it is simple: 'The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov'd from our thought and feeling, we are, in great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition'.[102] The Cartesian dualism of mind and body is erased, as 'all probable reasoning' is rearranged to be 'nothing but a species of sensation'.[103]

Reading Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1738-40) alongside Helvétius and Montesquieu, the newly qualified lawyer Jeremy Bentham was deeply impressed with this argument. Instead of continuing his legal career (which his father had hoped might peak with his becoming Lord Chancellor), Bentham quit after one brief and turned to the analysis and critique of legislation, fuelled by enthusiasm for his philosophical epiphanies. Concurring with Hume, he believed that '[a]mong all the several species of psychological entities ... the two which are as it were the *roots*, the main pillars or *foundations* of all the rest, the *matter* of which all the rest are composed ... [are] PLEASURES and PAINS'.[104] Furthermore, the categories of virtue and vice are made to refer to these two sensations; thus, that anything that produces pleasure is virtuous, while anything that produces pain is vicious. This, too, is corroborated by Hume, who in the *Treatise* argued the case for a 'natural theory' of morals based upon the pleasure caused by virtue and the pain caused by vice.[105] Sympathy, or the pain one feels upon observing the pain of another, gives proof of

---

[102] Hume, *Treatise,* 413.

[103] Hume, *Treatise,* 103.

[104] Bentham, Jeremy, *A Table of the Springs of Action*, in *Deontology together with A Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism*, ed. Amnon Goldworth, in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham,* ed. F. Rosen (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 98. Hereafter cited as Bentham, *Table*, followed by page number.

[105] Hume, *Treatise*, 295-6.

man's innate humanity: his feeling for the group takes priority over love of the self. Thus Hume's ethics, as well as being passional rather than rational, are social and societal, focussing on the virtues of good nature and good citizenship.

When he came to rewrite the *Treatise* for his *Enquiry*, Hume made a significant revision of emphasis, replacing sympathy with the less affective concept of utility. While he retained the argument that we have instinctive sympathy with the pleasures and pains of others, he now reasoned that this was due to our inborn concern for the public interest: utility. Equipped with the ability to sympathise with the pains and pleasures of others, one can extrapolate their own sensations to those of the group, and thus calculate the net beneficial consequences of one's actions. This can be seen in Hume's *Enquiry*: '[T]he circumstance of *utility*, in all subjects, is a source of praise and approbation ... inseparable from all the other social virtues, humanity, generosity, charity, affability, lenity, mercy, and moderation'.[106] Hume uses the notion of utility to bind virtue more tightly to the objective of harmonious society: 'We must adopt a more public affection,' he urges the reader, 'and allow, that the interests of society are not, even on their own account, entirely indifferent to us'.[107] Utility's capacity to please dissolves the binary between private and public interest by forging a connection between the passions of the individual and the claims of community, and making it our pleasure to please others. It is through the pleasures of utility that we create habits of sociability: for Hume, a concept such a justice is not 'natural', but artificially constructed by the gradual growth and amelioration of society. Yet, however similar it seems to sympathy, its ends are different: sympathy can be spontaneous, envisioned as passing from an onlooker to a specific individual or set of individuals (the net casting as wide as benevolence allows); on the other hand, utility, or public usefulness, is calculated and teleological.

Bentham follows Hume in basing his ethics on the sensations in the mind and body: 'Take away *pleasures* and *pains*, not only *happiness,* but *justice* and *duty*, and *obligation*, and *virtue* ... are so many empty sounds'. Bentham was also enthusiastic about an ethical standard that could be an improvement upon the vague and

---

[106] Hume, David, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom Beauchamp. *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton, M. A. Stewart and Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 45. Hereafter cited as Hume, *Enquiry,* followed by page number.

[107] Hume, *Enquiry*, 37-38.

unscientific philosophy of 'moral sense'.[108] Yet, in his 'Article on Utilitarianism', Bentham points out that '[i]n the work of David Hume's the idea attached to [utility] was altogether vague', a tool of explanation rather than the critical principle it would become for himself.[109] From his first publication, Bentham would insist that '[*i*]*t is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong*' and he would intensify Hume's stress on the role of sensation to an almost tyrannical degree: 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do'.[110] Flensing moral theory down to its plainest form, he discarded the Humean terms of emotion, passion, appetite, virtue and vice as derivatives to his central focus: pleasure, pain, motive and disposition. However, it is relevant to note the influence of Hume's writings on the links between sensation, virtue, and society: he remained the catalyst for Bentham's development of Utilitarian theory, and the one who first taught him to 'call the cause of the people the cause of Virtue'.[111]

Bentham's *A Fragment on Government* (1776), written some years after he attended Blackstone's famous lectures on legislation at Oxford, is the introductory section of a larger riposte to that august lawyer's *Commentaries*, a publishing success that was the first major attempt to explain and rationalise the convoluted English legal system, which had previously been taught simply, in a kind of apprenticeship fashion, often leading to discrepancies of practice. Bentham never completed his planned longer work, finding himself interested in the potential to create a revised legal system, based around utility. From the beginning, he understood the

---

[108] Bentham, *Table*, 89.

[109] Bentham, Jeremy, 'Article on Utilitarianism', in *Deontology together with A Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism*, ed. Amnon Goldworth in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. F. Rosen (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 290. Hereafter cited as Bentham, 'Utilitarianism', followed by page number.

[110] Bentham, Jeremy, *A Fragment on Government,* in *Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham,* ed. Philip Schofield (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 393. Hereafter cited as Bentham, *Fragment*, followed by page number; Bentham, Jeremy, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 11. Hereafter cited as Bentham, *Introduction*, followed by page number.

[111] Bentham, *Fragment*, notes to Chapter I.

controversial nature of his treasured principle: it was, he admitted, 'dangerous to every Government, which has for its *actual* end or object, the greatest happiness of a certain *one* ... "[*d*]*angerous*" it therefore really was to the interest—the sinister interest of all those functionaries, [Blackstone] included, whose interest it was to maximize delay, vexation, and expence'.[112] The 'Law of Nature' principle that Blackstone argued for in his *Commentaries*, Bentham argued, was 'nothing but a phrase' that played to the specific interests of the few against the many: specifically, the aristocrats, lawyers and bureaucrats who were, coincidentally, the main authors of national legislation.[113] Rather than acting for the public interest, those in power, either consciously or unconsciously, were manipulating the supposedly objective rules of the law to serve their own prejudices and preferences, all the while appealing to a fictional rationalisation of their own making. On the other hand, utility neatly 'furnishes us with that *reason*, which alone depends not upon any higher reason, but which is itself the sole and self-sufficient reason for every point of practice whatsoever'.[114] With utility, there is no need to construct a theory of law based on the nebulous conjecture of *why* justice exists. Pain and pleasure are self-evident, the happiness and misery of the group are self-evident; thus, it is logical to work towards the former and avoid the latter. As in Hume, for Bentham it is the passions (prompted by sensation) that direct reason, whose primary function is to make judgments towards one desire of the sense or another. For Bentham, the utility principle therefore promised a more egalitarian mode of dividing public interest, in which the pains and pleasures of those without legislative power can be equally taken into consideration as those of the privileged few. In in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), he elaborates:

> It has been shown that the happiness of the individuals, of whom a community is composed, that is their pleasure and their security, is the end and the sole end which the legislator ought to have in view ... [and] the sole standard to which

[112] Bentham, *Fragment*, notes to Chapter I.

[113] Bentham, *Fragment*, 483.

[114] Bentham, *Fragment*, 448.

> each individual ought, as far as depends upon the legislator, to be *made* to fashion his behaviour.[115]

'Community', for Bentham, is nothing more than a body composed of individuals; as he explains, '[t]he interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it'.[116] Society consists in the reality of its citizens, and in the sum of their pains or pleasures.

Utility appeals to Bentham as a neutral moral code, incapable of being weighted in favour of one group or another. In his exhaustive catalogue, *Table of the Springs of Action* (1817), each pain and pleasure is delineated as parts for use in a calculation: 'The pleasures and pains here brought to view are, every one of them, *simple* and *elementary*. Out of these, others in any number may be compounded ... giving, each of them, to the *compound* object, especially in so far as the denomination employed is single-worded, the aspect of a *simple* one'.[117] Utility clarifies the objectives of legislature as the maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of pain, two apparently simple points that, by using tools like the *Table*, can be viewed dispassionately and then laws can be adjusted accordingly. Compared to the fantastic conjectures of Blackstone's *Commentaries,* utility for Bentham is attractive for its accessibility and simplicity, and for its equal applicability to the peasant and the judge: pleasure and pain, 'a man has no need, we may hope, to go to a Lawyer to know the meaning of'.[118] While current disputes are so often 'no more than announcing, and that in an obscure and at the same time, a peremptory and captious manner, their opposite persuasions, or rather affections, on a question of which neither of them sets himself to discuss the grounds', under the utility principle they can be reclassified into disputes of judgment, measured against a calculable objective standard.[119] Similarly, legal disputes, contended on the shared ground of public utility, would lose the ambiguity and misunderstanding that so often attends them, so that parties, if not in

[115] Bentham, *Introduction*, 34.

[116] Bentham, *Introduction*, 12.

[117] Bentham, *Table*, 91.

[118] Bentham, *Fragment*, 418.

[119] Bentham, *Fragment*, 492.

agreement, at least may approach 'a visible and explicit issue'.[120] All too often, argument is passion carried under the guise of reason: utility enables true reason to be accessed, quantified and computed. '[W]hy not come home to it at once?' demands Bentham, 'Why turn aside into a wilderness of sophistry, when the path of plain reason is straight before us?'[121]

Ironically, Bentham's initial turn towards Humean empiricism, in which habit plays so strong a part, leads to the formulation of a principle that seeks to bypass the influence of such subjective factors upon the mind. Sighing over the various faults and ambiguities of language, he states that the blame cannot rest with any individual: 'We inherited it from our fathers, and, maugre all its inconveniences, are likely, I doubt, to transmit it to our children'.[122] The only remedy is to start over and build upon the neutral foundation of public utility. Unlike Hume's *laissez-faire* attitude, that time causes man and civilisation to insensibly conform to the demands of utility, Bentham is suspicious of the power structures that privilege a certain few; for him, habit and custom do not constitute a persuasive argument for practice. Although sensation establishes the basis of utilitarianism, its value is objective not subjective; the findings of sense must be harnessed by the understanding and calculated for maximal utility. The utility principle is a 'perpetual lesson' for the legislator, 'serving at once as a corrective to his prejudices, and as a check upon his passions ... Abide by it, and every thing that is arbitrary in legislation vanishes. An evil-intentioned or prejudiced legislator durst not look it in the face'.[123] Utility is therefore the flawless mirror against which all the capricious idiosyncrasies of law and justice are reflected and detected. Standardised thus across (and even between) nations, Bentham argues that 'mankind might carry on a mutual interchange of experiences and improvements as easily in this as in every other walk of science'.[124]

Bentham decries the 'sheep-like habit' of lawyers who, taking Blackstone's example, blindly follow precedent with no idea as to whether it benefits current society: such 'abject and indiscriminate[e]' obedience can only lead to a 'passive and

---

[120] Bentham, *Fragment*, 492.

[121] Bentham, *Fragment*, 486.

[122] Bentham, *Fragment*, 491.

[123] Bentham, *Introduction*, 274.

[124] Bentham, *Introduction*, 274. .

enervate race, ready to swallow any thing, and to acquiesce in any thing [...] insensible, short-sighted, obstinate [...] obsequious only to the whisper of interest, and to the beck of power'.[125] Bentham attacks the *Commentaries* for pretending to objectivity all the while advancing what he argues to be a highly partial, highly interested vision, 'in which one would think neither caprice, nor violence, nor accident, nor prejudice, nor passion, had any share'.[126] The eloquence of Blackstone's style is itself suspect for Bentham, bypassing the understanding to play upon the fancy: 'in spite of the merits which recommend it so powerfully to the imagination and to the ear, [it] has no better title on one account than on another, to that influence which, were it to pass unnoticed, it might continue to exercise over the judgment'.[127] Such articulacy smoothens the way for assumption, conjecture, prejudice, custom, making it easier to consume what is wild and irrational. To advance his point, Bentham mocks the 'obscure and crooked reasoning' of the *Commentaries*, ornamented as Blackstone's work is with florid accounts of '*Natural* Society the mother, and of *Political* Society the daughter, of Law *municipal,* duly begotten in the bed of Metaphor'.[128] This depiction of metaphor as a cradle of linguistic depravity is characteristic: his attack on Blackstone is intensely literary in critiquing him on points of language and style as the shaky foundations upon which his arguments are made. As he argued later, '[l]ittle aware are people in general of what importance the business of *nomenclature* ... is in the plantation of new ideas and dissemination of already-rooted ones'; it is an inattention, moreover, that has dangerous effects.[129] In one passage, Bentham scrutinizes him in a schoolmasterly manner:

> [Blackstone] sets out with the word "*duty*" in his mouth; and, in the character of a *Censor*, with all due gravity begins talking to us of what *ought* to be. 'Tis in the midst of this lecture that our *Proteus* slips aside; puts on the *historian*; gives

[125] 'Sheep-like habit' is a quotation from draft material included for Bentham's *A Fragment on Government*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 126; Bentham, *Fragment*, 402.

[126] Bentham, *Fragment*, 453.

[127] Bentham, *Fragment*, 405.

[128] Bentham, *Fragment*, 394-95.

[129] Bentham, 'Utilitarianism', 302.

> an insensible turn to the discourse; and without any warning of the change, finishes with telling us what *is*.[130]

Bentham finds this sloppiness disingenuous, lulling the reader into a false sense of persuasion without constructing a true argument, and indicative of ‘that spirit of obsequious *quietism* that seems constitutional to our Author’.[131] Here, Bentham is highly aware of the mind’s ability to be insensibly shaped through habits of thought and language: ‘The use of discourse is to influence belief, and that in such a manner as to give other men to understand that things are as they are really’.[132] The *Commentaries* are also compared to a gilded ornament: ‘on a distant glance nothing can look fairer: a prettier piece of tinsel-work one shall seldom see exhibited from the shew-glass of political erudition’; however, ‘[s]tep close to it, and the delusion vanishes’.[133] Bentham explicitly links a vague and suggestive style with the excitement of the imagination, arguing that ‘[i]t is the perplexity of ambiguous and sophistical discourse that, while it distracts and eludes the apprehension, stimulates and inflames the passions’.[134] The mind, unless guided by precise and well-defined language, is apt to slip into the by-ways of error and assumption.

The use of imagery in *Fragment* is almost parodically representative of Enlightenment values. Remarking upon Blackstone’s portrayal of English common law as ‘an old Gothic castle, erected in the days of chivalry, but fitted up for a modern inhabitant’, Bentham suggests it is rather ‘the den of Cacus, to whose enfeebled optics, to whose habits of dark and secret rapine, nothing was so hateful, nothing so dangerous, as the light of day’.[135] Throughout the *Fragment,* a binary is constructed between the illuminated world of reason, and the subterranean gloom of Blackstone’s fantasy speculations, firmly separating the grounds of understanding and imagination. Already, there is a clear privileging of the straightforward and objective, over the ground of subjectivity, imagination, habitual association, and decoration. As Bentham tells his reader sternly, truths ‘flourish not in the same soil

[130] Bentham, *Fragment*, 498.

[131] Bentham, *Fragment*, 498.

[132] Bentham, *Introduction*, 203.

[133] Bentham, *Fragment*, 438.

[134] Bentham, *Fragment*, 492.

[135] Bentham, *Fragment*, notes to the Preface.

with sentiment'; they 'grow among thorns; and are not to be plucked, like daisies, by infants as they run'.[136] In Bentham's work, the amiable sociability of Hume has evolved into a tough and rational form of empiricism.

Only a thorough revision will allow the 'light of human reason, universal experience and common sense' to shine through.[137] Indeed, Bentham presents himself as a scholar-philosopher: 'Striving to cut a new road through the wilds of jurisprudence, I find myself continually distressed, for want of tools to work with'.[138] However, a complete jettisoning of the ineffectual old ones would be impossible; the best that can be done is, 'to make here and there a new one in cases of absolute necessity, and for the test, to patch up from time to time the imperfections of the old'.[139] The tools he speaks of derive from language itself, in which, in its current form, 'a man can scarce avoid running, in appearance, into perpetual contradictions'; the deficiencies of language are so grave that it is to these

> and nothing more, are to be attributed, in great measure, the violent clamours that have from time to time been raised against those ingenious moralists, who, travelling out of the beaten tract of speculation, have found more or less difficulty in disentangling themselves from the shackles of ordinary language.[140]

Therefore, the difficulties of moral philosophy are not metaphysical, but linguistic: a result of language's careless tendency to mislead the interlocutor with its inability to mean one thing. Moral philosophy ought to be a matter of smoothing the path between word and referent, so that the babel of idiolect is reduced to a universal language. In 'Utilitarianism', Bentham notes that '[o]n his entrance into the moral, including the political, branch of art and science, he found it in much the same condition as that in which Lord Bacon found the physical', and, like Bacon, he utilises categorisation to order the randomness and purge it of hidden errors.[141] 'Till objects are distinguished, they cannot be arranged. It is thus that *truth* and *order* go

[136] Bentham, *Introduction*, 10.

[137] Bentham, 'Utilitarianism', 299.

[138] Bentham, *Introduction*, 214 n.

[139] Bentham, *Introduction*, 214 n.

[140] Bentham, *Introduction*, 102 n.

[141] 'Utilitarianism', 294.

hand in hand', and it is this task that Bentham undertakes in various of his works, most notably in his *Introduction*.[142] Offences are divided into five categories: private; semi-public; self-regarding; public; and multiform.[143] However, he appends to this a recognition that the new system must sit alongside the old, as too violent a change will produce only more confusion: 'for the first purpose, nature was to set the law: for the other, custom'.[144] Although it is a passing comment, Bentham here departs from the utilitarian argument of Hume significantly, by intimating that utility is in fact some 'natural law' that can be differentiated from that which has grown up through custom, which in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* had by contrast been the process through which utility was gradually achieved. Custom, in the *Introduction*, becomes the mantle under which the purposeless Gothic traditions praised by Blackstone have been allowed to flourish. In writing, Bentham hopes to encourage his student to 'place more confidence in his own strength, and less in the infallibility of great names'.[145]

Halfway through the *Fragment,* Bentham pauses to apologise to his reader for this 'tedious and intricate war of words', which he describes as a 'logomachy, wearisome enough, perhaps, and insipid to the reader, but beyond description laborious and irksome to the writer'.[146] The reason he persists so insistently, to everyone's chagrin, is that the only remedy for the poison afflicting the law is '*Definition,* perpetual and regular definition, the grand prescription of those great physicians of the mind, Helvetius and before him Locke':

> Nothing has been, nothing will be, nothing ever can be done on the subject of Law that deserves the name of Science, till that universal precept of Locke, enforced, exemplified and particularly applied to the moral branch of science by Helvetius, be steadily pursued, "Define your words".[147]

---

[142] Bentham, *Introduction*, 273 n.

[143] Bentham, *Introduction*, 270.

[144] Bentham, *Introduction*, 271.

[145] Bentham, *Fragment,* 500.

[146] Bentham, *Fragment*, 500.

[147] Bentham, *Fragment*, 123-4.

In pursuit of an unequivocal vocabulary of jurisprudence, Bentham's works are littered with notes on usage and etymology, either pinning down his exact meaning through a return to its linguistic roots in efforts to strip away accrued connotation, or by coining new labels altogether, such as 'maximise', 'minimise', 'codification', and 'international'.[148] Bentham insistently takes us back to first principles: 'What is a penal code of laws? What a civil code?'; to answer these questions 'in any manner that shall be tolerably satisfactory,' he argues, 'it will be necessary to ascertain what *a law* is; meaning one entire but single law'.[149] Ultimately, Bentham's work is driving towards a discourse built out of positive material realities; under the utility principle, the obscure tangle of motives and desires that clouds human interaction will be made transparent, reflected in language proofed against misinterpretation. In his essay 'Of Publicity', Bentham argues that '[s]ecresy is an instrument of conspiracy', and, while here he is speaking of government, it parallels his criticism of the law's wilfully obscurantist language, lest the general populace become aware of its corruption.[150] Rather than being bound together by a shared history of custom and superstition, Bentham argues, we should instead be bound by public interest, existing in a society where the sharing of knowledge constitutes our bonds: 'Without publicity, no good is permanent; under the auspices of publicity, no evil can continue'.[151]

Even so, there seems to be something inherent to language that makes it ahistorical and devious: in a note, Bentham complains that language is 'materially deficient, in not enabling us to distinguish with precision between *existence* as opposed to *unreality*, and *present* existence as opposed to *past*'.[152] Something about language places each of these states on a level field, obfuscating the way to a clear-cut definition between fantasy and reality, or past and present. The 'pestilential breath of fiction', with its attendant chimaeras and phantoms, is the enemy of the *Fragment,*

[148] Of note, Bentham was also the author of an unsuccessful petition to rename Great Britain 'Barabrithia' in order to accommodate Ireland.

[149] Bentham, *Introduction*, 299.

[150] Bentham, Jeremy, 'Of Publicity', in *Political Tactics*, ed. Michael James, Cyprian Blamires and Catherine Pease-Watkin. *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. F. Rosen and Philip Schofield (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 39. Hereafter cited as Bentham, 'Publicity', followed by page number.

[151] Bentham, 'Publicity', 37.

[152] Bentham, *Introduction*, 99 n.

and Bentham remains thoroughly opposed to suggestions that a certain amount of fiction is necessary in the teaching of justice and law: ‘Of the degree of debility produced, no better measure need be given, than the fact of men’s being in this way made to regard falsehood, as an instrument, not only serviceable but necessary to justice’.[153] While there may have been a less enlightened age when this held true, ‘the season of *Fiction* is now over’; the paternalistic argument in favour of cheating someone for his own good is no longer valid.[154] This is far from the knowing scepticism of Hume, who suggested that all knowledge was, in some sense, falsehood. ‘Fiction’ becomes a word loaded with suspicion, often applied to anything intangible, or that does not refer to a concrete object. All motives in the *Table,* because not materially observable, are fictions:

> The words here employed as leading terms, are names of so many *psychological entities*, mostly *fictitious*, framed by necessity for the purpose of discourse. Add, and even of *thought*: for, without corresponding words to clothe them in, ideas could no more be *fixed*, or so much as *fashioned,* than *communicated*.[155]

‘By habit’, Bentham continues, ‘wherever a man sees a *name*, he is led to figure to himself a corresponding object, of the reality of which the name is accepted by him, as it were of course, in the character of a *certificate*’.[156] Yet this is deceptive; he cautions the reader to remember that reality is constituted through empirically observable phenomena, and even ideas like ‘thought’ are mere fictions to facilitate discourse. Using the example of ‘power’, Bentham illustrates the circular argument that arises from abstract definition: ‘I might have cut this matter very short, by [...] saying, that a power was a faculty, and that a right was a privilege, and so on, following the beaten track of definition’.[157] However, only by linking it to a concrete entity or act can the word have real meaning. Power, in the jurisprudential sense,

---

[153] Bentham, *Fragment*, 511.

[154] Bentham, *Fragment*, 441.

[155] Bentham, *Table*, 87.

[156] Bentham, *Table*, 87.

[157] Bentham, *Introduction*, 205 n.

manifests through either a prohibition or command, which in turn is a result of the legislator's will regarding some act. It is only in this manifestation, and not in some immaterial or potential sense, that it signifies anything.[158] There are certain useful fictions: for instance, justice is 'an imaginary personage, feigned for the convenience of discourse'.[159] However, justice acquires meaning on application to practical benevolence, and therefore has public utility.[160] Fictions which have become useless, such as that of 'common law', he tries to undermine: it 'has no known person for its author, no known assemblage of words for its substance, [yet] forms every where the main body of the legal fabric'.[161] It is Bentham's frustration with those '[s]hreds and scraps of real law, stuck upon that imaginary ground', which 'compose the furniture of every national code' that pushed him to compose the *Introduction,* and to create a systematic model of jurisprudence.[162]

The *Introduction* argues for replacing the copiousness of language with terms and phrases of 'one neutral expression', and a broadly consequentialist approach to motive, which he reminds the reader are only 'pleasure or pain, operating in a certain manner ... [i]f they are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects'.[163] In later works, Bentham would expand his utilitarian theory beyond the scope of jurisprudence. One of the positives of the principle of utility, or the greatest happiness principle, is the comprehensive application of a consistent standard: 'It takes alike under its charge and gives character and direction to the details of Morals and Politics, including under Politics Government and Legislation and International Law'.[164] During the construction of his *Table*, Bentham notes that words used to label desires almost always have a positive or negative connotation. Thus, the motive of desire is attached to economy, frugality, thrift – but also to parsimony, corruption, covetousness, venality. As in the *Introduction,* Bentham is suspicious of this kind of morally weighted language, and he is aware of the necessity of supposedly 'bad' motives for the running of society:

---

[158] Bentham, *Introduction*, 204 n.

[159] Bentham, *Introduction,* 120 n.

[160] Bentham, *Introduction*, xxxiv-xxxv.

[161] Bentham, *Introduction*, 8.

[162] Bentham, *Introduction*, 8.

[163] Bentham, *Introduction*, 102n; 100.

[164] Bentham, 'Utilitarianism', 318.

> "*Regulators* are good things; mainsprings are bad things; therefore, to make a good watch, put into it regulators, two or as many as you please, but not one *mainspring.*" Exactly as conducive as such notions would be to *good watchmaking*, would be to good *government* the notion that men's conduct ought not to be influenced by any motives but those of the sort commonly called "good motives".[165]

For example, a person might be under prosecution, and the prosecutor operating under 'bad' motives of ambition, greed, or vengeance; yet the impurity of his motives does not negate the potential good of seeing a criminal go to jail. The use of biased terms, Bentham perceives, is largely determined by the opinions and motives of those portraying them and is open to manipulation by the authorities. Seeking to combat those 'interested deceivers' who utilise such manipulations as 'instruments of delusion and deception', he proceeds to map out a comprehensive inventory of motives grounded on objectivity, listed under the categories of 'eulogistic' and 'dyslogistic' terms, which terms themselves render the categories more neutral than 'virtuous' and 'vicious'.[166] So-called good motives ought not to be judged on supposed purity, but upon 'the *direction* in which, on each occasion, they act,—upon the nature of the effects,—the consequences—*pleasurable or painful*, of which they become *efficient causes* or *preventatives*'.[167] Of such motives as love of power, desire for wealth, and sexual desire, meanwhile, Bentham drily notes that they 'may accordingly be considered as the *unseemly parts of the human mind*', with eulogistic words such as 'patriotism', 'industry', or 'love' used as '*fig-leaves* ... for the covering of them'.[168] The *Table* ultimately develops a system of morality beyond the prejudices of moral imagination, grounded in objective quantifiability.

Paradoxically, Bentham uses the subjectivity of human nature as an argument for utilitarian morality. 'To no man, can the quality of sensibility in the breast of any other man be made known by any thing like equally probative and unfallacious

[165] Bentham, *Table*, 106-7.

[166] Bentham, *Table*, 105

[167] Bentham, *Table*, 108.

[168] Bentham, *Table*, 115.

evidence', he states; yet those who wear the character of Moralist disregard such differences of sensibility to 'prescribe exactly the same line of conduct to be observed by every man'.[169] In his *Introduction*, he argues that the principle of sympathy and antipathy, the dominant trend in moral philosophy of the eighteenth century, tends towards intolerance and severity: 'It is for applying punishment in many cases which deserve none: in many cases which deserve some, it is for applying more than they deserve. There is no incident imaginable, be it ever so trivial, and so remote from mischief, from which this principle may not extract a ground of punishment. Any difference in taste: any difference in opinion: upon one subject as well as upon another. No disagreement so trifling which perseverance and altercation will not render serious. Each becomes in the other's eyes an enemy, and, if laws permit, a criminal.'[170] Bentham even went as far as to argue that all theories of sympathy and antipathy were guilty of 'serving as a cloak, and pretence, and aliment, to despotism: if not a despotism in practice, a despotism however in disposition: which is but too apt, when pretence and power offer, to show itself in practice'.[171] Not only were they tyrannical, but they were also anarchical, leading to a blinkered system of morality in which each person is convinced by, and follows, their own whims. By contrast, the principle of utility 'neither requires nor admits of any other regulator than itself'.[172] Grown men and women should be responsible for judging themselves; the practical moralist ought to be no more than an assistant to their reflections and conclusions, a scout, 'who having put himself upon the hunt for consequences ... collects them as he can, and for the use of those who feel themselves disposed to accept of his services, spreads them out in their view'.[173]

In his portrait of Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt dismisses utilitarian philosophy, arguing that

---

[169] Bentham, Jeremy, 'Deontology' in *Deontology together with A Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism*, ed. Amnon Goldworth. *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. F. Rosen (Oxford: OUP, 1983). *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, 21 May 2015. Web. 14 August 2022,p. 131. Hereafter cited as Bentham, 'Deontology', followed by page number.

[170] Bentham, *Introduction*, 29.

[171] Bentham, *Introduction*, 26 n.

[172] Bentham, *Introduction*, 33.

[173] Bentham, 'Deontology', 251.

> [t]he moralist can no more do without the intermediate use of rules and principles, without the 'vantage-ground of habit, without the levers of the understanding, than the mechanist can discard the use of wheels and pulleys, and perform every thing by simple motion.[174]

Hazlitt revolts against the objective standard of utility and its erasure of difference: 'could our hands reach as far as our thoughts and wishes', he concedes, 'we might then busy ourselves to advantage with the Hottentots, or hold intimate converse with the inhabitants of the Moon; but being as we are, our feelings evaporate in so large a space—we must draw the circle of our affections and duties somewhat closer—the heart hovers and fixes nearer home'.[175] Bentham, too governed by reason, forgets the mechanism of habit, which operates individually in each person's mind. It is this mechanism, Hazlitt appears to argue, that protects us from utilitarianism's excesses. However, as Uttara Natarajan has demonstrated, mechanism is also what Hazlitt deplores on several occasions as a limitation on the disinterested imagination – a limitation that stems from empiricism's sense-based associative principle, and eventually leads back to the self-interested pleasure maximisations of Bentham.[176] Habit is therefore double-faced, as that which enables us to create the bonds that inform our imagination, and that which grounds it in a sense of reality that overwhelmingly leads to the privileging of self-interest.

[174] Howe, xi, 9.

[175] Howe, xi, 10.

[176] Natarajan, *The Reach of Sense*, 73-75.

CHAPTER I PART III: BURKE

'Time and custom', notes David Hume in his *Treatise*, 'give authority to all forms of government'.[177] What Hume framed as anthropological fact, Edmund Burke made into the moral truth at the heart of the British constitution, developing habit and custom into an affective idea that would strongly influence Romantic perspectives, including those of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt. However, his views on the subject are more nuanced and internally conflicted than the general portrait of 'the father of modern conservatism' usually allows.

A Philosophical Enquiry into The Sublime and Beautiful was published in 1757 and immediately acknowledged as the work of a promising mind. Burke follows Locke (and therefore Hume) in boiling human experience down to two simple ideas, which cannot be simplified further: pain and pleasure. However, he separates out their effects so that they are no longer dependent on each other: pleasure is not defined as the removal of pain, with pain as the cessation of pleasure. Instead, the mind generally rests in a state of indifference, with pain and pleasure as exciting sensations that raise it from its usual neutrality. Burke also categorises the removal of pain as 'delight' as opposed to pleasure: while the latter results in feelings of 'soft tranquillity', delight is more unsettled, 'a sort of tranquillity shadowed with horror'.[178]

This change in categorisation is significant, as it suggests that emotions associated with pain are not necessarily vicious. Hume's *Treatise* argues that pleasure and pain form a perfect analogue with virtue and vice, grounding psychology, morality and politics in the assumption that the human subject is naturally drawn to what gives pleasure and avoids what causes pain. Yet the *Enquiry* suggests that there are certain kinds of pain, or ideas similar to pain, that the human mind actively seeks out; the passions of self-preservation turn on pain and danger, taking perverse delight in their effect, as long as they are at a sufficient distance to be enjoyed instead of suffered. This strange yearning for shock and awe forms the first part of Burke's aesthetic theory: '[W]hatever is in any sort terrible, or conversant about terrible objects, or

[177] Hume, *Treatise,* 566.

[178] Edmund Burke, *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke,* ed. P. J. Marshall et al. 9 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1989-2015), i, 288.

operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*'.[179] The sublime is the sensation one feels when viewing a mountainous landscape, or watching a theatrical tragedy, or spectating at a public hanging. It is a brush with death, confined in such a way that the mind is suddenly made aware of its continued existence, thrown into a tumult of ideas so strong that it is almost overwhelmed.

Burke's discovery of the sublime contradicts the utilitarian bent of Humean aesthetics, in which objects are found beautiful according to their fitness for use. The human mind portrayed in the *Enquiry* loves to be raised up in its emotions, regardless of utility; the ideas of self-preservation are shown to be distinct from those of society, and even inimical to them. The mind's fascination with excitement and sensation is a completely amoral quality, originating from "[t]he first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind [...] Curiosity'.[180] Thus, Burke severs the link forged by most moral philosophers of the eighteenth century between ethics and aesthetics, depicting instead a subject who is irresistibly drawn to scenes of pain, fear, and horror – partly through pity, but also through fascination with power and its exertion, and curiosity at seeing something not witnessed before. Burke is also careful to clear this urge of any immoral leanings; we can be attracted to viewing what we would not choose to do: 'We delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed'.[181] It is not *schadenfreude* that activates the mind, but desire for astonishment and affect; no person would wish for London to be destroyed by fire or earthquake, yet supposing it happened, many would crowd to watch from a distance. In addition to this, David Bromwich notes that much of Burke's thought concerns the balance between forces of activity and stasis. If the mind habitually rests in a state of neutrality, encounters with the sublime and beautiful act as necessary disturbances, opposing the mind's natural tendency towards indolence; without its native desire for sensation, it would avoid scenes of pain altogether, leading, for example, to an abandonment of the sick or wounded.[182] It is human nature to be attached to both novelty and custom, but only novelty acts as a

---

[179] Burke, i, 216.

[180] Burke, i, 210.

[181] Burke, i, 223.

[182] David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and the Beautiful to American Independence* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 69.

stimulus for the senses. To work most effectively, both the sublime and the beautiful must excite curiosity; the sensation, whether sight, sound, or physical sensation, should be new. 'The nature of use and custom will shew, that beauty, which is a *positive* and powerful quality, cannot result from it'.[183] Thus the link between beauty and usefulness is thrown out as unlikely: pigs, after all, are a very useful animal, but generally not considered beautiful. Use and custom, both indicators of value in society, play no role in the sublime or beautiful.

Burke defines beauty as that which causes love without need of long attention, understanding, or will; it is a purely aesthetic category, separate from personal affection and taste.[184] One might become accustomed to preferring the taste of tobacco (bitter and unbeautiful) to sugar (sweet and therefore beautiful), but this is an outcome of habit, with no relation to intrinsic beauty of bitter over sweet. No man in his right mind, argues Burke, would upon first tasting prefer tobacco to sugar; the mind and body is hardwired to find certain things beautiful, and any deviation in taste is due to their diversion by custom and experience. It has no bearing on beauty *per se.* He gives an example of the difference between them:

> I remember to have frequented a certain place, every day for a long time together; and I may truly say, that so far from finding pleasure in it, I was affected with a sort of weariness and disgust ... yet if by any means I passed by the usual time of my going thither, I was remarkably uneasy, and was not quiet till I had got into my old track.[185]

Burke argues that the main qualities of beauty are broadly similar across human civilisation, arising out of the fundamental connection between body and mind. The physiognomist Campanella, who could mimic the faces of his patients with such accuracy that he could enter into their thoughts and dispositions, exemplifies the link between physical and mental pain or pleasure; likewise, he argues, opiates and spirits ease the mind by relaxing the nerves of the body.[186] Some aspects of Burke's theory

---

[183] Burke, i, 264-65.

[184] Burke, i, 255-56.

[185] Burke, i, 265.

