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KEVIN GILMARTIN

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Political Essayist



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In memory of Marilyn Butler
(1937–2014)

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Abbreviation

CW William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34).

Introduction

Political Hazlitt

The Controversial Spirit of the Age

Although a sense of neglect persists among his admirers, William Hazlitt has enjoyed a striking revival of interest among literary critics in recent decades. This enhanced reputation has certainly been assisted by the breakdown, since the 1980s, of lyric Romanticism as the primary framework for interpreting late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British literature. The effect has been to release Hazlitt from his ancillary status as a perceptive, though politically unreliable, commentator on the major poets of the period, notably Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron, and as an irascible member of social circles that included Shelley, Keats, and Charles Lamb. Taken as he once was, an index of the first rank of early nineteenth-century critical reviewing in the service of late twentieth-century canon formation, Hazlitt's achievement had less to do with his own literary value than with a selective sense of what he valued. This was particularly evident in M. H. Abrams' habit of making Hazlitt a prescient witness to Wordsworth's primacy in a Romantic poetic revolution that was first carried along by the spirit of the French Revolution, but then shed a restrictive rationalism along with any underlying assumption that historical experience might set the terms for literary imagination. Such claims derive from the ringing opening sentence of Hazlitt's essay on Wordsworth in his signature 1825 volume, *The Spirit of the Age: Or Contemporary Portraits*: "Mr. Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age" (CW 11: 86).¹ When Abrams isolates this vivid announcement in his 1971 study, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, as part of an account of the social and historical

dimensions of a Romantic “breakthrough from sensual into imaginative seeing,”² he initiates a process of selection and extraction that continues through a heavily elided passage from the same essay (no two complete sentences are given in succession), and that effectively suppresses the ironic counterpoint running through the critical portrait of Wordsworth. The tone is unstable, and far from uniformly honorific. Jon Klancher shrewdly observes that “for Hazlitt there was something amusing if not silly about the self-conscious effort to model English cultural renovation upon French revolutionizing.”³ What particularly gets lost in Abrams’ redaction is Hazlitt’s version of a second-generation Romantic critique of Wordsworthian egoism (“greater pride,” “to owe nothing but to himself,” “native pride”), and his identification of Wordsworthian ambition with a revolutionary violence that is mischievously figured in the terms of Edmund Burke’s counterrevolutionary critique of that violence (“obliterated and effaced,” “tramples on the pride of art,” “stripped off without mercy as barbarous, idle, and Gothic”).⁴

Already in the second sentence of the essay on Wordsworth, strategically omitted in *Natural Supernaturalism*, Hazlitt takes a sharp turn away from anything like a straightforward tribute: “Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of” (86). To invoke *The Spirit of the Age* in support of an argument that the “new poetry and poetic” of British Romanticism, “put forward in a revolutionary age, also has political and social parallels and implications,”⁵ is to catch the tenor of Hazlitt’s more provocative claims about the Jacobin orthography and versification of the *Lyrical Ballads* while overlooking the tendentious polemic involved in making such a case as late as 1825. At this point Wordsworth was far along in his career as an apologist for British state reaction to the French Revolution, and Hazlitt was no less advanced in his relentless campaign against Lake School “apostasy” as a cynical desertion of the cause of liberty. Abrams approves Hazlitt’s enthusiasm for a “levelling” Wordsworthian muse that “proceeds on a principle of equality” without regard for “distinctions of rank, birth, wealth, power” (87). But he omits a whole series of nagging qualifications and contrary enquiries that barb the appreciative response, and figure centrally in the development of an essay that is as embittered and satirical as it is laudatory. Hazlitt’s own divided feelings about social and aesthetic hierarchy further complicate the case. Key elements of what Abrams endorses in Hazlitt’s account of a Wordsworthian muse (“it . . . strives to reduce all things to the same standard”) register a

profound ambivalence on the critic's part, involving the imperfect alignment of social and aesthetic hierarchies. Other claims ("he elevates the mean by the strength of his own aspirations") only make sense after the caustic punch line is delivered. "Possibly a good deal of this," Hazlitt concludes of the whole celebrated Romantic revolution in poetic language, "may be regarded as the effect of disappointed views and an inverted ambition" (88). In this way a Wordsworthian emanation of the spirit of the age risks losing social and political consequence—let alone transcendental reach—as it collapses instead upon the poet's narrow professional interest and the critical essayist's bitterly partisan interest in the case at hand. If nothing else, the pervasive ellipses in Abrams' long extract from *The Spirit of the Age* suggests just how much of Hazlitt's own language and vision need to be done away with in order to make his prose portrait of Wordsworth into a prescient celebration of a visionary poetic career.