[186] Burke, i, 285-86.

approach the state of synaesthesia: softness, sweetness and smoothness, all qualities of beauty, operate by relaxing the nerves; sugar pleases the nerves because its crystals are smooth globes, while the sharp cubes of salt crystals 'vibrate' more jarringly on the tongue.[187] Such speculations are a nod to contemporary psychological theory, particularly David Hartley's doctrine of vibrations.[188] Under the *Enquiry's* neurological model of aesthetic experience, anything that dulls the senses is incompatible with both the sublime and beautiful. Burke goes further to argue that beauty is not to be found the opposite of deformity, but of commonness; a Platonic ideal of form, say of a horse, would not be the most beautiful horse but simply the most characteristic. Custom emerges in the *Enquiry* as a dampener on the sublime and beautiful: 'It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little' (233).[189] 'Daily vulgar use' creates a 'stale unaffecting familiarity' (210).[190] The contentment of habit is envisioned more in terms of its loss than its enjoyment; the tobacco chewer may not notice his everyday consumption of it, but would miss it if it were gone. Art and life do not line up to each other in Hume's neat parallel of utility; art has little to do with morality, and nothing to do with fitness or use.

However, an essay that Burke wrote while a student at Trinity College Dublin suggests an early interest in the connection between aesthetics and ethics, which would continue in his later career. 'So far from being disgusted at seeing any thing immoral represented, we are seldom better pleas'd', he notes in issue three of the *Reformer*. To counteract this danger, audience members ought to treat the action on stage as they would reality, curbing any secret pleasure they might take. Here, Burke recognises that the values of taste and the values of morality have mutual influence: the passions are stirred up in sympathy, the mind is gradually placated by custom, and what was at one time inadmissible is made acceptable. The danger is not that we

---

[187] Burke, i, 301-2.

[188] See David Hartley, *Observations on Man: His Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations,* first published in 1749 (Cambridge: CUP, 2014.)

[189] Burke, i, 233.

[190] Burke, i, 210.

love to see what we would secretly do; rather, we might do what we are accustomed to seeing.[191]

'[P]oliticks ought to be adjusted, not to human reasonings, but to human nature; of which the reason is but a part, and by no means the greatest part'.[192] Burke, a career politician, was a lifelong sceptic of the 'sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators'[193] who analysed political outcomes on the basis of pure self-interest, without taking into account the manifold irrationalities of human nature. Following Hume, Burke assumes that habit and experience, rather than reason, drives progress towards civilisation; customs act as 'the Standing Wisdoms of the country'.[194] Rejecting the social science of the *philosophes* as built on hopelessly unpredictable grounds, Burke, like Hume, turns to history as a record of human nature: 'In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind'.[195] History is important not only as the aggregate of human experience, but also for providing the ties that bind the nation together, that place the individual within a context that gives their actions moral consequence beyond their own self-advancement: 'a nation is not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation; but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space'.[196] Nation makes us responsible, not only for ourselves in the present, but for those who have bequeathed us the conditions in which we live, and for those who will inherit them after us; it is a co-operative enterprise ranged through time and space.

The preservation of custom becomes for Burke the guarantor for moral action, even (perhaps particularly) for those whose power would otherwise be at liberty: a letter to a friend in 1795 characterises religion and virtue as 'moral riders' which weigh down the 'rude power' of rulers (whether monarchs, senates or popular assemblies) and even 'hold the reins which guide them in their course, and wear the

[191] Quoted in Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke,* 31.

[192] Burke, 'Politics on a Late State of the Nation', ii, 196.

[193] Burke, viii, 127.

[194] Cited in John B. Stewart's *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy*, (Princeton: New Jersey, 1992), 211.

[195] Burke, viii, 189.

[196] Burke, iv, 219.

spur that stimulates them to the goals of honour and of safety'.[197] The loss of agency as the metaphor shifts is significant: Burke depicts a political ideal in which the individual will is tamed and directed by the hand of duty, until the politician is little more than a vessel for the public good; the brutality of power disparity is softened and balanced by the weight of obligation. He includes a quotation from Horace: *Dis te minorem quod geris imperas.*[198] This ode, a call to return to the older morals of Rome and to rebuild the temples that had been neglected by their forefathers, seems to predict the tenor of Burke's writing after the fall of the Bastille: an emotive call to arms in defence of habit and custom, coupled with the anxiety that failing to do so would result in profound moral degradation – a change which may already have taken place.

Reflections on the Revolution in France paradoxically instructs the British nation on what it must become by illustrating what it has always been. A political system shaped insensibly through history by habit and custom is reliant on the gradual modification of public opinion for its values; this is Hume's thesis, and one that Burke, throughout his political career, viewed as a moral argument. Britain's constitution is

> made by what is ten thousand times better than choice; it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.[199]

Political reform ought to be cautious and reflective of changes in societal standards, not an attempt to rip out the deep roots of commonly held belief in pursuit of a political vision. Radical transformation would not only be tyrannical, but short-lived, unanchored in the bedrock of general custom and prone to be overturned at the first sign of difficulty. The *Reflections* takes this model of slow change and repatriates it,

---

[197] 'Letter to William Elliot', Burke, ix, 42.

[198] ''Tis by holding thyself the servant of the gods that thou dost rule'; Horace, *Odes*, iii. vi. 4–5. Translation from Burke, ix, 42, n1.

[199] Burke, iv, 219.

framing it as not only a general trait but also the mythic origin of British national life. The succession of the British crown is 'the healthy habit of the British constitution', entailing liberty to its subjects, the idea of inheritance thus giving it a 'habitual native dignity' quite different to the innovative spirit of Jacobinism.[200] Home-grown liberty grows out of duty to history and locality, spreading steadily outwards from family to nation: 'to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections'.[201]

To influence public opinion, which in 1790 was still broadly in favour of the French bid for liberty, Burke would have to appeal to his audience's passions, thus galvanising them to action: yet the heart around which he builds this passionate argument is English attachment to habit and custom, a self-avowedly sluggish and stolid principle. It is clear from his descriptions of the Revolution that Burke recognises its superior attractions to the British, eagerly spectating from across the Channel: while he insists that in viewing its 'great drama [...] our minds [...] are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom', it remains a possibility that the sympathetic passions turn in the opposite direction.[202] Just as plays might accustom their audience to vice, the radical Unitarian preacher Richard Price's congregations are becoming 'gradually habituated' to the abstract principles of democracy.[203] 'The nature of things is [...] a sturdy adversary', as Burke observed in his 'Third Letter on a Regicide Peace' (1797).[204] And as long as public opinion was in favour of peace and apathy, Burke would have to work hard to bring the nature of things on to his side.

To compete with the French spectacle, he had to present the British constitution in a way designed to stir up the passions, to create tumult in the minds of his readers and prod them towards self-protective action; but this had to be done while elaborating a defence of compromise, cautious scepticism and everyday reality. Politics, as his earlier *Enquiry* had suggested implicitly, does not belong in the same realm as aesthetics; its slow, involuntary growth through time, built upon concession,

---

[200] Burke, viii, 75; 85.

[201] Burke, viii, 97.

[202] Burke, viii, 131-32.

[203] Burke, viii, 64-65.

[204] Burke, ix, 316.

imperfection and specific historical circumstance, is not designed to pique the mind's curiosity, or whirl its ideas into a tumult. It is the constant repetition of what is tried and true, not a visionary speculation on what might be. Burke was moreover aware of the increasing influence works such as *Reflections* held in the public sphere; in fact, he ascribed their popularity to the very societal tendencies he was hoping to counteract. 'Opinion (never without its effect) has obtained a greater dominion over human affairs than ever it possessed; and which grows just in proportion as the implicit reverence for old institutions is found to decline', he wrote in 1794.[205] This clearly called for a new approach, as precedence and prescription could no longer rely on their mere existence as guarantees of respect and continuation. In the *Reflections* Burke demonstrates that the passions can in fact be inflamed by habit and custom, by what has become by long use unremarkable, even unnoticeable. Burke's style, in his most extravagant passages, sits oddly with the moderation that he defends. Here is his version of the storming of Versailles:

> From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the centinel at her door, who cried out to her, to save herself by flight – that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give – that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this prosecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.
>
> This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcases.[206]

---

[205] Quoted in Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, Second Ed. 1960), 128.

[206] Burke, viii, 121-22.

It is clear that this passage has abandoned argument and entered into the realm of gothic hallucination: a fiction of chivalry slaughtered and modesty trespassed, with little resemblance to actual events. And yet it does not matter; the *Enquiry* had already demonstrated the affective power of words, even when unattached to real meaning. Burke asks the reader to imagine a warm and affecting voice repeating the words, '*Wise, valiant, generous, good and great*'. Without any subject, these words ought to have no effect – but, due to their customary use in sacred or august occasions, we are insensibly moved. In the *Enquiry,* Burke had cautioned his audience that only 'good sense and experience' can guard against the power of such 'bombast',[207] yet in the *Reflections* Burke constructs similar illusions out of rhetoric: moments when language and reality part ways, leaving the reader, depending on political alignment, somewhere between fervour and rage. The language of *Reflections* is at times so theatrically emotional that Mary Wollstonecraft was led to ask whether Burke was play-acting the part of a reactionary politician, a secret Jacobin trying out a disguise.[208] James Mackintosh finds the *Reflections* a masterclass in persuasion rather than the product of serious reflection:

> He can cover the most ignominious retreat by a brilliant allusion. He can parade his arguments with masterly generalship, where they are strong. He can escape from an untenable position into a splendid declamation. He can sap the most impregnable conviction by pathos, and put to flight a host of syllogisms with a sneer. Absolved from the laws of vulgar method, he can advocate a group of magnificent horrors to make a breach in our hearts, through which the most indisciplined rabble of arguments may enter in triumph.[209]

Mackintosh depicts Burke's rhetorical excesses as a Jacobinical mob of specious arguments and appeals to sentiment, making explicit the tension between what he is defending, and the way in which he does so. The book's hyperbole stretches the

---

[207] Burke, i, 269.

[208] Mary Wollstonecraft, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Man' (1790) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Women; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 44.

[209] James Mackintosh, *Vindica Gallica* (1791), quoted in Isaac Kramnick ed. *Edmund Burke* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 113.

credulity of its readers, calling attention to its own eloquence; custom and habit, the silently accumulating sediment of natural culture, is polished and erected into a national monument around which the population is urged to rally.

> All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.[210]

This, the conservative defence of national heritage, is one of the *Reflections'* most celebrated passages; yet in calling attention to its status as 'drapery', dress, fashion, his language problematizes what it seeks to protect.

Does Burke strengthen or lessen the case for habit by making it so visible to his readers? The *Enquiry* suggests that customs are felt only in the pain of their absence, but of course that would not serve Burke's strategy of preventative defence. He wished the English to self-consciously imagine themselves as creatures of habit and custom, on both the individual and the collective (state) level—but in doing so, he revealed the equivocal nature of habit, the fact that it hovers indeterminately between nature and artifice, between involuntary shaping and willingly manipulable opinion. The word 'habit' originally meant bodily apparel or attire, the habit of a monk or a women's robe; 'custom' similarly derives from the same Old French word as 'costume'. The suggestion of something donned, something removable, persists in their modern meaning; we can give up habits as well as gain them, and their very designation as 'second nature' separates them from our first, naked nature. The *Reflections* show the tension at work within the idea of habit, and particularly in Burke's use of it: he attempts to make an England by showing what it already is, but in doing so raises the question of why he goes to such lengths to do so. The history that Burke sketches, rich in tradition and heritage, as broad and deep as the spread of an oak, increasingly resembles the imaginative fantasies of which he accuses the Jacobins.

---

[210] Burke, viii, 128.

In Hume's *Treatise*, the problem of habit remains implicit, buried under an urbane tone that proclaims epistemological revolution while advocating social conservatism. Hume illustrates the centrality of habit and custom to all thought, the mind's involuntary shaping by external circumstance beyond its control, from the vantage point of a curious observer; his recommendation of habit in the evidence of fundamental ignorance is that of one who can separate himself and examine its influence, while still following its dictates. Burke's *Reflections* accomplishes a similar task as the *Treatise* in terms of demonstrating the power of habit and prejudice over political and cultural life, yet Hume's gentle irony is intensified into a kind of vehement ambivalence, that of a politician in the fray rather than an Edinburgh don. Conor Cruise O'Brien identifies 'three basic manners' in Burke's style, one of which is the Gothic mode of the Marie Antoinette passage. The others are a pragmatic and reasonable 'Whig manner', and a 'peculiar kind of furious irony', which though lacking in subtlety 'is often transfigured by a combination of gusto, fantasy and Hibernian hyperbole which is all Burke's own.[211] One might read the *Reflections* as a sustained exercise in irony, an expression of the tension between fantasy and reality out of which national feeling arises. '[T]here is no rust of superstition, with which the accumulated absurdity of the human mind might have crusted it over in the course of ages, that ninety-nine in 100 of the people of England would not prefer to impiety', he argues in one passage: prejudice, even when disproven by reason, still ought to be preserved if it has a use in warding off the destabilising forces of atheism and speculation.[212] The *Reflections* subjects the idea of habit to great imaginative pressure, so that the reader is reminded of its vital importance while being made aware of its essential artifice. John Whale, among others, have accused Burke of using the false consciousness of imagination to cloak the reality of life under tyrannical power; yet the level to which the reader is expected to wholeheartedly acquiesce to Burke's romantic vision is ambiguous.[213] To be complicit in habit is to exist in the space between conscious and unconscious self-fashioning, between voluntary and involuntary assent to its power. Burke may

---

[211] 'Introduction.' *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. (London: Penguin, 1969), 42-44.

[212] Burke, viii, 141.

[213] John Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 19.

valorise custom as an aestheticizing covering for existing structures of power, but in so doing he also makes it visible, and open to the manipulations of others.
The *Reflections,* Yoon Sun Lee suggests, develops a theatrics of public feeling that demands from its audience a conscious suspension of disbelief: a temporary re-cognition of England as a country of chivalry, of community-wide and nation-wide family affection, of sun-dappled ruminants and oak-lined pastures. Lee's argument is that Burke's writings on the French Revolution define the public sphere as a place of 'unmystified illusion', a stage upon which tropes can be used to call up emotion in a ritual of civic feeling at once performative and (perhaps) sincere.[214] In a telling letter, Burke describes the changing public sphere of the eighteenth century:

> Formerly, where authority was found, wisdom and virtue were presumed. But now the veil was torn, and to keep off sacrilegious intrusion, it was necessary that in the sanctuary of government something should be disclosed not only venerable but dreadful.[215]

In the Bible, the tearing of the veil symbolises the destruction of any barrier between man and God: the ultimate good. However, the revelation behind the veil of authority is that men in power are still men, with all the frailties and weaknesses of their electorate. Unable to recoup authority's former power, and disgusted by what he perceives as the servile demagoguery of contemporary politics, in which 'personal qualities should support situations', Burke makes his readers complicit in a performance of national image, which despite its illusory, almost mythic nature, serves to bind the nation together. In this double vision, Burke succeeds in reconciling the aesthetic and the humdrum, the dream and the reality. The weight of Burke's rhetoric shifts between these two poles, but the resulting tone is not insincere; at moments pragmatic, at others hyperbolically fervent, it encompasses the double nature of habit as elevated by Burke: a reassurance of common nature, a moral landscape for the nation.

---

[214] Yoon Sun Lee, *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 41.

[215] 'Letter to William Elliot 26 May 1785', Burke, ix, 39-40.

The double reality at play in *Reflections* can be detected in other, earlier writings. Burke's letter to the Duke of Richmond in 1772 is well known for its deferential, even sycophantic, illustration of the virtues of prescription.

> Persons in your Station of Life *ought* to have long views. You people of great families and hereditary Trusts and fortunes are not like such as I am, who whatever we may be by the Rapidity of our growth and even by the fruit we bear, flatter ourselves that while we creep on the Ground, we belly into melons that are exquisite for size and flavour, yet still are but annual plants, that perish without Season, and leave no sort of Traces behind us. You *if you are what you ought to be*, are in my eye the great Oaks that shade a Country, and perpetuate your benefits from Generation to Generation.[216] [italicisations my own]

Yet there is something unsettling in the excess of Burke's deference. Oliver Goldsmith described his ability to '[wind] into a subject like a serpent', a simile that indicates the mixture of force and obliqueness, or slyness, in his friend's eloquence.[217] The disturbing fecundity of the imagery works against the digestion of his message, forcing a pause and reconsideration. He, and his fellow self-made men, are depicted creeping along the ground in diabolic fashion, swelling alarmingly to bear luxurious fruit; the traditional imagery of luxury is reversed, so that it is the upstarts who are represented by melons, while the aristocracy are symbolised by the oak, a metaphor repeated in *Reflections*.[218] Also in that work, he cautions that a government ought to retain a balance between ability and property, activity and stasis;[219] in this metaphor of melons, Burke reminds the reader that, despite his political inclinations, he remains on the former side of this balance. While the oak's value is in its stability and continuance, it is the melons that actually do some fruit-bearing; the role of the oak, compared to their industrious flourishing, is passive, however vital to the landscape. Note also the implicit warning in '*ought* to have long views' and 'if you are what you

---

[216] Edmund Burke, 'Letter to the Duke of Richmond' (1772). *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke,* ed. Lucy S. Sutherland (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1960.), ii, 377.

[217] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Norman Hill and L.F. Powell (Oxford: OUP, 1934), ii, 260.

[218] See Burke, viii, 136.

[219] Burke, viii, 253.

ought to be'. The great houses of the aristocracy are valuable for the role they play as 'the publick repositories and offices of Record for the constitution ... in full vigour and acting with vital Energy and power in the Characters of the leading men and natural interests of the country'.[220] Yet they must play this role well, or their value to the constitution goes. James Boswell uses another image of abundance to describe Burke's parliamentary performance:

> It was a great feast to me, who had never heard him before. It was astonishing how all kinds of figures of speech crowded upon him. He was like a man in an Orchard where boughs loaded with fruit hung around him, and he pulled apples as fast as he pleased and pelted the ministry.[221]

Boswell's image, in which bounty is suddenly turned into ammunition, typifies Burke's double-edged style: even as he valorises the ideal of habit and custom, he retains an awareness of the compromised reality tenuously upheld by such ideals. Occasionally, furious irony breaks free from its habitual deference; his furious screed to the Duke of Bedford in 1796 takes great pleasure in warning of what happens to errant nobles who unwisely side with the radicals: chopped up into 'rumps, and sirloins, and briskets', they will be stewed and eaten by their erstwhile allies. '[P]oor innocent!'[222]

Burke often refers to 'contexture': of the State, the commonwealth, the Empire.[223] This word could mean either the act of weaving together in fabric manufacture, or the connected structure of a literary composition.[224] Poised between materiality and narrative, habit and custom give individual passions the context of time and history,

---

[220] 'Letter to the Duke of Richmond', Burke, *Correspondence,* ii, 377.

[221] James Boswell (1770), quoted in Isaac Kramnick, *Edmund Burke* (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), 102.

[222] Burke, ix, 180.

[223] See 'Substance of the Speech on Army Estimates' (1790), Burke, iv, 288; 'Letter to Charles Jean Francis Dupont' (1789), *Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Alfred Coban and Robert Arthur Smith (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1967) vi, 39-50; 'Letter to the Marquis of Rockingham' (Sept. 29 1773), *Correspondence*, ii, 464-70.

[224] *Oxford English Dictionary Onlin*e, entry for 'contexture'.

thus elevating them beyond the present moment. Nevertheless, Burke's thinking on habit is reflexive and critical rather than romantic; he recognises the simultaneous reality and unreality of the vision he puts forward: both arising piecemeal from accumulated historical circumstance, and streamlined into a sustaining narrative for the purposes of fashioning community. This fabric, at once real and idealised, conscious and unconscious, historical and mythic, is a step beyond the utilitarian theory of custom put forth by Hume, and represents, along with Bentham, a bifurcation in the uses of habit by the time Hazlitt comes to the subject.

Jeremy Bentham and Edmund Burke, respectively the father of utilitarianism and the father of modern conservatism, are not often written of as natural allies. Certainly Bentham had no kind words for Burke, castigating him as a madman whose 'unquenched thirst for lucre' was the sole reason for the 'verbal filth he [...] casts around him' (perhaps a conscious reversal of the pearls and diamonds William Wilberforce fancied dropping from Burke's mouth when he spoke, as in the fairy story).[225] However, both were young deserters from the legal profession, sceptical of its fitness for use; both believed in government as a tool of social utility; both would have classed themselves as empiricists with little faith in rationalism or 'theory'. Both believed that the Constitution grew organically through long use and custom, though they were arguing on opposing sides of the same argument. Compare the rhetoric of Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* and Burke's *Reflections,* and one is surprised by the similarities in metaphor and imagery; the difference is that while Burke sees the architecture of Britain's constitution as a long-enduring and weathered edifice, Bentham criticises its Gothic ornamentation and rotten foundations. The source of their divergence lies in their similar views and opposing stances on custom: while Burke chose to imbue it with a moral, even mystical power, Bentham regards it cynically, tearing aside the veil to speed up the process of calculation. The obscure beginnings of human action in pleasure and pain become for one writer an almost mystical argument in favour of unreasoning habit: in the other, it becomes the rationale for habit's derobing, leaving only its underlying hedonic principles for mathematical deduction. Broadly, Burke thinks in historical

[225] *The Book of Fallacies: from Unfinished Papers of Jeremy Bentham. By a Friend* (Tavistock Street, Covent Garden: John and H.L. Hunt, 1824), 321.

terms, and Bentham in legislative. While the law deals with a theoretical everyman, acting on rational principles, Burke recognises the influence of past and future in determining motive. This outlook is as pragmatic as it is Romantic, arising from his long experience as a parliamentarian: political reason is a computing principle, but one 'adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations'.[226]

Both, also, were important ideological opponents in Hazlitt's writing. He reviled Bentham's use of Hume's hedonic theory for calculative ends, thus discarding any notion of man's agency or individuality, yet it also aligned with his suspicion of institutions and spirit of radical reform. Thus, Burke's veneration of political custom is anathema—yet in terms of psychology and even morality, Hazlitt comes much closer to Burke's emphasis on the affective power of habit. Habit acts as a stultifying force in the political realm, but can act paradoxically as a stimulus for imaginative activity in the individual. However, while Burke's emphasis is always on moral duty, Hazlitt's *Essay* stresses the centrality of moral choice; while Burke depicted religion and virtue as 'riders' atop the person, Hazlitt would argue for the reverse. Both Burke and Bentham, in different ways, show the individual to be subject to external shaping without consent. Without throwing aside the influence of habit completely, Hazlitt insists upon the self's agency, and therefore liberty. Hazlitt's writings attest to a struggle between habit and agency, as he endeavours to refashion Burkean custom on politically radical terms.

[226] Burke, viii, 112-13.

CHAPTER II: POLITICAL HABIT

This chapter examines the development of a politics of habit in Hazlitt from *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs* (1806) to *The Eloquence of the British Senate* (1808) and finally, the 1819 collection *Political Essays*. I argue that *Eloquence,* which has generally been ignored by critics, is an important work that sets the stage for Hazlitt's future interest in the character portrait. It also voices anxieties about orality and the validity of habit in the form of 'common sense', issues which he would explore in later essays. In the chapter, the section on *Eloquence* leads to an examination of *Political Essays* and its development of ideas seeded in the earlier work regarding the role of the past in critiquing the present, the radical potential of political nostalgia, and an overarching diagnosis of modern culture as suffering from a dissociation of thought from feeling. The implicit argument that *Eloquence* makes through its biographical notices, about the relationship between politics and habit, is crystallised in the 'Preface' to *Political Essays*, which explicates the opposition between a politics of habit, and political principle *as* habit.

Political Writing, Political Speaking

In an essay 'On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking', Hazlitt throws down the gauntlet on behalf of authors everywhere:

> The great leading distinction between writing and speaking is, that more time is allowed for the one than the other: and hence different faculties are required for, and different objects attained by, each. He is properly the best speaker who can collect together the greatest number of apposite ideas at a moment's warning: he is properly the best writer who can give utterance to the greatest quantity of valuable knowledge in the course of his whole life.[227]

[227] Howe, xii, 262.

Flashy speechifiers make a better immediate impression, but it is writing that is the true test of intellectual resilience. Besides speed, there is 'a certain reach of capacity, a certain depth or shallowness, grossness or refinement of intellect' which marks the difference between those who speak and those who write: 'between those whose chief ambition is to shine by producing an immediate effect, or who are thrown back, by a natural bias, on the severer researches of thought and study'.[228] Lucy Newlyn has observed in Hazlitt's writing an abiding suspicion of orality; the autobiographical figure of the tongue-tied author crops up repeatedly throughout his writing, silenced and abashed when confronted with more loquacious adversaries.[229] 'On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking' is a vengeful exposé of the orator's underlying shallowness. The most eloquent man on the street may dazzle on the street, but as one watches him repeat his well-turned phrases again and again, it becomes clear that he is nothing more than a witty parrot: 'a walking polemic wound up for the day, a smartly bound political pocket book!'[230]

In the same essay, Hazlitt goes on to disparage the printing of speeches, suggesting that "Bottom! Thou art translated!" would be an apt motto for such collections. Set down on the page, stripped of the drama of delivery and gesture, the orator's '"fire and air" turns to puddle and ditch-water'.[231] Parliamentary speeches, composed and performed for a particular point in time, rarely age well: 'Those speeches that in general told the best at the time, are not now readable'.[232] What, then, was Hazlitt's motivation for creating the *Eloquence of the British Senate:* a task that required sifting through two centuries' worth of turgid parliamentary reports? Little noticed by most critical studies of Hazlitt, I will attempt to show that it brings together interests which would engross Hazlitt throughout his career: personal character; the individual in history; and the politics of habit.

---

[228] Howe, xii, 263.

[229] Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 361-2.

[230] Howe, xii, 263-4. A 'smartly bound political pocket book' is an apt description of *Eloquence of the British Senate* (1807).

[231] Howe, xii, 265.

[232] Howe, xii, 265.

I will begin by situating *Eloquence of the British Senate* within the context of the developing relationship between politics and the press during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To reveal the unusually wide-ranging and historiographical nature of Hazlitt's contribution to the genre, I will also compare it to other contemporary parliamentary compilations, which will allow for an interrogation of Hazlitt's preoccupation with the historical conditions of orality and unease with the nature of orality itself. This will in turn enable a reading of *Eloquence of the British Senate* as a diagnosis of the contemporary malaise of modern politics: a dissociation of thought and feeling, leading to a communal loss of 'common sense'. By examining his conflicted representation of eloquence as a political skill, this chapter will examine how Hazlitt began to develop a politics of habit which would eventually lead to the *Political Essays*. Hazlitt's divided response to Chatham's 'genius of common sense' is characteristic of his prose style, 'one that accommodates competing perspectives within a critical framework secured as much by what it counteracts and disavows as by what it affirms'.[233]

There is a critical tradition of assuming that Hazlitt disliked parliamentary reporting, which he would begin at the *Morning Chronicle* in 1812, and that this was in part due to his moral elevation above the vulgarity of politics: in his biography, Stanley Jones imagines that Hazlitt would have been 'angry and ashamed' to be forced to listen to the hypocrisy and cant of the Commons floor.[234] This has led to an undervaluation of *Eloquence* as a text: while Duncan Wu has suggested that the *Eloquence* was met with hostile reviews and poor sales,[235] Katie Homar's recent research has shown that it was reprinted at least five times, with three American editions.[236] There has been some recent critical interest, with Lucy Newlyn and James Mulvihill asserting its significance in broader surveys of the earlier nineteenth

[233] Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16.
[234] Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life from Winterslow to Frith Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 73.
[235] Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114.
[236] Katie Homar, 'Rhetorical Accretion and Rhetorical Criticism in William Hazlitt's *Eloquence of the British Senate*', *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2017), 285-301 (289).

century.[237] Nevertheless, Kevin Gilmartin's recent and otherwise exemplary study of Hazlitt's political writing passes over *Eloquence* without analysis, while of the major book-length studies, only Paulin's sets it within the context of his wider thought, as an 'early, exploratory, concealed statement of his own poetics'.[238]

Despite its seeming insignificance, *Eloquence* is not just a piece of hackwork, thoughtlessly commissioned and carelessly executed; Hazlitt thought of the idea himself and the Quaker printer Thomas Ostell agreed to take him up on it after the death of Joseph Johnson. This suggests at least some degree of original intent on Hazlitt's part. What is evident is Hazlitt's palpable enthusiasm for the speakers he admires, and an interest in the voices competing for attention that would come to decide the shape and direction of England's political history. But this is held in tension with a persistent suspicion of oral eloquence as a form of language that plays to the shallowest, most habitual and unthinking impulses of the mind.

Eloquence 'participated in an early nineteenth-century parliamentary rhetorical culture that was interested in the civic and aesthetic reception of past oratory'.[239] The rise of the newspaper saw a concomitant consolidation of the role of the press in politics, a development which was met with unease by some. Burke, who was the most adept of politicians at harnessing public opinion towards his own political ends, nevertheless felt moved to lament in 1794 that '[i]t is very unlucky that the reputation of a speaker in the House of Commons depends far less on what he says there, than on the account of it in the newspapers'. William Windham, as early as the 1790s, fretted about the democratic influence of newspapers, 'carried every where, read every where, by persons of very inferior capacities, and in common alehouses and places frequented chiefly by those who were least of all accustomed to reflection, to

---

[237] Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism*; James Mulvihill, *Upstart Talents: Rhetoric and the Career of Reason in English Romantic Discourse, 1790-1820* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004). See also Katie Homar, 'William Hazlitt's "Eloquence of the British Senate"', *The Wordsworth Circle,* Vol. 44, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2013) 127-131; and Homar, 'Rhetorical Accretion and Rhetorical Criticism'.

[238] Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber), 140.

[239] Homar, 'Rhetorical Accretion and Rhetorical Criticism in William Hazlitt's *Eloquence of the British Senate*', 289.

any great mental efforts'.[240] Newspapers were driving a shift towards a political system in which members were no longer addressing a select few of similar educational and cultural background; instead, their words would be reported, with no great degree of accuracy, to a far wider and more heterogenous audience.[241] In 1803 the status of parliamentary reporters was cemented by the reservation of the back row of the Strangers' Gallery for their use. By then for decades already tacitly accepted (though still technically outlawed) as part of the parliamentary machinery, they had until that point been made to contend for a seat among the general public, either relying on memory or making furtive notes to avoid detection and expulsion. The most successful politicians of the new era were those able to take advantage of the increasing transparency and publicity of political discourse for their performances of self. Pitt the Younger presented himself as distanced from the 'factious and jarring clamours' of parliamentary debate, instead addressing himself to 'the independent part of the House, and to the public at large' as the audience for his protestations of political virtue.[242] James Mulvihill observes a similarity between the functions of parliamentary speech and popular journalism. Both address and add to the current 'climate of opinion', acting to mediate public discourse, reflecting and commentating upon it while at the same time partaking in its formation.[243] Carlyle in 1841 would warn of the closing gap between political speech and print:

> But does not, though the name Parliament subsists, the parliamentary debate go on now, everywhere and at all times, in a far more comprehensive way, *out* of Parliament altogether? Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a *Fourth Estate* more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact, - very momentous to us in these times. Literature is our parliament too![244]

---

[240] Both quoted in Christopher Reid, 'Whose Parliament? Political Oratory and Print Culture in the Later 18th Century', *Language and Literature* Vol. 9, No. 2 (2000), 122-134 (124).

[241] Reid, 'Whose Parliament?', 124.

[242] Reid, 'Whose Parliament?', 133.

[243] James Mulvihill, 'Hazlitt on Parliamentary Eloquence', *Prose Studies* Vol. 12, No. 2 (1989), 132-146 (133).

[244] Quoted in Matthew Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickinson, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

The ‘Advertisement’ to *Eloquence* attests to a similar foreboding towards the ‘vice of *much speaking*’ that seemed to characterise the age, spurred on by the habit of living speakers of printing their own speeches: ‘[T]here is no danger, while [contemporary politicians] have breath and lungs left, that they will ever suffer the public to be at a loss for daily specimens of their polished eloquence and profound wisdom’.[245] The nineteenth century saw a proliferation in print of political eloquence, to a height that has never been matched since; at the same time, there was unease over the influence that politicians could now wield over an increasingly literate public, via the upstart medium of the newspaper.[246]

The Eloquence of the British Senate

Hazlitt was coming in the wake of a fashion for parliamentary speech collections: William Enfield’s *Speaker*, for example, and the numerous selections of ‘beauties’ from the orations of recent political luminaries.[247] Although *Eloquence* was part of an established genre, it is notable for the span of history, and the range of issues, covered in its two volumes. While Enfield’s compilation was designed to bring attention to exemplary orations from Brutus and Hannibal to Sir John St Aubin, and other collections centred on particular figures of oratorical genius like Fox, North, or Burke and their contributions to contemporary debates, Hazlitt waded through centuries of parliamentary volumes, covering such debates as the impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham in 1626, the Toleration Act of 1688, the taxation of the colonies, the governance of Ireland, the abolition of the slave trade, and Pitt’s lifting of *habeas corpus* in 1794. Beginning with the first speech of King Charles I to his

---

[245] Howe, i, 140.

[246] Bevis, 18.

[247] William Enfield, *The Speaker: or, Miscellaneous Pieces* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1798); *The Beauties of Fox, North, and Burke, Selected from their Speeches* (London: J. Stockdale, 1784); Thomas Browne, *British Cicero; or, A Selection of the Most Admired Speeches in the English Language, Vols 1-3* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808); William Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest, in 1066 to the Year 1803, Vols 1-36* (London: T Curson Hansard, 1806-1820).

parliament and going all the way up to a speech of 1802 by Sheridan, it was concerned not only with isolated examples, but the sweep of history, as characterised by its political voices.

At first glance, *Eloquence of the British Senate* might appear something like an abridged version of Cobbett's monumental 36-volume *Parliamentary History of England*, whose first volume had been published the year before. However, Cobbett's work, which would eventually be sold to its publisher Thomas Curson Hansard in 1812 and in time become the modern official transcript of parliamentary debate, was a more traditional archival record of all parliamentary debates from 1066 to 1803. Cobbett's venture was motivated by a desire to democratise knowledge, enfranchising the public through a catalogue that was concise, affordable and available to many.[248] The *Parliamentary History* is framed as an objective historical record: 'In a Work of this nature, the utmost impartiality is justly expected; and it is with confidence presumed, that a careful perusal of the following pages will convince the reader, that that impartiality has been strictly and invariably adhered to'.[249] Hazlitt's *Eloquence* is no such record; in his 'Advertisement', he is keen to stress the incompleteness of his compilation, as well as the relative insignificance of much contained in its two volumes. One of its interests is the vignettes that Hazlitt pens to introduce the character of his orators. Hazlitt seems aware of the idiosyncratic nature of his contribution to the genre; his advertisement apologises for the intrusion of notes and criticism as 'too long and frequent for a work of this nature'.[250] The historical focus of *Eloquence* is coupled with an interest in the characters that contributed to its direction; among the throng of parliamentary speech collections, it is the only one to attempt to draw connections in the life, personality and voice of the speaker, and the historical moment in which he lived: in both the 'agent' and the 'structure'.

This leads to some unusual selections. Although he defends Cromwell as 'not so bad a speaker as generally thought', the revolutionist is included less for rhetorical flair than for interest in the individual: '[his speeches] are just such speeches as a man

---

[248] William Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England. Vol. 1* (London: T.C. Hansard, 1806), 'Preface'.

[249] Cobbett, 'Preface'.

[250] Howe, i, 141.

must make with his hand upon his sword, and who appeals to that as the best decider of controversies'.[251] Hazlitt presages a time when interest in the personal character of politicians would become of general interest; as Bagehot would write decades later, politics is not accomplished by machines, but by 'living and breathing men, of various and generally strong characters, of various and often strong passions. Unless you know something of these passions and these characters you are continually at fault'.[252] This curiosity was not shared in previous centuries: at times, Hazlitt expresses frustration at the historical record:

> I am sorry that I can give no account of this celebrated character [Colonel Barre]. Indeed, I have to apologise to the reader for the frequent defects and chasms in the biographical part of the work. I have looked carefully into the dictionaries, but unless a man happens to have been a non-conformist divine in the last century, a chymist, or the maker of a new spelling and pronouncing dictionary, his name is hardly sure of obtaining a place in these learned compilations.[253]

It was also unusual in its contrarian attitude towards the act of compilation: unlike Enfield, who selected his examples 'With a View to Facilitate the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking' or Browne's selection of 'the Most Admired Speeches in the English Language', Hazlitt was at pains to demystify his subjects and bring them down from the lofty heights of genius, and the word 'Eloquence' in the title seems to take on a sardonic irony as one peruses the 'Advertisement'. In his introduction, Hazlitt frames *Eloquence* as a means of comparison, both between different political individuals and between different political ages:

> This collection took its rise from a wish which the compiler had sometimes felt, in hearing the praises of the celebrated orators of former times, to know what figure they would have made by the side of those of our own times, with whose

[251] Howe, i, 148.

[252] Quoted in David Craig, 'Statesmanship', in *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain,* ed. by David Craig and James Thompson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57.

[253] Howe, i, 169n.

> productions we are better acquainted. For instance, in reading Burke, I should have been glad to have had the speeches of Lord Chatham at hand, to compare them; and I have had the same curiosity to know, whether Walpole had any thing like the dexterity and plausibility of Pitt.[254]

The 'mighty dead' are not displayed for admiration only, but for the pragmatic reason of measuring 'how far we have improved upon, or fallen short of them'.[255] Such historical perspective, he hopes, will overcome the totality of the present and grant the reader 'long views'. Practise critical distance, Hazlitt seems to exhort us; by bringing the past and the present into dialogue with each other, they are opened up to mutual appraisal. The aim of *Eloquence* is neither to present a Whiggish history of improvement, nor a purely nostalgic retreat into past glories.

In *Eloquence,* Hazlitt takes what Katie Homar describes as a 'metacommentarial' approach to compilation, examining 'the consequences of transforming political oratory into literary texts'.[256] Homar points out Hazlitt's ambivalent tone towards a project that would contribute to the contemporary epidemic of mass publication, superficial reading, and decontextualized rhetoric. Contemporary anthologies and 'beauties' presented fragments of speeches, lacking in context, and encouraged a superficial engagement in political discourse that emphasised stylistic flourishes and biographical interest over more profound critique of the ideas that upheld the status quo. Defending his decision to exclude most contemporary speakers, Hazlitt notes drily that 'living speakers may, and are in the habit of printing their own speeches. Or even if this were not the case, there is no danger, while they have breath and lungs left, that they will ever suffer the public to be at a loss for daily specimens of their polished eloquence and profound wisdom'.[257] He was publishing in an age of talkers, and not doers; of rampant publication and self-publicization, to which his own volume was of course adding. *Eloquence* attests to a complex view of oratory: both testament to greatness and document of banality, it records instances of greatness

---

[254] Howe, i, 139.

[255] Howe, i, 139.

[256] Katie Homar, 'William Hazlitt's *Eloquence of the British Senate', The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 44, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2013), 127-131 (127).

[257] Howe, i, 140.

while emphasising that such rhetoric is always a novelty. However, it is not just an exercise to make the likes of Fox and Burke shine by comparison; *Eloquence* ‘recognises how little of what happens in Parliament is timeless and transcendent, but argues for its importance all the same’.[258] It traces the relationship between history and the individual through the lens of supposedly ‘great’ men. At first seeming to commemorate ‘[t]hose celebrated men of the last age, the Walpoles, the Pulteneys, the Pelhams, the Harleys, the Townshends, and the Norths’, it then judges them ‘nothing but perpetual smoke and bounce’, before the tone shifts to elegy: ‘all of them are now silent and forgotten; all that remains of them is consigned to oblivion in the musty records of Parliament, or lives only in the shadow of a name’.[259] The opposition set up in ‘Writing and Speaking’ is clear: writing is for history, oratory for the moment.

Yet even in their past inconsequentiality and present obsolescence, in Parliament it is such men that create history: paradoxically, through the fleeting, temporal form of the political speech. *Eloquence* is concerned with the way history is made through public opinion. Hazlitt ridicules the fashion of considering erstwhile arch-rivals Fox and Pitt, who had both died the year before, ‘in the light of the United Friends’. Retrospective sanitisations of the truth are not of interest to him, and so, as Hazlitt writes, ‘I hope I may be excused for not adhering exactly to the *costume* of the times’.[260] Hazlitt explicitly compares the governing orthodoxies of public opinion to a ‘costume’, one which he refuses to fit into, yet remains interested in commenting upon and critiquing; he reveals a sensitivity to the way in which historical narrative is constantly being shaped and reshaped to fit current interests. Years later, Keats would pick up on the phrase, admiring Hazlitt’s ‘feeling for the costume of society’ as ‘a style of genius’.[261] *The Eloquence of the British Senate* might be ‘an act of loving restitution towards transient speech’, but there remains an anxiety about orality’s

---

[258] Nikki Hessell, *Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 100.

[259] Howe, i, 139.

[260] William Hazlitt, *The Eloquence of the British Senate*, 2 vols (London: J. Murray, 1808), ii, 467n.

[261] John Keats, ‘Letter to the George Keatses, 13th March 1819’, *The Letters of John Keats, Volume Two: 1819-1821* ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76.

reliance on superficial stimulus and habitual association, as well as a desire to bind the transience of speech in the permanent form of a book.[262]

The aim of *Eloquence* is not just to showcase the best of oratory, but to serve as a history of 'the progress of the language, of the state of parties at different periods, of the most interesting debates'.[263] The aim is therefore twofold: to commemorate particular examples of oratorical or political genius, but also to serve as a record of general stylistic change in language through history. To this end, Hazlitt often chooses examples as representatives of certain rhetorical fashions that have passed into history. A footnote on a speech of Sir Edward Coke's, which mentions the terms '*logique'* and '*rhetorique'*, remarks that such allusions to Ciceronian philosophy act as 'a sort of *word to the wise',* putting Coke's listeners at ease with an assurance of mutual deep learning.[264] Certain speakers are selected as exemplars of certain styles: Heneage Finch, who exemplifies the 'flowery stile' in vogue during the 17th Century, the 'pompous stile' of Dudley Digges, or William Lenthall's 'adulatory stile'. The reader is thus encouraged to examine the speeches in light of these judgments. When Heneage Finch imagines the prelacy and nobility surrounding the king as 'enthroned like stars in the firmament … full of light and beauty, and acknowledging to whom they owe their lustre', one can recognise the 'far-fetched thoughts, and fulsome compliments' characteristic of the period.[265] In the admiring introduction to Philip Dormer Stanhope, the 'very peculiar' form of his sentences is held up for inspection. 'He perpetually takes up the former part of a sentence, and by throwing it into the next clause, gives a distinctness and pointedness to every separate branch of it. His sentences look like a succession of little smart climaxes'.[266]

This close attention to expression elucidates the mechanics of speech: how they have the effect that they do. The reader is brought into a critical practice which might question the common rhetorical devices and ploys of their own day. The sheer volume of historical evidence reveals differences between the past and present, but also dispiriting continuities that Hazlitt tellingly couches in the language of

---

[262] Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism,* 362.

[263] Howe, i, 140.

[264] This example is also used in Homar, 'Rhetorical Accretion and Rhetorical Criticism in William Hazlitt's *Eloquence of the British Senate',* 293.

[265] *Eloquence,* i, 17-18.

[266] *Eloquence,* i, 355.

legitimacy and legacy. In a footnote, he complains of the 'tedious monotony' and 'dreary vacuity of thought' that characterises much parliamentary discourse: 'such an eternal self-complacent repetition of the same worn-out topics, which seem to descend like an inheritance from one generation to another'.[267] Ominously couched in the language of legitimacy, this interjection voices an anxiety that, despite cosmetic differences, the deeper currents of thought remain dispiritingly static through history, power conserving its influence through the meaningless play of words.

James Mulvihill has noted that in *Eloquence* Hazlitt displays his underlying scepticism about rhetoric, his awareness of a mediation taking place between the self and audience, externalised as self-performance. In *Eloquence*, Hazlitt's politicians 'inhabit the same performative context as J. G. A. Pocock's "actors," representing ideological dispositions (or rather predispositions) in their characteristic "given" idioms'.[268] Hazlitt writes of Pulteney:

> To talk in the character of a great parliamentary leader, to assume the sense of the house, to affect the extensive views and disinterested feelings that belong to a great permanent body, and to descend in a moment to all the pertness and scurrility, the conceit and self-importance of a factious bully, are among the great arts of parliamentary speaking.[269]

Hazlitt seems to concur with Samuel Johnson's description of language as the 'dress of thought': language accrues meaning through social use, not from an essential link between symbol and referent.[270] '[N]ot a word, not a sentence but hangs together by a number of imperceptible links, and is a bundle of prejudices and abstractions',[271] he opines in a late essay, and in his portrait in *Spirit of the Age* of the philologist and

---

[267] *Eloquence* i, 471n.

[268] James Mulvihill, 'The Poetics of Authority: Representation in Hazlitt's Political Criticism', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* Vol. 101, No. 4 (Oct., 2002), 540-560 (544).

[269] *Eloquence,* i, 316.

[270] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works,* (Vol. I) Roger Lonsdale, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online,* 30 May 2014. Accessed 10.01.20 (230).

[271] Howe, xii, 194.

radical politician John Horne Tooke, he suggests that the associations that surround language act as 'a kind of veil over its natural features; and custom puts on the mask of ignorance'.[272] This reliance on the mind's habitual associations is exacerbated in oratory: 'You are in a go-cart of prejudices, in a regularly constructed machine of pretexts and precedents … You can no more move against the stream of custom, than you can make head against a crowd of people'.[273] As the simile suggests, speaking is dictated by the movement of the multitude; it is most effective as a reflection of what they desire to hear, rather than as a revelation of what they do not know. Rousseau found the theatre morally dubious for this reason: 'The theatre is made for the people, and it is only by its effects on the people that one can determine its absolute qualities': 'To please them, there must be entertainments which promote their penchants, whereas what is needed are entertainments which would moderate them'.[274] Reason has no place on the stage: far from having a moderating moral influence, theatre depends on its audience's most ingrained habits and impulsive passions: because of its specificity to the people, the Athenian plays of Menander were out of step with the taste of Rome.'[275] As in the theatre, so on the Commons floor; eloquence plays to the expectations of the people, and therefore seldom gets beyond custom and commonplace.

Yet it is because rhetoric is based on habits of mind and addressed to a general audience, acts as an interesting record of cultural change. 'Those speeches that in general told the best at the time, are not now readable'.[276] Because oratory is so profoundly nested in the passing events, established maxims and inveterate prejudices of its listeners, it is the form of language most dependent on historical context for effect. By setting speech down in print, *Eloquence* historicises the temporal, plotting its evolution through changing habits of thought and expression. In so doing, he begins the formation of an argument that would become the structural frame of his later *Political Essays*.

---

[272] Howe, xi, 54.

[273] Howe, xii, 271.

[274]Jean Jacques Rousseau, 'A Letter to d'Alembert on Spectacles', *The Collected Writings of Rousseau Vol. 10,* Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly ed. and trans. (Hanover: Published for Dartmouth College by UP New England, 2004), 263.

[275] Rousseau, 'A Letter to D'Alembert', 262.

[276] Howe, xii, 265.

Common Sense

Sometimes, the past can act to dissent against the present. In the selection of examples 'as might serve to mark the successive changes that have taken place in the minds and characters of Englishmen within the last 200 years', there is a line of argument being constructed, about the degradation of English character:[277]

> That distinctive character [of the 17th Century] was, I think, that most men's minds were stored with facts and images, almost to excess [...] Facts and feelings went hand in hand: the one naturally implied the other; and our ideas, not yet exorcised and squeezed and tortured out of their natural objects, into a subtle essence of pure intellect, did not fly about like ghosts without a body … through the *vacuum* of abstract reasoning, and sentimental refinement. The understanding was invigorated and nourished with its natural and proper food, the knowledge of things without it; and was not left, like an empty stomach, to prey upon itself, or starve on the meagre scraps of an artificial logic, or windy impertinence of ingenuity self-begotten.[278]

Hazlitt is here referring to changes in the legal profession; yet one could extend the argument out to politics and culture in general. The past is an arena where 'facts and feelings', sense and thought, were still united; the present is one in which they diverge from each other. Sir John Elliott, speaking in 1628, is similarly praised: 'his whole heart and soul are in his subject, he is full of it; his mind seems as it were to surround and penetrate every part of it'.[279] Comparing French and English eloquence, Hazlitt suggests that the Englishman's eloquence is 'forced from him', but this makes it 'the best that can be, because it is of nature's doing, and not his own, and comes from him in spite of himself'.[280] It is not 'mere *manner'* or artificial pose, but the natural expression of internal thought, bodied forth.

---

[277] *Eloquence,* i, 125.

[278] *Eloquence,* i, 125-6.

[279] *Eloquence,* i, 65.

[280] *Eloquence,* i, 248.

It is easy to read in the biographical account of Chatham (in the larger note on Burke) a similar vein of thought. A genius can either 'lead the mind into new trains of thought, to which it was before unused, and which it was incapable of striking out for itself; or else to collect and embody what we already knew, to rivet our old impressions more deeply'.[281] The latter kind of genius is described in associationist terms, as one able to 'rivet' the impressions of external reality and strengthen chains of thought. Hazlitt uses the figures of Chatham and Burke to illustrate the difference between speculative and habitual genius:

> They were in every respect the reverse of each other. Chatham's eloquence was popular: his wisdom was altogether plain and practical. Burke's eloquence was that of the poet; of the man of high and unbounded fancy: his wisdom was profound and contemplative. Chatham's eloquence was calculated to make men *act*; Burke's was calculated to make them *think*.[282]

With Chatham, '[A]ll is obvious and common'. Elsewhere, it is lamented that the generality of mankind is sympathetically disposed towards dullness rather than genius, while genius requires 'some thick cloud to dim its lustre, and blunt the fierceness of its rays'. The people, unused to it, prefer to idolise greatness 'in some vulgar representation of it, and to worship their own likeness in stocks and stones'.[283] Unusually, Chatham is able to break through the dispiriting inclination towards dullness and conservatism:

> [T]here is nothing but what we already knew, or might have found out for ourselves. We see nothing but the familiar every-day face of nature. We are always in broad day-light. But then there is the same difference between our own conceptions of things and his representation of them, as there is between the same objects seen on a dull cloudy day, or in the blaze of sunshine. His common sense has the effect of inspiration.[284]

---

[281] *Eloquence,* ii, 208.

[282] *Eloquence,* ii, 207.

[283] *Eloquence,* ii, 64.

[284] *Eloquence,* ii, 5.

Chatham could marshal the forces of habit to 'rouse the mind' in service of the cause of liberty. He is characterised in the terms of the traditional English character that has been taking shape throughout *Eloquence*: 'The feelings and rights of Englishmen were enshrined in his heart; and with their united force braced every nerve, possessed every faculty, and communicated warmth and vital energy to every part of his being'.[285] Energy, passion, plainness, tenaciousness: Chatham's eloquence is marked by the virtues of earlier times, untouched by the 'debating club' or 'law court' air of most politicians. Investing habitual knowledge with the strength of genius, the Great Commoner's common sense is able to reach the people in a way that neither the close reasoning of Fox, nor the 'high and unbounded fancy' of Burke, could accomplish. In the *Table Talk* essay 'On Genius and Common Sense', Hazlitt's use of the term is explicated:

> So far is it from being true that the finest breath of fancy is a definable thing, that the plainest common sense is only what Mr. Locke would have called a *mixed mode*, subject to a particular sort of acquired and undefinable tact. It is asked, "If you do not know the rule by which a thing is done, how can you be sure of doing it a second time?" And the answer is, "If you do not know the muscles by the help of which you walk, how is it you do not fall down at every step you take?" In art, in taste, in life, in speech, you decide from feeling, and not from reason; that is, from the impression of a number of things on the mind, from which impression is true and well founded, though you may not be able to analyse or account for it in the several particulars. In a gesture you use, in a look you see, in a tone you hear, you judge of the expression, propriety, and meaning from habit, not from reason or rules; that is to say, from innumerable instances of like gestures, looks, and tones, in innumerable other circumstances, variously modified, which are too many and too refined to be all distinctly recollected, but which do not therefore operate the less powerfully upon the mind and eye of taste.[286]

---

[285] *Eloquence,* ii, 4.

[286] Howe, viii, 31.

Eloquence's character portrait of the first Earl of Shaftesbury further serves to illustrate the idea. The earl had been to dine with Lady Clarendon and her daughter, who had married the Duke of York but not yet made it public. Returning home with another guest, he remarks: 'Depend upon it, the duke has married Hyde's daughter'. Yet Shaftesbury's powers of divination were derived from nothing more than sharp observation of the mother's behaviour, which had a new tone of respect now that her daughter was a married woman. This, Hazlitt notes admiringly, was carrying 'the *prophetic spirit* of common sense as far as it can go'.[287] Shaftesbury's intuition arose from thought expressed as feeling, or feeling derived from instinctive thought. Habit becomes the interface between thought and feeling: it is the material out of which a 'common sense' is made. David Q. Smith argues that common sense is the link by which genius is transferred to the community: imagination is the shared property linking persons of common sense, of taste, and of genius:

> [T]he fact that imagination operates throughout the scale of cognition from the just-awakening common sense to the loftiest genius means that a common instrument for expression or communication exists whereby the discoveries of genius can be assimilated into the community at large; and thus, the liberal march of progress is effected.[288]

Crucially, 'On Genius and Common Sense' makes the difference between the two a matter of degree, not of kind. Common sense, like the Imagination, brings together disparate information to reach a conclusion: only, in the former the effect is quotidian, while in the latter it is revolutionary.

What separates Hazlitt from his radical predecessors is that he is to a great extent persuaded by the idea of an intuitive well of knowledge that can be drawn on without the conscious intervention of reason. In 'On Genius and Common Sense' he quotes extensively and admiringly from Sir Joshua Reynolds's disquisition on the subject in his *Discourses*, before suggesting that Reynolds was probably prompted into this train of thinking by Burke, who 'has insisted on the same thing, and made rather a

---

[287] *Eloquence,* i, 205-6.

[288] David Q. Smith, 'Genius and Common Sense: The Romantics and Leigh Hunt', *Books at Iowa,* 40 (1984), 41-57 (47).

perverse use of it in several parts of his *Reflections upon the French Revolution*'.[289] Unlike Godwin or Bentham, Hazlitt is not able to dismiss common sense as a shoddy mask for mere superstition. By reimagining Burke's 'wise custom' as common sense, it is given clear democratic associations with Thomas Paine's hugely popular pamphlet of support for the American Revolution and the 'bon sens' of the Revolutionary *philosophes*.[290] Yet while Paine's radical 'common sense' was posited as ahistorical, a knife to cut through the mass of historicised custom and habit, Hazlitt's conception has clear ties with Burkean 'wise custom'. Common sense, as portrayed in the anecdote about Shaftesbury, relies on an attention to manner and expression that is culturally conditioned: a kind of miraculous social tact. But in *Eloquence* Hazlitt is also alive to the danger of this line of thinking, for the difference between common sense and habitual prejudice is not always evident. If thought and feeling are separated, habit becomes a dead mechanical impulse: reason is left unheated by passion, and passion undirected by the profounder motivations of reason.

Tom Paulin, among others, has made a persuasive argument for the influence of Hazlitt's *Eloquence* on Eliot's later theory of 'dissociation of sensibility'; yet Hazlitt's diagnosis goes further than poetics.[291] The break between thought and feeling in the seventeenth century has also led to the gradual loss of common sense, as in a *sensus communis*: the virtuous kind of habit, that unites feeling to thought and action, which folds the individual into the general, has been lost:

> A man can at present only be a retail dealer in politics: he can only keep a sort of huckster's shop of ready made goods. Do what he can, he can only repeat what has already been said a thousand times, and make a vain display of borrowed wisdom or folly … I should as soon think of being proud of wearing a suit of second hand clothes, or marrying another man's cast-off mistress. In the beaten path of vulgar ambition, the dull, the mechanical, the superficial, and

---

[289] Howe, viii, 33.

[290] Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 150.

[291] Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*, 57-9.

> the forward press on, and are successful, while the man of genius, ashamed of his competitors, shrinks from the contest, and is soon lost in the crowd'.[292]

Furthermore, there is some sense in which the demand for eloquence is responsible for this state of affairs; significantly the rot begins to set in after the 17th Century, around the time that Walpole turned the House into 'a regular debating society'.[293]

In the 'Character of Pitt' (which Hazlitt first published in *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, and replicated not just in *Eloquence* but in *The Round Table* and *Political Essays*), one can see the natural terminus of the dissociation between thought and feeling. In a note to one of his speeches, he makes his problem with Pitt clear: 'This is that kind of eloquence which any one may get out of a dictionary'.[294] His facility was impressive, but it had no connection with the man himself, and was thus incapable of adding to the general stock of knowledge.

Pitt is depicted less as a character than the *negation* of a character:

> Having no strong feelings, no distinctive perceptions, his mind having no link, as it were, to connect it with the world of external nature [...] having no general principles, no comprehensive view of things, no moral habits of thinking, no system of action.[295]

Pitt becomes a man without habits, interested only in classing actions as 'possible' and 'impossible', with little regard for political or ethical consequence, and no sense of responsibility for his actions. The kind of perverted immaterialism that Hazlitt diagnoses, results in a dependence on rhetoric, rather than reality, to determine action: 'he seems not to have believed that the truth of his statements depended on the reality of the facts, but that the things depended on the order in which he arranged them in words'. Pitt's 'taste in composition', his ability to rearrange knowledge to his advantage rather than advance it to new conclusions, forms a mind that is hermetically sealed and self-validating. It is independent of exchange between

---

[292] *Eloquence,* i, 346-7.

[293] *Eloquence,* i, 382.

[294] *Eloquence,* ii, 306n.

[295] *Eloquence,* ii, 494-5.

internal and external worlds, or between mind and mind: 'He has made no addition whatever to the stock of human knowledge'.[296] In the essay, this is pathologized until it comes close to madness: 'a degree of weakness and imbecility, a defect of understanding bordering on idiotism … In his mind the wholesome pulp of practical wisdom and salutary advice was immediately converted into the dry chaff and husks of a miserable logic' (II 109n.). Pitt becomes a kind of robot, possessed of a miraculous 'mechanical memory' that enables him to excel in extemporaneous speech, but driven ultimately by the habits of an automaton rather than by feeling or conviction.

Hazlitt's portrait of Pitt brings up an interesting distinction between 'moral habits', of which Pitt is entirely devoid, and the mechanical habits which give his thoughts their clockwork-like efficiency and organisation. The former seems to be loosely associated with the passions (in which Pitt is depicted as completely lacking), although for Hazlitt morality comes within the purview of reason: the latter is linked to a kind of bankrupt rationality, yet one which results from a failure of intellect. Pitt's eloquence gives him a smooth plausibility, but its effect is not persuasive but dangerously soporific: under his governance, Britain becomes increasingly torpid. Whereas political progressives such as Godwin or Priestley were anxious about oratory as a means of unduly inflaming the passions, Hazlitt's main concern with eloquence seemed to be its tendency towards torpidity, its ability to slide over difficult questions by the neat arrangement of a phrase or the skilful use of a commonplace.

Chatham resurfaces later in *Eloquence,* as a foil to the Whig leader Charles James Fox. Mulvihill notes that Hazlitt's comparison between Chatham and Fox clarifies certain similarities; both address the '*medium of opinion*', appealing to 'some basic ground of perception in his listeners'.[297] Hazlitt asks us to compare Fox - 'He rolled like the sea beaten by a tempest' – with the 'stiff, straight, upright figure' of his political nemesis, Pitt, 'turning as if moved by a pivot'.[298] Both Chatham and Fox represent a form of eloquent thought that 'bodies forth', as opposed to a superficial rhetoric that animates the body only mechanistically.

---

[296] *Eloquence,* ii, 10.

[297] Mulvihill, 'Hazlitt on Parliamentary Eloquence', *Prose Studies,* 12/2 (1989) 132-46.

[298] *Eloquence,* ii, 467

However, the problem remains how to differentiate between ‘public opinion’ and ‘common sense’. In ‘Genius and Common Sense’, Hazlitt is adamant that they are different:

> If we talk of common sense, we are twitted with vulgar prejudice, and asked how we distinguish the one from the other … if a mob agree for a while in shouting the same watch-word, this is not to me an example of the *sensus communis*; they only repeat what they have heard repeated by others.’[299]

Yet perhaps because there is ‘no rule for expression’, no way to fasten a definition down by principles, the difference is difficult to define. Common sense ‘is only a judge of things that fall under common observation’, while vulgar opinion is common prejudice relating to abstract or speculative matters.[300] The danger lies in confounding the one with the other, and since the rest of the essay is dedicated to drawing connections between concrete observation and abstract thought, it is not clear that Hazlitt’s formulation acts as a sure guide to distinguishing them.

The comparison drawn in *Eloquence* between Chatham and Fox is notably more critical towards the former than before. Reneging on the warmth of his earlier portrait, Hazlitt compares Chatham’s self-interested motives unfavourably with Fox’s genuine disinterested benevolence:

> Fox endeavoured to find out what the consequences of any measure would be; Chatham attended only to what people would think of it. Fox appealed to the practical reason of mankind; Chatham to popular prejudice’[301]

Hazlitt acknowledges the seeming disparity of his views, but clarifies, ‘I there spoke of the tone he assumed or his immediate feelings at the time, rather than of the real motives by which he was actuated’.[302] This opens up a hitherto unnoticed breach between Chatham’s presentation (‘the tone he assumed’) and his ‘real motives’,

---

[299] Howe, viii, 37-8.

[300] Howe, viii, 37.

[301] *Eloquence,* ii, 469.

[302] *Eloquence,* ii, 469.

bringing into question the authenticity of Chatham's common-sense eloquence. Doubts concerning the closeness of eloquence to performance resurface. The vehemence uniting Chatham in thought and feeling is now said to come from 'pride, passion, self-will, impatience of control', whereas in Fox it emanates from 'pure good nature'.[303] In the 'Advertisement', Hazlitt proleptically apologises for his praise of Chatham, acknowledging that 'it was written in the heat of the first impression which his speeches made upon me'.[304] This complicates the plain simplicity of common sense, and Hazlitt's own ability to judge of it. He adds, nevertheless, that 'perhaps the first impression is a fair test of the effect they must produce on those who heard them'.[305] […]

As I have already discussed, the boundaries between orality and textuality had become porous by the time Hazlitt began his journalistic career. Speeches increasingly appeared in print, while the newspapers sold writing with the immediacy and expendability of speech. Hazlitt's critique of those who cannot think beyond 'the routine of the daily newspapers and coffee-house criticism', and his misgivings about the 'ready made' opinions that infect modern discourse, suggest a diagnosis that at least partly implicates his own chosen profession.[306] In 'On Writing and Speaking', he states that the reader's pleasure 'is the counterpart of, and borrowed from the same source as the writer's'; perhaps, by urging the reader to dwell on these speeches, Hazlitt was attempting to introduce some of the tenacious virtue of writing to speech, and recuperate the association of thought and feeling.[307] *Eloquence of the British Senate* could be read as a submerged argument against eloquence, or at least a primer on how to spot its tactics. The return of common sense, he seems to suggest, will only come when we recognise the covert operation of commonplace in eloquence, and return to a discourse of fact united with feeling. But in fact, what *Eloquence* attests to is a threatening similitude between them, which gives the former its persuasive power, while leading to the degradation of the latter.

---

[303] *Eloquence,* ii, 469.

[304] Howe, i, 141.

[305] Howe, i, 141.

[306] Howe, xii, 264; Hazlitt, *The Eloquence of the British Senate,* i, 347.

[307] Howe, xii, 278.

CHAPTER III: HABIT AND CHARACTER: ON BEING DISAGREEABLE

> Mr William Hazlitt, ex-painter, theatrical critic, review, essay, and lecture manufacturer, London, Did you, or did you not, in the course of your late Lectures on Poetry, &c. infamously vituperate and sneer at the character of Mr Wordsworth – I mean his personal character; his genius even you dare not deny?[308]

'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned' (1818), like the other Cockney School attacks of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (henceforth *Blackwood's*), homed in on two aspects of Hazlitt as ripe for mockery: his supposedly bad character and his employment as a journalistic hack. John Wilson hints at private scandal – in which Hazlitt incites the ire of an 'indignant peasantry whose ideas of purity [he] had dared to outrage' – as well as his traitorous ungratefulness towards Wordsworth, who is shown to have extricated the Cockney from the fracas only to be later impugned by him in *Lectures on Poetry*.[309] In characteristic fashion, *Blackwood's* dredged up Hazlitt's personal conduct to compromise his professional reputation, while also reading the metropolitan sickliness of his works onto his body. The nickname that they gave him of 'pimpled Hazlitt' stuck, in spite of the author's insistence that he was in fact 'remarkably pale and sallow'.[310] A character began to take shape in the space between writer-subject, writer-observer, and reading audience; a shadow-double to the living person, not quite in the control of any participant, existing between life and work. The charge of Hazlitt being a 'scribbler' has faded with time, but the sense of acute proximity between Hazlitt and his literary persona has persisted.[311] Virginia Woolf judges that the 'essays are emphatically himself', and that the essays show the author almost physically present: 'He comes shuffling into the

---

[308] John Wilson, 'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned', *BEM*, 3/17 (August 1818), 550-52 (550).

[309] Wilson, 'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned', 550.

[310] Howe, ix, 10.

[311] Wilson, 'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned', 550.

room, he looks nobody straight in the face, he shakes hands with the fins of a fish; occasionally he darts a malignant glance from his corner'.[312]

Although published two years earlier in 1816, 'On Good Nature' could serve as a riposte to the charge that 'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned' makes of impropriety and transgression of social norms: 'Good-nature, or what is often considered as such, is the most selfish of all the virtues: it is nine times out of ten mere indolence of disposition'.[313] It reveals the insidious character of habit, its ability to camouflage venality in social politesse and habitual behaviours. Because the social world functions through habituated behaviours, it tends to reward those who are able to be shaped by its codes, regardless of personal worth. In fact, the essay seems to argue that those who are most able to conform are least likely to be deserving, as this malleability comes at the expense of moral backbone. Principles make for personalities of awkward shapes, misfits unable to smooth themselves off sufficiently for social approval. 'On Good Nature' portrays a society of stultifying social conformity and hypocrisy, more discomfited by the protest against injustice than injustice itself. It is telling that Charles Fox is mentioned as a good-natured man, alongside Castlereagh and Eldon; like the disappointing Whigs of the 'Preface' to the *Political Essays* (1819), the good-natured man is a trimmer, one willing to protect the social peace by failing the causes he claims to represent. Good nature acts as a veil of pleasantry over the reality of power and those who appease it.

The essay also provides a trenchant defence of the bad-natured. 'If the truth were known the most disagreeable people are the most amiable', Hazlitt writes: 'They are the only persons who feel an interest in what does not concern them'.[314] Disagreeable people move through the world without the carapace of self-interest to protect themselves from the great and small injustices of the world: 'They have an unfortunate attachment to a set of abstract phrases, such as *liberty, truth, justice, humanity, honour*'.[315] Hedonic theory, in the disagreeable, expands to the degree that 'pain' comes to mean not only immediate physical or emotional discomforts – the

---

[312] Virginia Woolf, 'William Hazlitt', in *The Common Reader: Volume 2,* ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 173.

[313] Howe, iv, 100.

[314] Howe, iv, 101.

[315] Howe, iv, 102.

stubbing of a foot, the slighting of a reputation – but also global and historical matters which, for the disinterested person, still cut to the quick. Throughout his life, Hazlitt would forgo opportunities for personal advancement due to his inability to play courtier; he lost the Tory Sir George Beaumont as a potential patron by violently defending Junius, and he would lose a commission for the *London Magazine* due to a disagreement with James Hessey about a piece on 'Guy Faux', whom Hazlitt had defended as 'neither knave nor coward'.[316] Some of Hazlitt's friends felt that his outspokenness went too far: Leigh Hunt protested at the portrait of Shelley that appeared in 'On Paradox and Commonplace', while Francis Jeffrey's negative review of *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) may well have been prompted by the ambivalent portrait of him that it had contained. Hazlitt's interpersonal ethics, with their refusal to compromise integrity for friendship or gratitude, had something of the Godwinian about them.

The autobiographical aspect of 'On Good Nature' did not go unnoticed. In its 1817 review of the *Round Table*, the *Quarterly Review* singled out the essay:

> [T]he waters of bitterness flow around this unhappy person unceasingly. There is nothing in the world which he seems to like […] He writes an essay in eager vituperation of "good nature" and good natured people: he abuses all poets, with the single exception of Milton […] he abuses all country-people: he abuses the English: he abuses the Irish: he abuses the Scotch. Nor is it simply abuse; it is the language of Billingsgate, except that it is infinitely more rancorous than any thing which, we are willing to believe, he can have learnt in that school of natural civility.[317]

Contemporary criticism repeatedly charged Hazlitt with misanthropy and bad manners. But 'On Good Nature' makes the reason behind the persona clear; it amounts to a political stand against the hypocrisies of good nature.

---

[316] Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89; 301.

[317] 'Art. VI. *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men and Manners*. By William Hazlitt', *Quarterly Review*, 17 (New York: Theodore Foster, 1817), 154-159 (157-158).

The rhetoric of the essay works so that great and small collide serio-comically; – the 'devastation of a province, or the massacre of a town, or the enslaving of a people' is compared with a dinner 'spoiled by a lump of soot falling down the chimney'.[318] Global politics is domesticated. As in *Eloquence of the British Senate* (1807)*,* politics is framed as the interface between self and society, the psychology of the individual brought to bear upon global events. On its original publication in the *Examiner* on 9th June 1816, 'On Good Nature' would have had a flattering effect upon its readers, who would have read the essay's valorisation of those who 'tease themselves to death about the morality of the Turks' immediately after a profile of Ali Pasha and his place in the Ottoman court.[319] The first essay in the issue*,* about royal intermarriages between countries, places the domestic and familial within the context of international politics (353-4). The articles that follow detail an insurrection of enslaved people in Barbados, and the 'canting and hypocritical' servant of Baron Lagerbilke, the Swedish ambassador: 'These are the tricks of your "legitimate" people, who talk against traitors, and affect to be all that is gentlemanly and high-minded! The canting dotards!'(358). Especially in its original *Examiner* context 'On Good Nature' involves the reader by inviting him to cultivate his or her own 'disagreeable' righteous indignation against the 'good-natured' hypocrisy of the ruling elite. Hazlitt draws a link between the orthodoxies of polite society and the forms taken by oppressive power.

Moulding Character

In the aftermath of the protracted and expensive Napoleonic Wars and in the wake of a string of disastrous harvests, Britain went through a 'cultural malaise'.[320] Shelley, writing in 1818, noted that 'gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair'.[321] Writing 'The Round

---

[318] Howe, iv, 101.

[319] *The Examiner,* 6 June 1816, 360-1.

[320] Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57.

[321] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*', in Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley* (Oxford: OUP, 1904), 36-7.

Table' in the post-Waterloo years (1815-7), it is unsurprising that Hazlitt was thinking of the place of the individual in society. Napoleon was a figure who, by sheer force of character, had seemed to change the shape of history. Contemporary caricatures attest to the sense of Napoleon as a character who exceeded the scale of reality; they alternately portrayed the French Emperor as a pygmy or a giant, a Brobdinagian, dominating the frame and threatening to swallow the world, or a Lilliputian whose vaunting ambition contrasted with his mincing, childlike figure. Napoleon was not just a representative of the enemy; he was an immediately recognisable character, an embodiment of pride and hubris.[322] Even after his defeat, the papers continue to report on his condition in St Helena, attesting to a public curiosity in his person that went beyond national interest.[323] Gregory Dart has written of the Romantic era as a period that saw a collapse in the distinction between psychology and political theory, one in which external events were interpreted as expressions of individual genius, 'subjective and objective poles of the same philosophical idea'.[324] Hazlitt – who contended that Rousseau's writings caused the French Revolution, and that Burke single-handedly turned British public opinion against it – certainly saw things in this fashion.[325] The metropolitan periodicals of the era attest to a wider new interest in the concept of character. Marilyn Butler dates this new interest to the preceding age:

> As the eighteenth century progressed, so did interest in the technique of life-writing: notably, in the second half of the period the focus became increasingly domestic, and the materials used, anecdotes and familiar letters, were designed to build an impressionistic account of the complex, many-sided living man rather than the older, more formal, public, and rationalized

---

[322] Theresa M. Kelley, 'J. M. W. Turner, Napoleonic Caricature, and Romantic Allegory', *English Literary History*, 58/2 (Summer 1991), 351-382 (355).

[323] See, for example, 'Napoleon's Removal to St Helena', in Harry Findlater Bussey and Thomas Wilson Reid (eds.), *The Newspaper Reader: The Journals of the Nineteenth Century on Events of the Day* (London: Blackie & Son, 1879), 88-91.

[324] Gregory Dart, 'Hazlitt and Biography', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 29/4 (2000), 338-348 (338).

[325] 'The Round Table No. 36' ['On the Character of Rousseau'], *The Examiner* (14 April 1816), 237-8.