Yet even a corrective reading of the essay on Wordsworth only begins to register the distortions involved in pressing *The Spirit of the Age* into the service of a canonical Romanticism that is said to define a revolutionary age by somehow transcending its material condition. A casual glance at the 1825 volume's table of contents is enough to reinforce the point, as Jerome McGann suggests when he enlists *The Spirit of the Age* in support of the observation that "not every artistic production in the Romantic period is a Romantic one."⁶ Expectations about the privilege accorded poetry, or even "artistic production," let alone Wordsworth and the Lake School, are eroded by the volume's competing, interlocking, and internally vexed portrait gallery of poets as well as novelists, essayists, reviewers, editors, philosophers, politicians, reformers, and clerics. Successive figures open upon distinct arenas of contemporary public life, without yielding a single comprehensive spirit of the age. For Romantic literary sensibilities, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, and Wordsworth are present, along with Godwin, Scott, Thomas Moore, Leigh Hunt, and Charles Lamb in the guise of Elia. But so too are Malthus and Bentham, and William Gifford and Francis Jeffrey in their competing roles as editors of the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh Reviews*, along with the Lord Chancellor John Scott, the campaigning moralist and anti-slave trade activist William Wilberforce, the Scottish clergyman and celebrity preacher Edward Irving, and the philologist and radical activist John Horne Tooke. Even stripped of its countervailing ironies, and considered as "a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age" and "one of the innovations of the time" (*CW* 11: 86–7), Wordsworth's leveling genius is hardly

privileged in the press of competing figures and forces. The accumulated portraits involve a sense of retrospection and degeneration as well as prospective “innovation,” and suggest contaminating partisan controversy and vexed contradiction as well as a more “pure emanation.”⁷ The difficulty about selecting any one figure as a summation of the whole is reinforced by the volume’s network of paired portraits, often within individual essays (“Mr. Campbell—Mr. Crabbe,” “Mr. Brougham—Sir F. Burdett,” “Lord Eldon—Mr. Wilberforce,” “Mr. T. Moore—Mr. Leigh Hunt,” “Elia—Geoffrey Crayon”), and also through suggestively ordered antithetical sequences. Even where such pairings gesture toward an identifiable spirit of the age, Hazlitt is less concerned to recommend essence than to make resistance equally telling and original. Where Washington Irving, as Geoffrey Crayon, cultivates “the flowers of modern literature,” Charles Lamb’s Elia has, by contrast, “raked among the dust and cobwebs of a more remote period.” For this reason he takes his place in the portrait gallery “not by conforming to the *Spirit of the Age*, but in opposition to it” (178). The essay on Godwin is particularly striking for the way it opens with a disenchanted version of the more famous keynote declaration from the Wordsworth essay, the emphasis shifting from imaginative expression to fickle public reception. “The Spirit of the Age was never more fully shown than in its treatment of this writer—its love of paradox and change, its dastard submission to prejudice and to the fashion of the day” (16). In considering Hazlitt an instructive guide through Romantic-period literary culture, we should attend to the many contradictory movements and contaminations of “Spirit” that complicate any account of “pure” Wordsworthian genius.

The paired essays on William Gifford and Francis Jeffrey offer one of the volume’s most telling antithetical sequences, with the liberal politics and impartial “critical decisions” of the *Edinburgh Review* proving “eminently characteristic of the Spirit of the Age,” whereas “the express object of the *Quarterly Review*” has been “to discountenance and extinguish that spirit” (127). This suggests a progressive historical framework, pivoting on Gifford as the outmoded residue of an earlier era, who believes “that modern literature should wear the fetters of classical antiquity” (115) and persists in endorsing aesthetic forms and principles “that came into fashion about forty years ago” (116). Yet even in this brutally reductive portrait of an editorial tool of Tory power, Hazlitt remains attentive to present and ongoing processes that do not favor liberty, and to paradoxes that erode historical

optimism. There is, for example, a troubling sense that political corruption, a central trope in contemporary radical discourse, has become a vital rather than degenerative formation. Human nature seems perversely disposed to injustice, even as the liberties rooted out by oppressive power are as much a national inheritance—a portion of “the spirit of the English constitution and the independence of the English character” (124)—as they are a recent revolutionary birth and a spirit of the age. In any case, a full account of contemporary criticism evidently requires both editorial portraits, Jeffrey and Gifford together, without the reassuring framework of historical progress to decide between them. And the problem is not simply that the founding of the conservative *Quarterly Review* in 1809 made it the more recent periodical development, a project that “arose out of the *Edinburgh*, not as a corollary, but in contradiction to it” (127). For if Gifford predictably despises rising genius, he presents in his own professional figure a more sordid version of the puzzles about leveling innovation and professional relapse that were evident in the essay on Wordsworth. “His standard of *ideal* perfection is what he himself now is, a person of *mediocre* literary attainments,” so that his “low, upstart, servile” notions make him a perverse editorial expression of the Tory assumption “that Whigs and Reformers must be persons of low birth and breeding” (115). Gifford is certainly mocked for a critical temperament that considers every literary innovation to be alarming evidence of “a restless and revolutionary spirit”: “He has long been stationary himself, and is determined that others shall remain so” (116). But in working ahead from the *Quarterly* to the *Edinburgh*, whose restless editor “never stands still” (131), Hazlitt does not discover the reassuring contrary evidence of progressive liberation through free inquiry. Instead Jeffrey embodies an unsettled critical intellect and determined political independence that seem to yield little beyond endless disputation: “He cannot rest on one side of a question: he is obliged by a mercurial habit and disposition to vary his point of view” (133). In any event the critical tendencies of the *Edinburgh Review*, to which Hazlitt himself contributed, mark its editor out as “a person in advance of the age” (130). In this sense the present remains elusive, with neither of the paired editorial portraits in *The Spirit of the Age* achieving current representative status.