"Character".[326]

Biographical sketches, character types and dyspeptic 'personalities' fill the pages of the literary periodicals that sprang up in the period - *Blackwood's,* the *London Magazine,* the *New Monthly,* and the *Examiner*. In *Invasions of Privacy* John Barrell has traced a new notion of public character as emerging among the middle classes at this time, in which an expanding sphere of influence elided an older aristocratic distinction between public and private life. Whereas in the late eighteenth century, a member of the old guard such as Charles James Fox could draw a veil over his extramarital affairs and alcohol consumption as long as he scrupulously maintained professional standards in his capacity as opposition leader in the House of Commons, in the 1800s private life increasingly became political, as each citizen's habits came to be seen as influencing the habits of the nation.[327] Rather than a sharp distinction between two poles, Tom Mole's idea of an intermediate space between public and private is perhaps more accurate. The rapid expansion of this intermediate space in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that 'in the experience of both the celebrity and the fan, public and private aspects are constantly referred to one another'.[328]

These changes did not go uncontested, however, and biography remained a controversial genre. In 1809, Coleridge complained that personality and gossip transgress and damage the boundary between public and private, and laid the blame for this at the feet of the press. In 'this age of personality, this age of literary and political gossiping', he writes, the 'characteristic reserve of the Britons' has been lost.[329] Jonas Cope maps a post-Waterloo 'ethological age' in which the growth of ethology, the study of character, was propagated as a popularly written and democratic 'science', particularly in the periodical press. This new investment in character, however, did not go unopposed. Cope cites as an example a piece written in 1836 called 'On the Pleasure of Being Without a Character', which suggested that

[326] Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

[327] John Barrell, *Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.

[328] Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6.

[329] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia*, i, 41.

character was not essential to the self, but a costume or mask that could be discarded.[330]

'Men palliate and conceal their original qualities, but do not extirpate them': this epigraph to 'On Personal Character', from Montaigne's *Essais,* announces Hazlitt as an essentialist when it comes to character.[331] This reading is further supported by the essay's opening line: 'No one ever changes his character from the time he is two years old; nay, I might say, from the time he is two hours old'.[332] Hazlitt makes a distinction, from the beginning, between 'manners' and 'original character', insisting that while external habits may be moulded 'with instruction and opportunity', character's 'internal, original bias' remains unchanged.[333] This essential nature provides the springs and motivations for action. Hazlitt's psychological determinism provides a bulwark to Benthamite conceptions of character, which see it as open to manipulation by circumstance and self-will. Hazlitt takes character out of our hands, leaving its origins mysterious; '"It is not in our stars," in planetary influence, but neither is it owing "to ourselves, that we are thus or thus."'[334]

'On Personal Character' expands its thesis to draw comparisons between character and family heritage. Hazlitt, a believer in physiognomy, states that 'the mind is stamped upon the countenance', and that just as facial features do not change with situations, neither do the essential lineaments of the mind.[335] Thus, one often perceives a family likeness not just in appearance, but in disposition. Hazlitt quotes Wordsworth's line that the 'child is father to the man'; there is a Wordsworthian, even Burkean, view of character being expounded, one rooted in community and heritage.[336] 'It is owing, not to circumstances, but to the force of kind, to the stuff of which our blood and humours are compounded being the same', he writes.[337] Why

---

[330] Jonas Cope, *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 34; 62.

[331] Howe, xii, 230.

[332] Howe, xii, 230.

[333] Howe, xii, 230.

[334] Howe, xii, 230.

[335] Howe, xii, 231.

[336] Howe, xii, 231.

[337] Howe, xii, 233.

should an uncle fixate upon the same picture as the author, or a cousin dog-ear *Tristram Shandy* at the same pages? The answer is 'Instinct, Hal, instinct!'[338]

When it comes to the knowledge of character, this places those who live surrounded by the evanescent characters of metropolitan life are at a disadvantage. 'Critics and authors, who congregate in large cities, and see nothing of the world but a sort of phantasmagoria', Hazlitt writes in 'The Plain Speaker', 'see character only in the bust, and have not room (for the crowd) to study it as a whole length, that is, as it exists in reality'.[339] True character can only be got at by taking in the subject's childhood, family history, and place within the ecosystem of the neighbourhood. This kind of study most appeals to 'gossips in country-towns', and is clearly not possible in the fluid, unstable milieu of London.[340] Metropolitanism and incomplete conception of character are interestingly linked together with the 'critics and authors' of the city.

For Hazlitt, civilisation, and socialisation change character by wearing away its idiosyncrasies:

> Harsh and disagreeable qualities wear out in nations, as individuals, from time and intercourse with the world; but it is at the expense of their intrinsic excellences. The vices of softness and effeminacy sink deeper with age, like thorns in the flesh. Single acts or events often determine the fate of mortals, yet may have nothing to do with their general deserts or failings. He who is said to be cured of any glaring infirmity may be suspected of never having had it; and lastly, it may be laid down as a general rule, that mankind improves, by means of luxury and civilization, in social manners, and become more depraved in what relates to personal habits and character.[341]

Nevertheless, however much character is modified by the refinement of society, for Hazlitt the change is 'more apparent than real, more in conduct than in feeling'.[342]

---

[338] Howe, xii, 233.

[339] Howe, xii, 233.

[340] Howe, xii, 234.

[341] Howe, xii, 235.

[342] Howe, xii, 236.

At the same time that society was registering a new interest in the individual, the metropolis was opening up new possibilities for self-fashioning. 'On Coffee-House Politicians' (1822) details a metropolitan character created *out of* novelty and fashion, making a habit of fashion. In the early eighteenth century the coffee-house was a symbol of the emergent bourgeois public sphere, the kind of polite sociability promoted by the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, but by the early nineteenth century it had degenerated, in Hazlitt's view, into a petit-bourgeois dilution of its former self. As Daniel E. White summarises, generations of 'scholars of the novel' tend to concur that 'by the early nineteenth century character was poised between generality and individuality, social legibility and private depth, national identity and cosmopolitanism'.[343] David Stewart suggests, further, that the 'relationship between writer and reader had become more like the relationship between actors and audience'.[344] At the same time as periodicals proliferated with scenes of imaginary intimacy and sociability such as those contained in *Blackwood's'* 'Noctes Ambrosianae' and the *London Magazine's* 'Table Talks', reading became an increasingly solitary activity.

In 'On Coffee-House Politicians', Hazlitt compares the denizens of the coffee-house to Falstaff's six men in buckram, touching upon the sense of phantasmagoria that affects the notion of character in the city. Somehow these denizens are simultaneously changeable and unchanging: 'I think this unmoved self-complacency, this cavalier, smooth, simpering indifference is more annoying than the extremest violence or irritability'.[345] This description of the coffee-house politician resembles that of the 'good-natured man' of the *Round Table* essay, along with the clockwork automatism of Pitt as portrayed in the *Political Essays*.[346] What to Shaftesbury in an earlier age had appeared to be the virtue of civil society – 'All Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of

---

[343] Daniel E. White, '"The Slangwhangery of the Jargonists": Writing, Speech, and the Character of Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 56/4 (Winter 2017), 453-478 (457).

[344] David G. Stewart, 'Charles Lamb's "Distant Correspondents": Speech, Writing and Readers in Regency Magazine Writing', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 57 (2008), 89-107 (96).

[345] Howe, viii, 194.

[346] See Howe, iv, 103 and Howe, vii, 331.

amicable Collision'[347] – is by Hazlitt represented as homogenisation, the sanding down of character to one smooth level. Sociability both requires character to make conversation comprehensible and destabilises its continuity. In his description of his friend 'M—', George Mounsey the solicitor,[348] the hero of the essay, who represents common sense and habit – as 'the most conversible man I know',[349] Hazlitt connects conversability and convertibility through a linguistic echo.

Despite all this, Hazlitt's piece seems to work against the trend he describes, by populating London with eccentric characters and personalities immune to the normative force of metropolitan social life. Rather than a corps of news-fixated automatons, the essay introduces the reader to the accomplished mimicry of Roger Kirkpatrick, the inveterate Toryism of 'Mr C—', and the awkward disputatiousness of the radical 'Mr B—'.[350] Within the imagined space of the essay, these characters are able to come together in an idealised public sphere descended from the *Tatler* and *Spectator,* socialising without either diluting their characters or coming to blows. Nevertheless, the contemporary social scene portrayed ultimately ends up a segregated one; the 'discourse at Randal's' is 'the best for boxers', and 'that at Long's for lords and loungers'.[351] The diversity of Mounsey et al. is replaced by a more pessimistic outlook in which good society depends on similitude. 'Sympathy is necessary to society', and in the increasingly heterogenous world of the city, it is no longer sufficient to assume a shared basis of understanding.[352] Hazlitt seems to suggest that only in such circumstances can the particular qualities of special company be preserved; the sparkling thoughts of Hunt or the grave wit of Elia. '[Y]ou can pick your society nowhere but in London', he writes, and such fastidiousness over one's company actively works against the kind of contingent friendships that might arise through proximity in smaller neighbourhoods.[353] As Francis Douce has it in *Recreative Review* (1821):

---

[347] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times,* ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31.

[348] Howe, viii, 357 note to 192.

[349] Howe, viii, 199

[350] Howe, viii, 212.

[351] Howe, viii, 202.

[352] Howe, viii, 202.

[353] Howe, viii, 203.

> anciently, books were read by those who understood them – and a new book did not get among the wrong class of readers – but, as it is a reading world now, an author fares worse in his fame, but better in his purse.[354]

Modern characters live and die by the newspaper. One acquaintance 'puts his sentences together as printers set up types, letter by letter', and this alarming mutability of character is somehow related to the conditions of modernity, and in particular the periodical press.[355] Tom Mole argues that celebrity culture requires the 'three pillars of an industry, an individual, and an audience'.[356] More broadly, this trend towards self-consciousness, self-reflection and self-knowledge might limit the potentialities of human thought and behaviour; habits constantly made visible in print and press might lead to their rapid amendment. The urbanised smoothing-off of character is a self-conscious phenomenon; habits are replaced by fashions, unconscious customs by self-consciously propagated trends. Underlying 'On Coffee-House Politicians' is a discomfort with the role of periodicals in precipitating crises of self-consciousness, by making readers acutely aware of their 'second nature'.[357] People cease to act naturally, and instead come to 'wear' themselves. A modern self-consciousness about manners is exemplified by the explosion of interest in slang in the early nineteenth century, with books such as Francis Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1788) promising to grant understanding to rural readers not up-to-date with the fast-moving argot of the city. The very necessity of such volumes speaks to the problem; without a key to help them, readers would find much in periodicals such as the slangy *Blackwood's* incomprehensible. Despite being maligned repeatedly as a 'slang-whanger', Hazlitt hardly ever employed it in his written work, and his essay 'On Familiar Style' criticises its use in writing.[358] Slang, for Hazlitt, is the exclusive property of a profession or coterie, language that has been

[354] Francis Douce, *The Recreative Review, or Eccentricities of Literature and Life*, i (London: Wallis and Co., 1821), 57.

[355] Howe, viii, 194.

[356] Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity,* 3.

[357] Howe, viii, 170.

[358] See 'Art. V. *Table Talk, or Original Essays*. By William Hazlitt' *Quarterly Review* 26 (London: John Murray, 1822), 103-108, and Howe, viii, 247.

kept out of common circulation and general social discourse. Like money, only the 'stamp of custom' gives words their value; slang, confined to the few, is vulgar because it is language removed from its roots in habitual association. It is habit made self-conscious, a marker of professional or personal status.

While critics such as Jonas Cope have tended to focus on Hazlitt's 'ethological essentialism', to suggest that Hazlitt dismissed the idea of a pliability in character, or was uninterested in it, is not accurate.[359] In 'On Personal Character', Hazlitt employs the metaphor of a potter: 'The clay that the potter uses may be the same quality, coarse or fine in itself, but he may mould it into vessels of very different shape or beauty'.[360] This image of the vessel, balanced between shape and texture, seems rather to elevate the bearing of habit on character than to deny it. Circumstances do not change original biases, but they can affect presentation, and for a writer as skilful at, and as interested in, the character sketch as Hazlitt, presentation is the means by which character is accessed. 'On Personal Character' affirms the abiding nature of character, but also the manners, fashions and forms of affectation that determine how it manifests itself in the world, as Daniel E. White has it, like 'varnish on wood grain'.[361] Character may be essential, but it is only knowable to oneself and others through habits.

'On Personal Character' ends with a gruff instruction to 'mind our own business' and not trouble ourselves overly with the peculiarities of others; an abrupt and comically common-sense lesson after the digressive journey the essay has taken through questions of family psychology, free will and automatism.[362] Yet the final sentence is a mysterious addendum, taking another turn into 'the doctrine of original sin, grace, election, reprobation, or the Gnostic principle that acts did not determine the virtue or vice of the character'.[363] This rather hurried sentence, which at the last moment opens the line of enquiry up to the cosmos, concludes only with the cryptic words: 'I agree – but always with a salvo'.[364] What the salvo might be is not made clear, but the dive into Calvinist theology suggests some alignment that Hazlitt

---

[359] Cope, *The Dissolution of Character,* 89.

[360] Howe, xii, 241.

[361] White, 'The Slangwhangery of the Jargonists', 471.

[362] Howe, xii, 241.

[363] Howe, xii, 241.

[364] Howe, xii, 241.

perceives between the doctrine of predestination and his own sense of character as fixed from birth. The salvo perhaps is an attempt to rein it back; undefined as it is, it offers an escape route from the claustrophobia of ethological determinism. This is a saving clause of scepticism, a literary performance of self-will and caprice that leaves the door open for the reader's own interpretations.

The Spirit of the Age

The Spirit of the Age (1825) is about characters both natural and acquired, and how one offers clues to the other, or otherwise disguises the original bent of mind. Bentham, for Hazlitt, has 'endeavoured to overlay his natural humour, sense, spirit and style with the dust and cobwebs of an obscure solitude'.[365] As if to continue this line of thought, a version of 'On Good Nature' reappears, this time split between the profiles of Lord Eldon and Henry Brougham. The character of the 'good-natured man' is reworked to apply to Eldon, whose 'oiliness [of] disposition' serves to smooth the waves of social discord and ease the way for his own advancement.[366] The conclusion to the earlier essay, which discussed the national character of the Irish, here becomes an introductory foil to Brougham's typically Scotch character. Whereas previously (in 'On Good Nature') the good nature of the Irish was framed as charming but basically disorderly and lacking in principle, in 'Mr. Brougham-Sir F. Burdett' it is redeemed by its new context; for while Irish eloquence rests on impulse, Scotch eloquence is the result of pure mechanism. Irish genius, 'its tongue darting forked fire', is judged more fortunate than its opposite, 'the principle of life and motion [being] … the primary condition of all genius'.[367] This division expands the scope of 'On Good Nature', offering a more nuanced, contemplative approach to questions of social character, shifting focus slightly to become more critical of the Scotch, utilitarian point of view that had also seemed the source of worry in 'On Personal Character'.

---

[365] Howe, xi, 15.

[366] Howe, xi, 142.

[367] Howe, xi, 134-135.

References to visual art abound in *Spirit,* drawing its subjects together as works in a gallery through which author and reader stroll together. Hazlitt goes so far as to suggest that increasing public interest in painting during the eighteenth century was responsible for the literary turn away from abstraction, and towards the 'eye for nature', realism, and particularity of detail.[368] 'Painting is essentially an imitative art; it cannot subsist for a moment on empty generalities', Hazlitt writes.[369] The poetry of George Crabbe finds its visual counterpart in the 'Dutch interiors, hovels, and pig-styes' of Teniers or Hobbema.[370] The true portraitist, Hazlitt argues in 'On the Knowledge of Character', can 'stamp his true character on the canvas, and betray the secret to posterity'.[371]

In his youth, Hazlitt took up, then abandoned regretfully, the profession of portraitist. Surviving paintings of his father and Charles Lamb speak to an interest in capturing not only the sitter, but also the intimate relationship between the artist and said sitter. His taste was formed at the Orleans Gallery, as recalled in the *Table Talk* essay 'On the Pleasure of Painting'. During his first visit, the scales fall from his eyes as he was confronted for the first time by Raphael, Guido, Domenichino, and the Carachi; he sees 'the soul speaking in the face'.[372] This epiphanic moment collapses the encounter with this series of painters into an intimate encounter with their subjects, which hang 'face to face' with the young Hazlitt.[373] The characters of the painted subjects blend with the character of the artist to show the 'soul' of the work.

In the late eighteenth century, aesthetic theory of portraiture was moving away from the sense of a portrait as an 'unmodulated image' of a subject, and towards 'the artist's self-conscious perception of his sitter'.[374] Theorists of portraiture like Joseph Reynolds aimed to go beyond accuracy and capture something more fundamental about their subjects; their true natures. Joel Haefner observes the centrality of portraiture to Hazlitt's conception of character, and of character as 'the means by

---

[368] Howe, xi, 166.

[369] Howe, xi, 166.

[370] Howe, xi, 166.

[371] Howe, viii, 303.

[372] Howe, viii, 14.

[373] Howe, viii, 14.

[374] Nadia Tscherny, 'Likeness in Early Romantic Portraiture', *Art Journal*, 46/3 (Autumn 1987), 193-199 (196).

which artist, writer and audience are bound together'.[375] John Kinnaird similarly suggests that portraiture most exemplifies what Hazlitt valued in art; an honest concussion of personalities, 'a relation of self to self'.[376]

In his 1820 review of Joseph Spence's *Anecdotes of Books and Men,* Hazlitt commented on the draw of biography, and literary biography in particular. With this genre, he said, 'we draw down genius from its air-built citadel in books and libraries'.[377] Biography, for Hazlitt, gives an embodied, homely aspect to the abstraction of creative genius. Whether the works coincided with or contradicted the life, the point was that by grounding the biographical subject in a shared world of private habits, customs and eccentricities, every reader was able to find common ground with the great. As in 'On Personal Character', 'character' in the review of Spence's book is compared to a bust: 'The heads of great men […] are not all that we want to get a sight of: we wish to add the limbs, the drapery, the background'.[378] But whereas in 'On Personal Character' it was the long habits of family and community that provided the full picture of character, here it is the particularised details of everyday living.

There is a similar turn at the end of Hazlitt's portrait of Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age.* In spite of the fact that Bentham is the author of a utilitarian philosophy that aims to turn people into machines, in his private moments he enjoys playing the organ and looking at Hogarth's prints.[379] His theories – shown in the context of the man who devised them – appear less monstrous in *The Spirit* than they do in other Hazlitt's essays. Bentham embodies the principle of philosophical abstraction to the extreme, and his revolutionary philosophy emerges as the result of his psychological quirks; a complete lack of imagination, a disposition towards logic and arrangement, and an innocence that verges on boyishness. To represent him as a person is to open him up to the sympathy of both author and reader; as a thinker, his flaws are all the more obvious in the context of his character's blind spots.

---

[375] Joel Haefner, '"The Soul Speaking in the Face": Hazlitt's Concept of Character', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 24/4 (Autumn 1984), 655-670 (661).

[376] John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 161.

[377] Howe, xvi, 153.

[378] Howe, xvi, 153.

[379] 'Mr. Bentham', Howe, xi, 16.

Perhaps, as Gregory Dart has suggested, literary genius for Hazlitt was 'synonymous with a virtuoso performance of personality [...] quite separate from and in a certain way prior to actual literary performance'.[380] W. H. Auden, on the subject of Goethe's desire to get to grips with landscape painting, points out the main difference between literary and pictorial representation: 'a drawing can show what something is at a moment, but it cannot show us how it came to be that way or what will happen to it next: this only language can do'.[381] *The Spirit of the Age* depicts its subjects as part of the national narrative, its characters *in time*, rather than static. The most striking portraits create 'scenes' to dramatize their subjects' performances of character within the drama of the 'age'. If characters do not change, then their circumstances change around them, making them survivors of the last age, shipwrecked in the present. Godwin, the philosophical colossus of the 1790s, is presented with melancholy sympathy, his character having shrunk back to a mortal scale and living on in the 'serene twilight of a doubtful immortality'.[382] By contrast, the Reverend Edward Irving, chosen as popular representative of the age's 'prevailing and preposterous rage for novelty', is on a rising tide of popularity, a Vulcan of 'cast-iron features and sledge-hammer blows'.[383] Such vivid characterisations and contrasts give *The Spirit of the Age* its distinctive interest, distinguishing it from similar galleries of well-known figures produced in periodicals at around the same time. Hazlitt, in framing his own gallery, seems committed to recording a particular moment in time through the figures that shape its character, while also inquiring into its contingent nature and the question of what persists and what fades away. Sure enough, Godwin remains a recognisable figure to the twenty-first century reader, while Irving's popularity peaked soon after the publication of *The Spirit of the Age*.

Biography both sets genius apart and makes it accessible. The reader is invited to gaze upon the spectacle of genius as something beyond the pale of ordinary life, and at the same time to identify common aspects that bring genius and the ordinary closer

---

[380] Dart, 'Hazlitt and Biography', 340.

[381] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788* trans. by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (London: Penguin, 1970), xvi.

[382] Howe, xi, 16.

[383] Howe, xi, 39.

together. The explosion of biographical content in the periodical papers of the 1810s and 1820s attests to a fact that David Higgins adverts to in his exploration of the construction of genius in the Romantic age; namely, that many people harboured feelings of not fitting in, of being misunderstood, or of being undervalued.[384] Encoding genius as avant-garde, separate, and perhaps even Byronically cast out from general society, such periodical content gave rise to the notion of the 'eccentric genius', the notion of genius as the manifestation of a certain intensity of character, and the notion of the 'neglected genius', which was characterised by social alienation.[385] One could read *The Spirit of the Age* as an attempt to re-socialise its subjects, marshalling its assortment of misfits and oddballs so that they could 'speak' to each other within the pages of a volume, in defiance of the external reality of an increasingly fragmented and politically fraught public sphere, which had in fact disintegrated into several public spheres. *The Spirit of the Age* is a group portrait, a written counterpart to Thomas Faed's 1849 painting 'Sir Walter Scott and His Literary Friends at Abbotsford', which depicts various 'spirits of the age' brought together for a convivial scene. In this painting, George Crabbe glances morosely across to Scott, James Hogg crouches, kilted, on a footstool, and – most uncharacteristically – Wordsworth is seated beside his arch-critic Francis Jeffrey. All is imagined, worked up from previous individual portraits.[386]

This proliferation of subjects was mirrored in the periodical magazines, which increasingly addressed themselves to audiences of particular political and cultural allegiances. The dynamic between readership and publication often became conditioned by an imagined scene of sociability. The 'Noctes Ambrosianae' (1822 to 1835) of *Blackwood's,* in which a cast of pseudonymous personae and semi-fictionalised authors break bread and sup together in Ambrose's Tavern, makes this most explicit.[387] The *Examiner*'s 'Round Table' series, however, had also aimed to create a similar sense of conversational bonhomie. Jeffrey N. Cox describes the 'Cockney School of Poetry' as 'an intersubjective collectivity always in the process

---

[384] David Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine* (London: Routledge, 2005), 12.

[385] See Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine,* 12-45.

[386] This portrait is discussed as a site of 'virtual sociality' comparable to the magazine in Mark Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ix.

[387] See John Wilson et al., *Noctes Ambrosianae* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1855).

of being imagined', a description indicative of just how much the group depended on its members' self-identification and desire to be known *as* part of the collective.[388] Cox also raises the potential problem that arises when it comes to expanding the collective beyond the circle of personal friendship: 'The group wishes to celebrate the local, the particular, the lived experience of the community, but they also wish to speak to a much larger audience'.[389] Unlike the sociability promoted by Shaftesbury or Addison, Leigh Hunt's circle valued interesting difference over polite consensus. Hazlitt's writing on his personal acquaintances brims with affection for individual whims and foibles, as well as an anxiety about their misrepresentation outside of the context of the group; his essay on Hunt in *The Spirit of the Age* admits that 'he runs on to the public as he does at his own fire-side, and talks about himself, forgetting that he is not always among friends'.[390] His character, Hazlitt intimates, does not make sense 'unless you are acquainted with his situation and habits'.[391] Reading Hunt's essays, in other words, the reader only sees him 'in the bust', the condition both of the magazines specifically and modern metropolitan life generally.

Roy Park has described *The Spirit of the Age* as a 'massing of particulars'.[392] Repeated terms align certain members of the group with one another by drawing subtle comparisons between them. Godwin, Coleridge and Byron are all compared to barks in the water, although their different fates at sea tell of their characters.[393] Both Wordsworth and Gifford are accused of being 'Drawcansir[s]' towards other writers, while Horne Tooke and Mackintosh, who exhibit their breadth of knowledge for the applause of the audience, are likened to intellectual 'juggler[s]'.[394] Scotch national character is a recurring theme throughout. These repeated motifs seem to speak to each other across portraits, creating conversation between participants of an increasingly fraught and acrimonious literary sphere. Nevertheless, there is a melancholy tone to *The Spirit of the Age,* a sense of belatedness and nostalgia that

---

[388] Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, 97.

[389] Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School,* 5.

[390] Howe, xi, 176.

[391] Howe, xi, 177.

[392] Roy Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory* (London: Clarendon Press, 1971), 214-5.

[393] See, for example, Howe, xi, 37.

[394] Howe, xi, 93; 125; 48; 98.

seems at odds with its title. Although it preserves its subjects within a golden bubble of literary immortality, one is simultaneously made aware of time passing by inexorably. Many of its subjects are depicted as outmoded survivors rather than embodiments of the present moment; Godwin reached his peak in the 1790s, Coleridge's early poetic genius was unfulfilled, and Horne Tooke – the only posthumous profile, until Byron died between magazine and book publication – was 'the finished gentleman of the last age'.[395] Even the most unambiguously favourable essay, on Thomas Campbell, concedes that since his two great early poems, Campbell has not produced anything of similar ambition or merit, though 'he may surely linger out the rest of his life in a dream of immortality'.[396] Genius outlives its own brilliance, leaving behind characters that seem to degrade with time. Wordsworth, moving on from the innovation of *Lyrical Ballads*, becomes more austere and prophet-like, while Coleridge sinks further into his sage-like persona and habitual addiction. Godwin's youthful spikiness, by contrast, is worn away until he is 'as easy as an old glove'.[397] Showing its subjects as they move through time, *The Spirit of the Age* depicts the deepening of habits both personal and social; the set nature of natural character causes idiosyncrasies to reify, or else the normative forces of society demand they be disguised.

Such representations are comparable to the 'personalities' that inhabited literary periodicals such as *Blackwood's.* Authors stand in for their works and vice versa, most infamously in the 'Chaldee manuscript' (1817), in which various Edinburgh public figures were caricatured. The blithe use of personal gossip and disparagement of physical appearance in this satirical piece led to an outcry, and its subsequent withdrawal from collected editions of the magazine.[398] While the use of 'personality' in *Blackwood's* was extreme enough to constitute an 'extended language experiment' involving the slippage between works and persons, in a more general sense, however, the line between scurrilous ad hominem attack and legitimate aesthetic critique was not clear-cut, particularly within a culture that increasingly came to see creative

---

[395] Howe, xi, 48.

[396] Howe, xi, 160.

[397] Howe, xi, 27.

[398] See John Strachan, 'The 'Chaldee Manuscript', William Hone, and Late Georgian Religious Parody', *Romanticism*, 23/3 (2017), 243-252.

output as directly related to the psychology of the individual.[399] Leigh Hunt, a favourite target of *Blackwood's*, was depicted thus by John Gibson Lockhart in 1817: 'He would fain be always tripping, and waltzing […] In his verses he is always desirous of being airy, graceful, easy, courtly and ITALIAN'.[400] Peter T. Murphy argues that such a review conflates the glibness of the poetry with the effeminate physicality of the man, and indeed Hunt would complain that the anonymous 'Z' had misinterpreted 'my very reading, nay, my personal manners and very walk'.[401] 'Mr Hunt cannot utter a dedication, or even a note, without betraying the *Shibboleth* of low birth and low habits', Lockhart writes.[402] For Lockhart, Hunt's Cockney status is encoded in his person, marking him out as a member of the wrong group.

The choice to depict Hunt speaking rather than writing conjures him up before the reader as a comic character 'running on' in front of his audience. Lockhart defended his text by insisting that his insults pertained only to Hunt's writing and not the man himself. His victim was understandably sceptical of this explanation, and while perhaps Lockhart was being somewhat disingenuous, nonetheless it may also have been the case that to the writers of *Blackwood's,* public writings revealed character even more fully than private life.[403] 'Personalities' (articles containing *ad hominem* attacks) were controversial sources of cultural anxiety during the period, and many writers felt reluctant to drag 'every weak, odd or even vicious *private act*' in front of the reading public for their titillation and entertainment.[404] Even repudiations of personality tended to themselves become mired in personality's logic, as Richard Cronin observes.[405] Hazlitt's employment of public characters, often acquaintances, in his essays is closer to the spirit of *Blackwood's* than has been acknowledged; a figure

---

[399] Peter T. Murphy, 'Impersonation and Authorship in Romantic Britain, *English Literary History* 59/3 (Autumn 1992), 625-649 (626).

[400] John Gibson Lockhart, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry', *BEM* (October 1817), 39; and Murphy, 'Impersonation and Authorship', 628.

[401] Quoted in Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine,* 57.

[402] Lockhart, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry', *BEM* (October 1817), 39.

[403] Discussed in *Romanticism and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine: 'An Unprecedented Phenomenon*' eds. Robert Morrison and Daniel S. Roberts (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 96.

[404] J. R. McCulloch, *The Scotsman*, 214 (24 February 1821), 62.

[405] Richard Cronin, *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture After Waterloo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42. Cronin singles out Hazlitt's 'Reply to Z' as an example of this.

like Coleridge quickly becomes shorthand, in his writing, for wasted genius, procrastination and logorrhoea, Wordsworth for ascetic Northern priggishness, and both together with Southey are eternally, totemically evoked as apostates to the cause of liberty. Existing half in the living republic of letters and half in the world of Hazlitt's creative imagination, they act as recurring characters in the narratives of Hazlitt's essays.

Like the writers of *Blackwood's*, Hazlitt plays games of exclusivity and inclusivity, hinting at the personal relationships that tie these literary characters to himself. His profile of Thomas Moore makes a coded reference to Moore's involvement in the awkwardness between Byron and Hunt over the *Liberal*,[406] and the essay on Wordsworth slyly quotes *The Borderers*, a remnant of the poet's radical youth that Hazlitt could only have been party to privately, as it was not be published until 1842.[407] The most interesting portraits, like these, are those which implicitly include Hazlitt as a character. Hazlitt's authority is predicated on his ability to give a privileged view of how personal habits do or do not map onto public personae. Hazlitt's character sketches blur the line between living individuals and semi-fictional characters, and, as in *Blackwood's,* this is particularly acute in the case of literary biography. Subjects inhabit an imaginary stratum between the rarefied ether of literary genius and the earth of material reality. Couched in the medium of literature, supposedly 'real' details of personal habit serve to push the individual into the realm of drama or the novel, moving them into a fictional space even if the details are accurate enough.

As Robert L. Patten observes, the caricatures of Regency satirical prints, edged with political intent, move from general locations and broad 'types' to particular people and places. Patten describes how caricaturists used a mixture of psychology, physiology, theatrical convention, and characterological types to ensure their subjects' legibility:

> [C]aricaturists were trying not to draw *from* or *like* life but to replicate a vocabulary of physical signs that had been established by a process of graphic

[406] 'Is Mr. Moore bound to advise a Noble Poet to get as fast as possible out of a certain publication', Howe, xi, 175.

[407] Howe, xi, 92.

> analysis, selection, reduction and exchange among artist, subject, and audience.[408]

Physiognomy, costume, and other visual clues to personal eccentricities or foibles take the place of accurate mimesis in caricature. Caricaturists, often lacking Academy training in anatomical knowledge, instead relied on clothing to show the contours of a figure that had to be instantly readable. Caricatures operate on a circular logic wherein signifiers take the place of personal features, strengthening the mythology of public figures; the Prince Regent keeps mistresses and has problems with his weight, so is portrayed as fat and sybaritic, which in turn is how the viewer recognises him. Identity is made legible through clues to the individual's personal habits, which are themselves industriously circulated through prints and satirical literature. In a letter to the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835, Edgar Allan Poe praised *Blackwood's* for its tendency to publish tales inclining towards 'the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical'.[409] Hazlitt creates biographies through the accumulation of detail, wherein personality is made visible through a rendering of externality.

In his profile of Robert Southey in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt suggests that while character may be essential, it is to be judged on its habits. He notes how Southey's characteristic extremism, which at one time expressed itself in the habit of liberty, later accustomed itself to Toryism and court-flattery. Frank as it is, this sketch is milder, on the whole, than other, earlier sketches of Southey's character in Hazlitt's writing might lead one to expect. Hazlitt assures the reader in *The Spirit* that what he has produced has been written 'with the malice of old friends' – though this is a characterisation with which Southey may not have agreed.[410] To Hazlitt, Southey is an exemplary family man, but one who has suborned his talent for personal gain.

---

[408] Robert L. Patten, 'Conventions of Georgian Caricature', *Art Journal*, 43/4 (Winter 1983), 331-338 (337).

[409] Quoted in *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine,* eds. Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiii.

[410] Howe, xi, 82.

CHAPTER IV: HABIT AND THE CITY

What a hell
For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din,
Barbarian and infernal! 'tis a dream,
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound,
Below, the open space, through every nook
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive
With heads; the midway region and above,
Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
Dumb proclamations of the prodigies;
And chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,
And children whirling in their roundabouts[411]

Wordsworth's 'Bartholomew Fair' is a wall of vision and noise, with all the ephemerality and oppression of a nightmare. One of the most familiar, perhaps the most familiar, image of Romantic London, it presents the metropolis as profoundly unreadable, out of its very heterogeneity transformed into a 'blank confusion' that annihilates the creative powers and leaves one struggling for speech – a far cry from what London had represented to the child Wordsworth, when a 'wondrous pow'r of words' was infused into the very toponyms of Vauxhall and Ranelagh.[412] As often in depictions of the city, paradox abounds – Wordsworth's London is an infernal galaxy of faces, a phantasmagoria of corporeality, a mechanically whirling wilderness, its sensory overload engendering torpor and dullness:

Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences

[411] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) , vii, ll. 659-669, in *The Prelude,* eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (London: W.W. Norton, 1979), 262. All further quotations are taken from this edition.

[412] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vii,123.

> That have no law, no meaning and no end.[413]

What is the meaning of habit in such an environment? For Wordsworth, habit ties the imagination to the landscape through long association, whether from individual experience or from communal and hereditary tradition. The scene of 'Bartholomew Fair', though '[h]olden where Martyrs suffered in past time', serves to illustrate the complete obliteration of that past in the whirligig of modernity.[414]

The narrator of 'A Day in London', a *New Monthly Magazine* article published in July 1823 is, like Wordsworth, a 'country gentleman', and advances a similar contrast between the steady habits of pastoral life and the confounding effects of the city:

> A country gentleman, whose habits are retired, uniform, quiet, and withal somewhat studious, on being occasionally hurried up to London, is always much more vividly impressed with the various objects of the singular scene presented by the metropolis, than those can be who reside almost all the year round in town, and whose senses are consequently accustomed and blunted to the stimulus of its imposing movements and its noises.[415]

The retired habits of rural life constitute and discipline the self, the alternative being a habituation to endless variety that, the essay seems to suggest, threatens the very idea of perception. James K. Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin have emphasised the interconnectedness of the city and the country in Romantic-period writing, suggesting that they overlay each other like transparent overlays in a panoramic exhibition, 'with lamps shining from *both* sides'. Nature and metropolis, in their rendering, each influence the conception of the other in a relation of 'mutual constitution and reflection'.[416] I will argue that a similar overlay between nature and art informs Hazlitt's conception of habit, which in turn relates to his ideas about the senses and

---

[413] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vii, 700-703.

[414] Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vii, 651.

[415] 'A Day in London', *New Monthly Magazine* (January 1823), 44.

[416] James K. Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin, ed. *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

the imagination. Bromwich writes of the 'dialectical spirit' in which Hazlitt's idea of habit is constructed: 'We must be careful if we speak at all of 'habitual sympathies', for each new act of sympathy presupposes an original act of the imagination; but every such act in turn presupposes the existence of our own habitual feelings, because it is to them we refer in imagining the interests of others'.[417] Rather than a one-way street, habit and imagination communicate in either direction, leading to the mutual, intertwined development of each. Looking at Hazlitt in the company of Mary Robinson, Charles Lamb, and Leigh Hunt, I will attempt to trace how they each articulate, in different ways, a metropolitan notion of habit that challenges Wordsworth's equation of habit with rural life.