A still more corrosive version of this pattern of interlocking political and historical contrasts develops through an earlier sequence of essays on “Sir Walter Scott” and “Lord Byron.” As with the Gifford–Jeffrey pair, the first portrait of Scott as “the most popular writer of the age” (57) is relatively

freestanding, with only casual reference to Byron, though there is a nagging sense that a “mind brooding over antiquity” might leave something out. Sir Walter Scott “is just half of what the human intellect is capable of being: . . . he knows all that *has been*; all that *is to be* is nothing to him” (57). It is not until the following essay on Byron that the relationship develops, and Hazlitt allows for similarity as well as difference: “We shall treat of them in the same connection, partly on account of their distinguished pre-eminence, and partly because they afford a complete contrast to each other” (69). If the earlier account of Scott’s conservative retrospection indicates a clear political contrast, matters are complicated by Byron’s celebrity and by his ostentatious performance of aristocratic status. Where Scott wants to suppress the spirit of reform out of deference to “old prejudices and superstitions,” the noble lord “panders to the spirit of the age” by paradoxically trading on elite privilege to court “popular applause” (76), so that any prospect of a liberal or reformist spirit of the age is compromised by the hazards of literary commerce and the mass formation of taste. Taken together Scott and Byron risk a mutually unflattering portrait of one another and of the literary age they dominate, so that (as with Gifford and Jeffrey) there is little sense of relief, even when antithesis seems to open out upon a corrective logic of extremes: “The extravagance and license of the one seems a proper antidote to the bigotry and narrowness of the other” (77). And while “no two men can be more unlike” (69), the two authors find common ground in part through Hazlitt’s own critical interest in teasing out the paradoxical relationship between contemporary developments in public taste and the politics of reaction and reform. This is boldly signaled in the opening sentence of the essay on Byron, as Hazlitt pivots from Scott taken on his own terms to a more sustained comparative analysis: “Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott are among writers now living the two, who would carry away a majority of suffrages as the greatest geniuses of the age” (69).⁸ Against political type, the liberal Byron finds “preference with the fine gentlemen and ladies (squeamishness apart)” while the conservative Scott carries “the critics and the vulgar” (69), so that the mock treatment of genius by ballot immediately troubles any expectation that the field of literature might offer a straightforward gauge of the historical tendencies of the age.

Hazlitt is particularly interested in how the Waverley novels struck a chord with post-Napoleonic British reading audiences by endlessly rehearsing the longer history of contested royal legitimacy. No doubt romance offers simple pleasures, “a relief to the mind, rarefied as it has

been with modern philosophy" (65). But Scott achieves something at once more paradoxical and more efficient, courting the ominous revival of past rebellion and sectarian conflict in order to put both safely to rest. In accounting for the bewitching spirit of reconciliation that runs through the Waverley novels, Hazlitt indulges in a bitterly playful confusion of the languages of past and present, reaction and reform, ancient chivalry and modern philanthropy:

At a time also, when we bid fair to revive the principles of the Stuarts, it is interesting to bring us acquainted with their persons and misfortunes. The candour of Sir Walter's historic pen levels our bristling prejudices on this score, and sees fair play between Roundheads and Cavaliers, between Protestant and Papist. He is a writer reconciling all the diversities of human nature to the reader. He does not enter into the distinctions of hostile sects or parties, but treats of the strength or the infirmity of the human mind, of the virtues or vices of the human breast, as they are to be found blended in the whole race of mankind . . . Sir Walter is a professed *clarifier* of the age from the vulgar and still lurking old-English antipathy to Popery and Slavery. Through some odd process of *servile* logic, it should seem, that in restoring the claims of the Stuarts by the courtesy of romance, the House of Brunswick are more firmly seated in point of fact, and the Bourbons, by collateral reasoning, become legitimate! (65)