'A Day in London' essays a psychological sketch of the various states through which the unnamed protagonist passes in his transition from country to city. At first, the idea of displacement is unwelcome: in the days leading up to the excursion, he feels a 'more than usually tender attachment to those objects which endear [home] to me' and the interruption of 'cherished habits of regularity'.[418] The narrator's entry into the city is not encouraging: the 'scanty gentility of the better sort of houses', 'half-pay coachmen, and regular pickpockets', 'the dingy multitudes of men in worn-out black coats, all full of a London look of important wretchedness' pass by his eyes in a spectacle of urban vice. There are 'glimpses of long streets of busy interested life; thousands of people, not one among whom would care if one died of apoplexy on the spot, and most of whom would rather like the excitement of such a spectacle' – 'interested' carrying here the double meaning of self-interested, and a vicious curiosity.[419] The city seems to 'receive you as if only to devour you'. Talent is rewarded, 'but the good feelings of our nature, the warm, social, uncalculating, and friendly propensities, find no favourable soil'. London becomes a nightmare of meritocracy, in which each citizen is stripped down to their utility and the 'little platoons' that Burke imagined as the building blocks of civilised society are shattered by the 'eternal occupation of a town-life'. Even debauchery becomes an exhausting production: whether it is dissipation or gain, both are pursued without stopping, 'whilst feeling and reflection are lost in *whirl*, and noise, and hurry, and never-ending

---

[417] Bromwich, *The Mind of a Critic,* 62.

[418] 'A Day in London', 44.

[419] 'A Day in London', 44.

toil'.[420] Upon reacquaintance with friends who have moved to London, he finds a sad change: men 'once amiably imprudent and full of human feelings' have become 'all so much alike that it is difficult to distinguish one from another, all asking the same questions, all too much hurried to sit down and be idle and agreeable'.[421] This suggests a connection between the loss of familiar affections and the extreme uniformity caused by overexposure to variety, as if the mind's individuating biases are worn down and only the general mechanism of cognition remains.

The scene is a familiar one, setting rural virtue and warm feeling against the coldness, selfishness, anonymity and vice of the city. Habit in the narrator's country home signifies familiar affections and associations, the strength of custom and tradition tying generation to generation and neighbour to neighbour. Habit in the metropolis, however, is an acculturation of the mind and body to a profoundly unnatural way of life, a 'blunting' necessary to survive in the overpowering sensory overload of the surroundings. This is such a common motif that it barely requires explanation – even so determined an urbanite as Charles Lamb concedes that 'those slender ties, that prove slight as gossamer in the rending atmosphere of a metropolis, bind faster … in hearty, homely, loving Hertfordshire'.[422] Each person is at once solitary and part of the undifferentiated mass; the habitual sympathy of community has been cut, leaving behind only individual self-interest and morbid fascination, as the lived reality of the other recedes into mere spectacle and incident. A small recompense is the relief London offers from 'the mechanical regularities of a country life, without thinking it at all necessary to conform to the habits of town', but after a day of surprise meetings, theatre goings, and unsatisfactory dinners, the country gentleman retires to bed comparing the peacefulness of his country seat to the 'weariness, staleness, flatness, and unprofitableness' of his evening entertainment and making a resolution to use the next day 'at least entirely in my own way' – a tacit acknowledgement, perhaps, of the capital's influence in bending the will against

---

[420] 'A Day in London', 45.

[421] 'A Day in London', 46.

[422] Charles Lamb, 'Mackery End', in *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols (London: Methuen, 1903), ii, 78. All subsequent quotations from Lamb's works are taken from Lucas's edition.

itself, habituating its citizens to a mechanical existence of passing from spectacle to spectacle: a displacement of self-imposed habits by unwilled ones.[423]

Mechanism creeps into Hazlitt's metropolitan writings too. In 'The Free Admission', the lucky recipient of one finds his steps 'bend[ing] mechanically' towards the theatre: 'pleasure becomes a habit, and habit a duty', the essay's focus on the anticipatory pleasure of the theatre not quite overcoming the slightly sinister depiction of its 'Lotos'-like temptations, producing 'a sort of listless intoxication'.[424] Another essay lambasts the 'self-complacency, this cavalier, smooth, simpering indifference' of coffee-house politicians, with their eternal query: 'Have you anything new?'[425] Kevin Gilmartin portrays Hazlitt as caught between the two conflicting ideologies of 'agrarian classical republican' and 'commercial humanist political idioms', leading to his recurrent equations of metropolitan refinement with moral destruction.[426]

However, this version of the Romantic metropolis, while well-rehearsed, ought not to obscure other, more optimistic reflections on the city. Not all experienced the clamour and bustle of street life as a threateningly random accumulation of sense impressions. Mary Robinson's 'London's Summer Morning' describes a similarly cacophonous urban scene, but here it is transformed into a paean to its vitality and variety.

> Who has not waked to list the busy sounds
> Of summer's morning, in the sultry smoke
> Of noisy London? On the pavement hot
> The sooty chimney-boy, with dingy face
> And tattered covering, shrilly bawls his trade,
> Rousing the sleepy housemaid. At the door
> The milk-pail rattles, and the tinkling bell
> Proclaims the dustman's office; while the street

---

[423] 'A Day in London', 46, 50.

[424] 'The Free Admission', Howe, xvii, 365-370, (366, 365, 369).

[425] 'On Coffee-House Politicians', Howe, viii, 189-204 (194, 190).

[426] Kevin Gilmartin, 'Hazlitt's Visionary London', *Repossessing the Romantic Past* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40-62 (46).

Is lost in clouds impervious. […]
Now every shop displays its varied trade,
And the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet
Of early walkers. At the private door
The ruddy housemaid twirls the busy mop,
Annoying the smart 'prentice, or neat girl,
Tripping with band-box lightly. Now the sun
Darts burning splendor on the glittering pane,
Save where the canvas awning throws a shade
On the gay merchandise. Now, spruce and trim,
In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)
Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger
Peeps through the window, watching every charm.[427]

As the morning matures and the pace quickens, the poem organises itself into a succession of moments, signalled by an anticipatory 'now … now … now …' that seems to confirm the clockwork regularity of events, each new sound falling in sequence like a run of dominoes. What might be perceived as undifferentiated noise is revealed to have a hidden pattern, discernible for those familiar with the routine of the city. The awareness of economic inequality is flattened in the call-and-response chorus of the poem's working subjects, while the middle and upper classes are conspicuous by their absence: although much of the action of tradespeople and servants theoretically revolves around them, they are absent from a system that, without them, appears to function ideally.

[…] All along
The sultry pavement, the old-clothes-man cries
In tone monotonous, while sidelong views
The area for his traffic: now the bag
Is slyly opened, and the half-worn suit

[427] William D. Brewer et al, 'London's Summer Morning', in *The Works of Mary Robinson,* Volume II, Part I (London: Routledge 2010), lines 1-9, 15-26. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and are cited as 'London's Summer Morning'.

> (Sometimes the pilfered treasure of the base
> Domestic spoiler), for one half its worth,
> Sinks in the green abyss.[428]

The old-clothes-man's theft, of the 'half-worn suit', then, is a crime without a victim despite his status as a 'base/Domestic spoiler': sinking into the 'green abyss', the suit disappears into the city's system of call-and-response, exchange, and trade. Unlike the subject of 'Bartholomew Fair', immersed half-unwilling in the crowd, the perspective of Robinson's poem seems to float above and slightly away from the pavement, describing events primarily through sound, perhaps personified in the 'poor poet' of the penultimate line, waking from 'busy dreams,/To paint the summer morning'.[429] With this final line, the poem's structure becomes a tidy cycle of scene and poetic depiction of scene – yet also brings in a new possibility as to whether all that has preceded was only a 'busy dream'. This suggests something about how experience of the city is sustained through the imaginary of its populace: the poem projects an idealised harmony onto the scene, yet also nudges the reader towards an awareness of potential discontinuity between reality and representation, its final line reflexively moving back to its origins within the mind of the poet. The movement of the poem is a transformation of negative urban values – noise, confusion, commerce – into positive, only for that transformation to be called into question by the possibility of fantasy or imaginative self-deception.

Between August and October 1800, Robinson authored a series of essays for the *Monthly Magazine* under the title 'Present State of the Manners, Society, etc. etc. of the Metropolis of England'. Adriana Craciun calls it a 'manifesto of metropolitan culture', a conscious response to Wordsworth's 'Preface' in its determined relocation of art's ideal habitat to the city.[430] 'As London is the great emporium of commerce, it is also the centre of attraction for the full exercise of talents, and the liberal display of all that can embellish the arts and sciences'.[431] This is a common idea: while Cowper

[428] 'London's Summer Morning', ll. 32-9.

[429] 'London's Summer Morning', ll. 41-42.

[430] Mary Robinson and Adriana Craciun, "Present State of the Manners, Society, Etc. Etc. of the Metropolis of England." *PMLA*, 119/1 (2004) 103–19(103). Subsequent quotations from this article are taken from Cracuin's article and are cited 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis'.

[431] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 108.

compares the 'gross and pamper'd' city to 'a common and most noisome sewer' to which flows '[t]he dregs and faeculence of every land', he also admits that they are 'nurseries of the arts,/In which they flourish most'.[432]

> There, touch'd by Reynolds, a dull blank becomes
> A lucid mirror, in which Nature sees
> All her reflected features. Bacon there
> Gives more than female beauty to a stone,
> And Chatham's eloquence to marble lips.[433]

'A Day in London' also finds real pleasure in London's 'exhibitions and museums … bazaars and shops of all descriptions': on one side he encounters a Wapeti (an elk), on the other Haydon's 'The Raising of Lazarus', with which he has a visionary encounter – 'it is death *yet*, indeed, but death as no man ever saw it – not death *approaching,* but death *departing*' – before hastily discounting art criticism as an unfit pastime for a country gentleman.[434] In spectacle is to be found consolation for the dissipation and alienation of the city, a retreat into aesthetic pleasure and imaginative contemplation, which out of doors is dulled and even annihilated by excess of sensual stimulation. Yet these circumstances – vice and beauty, commerce and art – are shown repeatedly to have a relationship, one creating the conditions that make the other possible. Talent can only reach its full flowering in a city that, at the same time as nurturing it, threatens to 'devour' it.

Robinson's piece strikes a tone of optimism about the city's cosmopolitanism. The benefit of galleries is their display of 'the features, the *costume,* the scenery, of different nations', and theatres are praised as 'open schools of public manners, which exhibit at all times the touchstone of the public mind'.[435] Immigrants from France are celebrated for contributing to the 'wide circulation of knowledge', and the prose incorporates modish French terms seamlessly into the vocabulary of the essay to reflect the capaciousness of London's customs: 'the *bouleversement* of every thing in

---

[432] William Cowper, *The Task* (London: J. Johnson, 1785), Book i, 36-7.

[433] Cowper, *The Task,* i, 37.

[434] 'A Day in London', 46-7.

[435] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 110, 119.

the polite world is in nothing more *outré* than in the disposal of time'.[436] Robinson does not see a contradiction between rooted English habits and polite cosmopolitan habits, defending the Italian opera in such terms: 'in its early establishment, [it] was considered as a pernicious species of exotic, only transplanted on a British soil to effeminise the public taste. But the gradual power it has evinced, has proved that harmony can exterminate the most rooted prejudices'.[437] In this, Robinson draws from the Whiggish 18th century tradition of cosmopolitanism, exemplified in Joseph Addison's famous panegyric to the Exchange: 'I am a Dane, Swede, or Frenchman at different times, or rather fancy myself like the old philosopher, who upon being asked what countryman he was, replied that he was a citizen of the world'.[438] The imagining of sympathy here is very different from Burke's conception. Identification comes from a quotidian experience of the mass difference of others, it does not move gradually outwards from near circles of habitual affection into the wider community. Habit becomes flexible and adaptable, the difference between modern Italian tastes and more 'rooted' English ones a matter of time rather than of kind.

However, as much as it commends the culture of the city and, connectedly, the modern rise of the periodical press, the essay also highlights the frequent neglect and indigence of the literary class. Although Robinson blames partly the patronage system for failing to reward talent, she also criticises the 'ardent … pursuit of fame' that characterises the modern age and divides any potential unity within the literary community: '[h]ow much is genius deceived when it seeks this single, this unconnected species of gratification!'[439] In a city of individuals striving to amplify their own unique reputations, there can be 'no sympathetic association of soul; no genuine impulse of affection, originating in congeniality of mind'.[440] The unsociability of the literary class hints at a wider failure of imaginative community in the city. An Irish inhabitant of London remarks that London 'is full of odd places and odd people … in London every thing is peculiar, individual and eccentric. Every man is whimsical in his own way, and follows no leader. They scorn to imitate, and baffle

---

[436] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 119, 112.

[437] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 112.

[438] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator,* No. 69 (19 May 1711), in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 6 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1987), i, 294.

[439] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 119.

[440] 'Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis', 119.

all attempts at being imitated'. How, then, to represent a city in which 'every individual forms a separate species'?[441]

Robinson's essays are part of a fashion for accounts of the metropolis that attempted to encapsulate and make decipherable its rapid growth and diversification. Unlike the industrial cities of the north like Leeds and Manchester, London was not organised around a dominant trade or market; its rapid expansion was fuelled by a variety of sectors including trades, distribution, clothing, furniture, shipping, and the financial market. At the same time, its centrality to the political and economic life of England as a whole increased, so that it became, in Raymond Williams's words, plural and various 'not only in the sense of its hundreds of trades but in the sense that it was managing and directing so much of other people's business'.[442] John Feltham's *The Picture of London* describes the inhabitants of London as 'in general, so completely involved in the vortex of their own particular circle or business, that they remain in a state of total ignorance of all the surrounding and inviting objects', his work hoping to redirect 'their thrifty and sensual pursuits to more worthy and liberal employment'.[443] The city becomes something that needs to be deciphered – to live profitably, the citizen must be lifted out of incomprehension and educated in its habits.

Not everyone frames this as a problem: in 1828 *The Athanaeum* proposed to illustrate for the reader various 'London Sets', and described its task as 'resembling the purveyor of an antiquarian, who drags to light recondite manuscripts which he is himself unable to decipher'. These 'sets' depended on occupation or systems of thought for their peculiarity – sets 'legal, mercantile, or medical, utilitarian, evangelical, or benevolentarian'.[444] The author of this article disdains those defined by locality such as country or country-town as too dull and homogenous to record. Rather it is the surface variety of London 'sets' that makes them of interest to the reader, a diversity of habits arising from the curious mix of insularity and miscellaneousness that characterises life in the metropolis.

---

[441] T. O'Toole, (1825). 'Letters from a London Student', No. II, *Dublin and London Magazine*, March1825 -December 1826, 1(2), 64-68.

[442] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage, 2016 [1973]) 147.

[443] John Feltham, *The Picture of London for 1802* (London: R.Phillips, 1802), 3-4.

[444] 'London Sets', *The Athenaeum* (30 July 1828), 633-634.

Yet metropolitan habits necessarily are provisional, even ephemeral, something that is also highlighted by the literature: Samuel Pegge's *Anecdotes of the English Language* (1803) is a comic 'antiquary' survey of London slang, the humour arising from the ironic incongruity between Pegge's faux-learned insistence on etymological roots linking the Cockney back to the ancient Saxons, and the reality of a fast-moving linguistic landscape obsessed with novelty.[445] Richard Phillips, in his *Modern London* (1804), aims to 'exhibit the very soul of the Metropolis in a way which has never before been attempted' by recording the lives of itinerant traders.[446] These works are as much memorial as they are instructive or entertaining; they emphasise the difficulty of metropolitan representation, the necessary incompleteness of such a task. Yet they also carry the promise of knowing the city, of becoming habituated to the apparent chaos of its faceless crowds and senseless variety. Writing of this tension between comprehension and incomprehension, Walter Benjamin writes that '[t]he city is only apparently homogenous. Even its name takes on a different sound from one district to the next […] To know them means to understand those lines that, running alongside railroad crossings and across privately owned lots, within the park and along the riverbank, function as limits.'[447]

Benjamin also finds the modernity of the city to be conditioned by the past, an ideal primal history which, 'as stored in the unconscious of the collective [...] engender[s] through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions'.[448] Knowledge of the city is therefore not only spatial, but temporal. Between the gallery and the theatre, the country gentleman of 'A Day in London' passes on to dinner, then a coffee-house, 'one of the very few … now remaining in which I find any thing which I can compare with the glorious coffee-house hours of the days of the Spectator'.[449] The narrator recalls his last visit to the coffee-house, when he came across a nobleman, now in his middle age, who had been in youth a part of the

---

[445] Samuel Pegge, *Anecdotes of the English Language* (London: John Nichols,1803).

[446] *Modern London; Being the History and Present State of the British Metropolis. Illustrated with Numerous Copper Plates. [By Richard Phillips.]* (London: 1804), 287.

[447] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 84.

[448] Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', *The Arcades Project,* 4-5.

[449] 'A Day in London', 48.

fashionable circles of London, but who now alternated between conversation and sleep 'with so easy and indolent an air that … I half suspected him of being a poet'.[450] In such contemplation of 'the silent lapse of time', Horace's *Eheu fugaces* affects the narrator particularly, the sight of one 'who had tried every changeful variety of fashion, until invention was exhausted and vanity satiated, and who had proved … the fatigue of fashionable folly' and settled finally on the form of 'the agreeable and well-informed gentleman'.[451] Sir L_____ S_____ embodies both the frothiness and temporality of fashion, and its ultimate resolve into a form that would withstand the test of time; the nobleman represents the passing of novelty into familiarity, a reassuring testament to continuity. This figure could thus be said to stand in for London, or at least its representations, which cross between apparent oppositions such as fashion and endurance, superficiality and depth, past and future.

II.

In *Notes of a Journey Through France and Italy*, published in 1826 following a honeymoon tour of Europe, Hazlitt concedes the superior design of Paris compared to London ('airy space' contrasted with 'fetid confinement') before reverting to his habitual preference:

> But for a real West End, for a solid substantial *cut* into the heart of a metropolis, commend me to the streets and squares on each side of the top of Oxford-street – with Grosvenor and Portman squares at one end, and Cavendish and Hanover at the other, linked together by Bruton, South-Audley, and a hundred other fine old streets, with a broad airy pavement, a display of comfort, of wealth, of taste, and rank all about you, each house seeming to have been the residence of some respectable old English family for half a century past, and with Portland-place looking out towards Hampstead and Highgate, with their hanging gardens and lofty terraces, and Primrose-hill nestling beneath them, in

[450] 'A Day in London', 48.

[451] 'A Day in London', 49.

> green, pastoral luxury, the delight of the Cockneys, the aversion of Sir Walter and his merrymen![452]

The element of wry self-reference here is interesting: this passage from *Journey* enacts the Cockney consciousness he disdains elsewhere. 'On Londoners and Country People', first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in August 1823, a month after 'A Day in London', had derided the narrow horizons of anyone who would believe that Primrose Hill was the 'Ultima Thule of his romantic desires', a location that immediately brings Keats and Hunt to mind, daydreaming in the suburban Eden of Hampstead.[453] By contrast, *Notes of a Journey* seems to dramatize and romanticise the imaginative manoeuvres mocked by Lockhart: for in the long, rapturous sentence quoted above, can't we see Hazlitt projecting himself into the 'comfort, wealth, taste, and rank' of all around him?[454] The 'he' of 'On Londoners', which objectifies the overweening presumption of the Cockney, is replaced by 'you', as each address on the broad avenue becomes a doorway into the imagined past. Habitual affection seems to extend out from the memory and into the city at large, as the homesick essayist rattles through foreign streets and reminisces of home. In a characteristic turn however, the sentence after this digression in *Notes of a Journey* is in praise of Paris's lack of suburbs. 'You have not to wade through ten miles of straggling houses to get a breath of fresh air, or a peep at nature … The superfluous population is pared off, like the pie-crust by the circumference of the dish'.[455] Yet it is Hazlitt's own friends and compatriots that live in and are associated with the unpared and straggling suburban excess of petit-bourgeois London. In another layer to the comparison: John Nash, whose layout of Regent Street was completed in 1823, had originally taken inspiration from the boulevards of French cities in a bid to clear away the ancient labyrinthine streets of the West End's less prosperous neighbourhoods.[456]

---

[452] *Notes of a Journey Through France and Italy* in Howe, x, 83-304 (158).

[453] 'On Londoners and Country People', Howe, xii, 66-77 (66).

[454] Lockhart as 'Z' launched a series of vicious attacks on 'the Cockney School' in *Blackwood's Magazine* from 1817.

[455] *Notes of a Journey*, Howe, x, 158.

[456] Ryan Heuser, Franco Moretti, Erik Steiner, 'The Emotions of London', *Pamphlets of the Stanford Literary Lab*, 13, October 2016, 7. This study examines the fictional representation of London,

'Footmen', published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1830, takes the perspective of a flaneur strolling around a similar neighbourhood, noting the livery men flocking around the carriages of 'fashionable belle[s]' with a mocking eye. Advising the reader to 'take a stroll towards the West-end of the town, South Audley or Upper Grosvenor-street' to enter into the '*beau-idéal* of civilised life', the essay soon turns to the more bitter realities of metropolitan expansion. 'Deliver me from the filth and cellars of St Giles's, from the shops of Holborn and the Strand, from all that appertains to middle and to low life … There is here none of the squalidness of poverty, none of the hardships of daily labour, none of the anxiety and petty artifice of trade'.[457] Burke's characterisation of habit as the 'decent drapery of life' seems apposite, obscuring the reality, the 'naked shivering nature' of London's economic relations behind the surface tranquillity of the Georgian facades lining Regent's Park.[458] The repetition serves to ironise both pieces: the reader who notices the similarity cannot help but go back to the earlier *Notes of a Journey*, wondering if they have been too easily taken in by its whimsical romanticisation of London aristocratic life, while the vituperative bitterness of the latter is leavened by the previous recognition of the seductions of laying aside the awareness of inequality, want, grubbiness. The essay,'On Footmen', becomes implicated in the cognitive dissonance it sets out to denigrate, the Cockneyfied imaginative dreaming that approaches delusions of grandeur. '[L]ife's business is changed into a romance, a summer's-dream, and nothing painful, disgusting, or vulgar intrudes': the essay acknowledges both the self-indulgence of imaginatively insulating oneself from the reality of social inequality, and the pleasures of doing so.[459]

It must also be noted the foundations upon which the nostalgia of *Notes of a Journey* is built; much of the West End was in the process of development as recently as the turn of the century, with Portland Place only laid out in the 1770s. Far from being a settled panorama, London in the nineteenth century saw a sharp increase in

---

confirming the representational bias towards the patrician West-End, and the financially important City at the expense of the North and South where population was growing rapidly. See 23 for more detail. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited Heuser et al, 'Emotions'.

[457] 'On Footmen', *New Monthly Magazine,* 29/115 (1830) 230-234 (231). This anonymous article was written by Hazlitt and is included in his *Complete Works* as 'On Footmen'. See Howe, xvii, 354-9.

[458] Burke, viii, 128.

[459] 'On Footmen', Howe, xvii, 355.

speculative property developments of fashionable houses aspiring to the status of the ever-popular Grosvenor Square; yet such investments often followed a pattern of temporary demand followed by decline, due to the attendant population of servants, salespeople and tradespeople that moved wherever a wealthy clientele would move. Developments like Regent Street would be constructed with the express purpose of separating out this inevitable intermixing of rich and poor,[460] yet because the livelihoods of the latter depended on the presence of the former, it led only to their being pushed back into the smaller, older streets, which would gradually become slum dwellings.[461] When Blake on his wander through 'charter'd streets' observes:

> How the Chimney-sweepers cry
> Every blackning Church appalls,
> And the hapless Soldiers sigh
> Runs in blood down Palace walls[462]

he brings to the surface the submerged connections between luxury and poverty that structure the life of the city.[463] It is a reality that *Notes of a Journey* sublimates through imaginative projection but that 'Footmen' makes explicit; the contrast between these two depictions of the same area suggest the complexity of Hazlitt's thought around romanticising the city – neither acquiescing to its erasure of social realities, nor dismissing its appeal to habitual sympathies. And after all, these are not irreversibly conservative, but can be turned to radical account. Raymond Williams describes the feeling of looking up at the buildings that constitute the city's centres of

---

[460] 'The whole communication from Charing-Cross to Oxford-Street will be a boundary and complete separation between the Streets and Squares occupied by the Nobility and the Gentry, and the narrow Streets and meaner Houses occupied by mechanics and the trading part of the community'. Quoted in Christopher Hibbert, Ben Weinreb, John Keay, Julia Keay, *The London Encyclopaedia (3rd edition)* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011), 685.

[461] Gavin Weightman, and Stephen Humphries, *The Making of Modern London, 1914-1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 74: 'There were no grand housing developments anywhere that did not develop their hideous slum quarters'.

[462] William Blake, 'London', *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* ed. Richard Willmott, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990 [1794], 38, ll.9-12.

[463] This reading is indebted to Williams, *The Country and the City,* 148.

power. ‘I find I do not say, “There is your city, your great bourgeois monument, your towering structure of this still precarious civilisation” or I do not only say that; I say also “This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?”‘[464] The very dynamism of the metropolis argues against any fatalistic reading of the oppressive habits that currently weigh down its citizens. Affection for the streets and squares of the West-End need not entail acceptance of corrupted power; the sympathetic imagination may move in a more democratic direction, taking the whole city into its purview.

However, the main focus of ‘Footmen’ is pushing the similitude between servant and master to an absurd degree, until the places are reversed so that the ‘plain suit of the master’ is ‘wonderfully relieved by the borrowed trappings and mock-finery of his servant’.[465]

> You see that man on horseback who keeps at some distance behind another, who follows him as his shadow turns as he turns, and as he passes or speaks to him, lifts his hand to his hat and observes the most profound attention – what is the difference between these two men? The one is as well mounted, as well fed, is younger and seemingly in better health than the other; but between these two there are perhaps seven or eight classes of society, each of whom is dependent on and trembles at the frown of the other.[466]

The semblance between master and servant was an established *topos* in literary representations of servants. Mary Robinson, describing the promenades of the wealthy, notes that ‘[t]he duchess, and her *femme de chambre,* are dressed exactly alike; the nobleman and his groom are equally ambitious of displaying the neat boot, the cropped head, and the external decorations, as well as the quaint language, of the stable boy’.[467] As early as 1730, not long after the occupation became commonplace among nobility, a poem written by a footman to his fellow colleagues advises, ‘But

[464] Williams, *The Country and the City,* 5.

[465] ‘On Footmen’, Howe, xvii, 355.

[466] ‘On Footmen’, Howe, xvii, 355.

[467] Robinson, ‘Present State of the Manners of the Metropolis’, 111.

don't ye run into affected Ways,/And apifh Geftures practis'd now-a-days'.[468] A 1737 correspondent to *The Daily Journal* complains that footmen 'have, for a long Course of Time, encouraged each other to look upon themselves, during the Time of their sitting to keep Places, as Representatives of those who sent them; and of course, as GOOD as any present in the house'.[469] Another 1821 essay of Hazlitt's, 'On the Look of a Gentleman', had observed the fungibility of gentlemanly attributes, and their subsequent adoption as the costume of the lower classes:

> Our modern footmen, as we see them fluttering and lounging in lobbies, or at the doors of ladies' carriages, bedizened in lace and powder, with ivory-headed cane and embroidered gloves, give one the only idea of the fine gentlemen of former periods, as they are still occasionally represented on the stage …[470]

Footmen are 'a cast of the aristocracy, with a slight shade of distinction', able to ape their manners to the extent that 'it was next to impossible to tell them apart'.[471] This imitation teeters between disruption and reification of class categories; the lord's superiority is buttressed by the gentility of his servants but undermined by the ironic revelation that gentility is not much more than an array of signifiers. Garrick's play *The High Life Below Stairs* (1759) satirises two footmen who borrow their employer's names and carry themselves with the same entitlement as they. The "Duke" exclaims: 'we, who have the Honour to serve the Nobility, are of another Species. We are above the common Forms, have Servants to wait upon us, and are as lazy and luxurious as our Masters. – Ha! – My dear Sir Harry! –'[472] Although it is the servants who are lampooned, the theatricality of such a representation makes the artifice and roleplay of class clear, bringing into question whether it is the footmen's pretensions that are the charade, or the very idea that one class of man is born better than another. The difference is sustained only by the continuing collusion of

---

[468] Robert Dodsley, *A footman's friendly advice to his brethren of the livery* (London: T. Worrall, 1730).

[469] Correspondent to the 'Occasional Prompter', *The Daily Journal*, 22nd February 1737.

[470] 'On the Look of a Gentleman', Howe, vii, 209-19, (212).

[471] 'On Footmen', Howe, xvii, 356.

[472] James Townley, *High Life below Stairs. A Farce. Written by David Garrick, Esq. [or Rather, by James Townley], Etc.*, (London: R.Butters,1780), Act I, scene ii.

gentleman with footman, by which the latter gains a nominal elevation above other types of domestic servant: the master 'wants drones, not drudges, about him, to share his superfluity'.[473]

Much has been written on the 'Cockney School Attacks', both as they reflected wider tensions within the literary scene of the early nineteenth century, and as they affected Hazlitt personally.[474] Politically the Tory *Blackwood's* and the liberal *Examiner* were natural rivals, and it was part of the former's house style to court controversy through libels, parodies, and broadsides. Nevertheless, the portrait of the Cockney school that emerges from the attacks speaks to something more than personal animosity towards Hunt and Hazlitt; rather it expresses acute cultural anxiety about the swelling audience of 'aspiring apprentices and critical clerks' now taking part in those political, philosophical and aesthetic discourses that had once been the preserve of 'men of some rank in society'.[475] Gregory Dart has identified the 'Cockney moment' as well established by 1817, with Cockney characters visible on the stage as well as in periodicals, and seen on both Tory and liberal sides of the political spectrum as figures of fun.[476] Whereas 'Cockney' had previously referred to any coddled inhabitant of the city, it now took on the class connotations that 'Z' plays upon in his portrait of Hunt: this new audience enjoyed consuming the glut of new periodicals and attending educational lectures, though unlearned in Latin and Greek. Thus, the figure of the Cockney emerges in the early nineteenth century as a sharply

---

[473] 'On Footmen', 356.

[474] See Emily Lorraine de Montluzin,. "Killing the Cockneys: 'Blackwood's'' Weapons of Choice against Hunt, Hazlitt, and Keats." *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 47 (1998), 87–107; Kim Wheatley, 'The Blackwood's Attacks on Leigh Hunt', *Nineteenth- Century Literat*ure (1992), 47(1), 1-31; Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*: *Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); On the group's response to the attacks, for example, see Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 370–81; Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 224–26, 366–68; John O. Haydon, *The Romantic Reviewers* (University of Chicago Press, 1968), 176–215; and Alan Lang Strout, 'Hunt, Hazlitt, and Maga,' *English Language Notes* 4 (June 1937), 151–59.

[475] 'On the Cockney School of Poetry', *BEM* (April 1819), 97.

[476] Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21.

defined stereotype: a skilled worker from the suburbs of London, 'smart' but ignorant and conceited, limited in means and position but high of aspiration.

While Hazlitt's direct retaliation was robust, it is also possible to detect throughout his essays a more reflective response to Lockhart's characterisation of the Cockney, which became a recurring theme: an interest in the psychology of the urban denizen, as well as an interest in depicting that interest. By dogging the footsteps of the Cockney as he dips in and out of Hazlitt's *oeuvre*, the reader is able to see how he takes up continually the charges of 'Z', not only to refute them, but to consider them and at times to mimic them, either in earnest or in burlesque – in true Cockney fashion. One comes to see that, far from being casual or random, they work to dramatize Hazlitt's conception of habit, and what is at stake for him in the idea.

'On Londoners and Country People' was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1823 and begins by invoking the author's adversary. 'I do not agree with Mr *Blackwood* in his definition of the word *Cockney*. He means by it a person who has happened at any time to live in London, and who is not a Tory – I mean by it, a person who has never lived out of London, and who has got all his ideas from it'.[477] As a response to the 'Cockney School attacks', it is intriguing, because of its willingness to engage with them in a spirit of enquiry rather than refutation. In another essay, he describes the need to 'cultivate' thought like a plot of land. 'People may collect all the wisdom they will ever attain, quite as well by staying at home as by travelling abroad. There is no use in shifting from place to place, from side to side, or from subject to subject […] we may see certain things nearer, and others more remote; but the great masses and landmarks will remain'.[478] The internal landscape of self becomes Wordsworth's Grasmere, or Clare's Helpstone, a pastoral geography of peaks and valleys in contrast to the ephemeral peep show of metropolitan street life; it is within the constancy of the setting that temporal change is observable, within the habit of long contemplation that meaning inheres. In contrast, as the examples below will illustrate, the Cockney is the victim of a habitual lack of reflection, an inability to stop shifting 'from place to place, from side to side'.

'On Londoners' begins by echoing the contemptuous tone of 'Z':

[477] 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 66.

[478] 'On Consistency of Opinion', Howe, xvii, 22-33 (33).

> [The Cockney] sees every thing near, superficial, little, in hasty succession. The world turns round, and his head with it, like a round-about at a fair, till he becomes stunned and giddy with the motion. Figures glide by as in a camera obscura. There is a glare, a perpetual hubbub, a noise, a crowd about him; he sees and hears a vast number of things, and knows nothing. He is pert, raw, ignorant, conceited, ridiculous, shallow, contemptible. His senses keep him alive; and he knows, inquires, and cares for nothing farther. He meets the Lord Mayor's coach, and without ceremony treats himself to an imaginary ride in it. He notices the people going to court or a city-feast, and is quite satisfied with the show […] He is, in short, a great man by proxy, and comes so often in contact with fine persons and things, that he rubs off a little of the gilding, and is surcharged with a sort of second-hand, vapid, tingling, troublesome self-importance.[479]

The Cockney becomes a caricature of associative psychology, unable to digest the barrage of sense data coming his way, a mere Humean bundle of perceptions. In the city, attention is too taken up to develop the understanding; instead, one is caught up in a blizzard of impressions, leaving behind nothing but 'troublesome self-importance'. The terms of critique seem to recall the 'Cockney School' articles, which had lampooned Leigh Hunt as such a deluded egotist: '[h]e draws his ideas of courtly splendour from the Lord Mayor's coach, and he dreams of tournaments, after having seen the aldermen on horseback with their furred gowns and silk stockings.'[480] In both pieces the logic is the same: the Cockney's imagination is piqued by the sights of the city, but rather than expanding his horizons, it only serves to reinvest their superficial glamour in his own person.

'On Londoners' was republished in the 1826 essay collection *The Plain Speaker,* appearing alongside the similarly-themed piece 'On the Look of a Gentleman', which notes the physiological effect on the individual of life in London: 'a quick flexibility of movement, a smart jerk, an aspiring and confident tread, and an air as if on the alert to keep the line of march'.[481] Cockneys also make their way into the

[479] 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 67.

[480] 'On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. II', *BEM* (November 1817), 194-201(198).

[481] 'On the Look of a Gentleman', Howe, vii, 217.

Characteristics, a book of aphorisms Hazlitt published in 1823 modelled after the maxims of La Rouchefoucauld. Maxim 390 states that 'the inhabitant of a metropolis is apt to think this circumstance alone gives him a decided superiority over every one else, and does not improve that natural advantage so much as he ought'. The next continues: 'A true-bred *cockney* fancies his having been born in London is a receipt in full for every other species of merit. He belongs, in his own opinion, to a *privileged class*', with maxim 392 adding that 'the number of objects we see from living in a large city amuses the mind like a perpetual raree-show, without supplying it with any ideas. The understanding thus becomes habitually mechanical and superficial'.[482] At this point, the form of the maxim no longer really applies, instead breaking its bounds and turning irrepressibly essayistic, drawn back to reiterate the train of thought that animated 'On Londoners'. Hazlitt's typification of the Cockney character in 'English Students at Rome', published in 1827, expands the Cockney problem internationally. The inhabitants of Rome:

> have too many objects always passing before them, that engage their attention and fill up their time, to allow them either much leisure or inclination for thought or study. Rome is the great metropolis of Art; and it is somewhat to be feared that those who take up their abode there will become, like other *cockneys*, ignorant, conceited and superficial.[483]

The setting is different but the argument is familiar: glutted by beauty, the Roman Cockney's mind wanders restlessly from masterpiece to masterpiece, taking in nothing but the reflected glamour of their fame; the imagination contracts rather than expands, moving from the 'great metropolis of art' to self-infatuation.[484] Such similarly themed pieces, published so closely together, suggest something more than the careless repetition of an essay manufacturer, staging and restaging the same opinion in different contexts, providing a different flourish each time.

However, 'On Londoners' enables a longer and more complex consideration of the idea. The essay continues: '[a] real Cockney is the poorest creature in the world, the

---

[482] 'Characteristics, In the Manner of Rochefoucault's Maxims', Howe, ix, 163-229 (223-4).

[483] 'English Students at Rome', Howe, xvii, 134-143, (135).

[484] 'English Students at Rome', Howe, xvii, 135.

most literal, the most mechanical, and yet he too lives in a world of romance – a fairy-land of his own'.[485] Though he lives in a garret he is able to fantasise himself into Grosvenor Square, and supplements his meagre clerk's wage with the imaginary dignity of the lawyers under whom he works. His predilection for tea-gardens is contextualised sympathetically within the cramped confines of his day-to-day existence. As the essay progresses, the perspective shifts: from the elevated view above the blinkered Cockney's head, it descends to survey 'the lime-trees or poplars wav[ing] overhead to "catch the breezy air" … the holiday people [...] playing ball … here [...] quaffing ale, there sipping tea'.[486] The authoritative voice of the essay becomes increasingly implicated in the urban scenes it purports to disavow, until eventually it is embodied in the harried interlocutor to the loquacious Doctor Goodman, who appropriates his umbrella and buttonholes him for an hour, and whose anecdote about Richard Pinch takes over the page. It then moves on to consider Dunster the fishmonger, and his childhood memories of supremacy at marbles. By this time the voice has resolved into an 'I' who engages with the Cockney milieu that he had previously reviled, in opposition to the *Blackwoods*' anonymous 'we'; and it is this 'I' who is able to identify himself the characters he ridicules, pleading, 'Forgive me, dear Dunster, if I have drawn a sketch of some of thy venial foibles, and delivered thee into the hands of these Cockneys of the North'.[487] In 'On Londoners', the reader sees a habitual thought gradually untangles itself until prejudice transforms into imaginative sympathy.

Similarly, when the Cockney of 'On Londoners' allows his imagination to ride alongside the Lord Mayor in his coach, he both confirms the aspirational status of such arbitrary figures of power and makes them a goal within the imaginative reach of such a common man as himself. This is a thought process familiar to many in the city: the country gentleman of 'A Day in London' reminds the reader that it is no small matter 'to find oneself actually in the same town with _______, and ________, and ________, men whose names and deeds furnish the remotest provinces with conversation but seem yet obscurely viewed so long as we remain in the country'. Walking out, he meets a Duke and a Marquis, a poet, a Judge, a bishop, before

[485] 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 68.

[486] 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 70.

[487] 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 75.

admitting that '[a]ll this is very astonishing to a country gentleman': the very fact of proximity gives vividness to the imagination. As Hazlitt's admits in 'Londoners'– sardonically – '[y]our true Cockney is your only true leveller', torn between seeing the Cockney as the upholder of a democratic metropolitanism, or as a commonplace pretender.[488] The dynamism and heterogeneity of the metropolis opens up the possibilities of habit: what has been made or instituted can be remade, the possibilities of self and society-making not limited by the more entrenched customs of person and place that might carry more weight in a rural setting, where one turns away from books and newspapers, everything 'that disturbs our lethargic animal existence'. We might even read Hazlitt's echoing of *Blackwood's* as a Cockney donning of the Blackwoodsman's garb in order to test out his arguments, his repudiation of the rural life the periodical equivalent of Richard Pinch's riposte: '"*The same to you, sir*!"[489]

At the end of 'Footmen', Hazlitt moves on to the situation of the 'lady's maid in a family travelling abroad'.[490] The reader is introduced to 'our Abigail',

> mounted in *dicky* with my Lord, or John, snug and comfortable – setting out on the grand tour as fast as four horses can carry her, whirled over the 'vine-covered hills and gay regions of France', crossing the Alps and Apennines in breathless terror and wonder – frightened at a precipice, laughing at her escape – coming to the inn, going into the kitchen to see what is to be hand – not speaking a word of the language, except what she picks up, "as pigeons pick up peas" – the bill paid, the passport *visé,* the horses put to, and *au route* again – seeing everything, and understanding nothing, in a full tide of health, fresh air, and animal spirits, and without one qualm of taste or sentiment …[491]

If the content seems to condemn her, the breathless, headlong style sympathises with Abigail's dizzy, rushed impressions. The maid enacts a humorously truncated Romantic pilgrimage to the sublime, without subsiding into 'taste or sentiment'. To

488 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 75.

489 'On Londoners', Howe, xii, 72.

490 'On Footmen', Howe, xvii, 357.

491 'On Footmen', 358.

the eyes of foreigners unfamiliar with the subtleties of the English class system, the place of Abigail and her mistress are easily confused – yet 'the difference is, that the young lady, on her return, has something to think of; but the maid absolutely forgets every thing, and is only giddy and out of breath, as if she had been up in a balloon'.[492] Upon return, nothing has changed for her; she remains the same, the course of her mind ultimately unaffected by her voyages. The impressions of travel are erased from Abigail's mind, while they remain to be reflected upon by the aristocratic young lady. The difference between mistress and servant is re-established as internal: whether the mind is able to create new associations, or whether it is too fixed to absorb any further. By going over the subject, these essays dramatise what they pose as lacking in metropolitan consciousness – an ability to stick with the subject, to mull over it and examine it from many perspectives, thereby establishing something more than a fleeting impression.

By the end of 'Footmen', class difference appears to be reconfirmed along psychological lines. Two kinds of habit vie against each other: the unthinking, habitual mentality of silly maids like Abigail, which keeps the mind fixed and shallow, and the habit of reflection cultivated by her mistress, whose thoughts require more wrangling but which lead to deeper understanding. Yet as we have seen, such an easy distinction does not adhere. Hazlitt's writing on the Cockney frequently slips in and out of the persona it professes to critique, at times in burlesque, at others in emulation; asserting the attractions and even the virtues of a Cockney sensibility, only to withdraw them again. Crucially, they also grapple with the Cockney attacks themselves, implicating himself throughout on both sides of the question – at once contemptuous observer and Cockney upstart mimicking his *Blackwood's* opponents. Another essay from *The Plain Speaker*, 'On Depth and Superficiality', also considers the effect of travel on the mind, but here Hazlitt replaces Abigail:

> in travelling abroad, the mind acquires a restless and vagabond habit. There is more of hurry and novelty, but less of sincerity and certainty in our pursuits than at home. We snatch hasty glances of a great variety of things but want some central point of view. After making the grand tour, and seeing the finest

[492] 'On Footmen', Howe, xvii, 358.

> sights in the world, we are glad to come back at last to our native place and our own fireside.[493]

The flexibility of sympathy in these essays gives them their fundamental instability of tone: critique and habitual contempt can suddenly burst into imaginative life, while Hazlitt's own label of Cockney seems to edge the voice of the essays with irony throughout. As a whole, they attest to a difficulty in distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' habit, between those imaginative manoeuvres that lead to deeper understanding, and those that lead merely to the self. The figure of the Cockney crystallises the ambiguous, questionable nature of habit, perhaps most acute in relation to the city. Residing between thought and feeling, conscious and unconscious action, habit is not as manageable or as predictable as it appears, its associations often leading to unexpected ends.

III.

The research of Ryan Heuser, Erik Steiner and Franco Moretti has shown a curious fact about representations of London.[494] Despite the great swelling of the capital that began in the eighteenth century [and continued into the next century], the imaginary city in the next century became increasingly detached from its reality as it proliferated [in the nineteenth century], with fictional representations remaining steadily clustered around the old centres of the City and the West End; and wider London remained unrepresented, even though by the early 19th nineteenth century it extended northwards to Somers Town and south and eastwards to the newly-built docks.[495]

Despite this, the London of the nineteenth century did not undergo a dramatic physical change – ambitious city planning to bring it up to the modern standards of other European cities remained on paper, leaving much of the older streets and

---

[493] 'On Depth and Superficiality', Howe, xii,346-359, (355).

[494] Heuser et al, 'Emotions'

[495] Gavin Weightman and Steve Humphries, *The Making of Modern London* (London: 1984, 2007 reprint) 6.

neighbourhoods unchanged.[496] Coincidentally, the innovations that turned London into a global hub of finance – the Royal Exchange and founding of Bank of England in the 18th century – located much of the modern power of the city in its oldest district, the City.[497] The apparent contradiction, one that still exists today, is articulated by Gavin Weightman and Steve Humphries as a double symbolism: the City at once represents money, 'and a peculiarly well-dressed and tidy way of acquiring very large quantities of it', and, in the guilds and livery companies, 'a resplendent repository of surviving ancient ritual'. The City 'cannot escape the fact of its overriding, and still not-quite-acceptable commercialism, but it can hide behind its anachronistic ritual'.[498] In fact, by the turn of the century, the square mile was undergoing a transformation of character, displacing its tradesmen, shopkeepers and merchants, to be replaced by offices and financial institutions.[499] Such changes, however, remained demographic rather than physical, with abandoned merchants' houses being transformed into clerks' tenements: the new wove itself around the skeleton of the old, leaving traces of the city's history intact.[500]

One of the major changes to London life in the early nineteenth century was the proliferation of clerks and office-workers, employees of the huge bureaucracies that kept England's capital functioning at the heart of a global empire. These city workers create and are created by the modern city, the daily routine of commute and commercial drudgery seeming to represent all that is unnatural and deadening about urban life. Resisting the habituating, mechanising tendencies of the city, which threaten to consume the individual, becomes a familiar *topos* of those who write of it. The narrator of 'A Day in London' imagines the coffee-houses of old, where gentleman who 'hang loosely upon society, and are not chained to localities by wives, children, or any set occupation or regular and daily routine of duties' would consort with each other. Such are idealised as men 'of the varied information of professional men, but without professional prejudices, because they are of no profession; and are men of discursive habits, tastes and fancies' – a version of the

[496] Weightman and Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, 10.

[497] Weightman and Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, 41.

[498] Weightman and Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, 3.

[499] Weightman and Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, 3-4.

[500] Weightman and Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, 11.

metropolitan citizen cleansed of the 'interest' which had so horrified him upon entry into the city.[501]

Similarly, Hazlitt's *Conversations of Northcote* (1830) sees him resisting the exhortation to contribute more to society.

> I see how the man of business and fortune passes his time. He is up and in the city by eight; swallows his breakfast in haste, attends a meeting of creditors, must read Lloyd's lists, consult the price of consols, study the markets, look into his accounts, pay his workmen, and superintend his clerks […] I rise when I please, breakfast at length, write what comes into my head, and after taking a mutton-chop and a dish of strong tea, go to the play, and thus my time passes. Mr —— has no time to go to the play.[502]

Hazlitt's friend Charles Lamb, however, could not afford this bohemian approach to employment. He worked for many years as a clerk at the East India Company, his letters often confessing to being authored furtively at his desk, and upon his retirement wrote joyfully of his liberation: 'Here I am, then, after thirty-three years' slavery … I am daily steadying, and shall soon find it as natural to me to be my own master as it has been irksome to have had a master'.[503] Yet a letter to Mary Wordsworth suggests that the habits of office life offer certain consolations. It begins with a familiar confession that he writes at work, with a quill 'which seems more ready to glide into arithmetical figures and names of gourds, cassia, cardamoms, aloes, ginger, or tea, than into kindly responses and friendly recollections'.[504] His very quill, habituated to work, seems to rebel against the incursion of personal life into the office space, mechanically redirecting his hand towards the accounts. The letter, however, casts this automatism in potentially liberating terms.

---

[501] 'A Day in London', 48.

[502] 'Mr. Northcote's Conversations, Conversation the Twenty-Second' Howe, xi, 316-20, (319)

[503] Lamb, Letter to William Wordsworth, 6th April, 1825, in *Letters,* ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols (London: Methuen, 1935), ii, 466-8, (467).

[504] Lamb, Letter to Mary Wordsworth, 18th February 1818, *Letters,* ii, 224-227, 224.

> I could sit and gravely cast up sums in great books, or compare sum with sum, and write "paid" against this, and "unpaid" against t'other, and yet reserve in some corner of my mind "some darling thoughts all my own,"—faint memory of some passage in a book, or the tone of an absent friend's voice,—a snatch of Miss Burrell's singing, or a gleam of Fanny Kelly's divine plain face. The two operations might be going on at the same time without thwarting, as the sun's two motions (earth's I mean); or as I sometimes turn round till I am giddy, in my back parlor, while my sister is walking longitudinally in the front; or as the shoulder of veal twists round with the spit, while the smoke wreathes up the chimney.[505]

The very dullness of office-work enables a complete separation of the imaginative and sensual operations of the mind, permitting Lamb to create an internalised psychological sanctuary to which he retreats. The resolutely domestic analogies emphasise the sense of refuge: in this letter, it is not the home that provides respite from office life, but the office that offers protection from a constant stream of visitors at home, who 'worrit me at business and in all its intervals', before following him home and interruption the 'agreeable abstraction of mastication'.[506] At his desk, however, Lamb expresses a strange enjoyment in his automatization, as if this partial erasure of identity in the rote and anonymous activity of paperwork enables his mental division into physical mechanism and imaginative escape: a doubling of the self that seems particularly urban, calling to mind Hazlitt's portrait of Dunster the butcher, in the contrast between his cramped and mundane surroundings and the vividness of his childhood reminiscences.

Rita Felski has characterised the vocabulary of modernity as 'a vocabulary of anti-home', citing Adorno's adage that '[d]welling, in the proper sense, is now impossible … It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home'.[507] Modernity celebrates the qualities of spiritual homelessness – 'mobility, movement, exile, boundary crossing' – while denigrating home as the site of 'familiarity, dullness, stasis'. As well as

---

[505] Lamb, Letter to Mary Wordsworth, 18th February 1818, *Letters,* ii, 224-227, 225.

[506] Lamb, Letter to Mary Wordsworth, 18th February 1818, *Letters,* ii, 224-227, 225.

[507] Rita Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', from *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 86.

noting the gendered implications of such an equation, Felski argues for the revisualisation of home as 'an active practicing of place', conditioned not just by place but by time, by the repetitive act of visitation. Home is 'a storage place … [it] often contains many of the objects that have helped to shape a life history, and the meanings and memories with which these objects are encrypted'.[508] As a writer, Lamb is particularly alert to the resonances of the customary and familiar, perhaps as alert as his friend Wordsworth. His 1802 essay 'The Londoner' articulates a defence of the metropolis that seems to act as a riposte the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and emphasise that the associative imagination functions outside of the Lake District. 'The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me … from habit I perceive nothing but urbanity, where other men, more refined, discover meanness: I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision'.[509] But there is a kind of perversity being admitted to here. It is not just that he loves London including its deformities, but that its deformities hold special significance for him, his embrace of them marking him out as a Londoner. Metropolitan life requires a conscious effort to make a virtue of its vices, a 'well-natured alchemy' of the imagination that Lamb compares to the Foresters of Arden from *As You Like It,* who

> Found tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

There is the direct irony of substituting the urban scene for the classic pastoral setting of Arden. Yet it should also be observed that the lines preceding proclaim, 'Sweet are the uses of adversity,/Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,/Wears yet a precious jewel in his head'.[510] The Duke of Amiens and his lords have just been banished from the court, and he is trying to rally them around to the sweets of country life. Rather than depicting habitual affection for the familiar objects of

---

[508] Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 88.

[509] Lamb, 'The Londoner', *Works,* i, 40.

[510] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen et al (London: W.W. Norton & co, 2016), 1613-1684, (1638), II.i , ll.16-17.

childhood, it stresses the effort of imagination, the conscious determination to re-envision adverse surroundings, and to enjoin others to share in this new vision.

Lamb's essay on 'The South Sea House' overlays the contemporary reality of London with layer upon layer of time, populating its enduring edifices with multiple imaginative hauntings.[511] It begins by addressing the reader, a dialogue imagined as clerk to clerk: 'in thy passage from the Bank … didst thou never observe a melancholy looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice, to the left – where Threadneedle-street abuts upon Bishopsgate?'[512] Lamb recalls his childhood imagining that 'the shade of some dead accountant, with visionary pen in ear, would flit by me, stiff as in life' – yet this is immediately followed by the confession that '[l]iving accounts and accountants puzzle me'.

> [T]hy great dead tomes, which scarce three degenerate clerks of the present day could lift from their enshrining shelves with their old fantastic flourishes, and decorative rubric interlacing their sums in triple columniations, set down with formal superfluity of cyphers with pious sentences at the beginning, without which our religious ancestors never ventured to open a book of business, or bill of lading—the costly vellum covers of some of them almost persuading us that we are got into some better library, are very agreeable and edifying spectacles. I can look upon these defunct dragons with complacency. Thy heavy odd-shaped ivory-handled penknives (our ancestors had every thing on a larger scale than we have hearts for) are as good as any thing from Herculaneum. The pounce-boxes of our days have gone retrograde.[513]

The essay makes explicit the action of history upon the imagination, reconciling and aestheticizing the materials of the past. The City, with its sharp contrasts of ancient

---

[511] Scholars including as Jayson Althofer, Brian Musgrove and Julian Wolfreys have investigated the relationship in the Romantic mind between phantasmagoria and modernity. My interpretation of Lamb's essays relies on a more benign kind of haunting. See Jayson Althofer, Brian Musgrove, '"A ghost in daylight": drugs and the horror of modernity', *Palgrave Communications* (2018) Vol. 4 Issue 112; Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

[512] 'The South-Sea House', *Works,* i, 1.

[513] 'The South-Sea House', *Works,* ii, 2.

and modern, commercial and romantic associations, structures Lamb's habitual contemplations in a particular way. In his punning manner, he insists that he has 'no skill in figuring' – yet the essay itself is an exercise in figuring, both in the sense of 'figure' as phantasm and in the sense of the figure on the page, the figure of speech.[514] Lamb's writings could be characterised as an imaginative 'practicing of place', and it is through their recreation on the page that this nostalgic vision of London can be shared. Nevertheless, because of their setting, there is an irony present in such invocations. 'The South Sea House' ends ambiguously, with a playful insinuation of doubt: 'Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while—peradventure the very names, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic-insubstantial like Henry Pimpernel, and old John Naps of Greece:——'. In a reflexive turn, the artificiality of what has preceded is revealed, the status of unverifiable reminiscence called into question in a city where each street and building might call up a different multiplicity of anecdotes and ghosts, half-reality and half-fantasy. The final line advises the reader to '[b]e satisfied that something answering to them has had a being. Their importance is from the past'.[515] *From* the past rather than *for*: hovering between real and imaginary, these memories nevertheless go on to condition the experience of the present.

In his 'Preface to the Last Essays of Elia', Lamb finally casts his alter-ego into the past. His 'jests were beginning to grow obsolete, and his stories to be found out'.[516] 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple' ends in similarly doubtful fashion to 'The South Sea House', lamenting the author's misremembrance of Samuel Salt as a bachelor: 'Henceforth let no one receive the narratives of Elia for true records! They are, in truth, but shadows of fact – verisimilitudes, not verities – or sitting but upon the remote edges and outskirts of history'.[517] Lamb flinches away from memorial's potential to reify the past, positioning his essays as something more marginal and shadowy – on the threshold between fact and fantasy, as much constructs of habitual misremembrance and imaginative whimsy as straightforward reality. This movement

---

[514] *OED*, 'figure' II. 9 (b); IV. 18; V. 21 (a).

[515] 'The South-Sea House', *Works,* ii, 7.

[516] *Works,* ii, 153.

[517] 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple', *Works,* ii, 90.

between familiarity and estrangement calls to mind Stanley Cavell's definition of the everyday:

> The everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very inhabitation is from time to time perceptible to us – we who have constructed it – as extraordinary, we conceive that some place elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics […] call 'home'.[518]

Lamb's metropolitan essays construct an imaginary home out of the everyday, his essays investing the streets and buildings with meaning that ties his audience together in a shared familiarity with the city. Yet he also reminds the reader of their provisionality: the effort of recreating the imaginative reminiscence is always clear in the irony that shades them, the vision remains on the verge of disappearing.

Leigh Hunt's essays also circle around home, yet in quite a different way to Lamb. In the essay 'A Day by the Fire', the word 'snug' is used eight times: the essay could be described as a cultural history of the concept, from the ancients onwards. It becomes a touchstone of Anglo-Saxon identity, reminding the author that 'amidst all the languages, ancient and modern, it belongs exclusively to our own; and […] nothing but that soul-wrapping epithet could have induced certain frigid connoisseurs to tax our climate with want of genius'.[519] Hazlitt describes the 'self-hugging' quality of Hunt's prose, and indeed there is something slightly claustrophobic in the effect, as every association is insistently related back to the situation of a warm chair by the fire, with the cold drawing in outside the window. 'We talk of going to Athens or Rome', Hunt writes, 'to see the precise objects which the Greeks and Romans beheld; and forget that the moon, which may be looking upon us at the same moment, is the same identical planet that enchanted Homer and Virgil'.[520] Horace becomes an early adopter of snugness, 'talking of his blazing hearth and snug accommodations like the

---

[518] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary, Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (London: The University of Chicago Press,1988), 10.

[519] Leigh Hunt, 'A Day by the Fire', *The Reflector*, 2 vols, (London: 1812), ii, 400-419.

[520] 'A Day by the Fire', 410.

jolliest of our acquaintances', and even Milton becomes a eulogist to snugness.[521] Hunt's focus on home is less melancholy than Lamb's, not shadowed by wry self-reflexivity. His essays more openly invite the reader to partake in their imaginary scenes, often beginning with a direct invocation to imagination: 'A Day by the Fire' insists 'for perfection's sake on the present occasion' upon 'my clear morning, and will add to it, if the reader pleases, a little hoar-frost upon the windows, a bird or two coming after the crumbs, and the light smoke from the neighbouring chimneys brightening up into the early sunshine'.[522] 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops' exhorts its readers to imagine 'a fine day; time, about noon; scene, any good brilliant street'.[523] Loosed from the particularity of remembrance that characterises Lamb's essays, the distinction between reality and imagination is not so urgent – instead, Hunt constructs common scenes and objects, and through the flamboyance of his imagination invests them with associative power. Thus the relative merits of tea urn and kettle are debated through Cowper and Hesiod, and the fire in the grate becomes a 'fiery expression of vivification':

> it has full room to breathe and to blaze, and I can poke it as I please. What recollections does that idea excite?—Poke it as I please! Think, benevolent reader,—think of the pride and pleasure of having in your hand that awful, but at the same time artless, weapon, a poker,—of putting it into the proper bar, gently levering up the coals, and seeing the instant and bustling flame above![524]

The humorous exaggerations that typify this style serve to expand the quotidian and habitual into the realms of epic, associations breaking the bounds of the personal and stretching back through history to ancient Greece: the poker becomes a reminder of the object's history as a weapon; the inadequacy of the tea urn is made up for by the consolation that 'the Greeks were such a nation!'.[525] The essay insists upon the shared history of humanity as the link between each individual and the mass. Such

---

[521] 'A Day by the Fire', 410.

[522] 'A Day by the Fire', 401.

[523] Leigh Hunt, 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops', *The Indicator* No. 35 (7 June 1820), reprinted in *The Indicator* (London: Appleyard, 1822), 273-278, (273).

[524] 'A Day by the Fire', 400-1.

[525] 'A Day by the Fire', 400.

democracy of outlook brings every reader up to the level of 'Plato … the Antonines … the Alfreds, the l'Hospitals, the Miltons, Newtons, and Shakespeares' – for 'when we act naturally and think earnestly, we are reflecting their commonest habits to the life'.[526] There is something of Hazlitt's Cockney in this determined levelling, in the magpie-like allusions and their contrast to the everydayness of the subject.

'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops' also demonstrates this mix of subjective intensity of feeling and panoramic view of humanity. The adult author finds himself in the midst of a Wordsworthian reminiscence occasioned by the sight of a red sword: 'There it is, in that corner of the window – the same identical sword, to all appearance, which kept us awake the first night behind our pillow. We still feel ourselves little boys, while standing in this shop'.[527] It is notable that what occasions this reverie is a manufactured toy, the habitual association inhering in the mass-produced copy rather than the beloved item itself. The imaginative world of 'A Nearer View' is, as one might expect from the subject, headily consumptive. Yet there is something quietly radical in Hunt's insistent extraction of art from the commodified urban experience. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: argues for the necessity of shifting the connotations of consumption away from passivity and docility and redefining it as an activity of making: 'Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others'.[528] The toy sword is invested with 'memories' that contrast favourably with the lesser history of the toy gun: 'the shape and appurtenances of the sword being genuine, the whole sentiment of massacre is as much in its wooden blade, as if it were steel of Damascus'.[529] The movement of 'A Day by the Fire' is repeated: instead of landmarks and landscapes it is the everyday object that is invested with habitual associations, which through the imagination dilates to include the whole history of swords. But is this optimistic view of imagination's ameliorative powers an emancipatory resistance to the quotidian and utilitarian tendencies of the city, or is it self-indulgence? The exuberance of Hunt's imaginative embellishments serves to put

[526] 'A Day by the Fire', 410.

[527] 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops', 273.

[528] *Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press Ltd, 1984), xii.

[529] 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops', 274.

pressure on the question underlying Hazlitt's 'On Londoners', reminding us that an imagination based on habit, without vigilance, will always tend to turn back on itself.

There is a moment in 'Walks Home at Night' that seems at odds with the democratic spirit of Hunt's essays. Hunt describes the pleasure of walking home in bad weather, when the consciousness of overcoming physical obstacle gives vigour to one's mental exertions: 'mere action is something; imagination is more … Every time you set down your leg, you have a respect for it'.[530] Along the way, the essay becomes a disquisition on watchmen, hangovers from a previous age who by the early nineteenth century were largely ineffectual, rarely if ever enforcing the curfew that still restricted citizens' movements at night. Watchmen are 'staid, heavy, indifferent, more coat than man, pondering yet not pondering, old but not reverend, immensely useless'.[531] Yet, Hunt adds, there can be discerned individual characters in watchmen, '[t]hey are not all mere coat, and lump, and indifference'.[532] Various watchmen, including the 'Dandy Watchman', the 'Metallic Watchman' and the 'Reading Watchman' are described. The latter occasions unease in Hunt, who observes that '[i]t seemed cruel to pitch amidst so many discomforts and privations one who had imagination enough to wish to be relieved from them … [n]othing but a sluggish vacuity befits a watchman'.[533] The essay pressurises the objects of its gaze into becoming a hybrid between man and mechanism – the watchman is denied the fullness of consciousness that Hunt elsewhere insists on as redemptive.

In 'On the Love of the Country', Hazlitt differentiates between the 'transferable nature of our feelings' relating to physical objects, as opposed to the non-transferable nature of associations relating to people.[534] The city jumbles this distinction: a figure such as the watchman seems caught between person and object, perceived more as one of a class than as an individual. Yet the possibility of the watchman's imagination raises the possibility of the subject becoming the object – of oneself being transformed through the imagination of another. This exemplified in the metropolitan relationship of familiar stranger to familiar stranger, for example the

---

[530] Leigh Hunt, 'Walks Home by Night in Bad Weather. Watchmen', *The Companion*, (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1828) 40-46, (43).

[531] 'Walks Home by Night', 43.

[532] 'Walks Home by Night', 44.

[533] 'Walks Home by Night', 45.

[534] 'On the Love of the Country', in Howe, iv, 17-21 (19).

commuter that one has never exchanged a word with, but who one recognises from sharing the same route every day, thus insensibly becoming part of the landscape rather than a differentiated figure. Habit, even as it splits our imagination from our sensing selves so that we can fantasise during walks at night, reminds us that we must make up part of the habitual landscape of others – that we are moving aspects of a physical reality and that, however fanciful they become, our imaginations are tethered to an embodied experience of place.

The final watchman that Hunt enumerates is the 'Sliding Watchman', the strangest and most fantastical left until last.

> Think of walking up a street in the depth of a frosty winter, with long ice in the gutters, and sleet over head, and then figure to yourself a sort of bale of a man in white, coming sliding towards you with a lantern in one hand, and an umbrella over his head. It was the oddest mixture of luxury and hardship, of juvenility and old age! But this looked agreeable. Animal spirits carry everything before them; and our invincible friend seemed a watchman for Rabelais. Time was run at and butted by him like a goat. The slide seemed to bear him half through the night at once; he slipped from out of his box and his common-places at one rush of a merry thought, and seemed to say, "Everything's in imagination;—here goes the whole weight of my office."[535]

The scene is the oddest mixture of art and nature, corporeality and idealism. The watchman appears to defy time and gravity, a ghostly figure whose final words seem to echo Hunt's own philosophy. Yet the question remains as to whether imagination is sufficient, or whether such a retreat from the world as it is lived in constitutes a move away from disinterested benevolence, and towards a self-pleasing solipsism. The narrator does not answer the question, instead passing onto the suburban landscape of home. 'How particular, and yet how universal, is that word; and how surely does it deposit every one for himself in his own nest!'[536]

[535] 'Walks Home by Night', 45.

[536] 'Walks Home by Night', 46.

CHAPTER V: KEEPING THINGS INTERESTING – HAZLITT, THE ESSAY AND REPETITION

Upon yet another appeal for an advance, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* Francis Jeffrey wrote back to Hazlitt that:

> If you really want £50 you shall have it – but I want to see you regular and independent – and some times think it would be better if I were a little more strict with you […] I cannot help wishing that you had some other employment than writing for printers and playing fives –[537]

Hazlitt's enthusiasm for the game is well-documented, and biographies tend to emphasise the persona of the essay writer as passionate sportsman. Yet the pleasure that he gains from the game is of a painful type. William Bewick describes how

> his sighs, groans, and lamentations left no doubt that he was becoming warm in the spirit of the game, and sad trouble he had to hitch up his trousers, it being his custom to be free of braces [...] His ejaculations were interlarded with unintentional and unmeaning oaths that cannot be repeated, but may be imagined. In this way he would stamp and rave: – "Nothing but my incapacity, – sheer want of will, of power, of physical ability, – of the Devil knows what!"[538]

If anything, the interest that Hazlitt appears to invest in the game of fives according to these accounts surpasses that which he portrays himself as investing into essay writing: 'I have not much pleasure in writing these Essays, or in reading them afterwards', he claims in 'On the Pleasure of Painting', '[…] and when I have as by a

---

[537] Francis Jeffrey to WH, 23 October 1821; Beineke Library, Osborn collection folder 8033. The dispatch postmark is dated 24 October 1821. Quoted in Duncan Wu, *The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 302.

[538] William Bewick, *Life and Letters of William Bewick*, ed. Thomas Landseer, 2 vols. (London, 1871). Quoted in Wu, 258.

miracle escaped, I trouble myself little more about them'.[539] Swinging a racket, like painting, digging a hole, planting a cabbage, or hitting a mark – and unlike the sedentary employment of writing – is an activity that satisfies the will's desire for action.

However, there is something about Hazlitt's energetic, combative prose that makes an irresistible parallel with the fast-paced, head-to-head game of fives. In the same essay, he describes himself as 'only anxious to get to the end of them, which I am not sure I shall do, for I seldom see my way a page or even a sentence beforehand'[540], a kind of headlong immediacy that seems akin to sport. Tom Paulin in particular sees Hazlitt's playing of fives as an 'enactment of the concentrated, blind, sloggering, disciplined fury of the prose-writer at work, in wild but highly trained action like the boxers he also celebrates'.[541] As well as style, there is a similarity of approach: Hazlitt's dramatic performance on the fives court, as witnessed by Bewick, is one of frustration and disappointment, of meeting the limitations of our abilities; the failure of living up to our hopes of excellence. The image of Hazlitt as fives player is interesting and attractive to readers, despite (or perhaps because of) the frustrations that clearly attended the game for him. Like the problem of fives, I would like to argue, essay writing is also about confronting repeatedly the limits of the self, of tackling a sense of one's own incapacity and attempting a different result. In this paper, I focus on the essay 'On Egotism' to look at two related questions: how to do things again and again while staying interested, and how to keep the reader interested in repetition. Hazlitt's repetitions can be nostalgic in tone, but they can also be irritable, dissatisfied; the picking up of an unfinished thread. By looking at 'On Egotism' alongside the other essays to which it alludes, and with reference to the work of Sianne Ngai on the category of the interesting, I examine what might make Hazlitt interesting to his readers. With particular reference to 'Novelty and Familiarity', I also propose a reading of Hazlitt's use of repetition, which he both disparages and seems irrevocably drawn to in his familiar essays.

---

[539] Howe, viii, 6.

[540] Howe, viii, 6.

[541] Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 131.

'A Farewell to Essay-Writing' includes another acquaintance's account of Hazlitt's fives playing, where he is equally deranged. Reviewing Hunt's description of him 'crawl[ing] about the Fives-Court like a cripple till I get the racket in my hand, when I start up as if I was possessed with the devil', Hazlitt defends his behaviour thus: 'I lie by for difficulties and extreme cases. *Aut Caesar aut nullus*'.[542]

This determination to be a Caesar or nothing is repeated in the essay 'On Egotism', included in *The Plain Speaker*:

> They go beyond the old motto – *Aut Caesar, aut nihil* – they not only want to be at the head of whatever they undertake, but if they succeed in that, they immediately want to be at the head of something else […] A prose-writer would be a fine tennis-player, and is thrown into despair because he is not one, without considering that it requires a whole life devoted to the game to excel in it; and that, even if he could dispense with this apprenticeship, he would still be just as much bound to excel in rope-dancing, or horsemanship, or playing at cup and ball like the Indian jugglers, all which is impossible.[543]

Characteristically, this self-portrait is not named as the author himself, despite the mention of Indian jugglers being an obvious clue to an earlier essay, so named, in *Table Talk:*

> The hearing a speech in Parliament drawled or stammered out by the Honourable Member or the Noble Lord, the ringing the changes on their common-places, which any one could repeat after them as well as they, stirs me not a jot, shakes not my good opinion of myself: but the seeing the Indian Jugglers does. It makes me ashamed of myself. I ask what there is that I can do as well as this? Nothing. What have I been doing all my life? Have I been idle, or have I nothing to shew for all my labour and pains? Or have I passed my time in pouring words like water into empty sieves, rolling a stone up a hill and then down again, trying to prove an argument in the teeth of facts, and looking for causes in the dark, and not finding them? […] What abortions are these

---

[542] Howe, xvii, 318.

[543] Howe, xii, 167-8.

> Essays! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions! How little is made out, and that little how ill![544]

Here again, a contrast is drawn between the perfection of the circus performers, and the comparatively dissatisfying transition of thought to paper. This is Hazlitt's characteristic pose towards the essay form: one of disappointment and ambivalence. 'The Indian Jugglers' enacts a similar manoeuvre to 'On Egotism' by ending with an allusion to another essay: an obituary to Cavanaugh, the fives player, that had originally appeared in a February issue of the *Examiner,* which the author enigmatically describes as 'written apparently between jest and earnest [...] and fall[ing] in with my own way of considering such subjects'.[545]

> His style of play was as remarkable as his power of execution. He had no affectation, no trifling. He did not throw away the game to show off an attitude, or try an experiment. He was a fine, sensible, manly player, who did what he could, but that was more than any one else could even affect to do. His blows were not undecided and ineffectual—lumbering like Mr. Wordsworth's epic poetry, nor wavering like Mr. Coleridge's lyric prose, nor short of the mark like Mr. Brougham's speeches, nor wide of it like Mr. Canning's wit, nor foul like the *Quarterly*, nor *let* balls like the *Edinburgh Review*. Cobbett and Junius together would have made a Cavanagh.[546]

The similitude between writing and fives playing suggests that both are characteristic of their authors: they disclose true nature, whether it is Coleridge's irresolution or Canning's chronic lack of aim. If it were not already transparent that the obituary is by Hazlitt himself, 'On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority', which appears in the second volume of *Table Talk*, says this:

> Shall I confess a weakness? The only set-off I know to these rebuffs and mortifications, is sometimes in an accidental notice or involuntary mark of

---

[544] Howe, viii, 78-9.

[545] Howe, viii, 86.

[546] Howe, viii, 87.

> distinction from a stranger. I feel the force of Horace's *digito monstrari*—I like to be pointed out in the street, or to hear people ask in Mr. Powell's court, *which is Mr. H*—? This is to me a pleasing extension of one's personal identity. […] I have seldom been in a company where fives-playing has been talked of, but some one has asked, in the course of it, 'Pray did any one ever see an account of one Cavanagh, that appeared some time back in most of the papers? Is it known who wrote it?' These are trying moments. I had a triumph over a person, whose name I will not mention, on the following occasion. I happened to be saying something about Burke, and was expressing my opinion of his talents in no measured terms, when this gentleman interrupted me by saying, he thought, for his part, that Burke had been greatly over-rated, and then added, in a careless way, 'Pray did you read a character of him in the last number of the — —?' 'I wrote it!'—I could not resist the antithesis, but was afterwards ashamed of my momentary petulance. Yet no one, that I find, ever spares me.[547]

That an essay 'On Egotism' links, however indirectly, to an essay 'On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority' may simply be the habitual repetition of themes that is one of Hazlitt's trademarks – or it may suggest something artful being done around the figure of the essayist. Through such repetitions, an authorial persona is being created and fortified; yet it is one that displays consciousness of its status *as* persona, probing at the fallible connection between the written and living selves. The figure of Hazlitt is both central and marginal to these essays: he is at once the celebrated essayist, and a diffident nobody silently hoping for recognition, obscuring his name even as he prompts you to another of his works. The essay both stands alone and acts as the edge of another essay. Such indirectness contributes to their fascination: as readers, we feel part of a game, impelled to seek out the other essays that might complete this enigmatic trail of hints and allusions. When we come across such repetitions or connections to an essay we have read before, our fascination increases; the continuities between essays contribute to a sense of openness rather than organisation. Instead of coming across as stale or monotonous, they renew our attention.

[547] Howe, viii, 285-6.

One way of considering the play of personae in these essays is through the lens of interest. One might characterise the essay as exactly that which *interests* the writer, and 'On Egotism', as the title suggests, betrays a keen interest in the person of its author. Sianne Ngai, in her essay 'Merely Interesting', dates the concept of the 'interesting' as an aesthetic category in literature back to Romanticism, to Schlegel's early writings, where *die interessante Poesie* was conceived as a theoretical category opposing *die schöne Poesie* of the ancients. For Schlegel, the interesting lacks the objectivity – the disinterestedness – of the beautiful, centring around nothing but the subject's own fascination and striving for a completeness of vision; a final fulfilment of curiosity, that is impossible within the fragmented world of modernity. The interesting is open-ended, an experience with a temporal aspect: what interests continues to interest, it keeps our attention, we return to it 'as if to verify that it is *still* interesting'.[548] It is also a category that invites the continuation of a conversation: when we describe a work of art as 'interesting', it encourages the question 'why?'

Thus there is an element of the irritating to the interesting; a lack of resolution, a failure to come to a decision about the contemplated object. Interest and irritation, fascination and revulsion, inspire similar feelings. Yet Ngai's consideration of the interesting also classes it at a certain remove from more established, immediate reactions to aesthetic experience: the interesting is scholarly, notable yet always on the precipice of slipping into the 'merely' interesting, the almost-unremarked-upon. For Hazlitt, the irritation is deeply felt, an inability to come to terms with what is being experienced, a lack of conclusion as a response. 'On Egotism' argues: 'Nothing is truly and altogether despicable that excites angry contempt or warm opposition, since this always implies that some one else is of a different opinion, and takes an equal interest in it'.[549] Hatred is the obverse side of interest, not its absence; we are not uninterested in what annoys us. The essays return repeatedly to the scene of fives or tennis, as the representation of a sense of incapacity or failure. However, this need not be read as negative: instead, it can be a spur for a creative, playful response to a predicament.

The essay 'On Egotism' sets up an opposition between two main types of egotism. There is the 'sanguine egotist', who 'prides himself on what he can do or

[548] Sianne Ngai, 'Merely Interesting', *Critical Inquiry,* 34/4 (Summer 2008), 777-817 (786).

[549] Howe, xii, 162.

possesses'.[550] An example of this type would be Dunster, 'the fishmonger in the Poultry' from 'Londoners and Country People', who boasts to Hazlitt: 'I should not mind playing you at fives neither, though I'm out of practice. I think I should beat you in a week: I was a real good one at that'.[551] And there is the 'morbid egotist', that is, the frustrated tennis player we came across earlier: a victim of 'an inverted sort of pride […] which, because it cannot be every thing, is dissatisfied with every thing.'

> The charm that rivets their affections is not the importance or reputation annexed to the new pursuit, but its novelty or difficulty. That must be a wonderful accomplishment indeed, which baffles their skill—nothing is with them of any value but as it gives scope to their restless activity of mind, their craving after an uneasy and importunate state of excitement. To them the pursuit is every thing, the possession nothing.[552]

The third person that has predominated throughout the essay soon changes to the first: 'We think nothing of what we are, because we cannot be every thing with a wish'.[553] Interest is strikingly framed in terms of frustration and disappointment: it is in coming up against the limits of himself, in desiring to be the kind of person who excels at tennis or juggling, that the morbid egotist becomes invested in his pursuit. This highlights the curious double nature of this type of egotism: how it seeks both to aggrandise the capabilities of the existing self, and escape its own bounds in a fantasy of another life – as the narrator notes ruefully, 'it requires a whole life devoted to the game to excel in it'. Yet it is the unfulfillment of this fantasy that sees the unhappy prose-writer returning to the tennis net; that for him keeps the sport, in Ngai's words, '*still* interesting'.

Egotism is a miserliness of interest, a refusal to concede anything to what doesn't interest us. 'It is a cheap and a short way of showing that we possess all excellence within ourselves, to deny the use or merit of all those qualifications that do not belong to us […] If so, the dullest fellow, with impudence enough to despise what he

---

[550] Howe, xii, 167.

[551] Howe, xii, 73-4.

[552] Howe, xii, 167.

[553] Howe, xii, 168.

does not understand, will always be the brightest genius and the greatest man'.[554] It is one thing to be a political economist, another to decide that political economy is the only subject worth knowing about and to disdain all others. Likewise, 'On the Tendency of Sects' states that '[w]e learn from the interest we take in things, and according to the number of things in which we take an interest. Our ignorance of the real value of different objects and pursuits, will in general keep pace with our contempt for them'.[555] Our understanding of the world is shaped by the attention we give it; the poet or the painter sees the world quite differently from the man of science. As a category, the interesting refuses objectivity; everyone finds different things interesting, and there is not much one can do to correct or level it – and as 'On Egotism' argues, this is all to the good.

As the essay puts it, '[w]hatever interests, is interesting': there is no arguing with what captures someone's attention. Interest provides an alternative measure of value to 'the calculations of positive utility'; in reality, one's experience and judgment of the world is shaped by the power of objects 'appealing to and affecting the imagination' and 'the habitual impression they leave upon the mind'.[556] Interest *both* pulls you out of yourself and brings you back into yourself: we only pay attention to the world according to the natural bias of our thoughts. This is what gives the world meaning and colour beyond the animal, self-interested fulfilment of basic needs and impulses. Yet as the mind becomes shaped by this bias – as knowledge, experience and taste become fixed by the habitual associations that arise from it – we become narrower and less open to those kinds of interests that do not align with our own.

Writing anonymously for *The Champion* in 1816, John Hamilton Reynolds notes that 'Egotism is a quality which is very generally decried, and very universally relished.' Possibly referring to Hazlitt, his *Champion* colleague, he discusses 'one writer of the present day, who delights his readers with the most able and ingenious speculations, and who is never so eloquent as when he speaks of his own feelings. He then seems to rise above this earth, and to float in an air and in a light of his own: – his youth comes back upon him. His heart lives in a vision. He talks the purest poetry.' There is perhaps something always a little egotistical about the very venture

[554] Howe, xii, 159.

[555] Howe, iv, 49-50.

[556] Howe, xii, 161.

of essay writing – an assumption that the author's mind is a terribly interesting place to be – but it is also this self-centredness, Reynolds argues, that makes the essay interesting in the first place. The piece concludes with its own piece of egotism, Reynolds wistfully wishing 'that we could be as egotistical in our writings, as we are in our feelings and fancies. Our readers would like us the better'.[557]

'On Egotism', when read alongside 'The Indian Jugglers' and 'On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority', portrays a kind of egotistical inability to drop yourself from the conversation, in tension with a reluctance to allow the character of the author to strut forward without disguise. It plays on both the reader's interest in the persona of the author, and the author's supposed interest in himself. The amusing coyness of this self-presentation, characteristic of Hazlitt's essays, also serves to objectify this persona in a way comparative to other characters who populate them; like Dunster the fishmonger, the morbid egotist becomes a case study, complicated by our identification of who the figure might represent: both separate from, and implicated in, the narrative voice.

After lambasting the egotist, the conclusion of the essay takes a turn: 'By looking out of ourselves, we gain knowledge: by being little satisfied with what we have done, we are less apt to sink into indolence and security'.[558] Here the complex intertwining of egotism and interest comes full circle: it is a certain kind of egotism that causes the mind to look beyond the self. The final sentence states: 'To conclude with a piece of egotism: I never begin one of these *Essays* with a consciousness of having written a line before; and endeavour to do my best, because I seem hitherto to have done nothing!'[559] This suggests that the very appeal of essay writing lies in its sense of novelty; of coming to a new subject and then being able to drop it once it is done: it does not last long enough for him to become dissatisfied.

'On the Pleasure of Painting' claims, similarly, that

> I sometimes have to write them twice over: then it is necessary to read the *proof*, to prevent mistakes by the printer; so that by the time they appear in a

---

[557] John Hamilton Reynolds, 'The Reader No. V', *The Champion* (2 June 1816), 173-4.

[558] Howe, xii, 168.

[559] Howe, xii, 168.

> tangible shape, and one can con them over with a conscious, sidelong glance to the public approbation, they have lost their gloss and relish, and become 'more tedious than a twice-told tale.' For a person to read his own works over with any great delight, he ought first to forget that he ever wrote them. Familiarity naturally breeds contempt. It is, in fact, like poring fondly over a piece of blank paper: from repetition, the words convey no distinct meaning to the mind, are mere idle sounds, except that our vanity claims an interest and property in them. […] After I have once written on a subject, it goes out of my mind: my feelings about it have been melted down into words, and *them* I forget.[560]

The essay is a form that allows the author to escape from the fatigue and boredom of more extended application. Yet, as Reynolds and Hazlitt argue, it is also the form that most insistently centres the self, that relies the most on the habitual thoughts and interests of its author. The passage suggests Hazlitt's problematic relationship to repetition: 'familiarity naturally breeds contempt', going over our own thoughts repeatedly leads only to boredom. We have seen, however, that far from avoiding them, Hazlitt's essays are constructed around repetitions and returns. Such avowed distaste reacts against the form and style in which this distaste is framed.

'On Novelty and Familiarity' is an essay that illustrates how tangled the ideas of pain, pleasure, interest and repetition, past and future, newness and familiarity, hope and disappointment are in his thinking on the subject.

> [I]n the acquisition of knowledge or of skill, it is the transition from perplexity and helplessness, that relieves and delights us; it is the surprise occasioned by the unfolding of some new aspect of nature, that fills our eyes with tears and our hearts with joy […] We are happy not in the total amount of our knowledge, but in the last addition we have made to it, in the removal of some obstacle, in the drawing aside of some veil, in the contrast between the obscurity of night and the brightness of dawn.[561]

---

[560] Howe, viii, 6-7.

[561] Howe, xii, 296.

It is this relaxation of tension, the transformation of pain to pleasure, that accounts for the satisfaction of interest; yet it remains elusive. Too much experience dulls that pleasure again: 'does not our familiarity with nature, with science, and with art, breed an indifference for those objects we are most conversant with and most masters of?'.[562] Habitual reflection upon art may sharpen the critical faculties, but it dulls the wonder that we had felt upon encountering beauty in youth. Habit 'takes away the liveliness of impulse that imparts a sense of pleasure or of pain to the soul. No one reads the same book twice over with the same satisfaction'. This is why childhood is more pleasurable than adulthood, where 'in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred we only retrace our steps, and repeat the same dull round of weariness and disappointment'.[563] Habit is dulling, hardening, boring, its repetitive nature inescapable, its fossilisation of the individual inexorable. Under such conditions, is it not inevitable that we either become egotists, or end up getting sick of ourselves?

If, as the essay suggests, the pleasures of the past eventually wear themselves out, and those of the future fade with age, the great difficulty is retaining any interest in life past the first glow of youth. However, one sentence suggests an intriguing loophole or recompense for this journey towards disappointment, disillusionment and deadness. Pleasures 'leave traces of themselves behind them, durable and delightful even in proportion to the regrets accompanying them, and which we relinquish only with our being. The most irreconcilable disappointments are perhaps those which arise from our obtaining all we wish'.[564] It is *not* fulfilling our wishes that allows the imagination to stay alive, that keeps the dreams of the past from becoming the stale disappointments of the present. By having them remain in the uncertain realm of possibility, we can return to them with enduring interest, their speculative character untouched.

Hazlitt also appends to 'On Novelty and Familiarity' an ambiguous footnote: 'I remember Mr. Wordsworth saying, that he thought we had pleasanter days in the outset of life, but that our years slid on pretty even one with another, as we gained in variety and richness what we lost in intensity. This balance of pleasure can however only be hoped for by those who retain the best feelings of their early youth, and

[562] Howe, xii, 295.

[563] Howe, xii, 296.

[564] Howe, xii, 308.

sometimes deign to look out of their own minds into those of others: for without this we shall grow weary of the continual contemplation of self, particularly as that self will be a very shabby one'.[565] Hazlitt's readings of Wordsworth elsewhere do not present him as one with a natural gift for disinterestedness: his is a genius whose feelings run 'deep, but narrow; the range of his understanding is lofty and aspiring rather than discursive'.[566] It remains uncertain in which category the essay places its narrator: as one who can 'look out of their own minds into those of others' or as one who grows weary contemplating the self. The strength of 'On Egotism' derives from the way these two things are presented in the figure of the morbid egotist as intertwined inextricably: weariness and interest, sympathy and egotism, pleasure and frustration, so that contemplation of the self becomes a form of looking outward. Rather than alienating the reader, it invites them into a play of association, so that the repetitions themselves become part of the game. Because the self-portraits that recur in the essays offer both a character and the *performance* of that character, they retain a certain instability. They do not settle into self-caricature, but remain odd and awkward, leaving the reader in the enjoyably uncertain ground between ironic and genuine self-revelation. In an unpublished review of *Table Talk,* Lamb describes them as written in 'the style of a discontented man'. Discontent and disappointment, as well as being the backbone of Hazlitt's author persona, are his abiding interests: not only their inevitable appearance in life, but also their contribution to character and action; how to make dissatisfaction work for you.[567]

The experimental, unfinished nature of the essay is what enables them to continue being written. It is the dramatisation of this interplay that gives the repetitions of Hazlitt's essays their restless energy, makes them both familiar and novel at the same time, with the quality of a recurring thought that might nevertheless dart off in a new direction. We might recognise a motif, character or a quotation, but they can be twisted in a way that reframes their use: rather than being purely reiterative, they accumulate in the same way that our thoughts do, the accumulation itself being part of their substance. Once you settle into a certain pattern, you become habitual – the deadness described in 'On Novelty and Familiarity'. So it is a kind of lack of

---

[565] Howe, xii, 310n.

[566] Howe, xi, 94.

[567] Charles Lamb, *Lamb as Critic*, ed. Roy Park (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 303.

satisfaction that these essays articulate and that, I argue, Hazlitt frames as an essential aspect of the essay as a form. This is failure's fruitfulness: how struggling to articulate meaning, how not being quite satisfied with the way things turn out, how refusing to allow a thought to settle, allows the essay to remain open-ended, receptive to the revisions of other, later essays, relating to them in a chain of associations that expand rather than foreclose the persona in play. Hazlitt's essays attest to a continued interest in the problems of being a self, of remaining interested without falling into apathy, despair or complacency. The figure of the essayist never settles, instead skulking around the margins, waiting to attack with racket in hand.

CHAPTER VI: HABIT AND THE NOSTALGIC IMAGINATION

In *Englishness Identified*: *Manners and Character 1650-1850,* Paul Langford discusses the characteristic nature of Englishness as it was remarked upon by international observers. There was, he says, 'something about the English that made national character seem a peculiarly appropriate tool of analysis […] much of their self-perception seemed to depend on characterisation.'[568] France's 'Marianne', for example, did not have personality in the same way that 'John Bull' did. The habitual character of the English is a subject that Hazlitt returned to habitually. A portrait in his 'Notes of a Journey Through France and Italy' (1826) paints the Englishman as characteristically habitual, a 'stock or a stone' with 'feelings … hardened by custom', a 'hard, dry, mechanical, husky frame' who relishes pain for shocking him out of his usual insensate state.[569] Contrasted with the wit and social emollience of the French character, the Englishman is awkward, surly, resentful, slow and backward, only wringing pleasure out of spleen and discomfort. It is hard to read Hazlitt's account of the Englishman in Rome, who is 'silent … from having nothing to say' and 'stupid' because 'he is so', without hearing an echo of the author's own essayistic persona: 'Do not stifle him with roses; do not kill him with kindness: leave him some pretext to grumble, to fret, and torment himself'.[570]

When Hazlitt writes on Englishness he is always, alternately, including and excluding himself from the category, sometimes engaging in detached critique, sometimes folding himself into a collective 'we'. He values 'the *matter-of-factness* of [English] understandings', a tenacious empiricism that resists shallow frivolity, and 'a love of liberty out of hatred to oppression' that acts as a bulwark against the sway of arbitrary power where other nations falter.[571] Yet post-Waterloo he depicts the English character as having turned against its natural instincts, siding with legitimacy

---

[568] Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.

[569] Howe, x, 242.

[570] Howe, x, 244.

[571] Howe, x, 242-243.

and arbitrary power: '[f]ormerly, liberty was the word with John, - now it has become a bye-word'. Slavery and tyranny are now countenanced, and foreigners look upon the English in wonder 'that out of mere perversity and contradiction we would rather be slaves ourselves, than suffer others to be free'.[572] This sentiment is echoed in 'Character of John Bull', which was published in 1816, only a year after Waterloo. The essay notes recent conservative attempts to rewrite England's history of regicide and rebellion into a narrative designed to support the Hanovers' divine right to rule.[573] A late essay, 'Our National Theatres' (1829), likewise defines the motto of the English as 'exclusion', criticising the institution of private boxes and the consequent division of the population into '*proper* people' and '*improper* people'.[574] 'English Characteristics', from 1829, seems to give up on the idea of English love of liberty entirely, dismissing the English people as having 'no compassion for the weak and helpless', with heads merely 'full of blows and bludgeons'.[575] That essay ends by excusing the author's 'harping on a grievance'; but 'at least it is not an imaginary one'.[576]

Hazlitt's own claims to Englishness came under attack in the Tory periodicals, where his 'Jacobinism' and sympathy for the French were read as effeminate and anti-patriotic. The Cockneys as whole, associated with over-fondness for Italian poetry and the adoption of French sexual promiscuity, were excluded conclusively from Englishness by the likes of *Blackwood's*. David Higgins has read Hazlitt's 'The Fight' (1822) as an attempt to stave off such accusations through its espousal of figures of robust English masculinity, banishing French sentimentality to the side-lines after the disastrous publication of *Liber Amoris*. The *Blackwood's* review of *Liber Amoris,* by contrast, mocked Hazlitt as a Cockney Rousseau, and questioned the 'manliness' of the 'Cockney and Liberal' character.[577] Higgins's assertion that Hazlitt was 'trying to find an ideal of masculine Englishness that can contain his Jacobinical political views and the confessional writing with which they were associated' addresses the challenge that arose for him and those of similar political

[572] Howe, x, 244-245.

[573] Howe, iv, 99.

[574] Howe, xx. 287-288.

[575] Howe, xx. 247.

[576] Howe, xx. 247.

[577] *BEM* (June 1823), 646.

sympathies when faced with a conservative narrative of nation that portrayed radicalism and stolid, John Bull Englishness as diametrically opposed.[578] But as the character of Englishness in *Notes of a Journey* sought to show, the imaginative power of nationalism does not necessarily tend in one direction – a notion of Englishness defined by rebellion against repression and protest against corruption is as plausible as any other. By locating such a version in England's past in opposition to the degraded present, Hazlitt could call upon the emotional appeal of tradition and custom, the 'choice of inheritance' that Burke had idealised as quintessentially British, to argue for political liberty.

The noun 'Englishness' was first used by William Taylor of Norwich in 1805, 'the radical poetaster who is credited with bringing German romanticism to the attention of a British audience'.[579] Hazlitt's repeated revisiting of the subject of the English character is clearly related to the revival of interest in English folk customs at the turn of the century. David Higgins has drawn attention to the metropolitan periodical base out of which much of this nostalgia for rural popular culture sprang, often in alignment with oppositional politics.[580] As Mina Gorji has shown, Leigh Hunt, William Hone, and the *London Magazine* in particular published many essays on the decline of folk festivals and rustic traditions, with Hunt ascribing the decline to modern 'trade', 'fanaticism' and 'the pretended politeness and reasoning spirit of the French'.[581] In an *Examiner* article of 1821 he lamented the decline of Christmas celebrations and contemporary lack of festivities:

> The rich invite their friends to their country houses, but do little there but gossip and gamble, and the poor are either left out entirely, or presented with a few clothes and eatables that make up a wretched substitute for the long and hospitable intercourse of old.[582]

---

[578] David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness: Local, National, and Global Selves, 1780-1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 125.

[579] *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late William Taylor of Norwich*, ed. J. W. Robberds, 2 vols., (London, 1843), i. 195, 226. Quoted in Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

[580] David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness*, 105.

[581] Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 91.

[582] 'Christmas', *The Examiner* (23 December, 1821), 814-815.

An idealised feudal past, in which rich and poor exist within the same community, is imagined as a bulwark against the inequalities of the present. The equation between the preservation of old customs and social consciousness is made so complete that '[e]very holly bough and lump of berries with which you adorn your houses is a piece of natural piety as well as beauty, and will enable you to relish the green world of which you show yourselves not forgetful'.[583] Karen Williams has observed how the public perception that Christmas celebrations were waning during the eighteenth century was countered by conscious nineteenth century attempts to revive it. Shifting structures of leisure time and changing social structure led to anxieties about losing the characteristic English jollity of the season. Tara Moore's research in *Victorian Christmas in Print* shows how nostalgia for old customs was used as a bulwark to protect against increasing industrialisation and urbanisation.[584] A philosophical poem on Punch and Judy in *The Monthly Magazine* (1826) laments: 'For England's ancient pastimes vanish fast/In this political prosaic age […] The rustic morris-dancers, where are they?/How few the merry May-games which we see!'[585]

A major proponent of such efforts in the early nineteenth century was William Hone, who had published Hazlitt's *Political Essays* (1819), and who had become a radical hero for successfully combatting the government against a charge of blasphemy for publishing satirical pamphlets. *The Every Day Book* (1825) details traditions such as 'Collop Monday', the day before Shrove Tuesday when eggs and bacon were traditionally served: Hone traces its origins to the feasts of Bacchus, while also linking it to a traditional song sung by boys in Salisbury, as reported by the Rev. Bowles.[586] *The Every Day Book* is introduced as a communal publication, with information gleaned from literary sources and correspondents, Hone noting disarmingly that '[i]t is not possible […] that I should know *every* thing; but if each will communicate "something," the work will gratify every one, and my own most

---

[583] 'Christmas', *The Examiner* (23 December, 1821), 814-815.

[584] Karen Williams, *Humour in Children's Literature, 1800-1840* (Doctoral thesis: University of Roehampton, 2017), 95.

[585] Bougeradickius, 'Punch and Judy: A Philosophical Poem in two Cantos' in the *Monthly Magazine* (September, 1826) p.261. Quoted in *Humour in Children's Literature,* 237.

[586] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book, or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements* 2 vols (London: William Tegg and Co., 1825), i, 242.

sanguine wishes'.[587] Like Hunt's essay, the feudal feast scene, in which rich and poor intermingle, is held up as a nostalgic ideal in contrast to the exploitations of industrial society. Carnivalesque traditions such as the Garrat Elections (wherein the Mayor of Garrat would be elected by mock election) or May Day (when rural pastimes came to the city) are particularly emphasised. The almanac stresses its anti-exclusionist principles in other ways: it condemns the English 'pleasantry' of ridiculing the peculiarities of other nations, consigning it to a bygone moment when 'different soil was good ground for a laugh at a person'. Nostalgia is not portrayed unreflectively, but as a powerful force in shaping future, more egalitarian behaviour.[588] Hone also includes a defence of Jews and an apologia for card-playing: the values advanced are liberal and cosmopolitan. Quotations from Hunt's poetry, Elia's essays and the *Flora Domestica* (which was authored by Elizabeth Kent, Hunt's sister-in-law, as a handbook for urban dwellers wishing to grow 'portable' gardens) place the almanac in a context where the rural and the metropolitan are not separate but intertwined. Hone's antiquarian work may not appear political, but the vision of England that it imagines is one in which the character of the English is turned towards radicalism: eccentricity, roughness and candour become the grounds for democracy and political liberty rather than their enemy. *The Every Day Book* takes the Burkean conservative ideal of national custom and reorients it towards political radicalism; such efforts turn habit towards utopian or liberal ends – a way out of habit as the 'flywheel of conservative society', to paraphrase William James writing a century later in 1890.[589]

Such writings present a popular English inheritance that reaffirms the English values of liberty and communality, in opposition to an increasingly 'refined', shallow and callous present. The myth that underlies 'Merry England' (1825) is that of Robin Hood, 'that stout archer and outlaw, and patron-saint of the sporting-calendar':[590] a figure who embodies rebellion, escape from a repressive and corrupt justice system, and fair redistribution of property.

---

[587] *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, i, vii.

[588] *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, i, 320.

[589] Wiliam James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1918), i, 121. The full quote reads: 'Habit is thus the enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.'

[590] Howe, xvii, 155.

The mythos of Robin Hood was popular among the Hunt circle, uniting literary significance with robust physicality and an appealing dissent from the mainstream. In 1818 Keats sent some lines on the subject to John Hamilton Reynolds, adding that 'they are at least written in the spirit of outlawry'.[591] The poem in question, 'Robin Hood', elegizes the 'bugle sounds' and 'twanging bow' of Sherwood forest, at a time when 'men knew nor rent nor leases'.[592] Six years later, a year before writing 'Merry England', Hazlitt included it in the section on Keats in *Select British Poets* (1824). John Barnard detects a harder political edge in Keat's poem than the Reynolds poem to which it had responded. It paints the age of Robin Hood as 'gone away/And their hours are old and grey'. Merry England becomes a time similar to Ovid's 'Golden Age', before the introduction of punitive property laws and ecological degradation. Keats insists that Robin Hood cannot be 'known' to a modern audience; he has less faith in fancy's ability to conjure up the fanciful.[593] This complex reckoning with nostalgia – with its limitations as a political tool as well as its imaginative power – can be seen in Hazlitt's 'Merry England'.

Among the traditional English pastimes that Hazlitt lists in 'Merry England' are 'wiring a hare … stalking a deer … shooting, fishing, and hunting': the wealth of the land is made each Englishman's right, untrammelled by laws of enclosure.[594] The essay's definition of 'merriness' centres upon thoughts of liberty and escape – it is because the English are so constitutionally grave that their merry-making is all the more passionate: 'They are then like a school-boy let loose from school, or like a dog that has slipped his collar'.[595] The Cockney is contrasted to the Parisian, who is 'as well […] contented with himself wherever he is, stewed in his shop or his garret', while the Londoner 'is miserable in these circumstances, and glad to escape from them', moving out into the suburbs that increasingly crowd the perimeter of the city in a bid to partake in some semblance of rural life.[596] The essay also makes a clear distinction between the 'English nobility' and the 'English common people', with

---

[591] Keats, *Letters*, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 1958), i, 225.

[592] Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1973), 223-5.

[593] John Barnard, 'Keats's "Robin Hood", John Hamilton Reynolds, and the "Old Poets", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXXV (1989) 181-200 (185; 199)_

[594] Howe, xvii, 155.

[595] Howe, xvii, 152.

[596] Howe, xvii, 156.

Byron's 'occasional ease and familiarity' contemptuously dismissed as 'equally constrained and affected, whether in relation to the pretensions of his rank or the efforts of his genius'.[597]

It is striking that 'Merry England' locates as a fundamental paradigm of Englishness the habit of habit-breaking. English humour for Hazlitt is predicated on an ability to break face; to recognise the ridiculous irony or burlesque of a situation that habit often engenders. The French, by contrast, having no sense of incongruity, never find themselves ridiculous. It is the English reliance on habit, in fact, that allows for this; one can't have merriness without its opposite, acting as a Saturnalian safety valve. The essay posits a dialectical relationship between willingness to commit to the dogged everyday *and* the energy of exploding it. The seeming English commitment to conservatism, sluggishness and tradition paradoxically act to guarantee a degree of political independence and a rooted instinct for liberty.

The essay offers, too, a riposte to Benthamite utilitarianism, arguing that the distinctive quality of the English character is a 'mixture of patience and pastime, of vacancy and thoughtfulness, of idleness and business, of pleasure and pain'.[598] The web of an Englishman's life is of a mingled yarn—good and ill together. Higgins has noted the paradoxical nature of Hazlitt's formulation of Englishness, where the very inertness of its nature guarantees that it does not remain fixed, moving instead between solemnity and merriment, sluggishness and vitality, tears and laughter.[599] 'On Wit and Humour', the opening essay of the *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* of 1819, proposes a physiological theory of humour as arising from the relaxation of seriousness; thus, the higher the customary tension of the English mind, the more explosive its eventual relaxation.[600] The constant gaiety of the French, by contrast, is so habitual that it becomes its own caricature: 'one eternal smile of self-complacency, tortured into affectation, or spun out into languid indifference'.[601] 'Absurdity and singularity', the essay continues, 'glide over the French mind without jarring or jostling with it'.[602]

---

[597] Howe, xvii, 159.

[598] Howe, xvii, 155.

[599] Higgins, *Romantic Englishness*, 127.

[600] Howe, vi, 5-30.

[601] 'Merry England', Howe, xvii, 152.

[602] Howe, xvii, 157.

Here two kinds of habit are laid open. The first kind are the habits arising from refinement, which serve to blunt the differences between individuals and classes. They work like Humean custom, moulding society. The second is a more localised form pertaining to individuals whose habits serve to make them less uniform rather than more: the habit of following one's own wont, although it makes one uncomfortable, awkward or odd. Individual liberty of character becomes the conduit to political liberty within a populace brought together through customs that celebrate ludicrousness rather than seeking to smooth it away.

One such custom, or popular tradition, is the pantomime, of which 'Merry England' proudly declares English theatre 'the very throne'.[603] Brian Bates has commented on the high regard that Keats had for pantomime, arguing that it presented 'a carnivalesque, tongue-in-cheek space of cultural translation, genre adaptation, character metamorphosis, and physical transformation'.[604] Hunt, in two essays for *The Examiner,* also praised the 'animal spirits' of pantomime and called it 'the best medium of dramatic satire', its lack of dialogue allowing spectators 'according to their several powers, to imagine what supplement they please to the mute caricature before them'.[605] In pantomime actors and audience join together in shared laughter against the stupid, rich and powerful: its represents the attractively subversive and democratic face of English popular culture, its appeal springing from the 'natural candour' of the audience's hearts rather than the dictates of modern fashion. Melynda Nuss discusses the 'Harlequinade' section of the Romantic-period pantomime, the moment at which the fairytale setting would be replaced by a contemporary London backdrop, with parodies of real shops and fashions. 'London fads like coach driving, dandyism and military fashion […] all appeared in the harlequinade section of the pantomime and heightened the effect of an exotic, theatrical world giving way to the foibles of ordinary London'.[606] The English

---

[603] Howe, xvii, 153.

[604] Brian Bates, 'Keats, Negative Capability, and the Pantomime', *The Keats Letters Project* Accessed 13.07.2021 at: https://keatslettersproject.com/correspondence/keats-negative-capability-and-the-pantomime/.

[605] Leigh Hunt, 'Pantomime' *Examiner* (January 1828), 19-20; 'On Pantomime – Continued from a Late Paper', *Examiner* (26 January 1817), 57.

[606] Melynda Nuss, *Distance, Theatre, and the Public Voice, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Quoted in Karen Williams, *Humour in Children's Literature*, 244.

pantomime was an art form that played upon the imitation and explosion of habits: not just of story-tale tradition, but of the historical present. As in Hone's *Every Day Book*, rural and urban were combined. A notion of national community was created around an awareness of shared traditions, often traditions of burlesque.

Yet far more than the *Every Day Book*, 'Merry England' questions whether any real solidarity or purpose can be based around a shared sense of humour. To laugh spontaneously along with one's fellow spectators at the pantomime is to partake in the expression of the Rousseauvian general will, but it is by its nature an ephemeral habit, self-forgetful, transient. In his earlier essay 'On Wit and Humour', Hazlitt made a distinction between between the elevating power of imagination and the deflating one of wit or humour:

> [I]t is easier to let down than to raise up; to weaken than to strengthen; to disconnect our sympathy from passion and power, than to attach and rivet it to any object of grandeur or interest; to startle and shock our preconceptions, by incongruous and equivocal combinations, than to confirm, enforce, and expand them by powerful and lasting associations of ideas, or striking and true analogies […] To be indifferent or sceptical, requires no effort; to be enthusiastic and in earnest, requires a strong impulse, and collective power.[607]

Wit and humour 'appeal to our indolence, our vanity, our weakness, and insensibility; serious and impassioned poetry appeals to our strength, our magnanimity, our virtue, and humanity'. It is easier to break down patriotic fellow-feeling than to raise it up.[608]

For Hazlitt the consolations of 'Merry England' are necessarily occasional, rooted in temporary relaxation from habitual high tension – its merriness arises from this principle, and this is the reason that it troubles him. Langford has written of the characteristic English audience's 'horse-laugh', the sudden explosion of uproarious laughter after serious appreciation, that its eccentricity was antisocial, even barbarous, ripping through the model of politeness borrowed from the French.[609]

---

[607] Howe, vi, 23.

[608] Howe, vi, 23.

[609] Langford, *Englishness Identified*, 292.

Writing on ‘Hazlitt as an English Comic Writer’ Robert Ready argued that:

> In ‘On Modern Comedy’ (1813) Hazlitt decided that comedy eventually destroyed itself; he repeated this idea in ‘Theatrical Examiner’ (l8l5), in The Round Table (l8l7), and in the final section of Lectures on the English Comic Writers (1819). 2 He talks about the dearth of good modern stage comedies as a direct result of the levelling process of comedy itself, which holds up the singularity of the insulated egotist to ridicule long enough until self-consciousness banishes the idiosyncratic self into homogeneity.

Comedy has a levelling effect, doing away with its own material, for ‘once the object of comedy begins to see himself as others see him, he hides his comic nature in a wash of sameness, in his shared qualities with those around him’.[610]

> Comedy runs out of material as every one becomes the same. One result, we may speculate, is that Beau Brummel already laughs at himself; in Brummel's double consciousness of what he is doing, Sir Fopling Flutter is but a pose.[611]

A nation defined by its humour may be difficult to keep together. ‘Merry England’ poses a difficult question about habit once it becomes visible or self-conscious; whether it can still as powerful engine of the imagination, able to sustain the idea of nation, or whether it eventually devolves into habit as normative force, wearing down the eccentricity and oddness that supposedly defines Englishness through its own self-consciousness.

But there is another current in ‘Merry England’. For in the final paragraphs of the essay Hazlitt vividly recontextualises his meditation on patriotism and national character: ‘As I write this, I am sitting in the open air in a beautiful valley near Vevey. Clarens is on my left, the Dent de Jamat is behind me, the rock of Meillerie opposite’.[612] This adds a note of wistfulness to an essay which had seemed so

---

[610] Robert Ready, ‘Hazlitt as an English Comic Writer’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 6/2 (Spring 1975), 109-114 (113).

[611] ‘Hazlitt as an English Comic Writer’, 113.

[612] Howe, xvii, 161.

confident in its judgments up to this point; casting a longing rather than bullish glance at its copious enumerations of English pastimes and pleasures. The narrator becomes an object of humorous consideration - he portrays himself as he appears in the midst of his happy reminiscences and 'the cheerful passages of my life': 'No one would see it in my looks – my eyes grow dull and fixed, and I seem rooted to the spot, as all this phantasmagoria passes in review before me'.[613] But, he continues, 'the traces of pleasure, in my case, sink into an absorbent ground of thoughtful melancholy, and require to be brought out by time and circumstances, or as (the critics tell you) by the *varnish* of style!'.[614] This brings the moment of remembrance back around to the moment of composition, so that each collapses into the other.

The structuring myth of Merry England, derived from *Ivanhoe* (a narrative about the struggle to integrate Saxon and Norman into English identity), does not lend itself to an easy encapsulation of what Englishness might mean. Scottish revivalists like Scott and the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* often used Highland folk and land heroes to oppose to the courtly influence of the more 'civilised' Lowlands. This was not an option available for Cockney writers like Hazlitt; English society was not easily divided into atavistic country and refined court. This may account for the more reflexive, questioning outlook on national character that he adopted, which always seems on the brink of pulling itself apart even at the point that it is being established.

This late shift of the authorial voice occurs in a setting that would have been familiar to Hazlitt from Rousseau's *Confessions* and *La Nouvelle Heloise.* Hazlitt places one of the chief consolations of Englishness in its rich artistic heritage: 'Our cloud has at least its rainbow tints: ours is not one long polar night of cold and dullness, but we have the gleaming lights of fancy to amuse us'.[615] Imaginative escape compensates for the seeming drawbacks of the physical environment.

The ghost of Rousseau also complicates the easy closed link between England and liberty. 'Merry England' charts a gradual move from the material and physical to the ideal, the communal to the individual. There is a sense in which the individual threatens to dissolve or undermine the communal potential of English 'habit'. The quotation from Froissart that encapsulates the theme of the essay, and the lens of

---

[613] Howe, xvii, 162.

[614] Howe, xvii, 162.

[615] Howe, xvii, 161.

Scott's *Ivanhoe* through which Robin Hood is refracted also demonstrate the inability to quarantine one national identity from another – porously, it is constituted by outsiders as well as insiders. Christopher Ricks has written of allusion as a way of claiming inheritance: 'In the face of lonely suffering and anxiety, these allusions embody the comfort of company'.[616] Hazlitt's allusive essay suggests that literary narratives about England – from *Ivanhoe* to *Cymbeline* to Wordsworth – are as productive of national habits of thought as temperament or climate. During his European travels, Hazlitt was borrowing Scott's novels from the library.[617] Rather than the exemplary 'real' English figures of 'The Fight', Hazlitt refers us obliquely to Jack Sheppard, the Wordsworthian rural egotist, Robin Hood and so on. The essayist positions himself as a *reader* as well as a writer: many of the essay's ideas of Englishness come out of reading. The essay reinforces the notion of English character as we read – it adds to the canon. Yet the claims that the essay makes for the imagination are tentative, its powers in doubt; one is left with an image of the solitary traveller in contemplation, the illusions of fiction foregrounded as the unstable site of nationalism's power. 'Merry England', like Hunt's essays and Keats's poetry, makes overt the artificial nature of antiquarian and nostalgic appeals to the past; they appeal to the reader not on the level of historical reality but of shared entrancement, of make-believe. The mode is playful, suspended somewhere between irony and sincerity, in a manner that reminds one of the parlour-game atmosphere in 'Of Persons One Would Wish to Have Seen' (1826).

The final paragraphs of 'Merry England' move from the lineaments of Hazlitt's mind to the furnishings of the English hearth. Comfort and discomfort rub up against each other, reliant upon one another for meaning. 'The English are certainly the most uncomfortable of all people in themselves, and therefore it is that they stand in need of every kind of comfort and accommodation'.[618] This innate awkwardness seems to guarantee stolidly material freedom from overly utilitarian considerations. Mike Sanders uses Cobbett's distinction between 'national wealth' and 'national prosperity', that is, between Gross Domestic Product and that which 'shows itself in very different ways: in the plentiful meal, the comfortable dwelling, the decent

---

[616] Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

[617] Duncan Wu, *The First Modern Man*, 377.

[618] Howe, xvii, 162.

furniture and dress, the healthy and happy countenances, and the good morals of the labouring classes of the people'.[619] Cobbett makes a distinction between qualitative and quantitative conceptions of value, and there is something habitual about what he prizes as 'national prosperity', the material yet ineffable goods of comfort and decency.

However, the English obsession with comfort, noted by outsiders, was not always seen in a positive light. Hegel considered it a sign of English society's ultimate status as an industrialised one:

> What the English call 'comfort' is something inexhaustible and illimitable. Others can reveal to you that what you take to be comfort at any stage is discomfort, and these discoveries never come to an end. Hence the need for greater comfort does not exactly arise within you directly; it is suggested to you by those who home to make a profit from its creation.[620]

The repetitions of tradition may lead nowhere but back to our own sitting rooms, instead needing to be renewed constantly and consciously. Paul Langford notes that, more than the countryside, English towns permitted secrecy and mystery, with London houses particularly constructed to shut families off from each other. Hazlitt concurs: the English 'are afraid of interruption and intrusion, and therefore they shut themselves up in in-door enjoyments and by their own firesides'.[621] Conversely, there was no comparable distinction between 'private' and 'public' in France, while in Germany families ate with the door open. The English were remarked upon for their inhospitality towards unexpected callers. There was an idealisation of home and domesticity – a sentimentality attached to 'home' in English.[622] When Dickens, in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), extols 'Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his

---

[619] W. Reitzel, (ed.), *The Autobiography of William Cobbett* (London: Faber, 1967) 183-4. Quoted in Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 145.

[620] Hegel, 'The System of Needs', *Philosophy of Right* trans. TM Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) § 191.

[621] Howe, xvii, 162.

[622] Langford, *Englishness Identified*, 106-8.

youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fire-side and his quiet home!' one is struck not by a sense of communal feasting, but by the consciousness of illusion – and by the final image of the lone figure by the safety of his own private fireside.[623]

In 'The Nation Form' (1990), Etienne Balibar explicates the imaginative pressure required by the citizen to create the idea of nation:

> *Every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary*, that is, it is based on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common *name* and on traditions lived as the trace of an immemorial past (even when they have been created and inculcated in the recent past). But this comes down to accepting that, in certain conditions, *only imaginary communities are real*.[624]

It is the status of the imagined community that seems to preoccupy 'Merry England': the extent to which the individual is, or ought to be, conscious of the imaginative power they invest in the idea. The essay takes Burke's idealisation of nation, tradition and community and subjects it to enough pressure that its ironies and illusions come to the fore. The nation's 'second nature', rather than being the residual atmosphere out of which the nation's subjects semi-consciously take their lead, comes to the fore as what must be forcefully called upon to sustain the imagined community. As Tilottama Rajan states, the Romantic position is one poised between irony and sentimentalism, giving into neither the pure scepticism of the former nor the illusions of the latter.[625] The idea of second nature becomes open to critique, comment and self-conscious refashioning. 'Merry England' takes the habit of nostalgia apart and turns it inside out, making conscious what ought ideally to work as unconscious. What sets the essay apart from other explorations of English character is that it makes overt the implicit anxieties and inconsistencies of national self-definition. It takes the

---

[623] Dickens, Charles, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 169.

[624] Etienne Balibar, 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Vol. 13 No. 3, 329-361 (346).

[625] Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

spirit of Burke's *Reflections*, its insistence on affirming the habit of nation which already ought to be unquestionably in place, and applies enormous pressure to the idea of its existence without strong conscious effort on the part of the national subject.

The dream of 'Merry England' would continue to have political power in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Among others, Chartists of the 1840s used nostalgia for an agrarian age of prosperity and community to drive critique of the industrialised, degraded present.[626] It was a way to give emotional charge to an economic argument – the 'authentic' feelings of Chartists opposing the coldness of capitalist political economy. However, Chartist poems such as 'Merry England' and 'To England' do not voice quite the same ambivalence as Hazlitt's essay does; in these, the trope reinforces the political message to the extent that anxiety over its illusiveness is redundant: they are less interested in the past as much as the construction of a restored future.

'Merry England' attests to, and recognises, the radical imaginative power of nostalgia and the antiquarian impulse as promoted by Hone's *Every Day Book*, yet reservations remain about its political application. Burkean nostalgia rested on the assumption that custom and habit reflexively lean into conservative ideology; 'Merry England' makes clear the effort needed to sustain such imaginative energy in a more liberal direction. Hazlitt recognises habit's inherent instability; how it exists at the interface between personal and social feeling and harbours a preponderance to retreat into the self. The fact of having to point out habits already brings with it an element of play acting or wishful thinking. Yet the essay also makes much of the randomness of habitual association – how, unbidden, sights and sounds return the mind back to familiar places. This entanglement is part of the problem. *Because* habit is so embroiled in the individual nature of imagination, Hazlitt sees its utopian application as a political tool to be limited.[627]

---

[626] Mike Sanders, 'Ch. V: "Merry England": Memory and Nostalgia in the Year of the Mass Strike', *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History,* 129-165.

[627] It was, according to Hannah's notes, her intention to develop a conclusion from here (drawing variously on Sean O'Toole's *Habit in the English Novel, 1850-1900* (London: Palgrave, 2013), Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), John Stuart Mill's writings on eccentricity, William James' pragmatism, and Sigmund Freud's work on the unconscious). She intended to consider habit's inward-turn: how it becomes increasingly psychological and twines

CODA: HABIT AND NONSENSE

Virgins are like the fair Flower in its Lustre,
Which in the Garden enamels the Ground;
Near it the Bees in play flutter and cluster,
And gaudy Butterflies frolick around.
But when once pluck'd, 'tis no longer alluring,
To Covent-Garden 'tis sent, (as yet sweet,)
There fades, and shrinks, and grows past all enduring,
Rots, stinks, and dies, and is trod under feet.[628]

'Gaudy' is a word that appears twice in 'Merry England', both times separated from the main text by quotation. The line 'To tell the world 'tis but a gaudy shadow'[629] from *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1634) is reworked by Hazlitt into 'Throwing a gaudy shadow upon life', followed a few paragraphs later by the line 'And gaudy butterflies flutter around', a slight misquotation from *The Beggar's Opera* (1728).[630] The latter reference is reinforced by being placed next to a description of a 'green bank, enamelled with white and purple flowers', which echoes the same air's 'fair Flower … Which in the Garden enamels the Ground': the apparently random movement of the essay from the superiority of English theatre to the author's present abode in the valley near Vevey is mediated by this buried

---

with escalating anxieties for the autonomous, the mechanical, the numbing throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century. In turn, Hazlitt's place within this transition is one that gives expression to a "place of flux," as her notes read, "where habit's place is still to be determined". "One might term the move as a shift from habit towards *habits*," writes Hannah, "as the search for how semi-conscious actions create the world turned from an idea of empirically observed and imitated behaviours towards one influenced by developments in the fields of psychology, neurology and self-help."

[628] John Gay, 'The Beggar's Opera' (1728), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th edn., gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, vol. C: The Restoration and Eighteenth-Century, ed. James Noggle and Lawrence Lipking (New York: Norton, 2012) Act 1 Scene 7 (, 2795)

[629] William Shakespeare and John Fletcher *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) ii.2.702 (, 1412).

[630] *The Beggar's Opera,* xvii, 161.

association, which connects Covent Garden to the flowers and butterflies of the Swiss countryside. The allusion uncovers itself for the reader in gradual steps, so that the seemingly wandering argument leads to an echo within the text that may chime with a reader familiar with Gay's work, and then to a direct quotation. As one reads, one becomes aware of an imagination suffused with literary history, in which phrases and images echo and reconstitute themselves in new formations, altering meaning and perception of external reality. Allusions speak to a complex rewriting and repurposing of words to change their associations. There is a dense web of associations underlying the imaginative ground of the essay, one in which the reader perhaps shares, a game of making sense out of the allusions that oscillate in and out of focus throughout the text. In its most seemingly lyrical and autobiographical section, the essay brings in associatively the spectre of Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild, whose legend is retold by Gay: an anarchic, urban and rebellious version of English popular culture. Yet it is part of the meaning that the allusion is not overt, that it hovers between conscious and unconscious citation; indeed it mimics the movement of imagination in its shadowy conjuring of these evocative figures.

In 'Merry England' the most obvious association of the word 'gaudy' is with 'gaudy days', a slightly archaic term for a festival or gala day. To be 'gaudy' is to be merry, in the essay's terms, and the word may simply be used to evoke scenes of Golden Age merry-making. However, 'gaudy' also has less positive connotations, particularly for Hazlitt. William Gifford's *Quarterly* review of *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) had accused Hazlitt of bringing together 'an incoherent jumble of gaudy words', of waging 'everlasting war against accurate reasoning, just observation, and precise or even intelligent language'.

> He seems to think that meaning is a superfluous quality in writing, and that the task of composition is merely an exercise in varying the arrangement of words […] ever hovering on the limits between sense and nonsense … the greater part of Mr Hazlitt's book is either completely unintelligible, or exhibits only faint and dubious glimpses of meaning; and the little portion of it that may be understood is not of so much value as to excite regret on account of the vacancy

> of thought which pervades the rest […] They are of that happy texture that leaves not a trace in the mind of either reader or hearer.[631]

The word 'gaudy' clearly remained in Hazlitt's memory for in 'A Letter to William Gifford' (1819) he makes a point of refuting the accusation of 'figurative and gaudy phraseology' by objecting that Gifford had 'never heard what I had written in my first dry manner': 'I afterwards found a popular mode of writing necessary … to force attention to original observations, which did not restrict themselves to making a parade of the discovery of a worm-eaten date, or the repetition of an obsolete prejudice'.[632] Gaudy here is not florid or flowery, but eccentric and unexpected; a style founded on deliberate incongruities, paradox and digression may be read by an unsympathetic reader as 'hovering on the limits between sense and nonsense', but it is necessary to bypass the repetitive assumptions of truism and prejudice, to 'strike' the reader's imagination rather than conform to well-worn channels. The definition of vanity as originating in an 'over-valuing of pain' also recalls the frequent charge of 'wounded and festering vanity' from *Blackwoods*;[633] Hazlitt defends himself by displacing the trait onto the effeminate French and affiliating himself with the English who display 'the same determination and spirit shown in resistance as in attack'.[634] While the obvious opposition that structures 'Merry England' is between the English and the French, another buried polarity could be Scottish explicitness, represented by his enemies in the Tory press, and English eccentricity. 'No people ever laugh heartily who can give a reason for their doing so' Hazlitt argues in 'Merry England',[635] and the perverse character of the Englishman, hovering between surliness and merriment, is indeed different from the sketch of the Scotchman who appears in 'The Main Chance' (1828), declaring that 'allowing for occasional exceptions, diversities, and singularities, *the main chance* is still stuck to with rigid and unabated pertinacity'.[636] The emphasis in 'Merry England' on what is

---

[631] *Quarterly Review* review of Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* Vol. 19 (1818) 424-434 (424-425).

[632] Howe, ix, 31.

[633] *BEM*, review of Hazlitt's *Table Talk* Vol. 3 (1822) 157.

[634] Howe, xvii, 154.

[635] Howe, xvii.160.

[636] Howe, xvii, 286.

inexplicable, unreasonable and contradictory suggests that not everything can be reduced to 'accurate reasoning, just observation, and precise … language', in fact that the most distinctive and precious aspects of Englishness reside in being 'startled by a sense of oddity and incongruity, indulges [gaiety's] wayward humours or lively impulses, with perfect freedom and lightness of heart'.[637] In embracing the gaudy and excessive, one may see Hazlitt bringing the character of John Bull into himself.

In this spirit, one might read the several quotations from Shakespeare, and the upholding of his fools as the height of this particularly English taste for the ludicrous and nonsensical, as a riposte to those reviewers who judge 'Mr Hazlitt's knowledge of Shakespeare and the English language' as 'exactly on a par with the purity of his morals and depth of his understanding'.[638] The English are 'almost the only people left who understand and relish *nonsense'*;[639] hence to be read as hovering 'between sense and nonsense' by a Scottish reviewer may expose the limits of the reader rather than the author. It is Hazlitt's 'vacancy of thought' that places him closer than the sensible Scots to Shakespeare's wit, which 'does indeed tread upon the very borders of vacancy: his meaning often hangs by the very slenderest threads'.[640] 'Vacancy' is also mentioned in 'Brummelliana' (1828), which describes Brummell's jests as 'of a meaning so attenuated that "nothing lives 'twixt them and nonsense': - they hover on the very brink of vacancy are in their shadowy composition next of kin to nonentities'.[641]

This line, 'the very brink of vacancy', originates in Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814). Mary Jacobus has considered the importance of 'vacancy' to Wordsworth's poetics, as a figure of frightening sensory deprivation that nevertheless offers potential sight of the sublime, or 'things unbeseen'.[642] In the cases of both Brummell and Shakespeare, a comic sublime of the near-nonsensical seems to be asserted by Hazlitt through reference to the Wordsworthian abyss – an allusion which is not fully

---

[637] *Quarterly Review*, review of Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* 424.

[638] *Quarterly Review*, review of Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* vol.18 (1818) (458-466) 466.

[639] Howe, xvii.159.

[640] Howe, xvii, 159.

[641] Howe, xx, 152.

[642] Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 129.

accounted for by comic incongruity, but serves also to confer the solemn weight of Wordsworth's visions of sublimity onto petty trifles and fooling. In both cases, the elevation of the trivial to the heights of significance also carries a democratic charge, upending traditional hierarchies of meaning and playing up the latent absurdity of the human condition. A characteristic Brummellian *bon mot*, ('Do you call that *thing* a coat?') is glossed thus:

> It seems all at once a vulgar prejudice to suppose that a coat is a coat, the commonest of all common things, – it is here lifted into an ineffable essence, so that a coat is no longer a *thing*; or that it would take infinite gradations of fashion, taste, and refinement, for a *thing* to aspire to the undefined privileges, and mysterious attributes of a coat. Finer 'fooling' than this cannot be imagined.[643]

Settled categories, of what is a 'thing', what is a 'coat', what is held in common and what is defined by fashion, are held up for inspection and shaken from certainty in a playful burlesque of meaning; Brummell's parodically exquisite attunement to manner and custom exposes their nearness to absurdity.

That Hazlitt would admire a figure like Brummell, and (however ironically) associate him with Wordsworth and Shakespeare, confirms the value of vacancy to his writing. The difficulty of knowing precisely what he is getting at can be attributed to this same sensibility, which is willing to leave things unsaid, to change the subject, to forgo always spelling his conclusions out. Such obliqueness, however, is not the symptom of a frivolous or dithering sensibility, but of one that determines to 'follow [its] own bent from wilfulness or simplicity'.[644] The essay traces an English tradition of Shakespearean fools and wits, through Swift's 'idle or *nonsense* verses', down to Fielding and Hogarth – and, implicitly, affirms Hazlitt against accusations of Jacobin Gallicism by placing him within this English tradition.

Still, the dichotomy between English and Scot should be taken as suggestive rather than prescriptive; one notes the allusion to *Ivanhoe*'s '*Fair play and Old England forever!*' in a footnote, and Hazlitt's borrowing of Scott's works from a local library

[643] Howe, xx, 152.

[644] Howe, xvii, 158.

while on the sojourn in Switzerland during which ‘Merry England’ was composed. Scott’s reworking and reinforcement of the Robin Hood legend works to sustain the imagined community of the ‘English’ as much, and perhaps more, than facts of geography and history: Hazlitt’s allusion serves as a tip of the hat to England’s British neighbours and the cultural cross-pollination that goes into the creation of an amorphous and porous ‘national’ identity.

Absurdity and nonsense have a close relation to habit. Bergson’s essay on laughter suggests that ‘[a]ny individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings’.[645] His theory of laughter’s function is startlingly like Hazlitt’s, contending that laughter serves to discipline and modify habits so as to prevent the citizen ‘shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower’.[646] Similarly in ‘Merry England’, the characteristic English sense of humour is attributed to a certain degree of provincialism in the national character: ‘Clowns and country people are more amused, are more disposed to laugh and make sport of the dress of strangers, because from their ignorance the surprise is greater, and they cannot conceive any thing to be natural or proper to which they are unused’.[647] The difference is that, while the English ‘resent any difference or peculiarity of appearance at first’ yet in the end ‘are glad to turn it into a jest’, they are also of such an ‘insular situation and character’ that their own eccentricities and awkward points are not smoothed away by social refinement; placed on both sides of the joke, the English are ‘wits as well as *butts* for ridicule’.[648] Nonsense might be defined as the reverse side of habit, where repetition of word and action are unmoored from rational meaning, leading to surprise and laughter; it reveals the innate irrationality of habit, and of human behaviour in general. In ‘On Wit and Humour’, Hazlitt offers up a cognitive theory of the comic that centres on the transition ‘from one impression to another that we did not at all expect, and when we had expected just the contrary’.[649]

---

[645] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935), 134.

[646] *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 135.

[647] Howe, xvii, 157.

[648] Howe, xvii.158.

[649] Howe, vi, 7.

> The mind having been led to form a certain conclusion, and the result producing an immediate solution of continuity in the chain of our ideas, this alternate excitement and relaxation of the imagination, the object also striking upon the mind more vividly in its loose unsettled state, and before it has had time to recover and collect itself, causes that alternate excitement and relaxation, or irregular convulsive movement of the nervous system, which constitutes physical laughter.[650]

Thrown from the usual train of thought, the mind is struck by idiosyncrasy and eccentricity, and is inclined to laugh. One thinks, for example, of Sterne's characters, either trapped in loops of randomly associated behaviours, or led to pursue madly the consequences of a certain rigid system of thought. 'That reason and good sense should be consistent, is not wonderful: but that caprice, and whim, and fantastical prejudice, should be uniform and infallible in their results, is the surprising thing'.[651] Through following the apparent senselessness of another person's associative logic, one comes to the recognition of one's own chaotic and idiosyncratic thought patterns. 'On Wit and Humour' affirms that this is no peripheral matter, for '[t]he devotion to nonsense, and enthusiasm about trifles, is highly affecting as a moral lesson: it is one of the striking weaknesses and greatest happinesses of our nature'. Nonsense offers a doubling of habit, so that the same thing can be viewed both seriously and as a joke: 'We cannot suppress the smile on the lip; but the tear should also stand ready to start from the eye'.[652]

Peter Swaab, meditating on the potential connections between the poetry of Wordsworth and of Edward Lear, has suggested that nonsense poetry

> might also illuminate the awareness in writings of the Romantic period that obstacles to sense can at times be experienced not just as perplexity but as enjoyment shared with an audience, uncovering a mutuality in limitation and

[650] Howe, vi, 7.

[651] Howe, vi, 11.

[652] Howe, vi, 11.

> producing a comedy of forbearance in the recognition of ordinary levels of creaturely incompetence.[653]

I read Hazlitt's essays as enacting a similar desire to share in the creation of sense, and the occasional perplexity of sense, with his reader. Hazlitt's meditations on habit, I hope to have shown, do not merely constitute an intervention in the wider intellectual history of habit as a concept, but articulate his unique conception of an idea that suffuses the difficulties, intensities, and fascination of his writing. The meditation on English humour in 'Merry England' seeks to imagine a community not only through national customs and traditions but through a certain state of mind: one of tolerance and open-mindedness that does not devolve into polite complacency but retains the piquancy of humour and a sense of the ludicrous – as well as a capacity for self-irony, the recognition that one is all at once the wit and the butt of ridicule. Yet perhaps tolerance is too strong a word, suggesting permanent reconciliation with the state of things. Hazlitt's distinctive style, with its changes of tone, sudden reversals and idiosyncratic quotations, abruptness and leaps from digression to digression, leave space for the reader to be amused, cajoled, irritated, surprised and confused: Hunt's description of pantomime is apt – 'motion; motion for ever, and motion all at once […] a lively representation of the vital principle of all things, from the dance of the planets down to that of Damon and Phillis'.[654]

Stephen Booth, in *Precious Nonsense* (1998), defines nonsense thus: 'The paradox I focus on here manifests the physics that is the common denominator in every literary phenomenon in which the human mind takes pleasure. *What our minds most like is to be in situations where they simultaneously perceive is as is not and is not as is* [my emphasis].'[655] This could be put another way: 'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be'.[656] The doubleness of habit, out of which humour arises, gets to the heart of the human condition. The fact that it frustratingly

---

[653] Peter Swaab, 'Romantic Poetry and Victorian Nonsense Poetry: Some Directions of Travel', *Romanticism*, Vol. 25 Issue 1 (March 2019) 90-102 (102).

[654] Hunt, 'Pantomime' (1820), 20.

[655] Stephen Booth, *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press 1998), 184.

[656] Howe, vi, 5.

cannot be digested into something is also what makes it important. There is something unresolvable, there is always a remainder. Something not quite radical, not quite utopian, yet refusing to be contained. In this way, habit becomes a way to open up the imagination rather than narrow its focus; the nonsense of habit becomes a way to claim a place for the unexplained, abrupt and paradoxical, to take what is internal and throw it out again, to create new forms of togetherness – however partial and temporary.[657]

[657] 'Philosophy is the real home of irony, which one would like to define logical beauty: because wherever in oral or written conversations, and just not quite systematically philosophized, one should perform and demand irony; and even the Stoics considered urbanity a virtue. […] Poetry alone can rise from this side to the height of philosophy, and is not based on ironic passages, like rhetoric. There are old and modern poems that breathe the divine touch of irony throughout the whole and everywhere. *A really transcendental buffoonery lives in them.* Inside, the mood which overlooks everything and rises infinitely above everything that is conditioned, also above one's own art, virtue, or ingenuity: *outside, in execution, the mimic manner of an ordinary good Italian buffo*.' Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments* in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) § 42 (5-6) (italics added).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Addison, Joseph, and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 6 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1987).

Althofer, Jayson, and Brian Musgrove, '"A ghost in daylight": drugs and the horror of modernity', *Palgrave Communications* Vol. 4 Issue 1 (2018), 112-123.

Aquilina, Mario, 'Echoing as Self-Fashioning in the Essay: Hazlitt's Quoting and Misquoting of Shakespeare', *Polysèmes*, 20 (2018), 1-15.

Arnold, Matthew, *Poems* (London: Longman, Green, and Longmans, 1853).

Baker, Herschel, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

Balibar, Etienne, 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Vol. 13 No. 3 (1990), 329-361.

Barnard, John, 'Keats's "Robin Hood", John Hamilton Reynolds, and the "Old Poets"', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXXV (1989), 181-200.

Barrell, John, *Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

—, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987).

Barthes, Roland, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Malden: Blackwell, 1990).

Bate, Walter Jackson, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Bentham, Jeremy, *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. F. Rosen et al. (Oxford: OUP, 1983-).

—, *The Book of Fallacies: from Unfinished Papers of Jeremy Bentham. By a Friend.* (Tavistock Street, Covent Garden: John and H. L. Hunt, 1824).

Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935).

Bevis, Matthew, *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickinson, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Blake, William, 'London', *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* ed. Richard Willmott, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990 [1794].

Booth, Stephen, *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Norman Hill and L.F. Powell (Oxford: OUP, 1934).

Bromwich, David, Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic (Yale: Yale University Press, 1983).

—, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and the Beautiful to American Independence* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1969).

—, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Lucy S. Sutherland (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1960).

—, *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. P. J. Marshall et al., 9 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1989-2015).

Butler, Marilyn, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Cavell, Stanley, *In Quest of the Ordinary, Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (London: The University of Chicago Press,1988).

Certeau, Michel de*, The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press Ltd, 1984).

Chandler, James K., and Kevin Gilmartin, ed. *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Cobban, Alfred, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, Second Ed. 1960).

Cobbett, William, *Parliamentary History of England. Vol. 1* (London: T.C. Hansard, 1806).

Coleridge, S. T., *Conciones ad Populum. Or, Addresses to the People* (Private print, Duke University Rare Books Collection, 1795).

—, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times,* ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Cope, John, *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Cowper, Williiam, *The Task* (London: J. Johnson, 1785).

Cox, Jeffrey N., *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Craig, David, 'Statesmanship', in *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain,* ed. by David Craig and James Thompson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Cronin, Richard, *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture After Waterloo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Dart, Gregory, 'Addison and the Romantics', in Paul Davis ed., *Joseph Addison: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

—, 'Hazlitt and Biography', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 29/4 (2000), 338-348.

—, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Dickens, Charles, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

Douce, Francis, *The Recreative Review, or Eccentricities of Literature and Life* (London: Wallis and Co., 1821).

Enfield, William, *The Speaker: or, Miscellaneous Pieces* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1798).

Felski, Rita, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', from *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

Feltham, John, *The Picture of London for 1802* (London: R.Phillips, 1802).

Gay, John, 'The Beggar's Opera' (1728) in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th edn (New York: Norton, 2012).

Gilmartin, Kevin, 'Hazlitt's Visionary London', *Repossessing the Romantic Past,* ed. Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40-62.

—, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Godwin, William, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin Classics, 1976).

—, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (New York, NY: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965).

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788* trans. by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (London: Penguin, 1970).

Good, Graham, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Gorji, Mina, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

Haefner, Joel, '"The Soul Speaking in the Face": Hazlitt's Concept of Character'. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 24/4, (Autumn 1984), 655-670.

Hartley, David, *Observations on Man: His Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014.)

Haydon, John O., *The Romantic Reviewers* (University of Chicago Press, 1968).

Hazlitt, William, *Complete Works*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1934).

—, *The Eloquence of the British Senate,* 2 vols (London: J. Murray, 1808).

—, *Letters,* ed. Herschel Moreland Sikes (London: Macmillan, 1979).

—, *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things*, ed. by William Carew Hazlitt (London: Bell & Daldry, 1870).

Hegel, G., 'The System of Needs', *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

Hessell, Nikki, *Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

Heuser, Ryan, et al., 'The Emotions of London', *Pamphlets of the Stanford Literary Lab*, 13, October 2016.

Hibbert, Christopher, et al., *The London Encyclopaedia (3rd edition)* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011).

Higgins, David, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine* (London: Routledge, 2005).

—, *Romantic Englishness: Local, National, and Global Selves, 1780-1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Homar, Katie, ‘Rhetorical Accretion and Rhetorical Criticism in William Hazlitt’s *Eloquence of the British Senate*’, *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 20 No. 3 (2017).

Homar, Katie, ‘William Hazlitt’s “Eloquence of the British Senate”‘, *The Wordsworth Circle,* Vol. 44, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2013) 127-131.

Hone, William, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book, or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements* 2 vols (London: William Tegg and Co., 1825).

Hume, David, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom Beauchamp. The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume, ed. David Fate Norton, M. A. Stewart and Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: OUP, 1998).

—, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Sir Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge, and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: OUP, 1888; 1978).

—*, Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* ((London: J. Jones, 1822).

Hunt, Leigh, *Selected Writings*, 6 vols, ed. Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra et al. (London: Routledge, 2003).

—, *The Companion*, (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1828).

—, *The Indicator* (London: Appleyard, 1822).

—, *The Reflector*, 2 vols, (London: 1812).

Jacobus, Mary, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

James, Felicity, ‘Protestant Dissent’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

James, William, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1918).

Johnson, Samuel, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works,* 4 vols, ed. Roger Lonsdale, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Johnston, Freya, ‘Keeping to William Hazlitt’, in *Thinking Through Style: Non Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55-69.

Jones, Stanley, *Hazlitt: A Life from Winterslow to Frith Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Keats, John, *The Letters of John Keats,* 2 vols, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, rep. 2012).

Kelley, Theresa M., 'J. M. W. Turner, Napoleonic Caricature, and Romantic Allegory', *English Literary History* 58/2 (Summer 1991), 351-382.

Keymer, Thomas, 'The Subjective Turn', in David Duff ed., *Oxford Handbook of Romanticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates,* trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Kinnaird, John, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

Kristeva, Julia, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Lamb, Charles, *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols, (London: Methuen, 1903).

Langford, Paul, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Lee, Yoon Sun, *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).

Livingstone, E. A., ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 [third edition]).

Masters, Roger D., *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986 [repr. 2015]).

Mole, Tom, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Montaigne, Michel de, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

Montluzin, Emily Lorraine de, "Killing the Cockneys: 'Blackwood's'' Weapons of Choice against Hunt, Hazlitt, and Keats." *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 47 (1998), 87–107.

Morrison, Robert, and Daniel S. Roberts, eds., *Romanticism and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine: 'An Unprecedented Phenomenon*' eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

—, ed., *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine,* ed. with Chris Baldick (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Mualem, Shlomy, ‘Nonsense and Irony: Wittgenstein’s Strategy of Self-refutation and Kierkegaard’s Concept of Communication’, *Tópicos*, *Revista de Filosofía*, 53 (2017), 203-227.

Mulvihill, James, ‘Hazlitt on Parliamentary Eloquence’, *Prose Studies* Vol. 12, No. 2 (1989), 132-146.

—, ‘The Poetics of Authority: Representation in Hazlitt’s Political Criticism’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* Vol. 101, No. 4 (Oct., 2002), 540-560.

—, *Upstart Talents: Rhetoric and the Career of Reason in English Romantic Discourse, 1790-1820* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004).

Murphy, Peter T., ‘Impersonation and Authorship in Romantic Britain, *English Literary History* 59/3 (Autumn 1992), 625-649.

Natarajan, Uttara, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Newlyn, Lucy, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Ngai, Sianne, ‘Merely Interesting’, *Critical Inquiry,* 34/4 (Summer 2008), 777-817.

Nuss, Melynda, *Distance, Theatre, and the Public Voice, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Park, Roy, ed. *Lamb as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

—, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory* (London: Clarendon Press, 1971).

Parker, Fred, *Scepticism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Parker, Mark, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Patmore, P. G., *My Friends and Acquaintance* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1854).

Patten, Robert L., ‘Conventions of Georgian Caricature’. *Art Journal* 43/4 (Winter 1983), 331-338.

Paulin, Tom, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt’s Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber).

Pegge, Samuel, *Anecdotes of the English Language,* (London: John Nichols,1803).

Phillips, Richard, *Modern London; Being the History and Present State of the British Metropolis. Illustrated with Numerous Copper Plates* (London: 1804).

Philp, Mark, *Godwin’s Political Justice* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1986).

Potkay, Adam, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

Rajan, Tilottama, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

Ready, Robert, 'Hazlitt as an English Comic Writer', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 6/2 (Spring 1975), 109-114.

Reid, Christopher, 'Whose Parliament? Political Oratory and Print Culture in the Later 18th Century', *Language and Literature* Vol. 9 No. 2 (2000), 122-134.

Rendell, Steven, *Distinguo: Reading Montaigne Differently* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Reynolds, J. H., 'The Reader No. V', *The Champion*, 2 June 1816, 173-4.

Ricks, Christopher, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Robinson, Mary, *Works of Mary Robinson,* Vol. I, ed. William D Brewer, Daniel Robinson, Sharon M Setzer, Orianne Smith (London: Routledge 2009).

Rosenfeld, Sophia, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau Vol. 10,* ed. and trans. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, et al. (Hanover: Published for Dartmouth College by UP New England, 2004).

Rushing, Robert, 'What We Desire, We Shall ever Have: Calvino, Žižek, and Ovid', *Comparative Literature*, 58 (2006), 44-58.

Sanders, Mike, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Schlegel, Friedrich, *Critical Fragments* in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Schoenfield, Mark, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

Shelley, P. B., *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*, (Oxford: OUP, 1904).

Smith, David Q., 'Genius and Common Sense: The Romantics and Leigh Hunt', *Books at Iowa*, 40 (1984), 41-57 (47).

Stafford, W., 'Dissenting Religion Translated into Politics – Godwin's "Political Justice"', *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 1 (2), 1980, 279-99.

Stewart, David G., ‘Charles Lamb’s “Distant Correspondents”: Speech, Writing and Readers in Regency Magazine Writing’, *Keats-Shelley Journal* 57 (2008), 89-107.

Stewart, John B., *Opinion and Reform in Hume’s Political Philosophy*, (Princeton: New Jersey, 1992).

Strachan, John, ‘The ‘Chaldee Manuscript’, William Hone, and Late Georgian Religious Parody’. *Romanticism* 23/3 (2017), 243-252.

Strout, Alan Lang, ‘Hunt, Hazlitt, and Maga,’ *English Language Notes* 4 (June 1937), 151–59.

Swaab, Peter, ‘Romantic Poetry and Victorian Nonsense Poetry: Some Directions of Travel’, *Romanticism*, Vol. 25 Issue 1 (March 2019) 90-102.

Townley, James, *High Life below Stairs. A Farce. Written by David Garrick, Esq. [or Rather, by James Townley], Etc.*, (London: R.Butters,1780).

Tscherny, Nadia, ‘Likeness in Early Romantic Portraiture’. *Art Journal* 46/3, (Autumn 1987), 193-199.

Weightman, Gavin, and Stephen Humphries. *The Making of Modern London, 1914-1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984).

Whale, John, *Imagination Under Pressure 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

Wheatley, Kim, ‘The Blackwood’s Attacks on Leigh Hunt’, *Nineteenth- Century Literat*ure (1992), 47(1), 1-31.

—, *Romantic Feuds: Transcending the ‘Age of Personality’* (London: Routledge, 2013)

White, Daniel, E. *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

—, ‘“The Slangwhangery of the Jargonists”: Writing, Speech, and the Character of Romanticism’, *Studies in Romanticism* 56/4 (Winter 2017), 453-478.

Williams, Karen, *Humour in Children’s Literature, 1800-1840* (Doctoral thesis: University of Roehampton, 2017).

Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City*, (London: Vintage, 2016 [1973]).

Wolfreys, Julian, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

Wolfson, Susan, ‘First Acquaintance and ‘Quaint Allusion’’, *ELH*, 79 (2012), 261-288.

Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Women; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

Woolf, Virginia, 'William Hazlitt', in *The Common Reader: Volume 2,* ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986).

Wordsworth, William, *The Prelude,* eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, (London: W.W. Norton, 1979).

—, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200).

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