It is by means of this curious romance of "*would-be* treason" that Scott contrives to make his readers "conceive a horror of all reform, civil, political, or religious, and would fain put down the *Spirit of the Age*" (65–6). The claim about the novelist's dubious ability to reconcile competing qualities suggests a pattern of antithesis and resolution that manages to complicate, before the fact, any ensuing comparison with Byron. Yet when Hazlitt does turn, in the subsequent essay, from Scott's "gratuitous servility," he finds little comfort in the "preposterous *liberalism*" of Lord Byron, who might "affect the principles of equality" but takes care to resume "his privileges of peerage, upon occasion" (77), in ways that shore up such privileges for himself and his class. As with Gifford and Jeffrey, this sequence of portraits teases the ingenuous reader and the disenchanted essayist alike with the possibility of a reformist spirit of the age, even as it defers fulfillment through a host of compromises and contradictions that leave revolution and reaction hopelessly intertwined in contemporary public life.

Yet even this sense of a blocked dialectic of political disenchantment would be misleading as an account of *The Spirit of the Age*, since the volume

is less systematic and comprehensive than any number of critical appeals to its suggestive title would seem to indicate. Hazlitt may not always follow his friend and fellow essayist Charles Lamb in preferring literary “*bye-ways to highways*” (178), but his gallery of contemporary portraits is as telling in its digressions and exceptions as in its ringing claims about central figures. The chapter on “The Late Mr. Horne Tooke” closes with a “curious example of the *Spirit of the Age*,” and disturbing evidence of the triumph of “blindness and obstinacy” over “originality” (56–7), as Hazlitt pauses to consider why the etymological theory of grammar developed in Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley* (1786) has been overlooked while Lindley Murray’s derivative and conventionally didactic *English Grammar* (1795) becomes a standard text.⁹ Our critic suspects political bias against the reformer Tooke—“Can it be that our politicians smell a rat in the Member for Old Sarum?” (57)—but he also seizes an opportunity to settle old scores by reviving an attack on Murray that went back to his own *New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue* (1809).¹⁰ Lindley Murray is one of many figures who pass in and out of *The Spirit of the Age* without the benefit of a full-dress portrait, yet even the brief negative notice at the end of the essay on Tooke confirms Hazlitt’s interest in political and historical inconsistency as a hallmark of the present age, and reinforces, too, a sense that no one individual (be it Tooke or Murray or Wordsworth) achieves representative status across the volume as a whole. An American Quaker attorney and loyalist who left the United States in 1784 for business or political reasons and wound up settling in York, Murray became an enterprising man of practical letters whose talents lay in compilation and popularization rather than invention or discovery.¹¹ His *English Grammar* went through countless editions in the nineteenth century, and its many sequels, adaptations, abridgements, and exercise books helped make “Lindley Murray” a household name in Britain and the United States, where he outsold Noah Webster.¹² At least one commentator has noticed the irony of a career that began in New York and wound up in old York,¹³ and the return emigration is itself instructive. While the title of *The Spirit of the Age* is often taken to suggest an expansive sense of the present, rich with future possibility, Hazlitt had himself experienced a version of Murray’s inauspicious return from the New World—in his case, a return manifestly characterized by defeat and diminished expectation. Some of his earliest years were spent in Ireland and the United States, as his father, a Unitarian minister, struggled unsuccessfully to find a congregation amenable to his progressive faith. The family eventually returned to England,

to settle in relative obscurity in Shropshire in the village of Wem, and the elder Hazlitt's spiritual and professional disappointment likely conditioned his son's skepticism about social progress.¹⁴

Lindley Murray arrived in England, just two years before the return of the Hazlitts, as a Tory loyalist and embarrassed man of trade, producing his first English grammar in response to the local requirements of a Quaker school for girls, and going on to display all the enterprising energy that Hazlitt associated with the Quakers. By his death in 1826 there was a 40th English edition of the *Grammar* and a 33rd edition of the associated *English Exercises*, and he continued to dominate the textbook market in England and America for decades. The translation of the *Grammar* into several languages as an instrument of English language instruction has been taken as early evidence of the rise of global English.¹⁵ Though Hazlitt defended the Quakers against the wholesale attacks of William Cobbett, he allowed that the sect was a spiritual "puzzle," a strange transplanting of ancient Christian "maxims of the desert into manufacturing towns and populous cities" (*CW* 4: 50–1). The account of Lindley Murray in *The Spirit of the Age* reinforced this sense of historical paradox, down to the final complaint that Horne Tooke's innovative discoveries languished while Murray's outmoded errors were distributed through the latest publishing technology: "It seems in this, as in so many other instances, as if there was a patent for absurdity in the natural bias of the human mind, and that folly should be *stereotyped*" (*CW* 11: 57). If nothing else, the professional opportunism and steady-selling appeal of Lindley Murray confirmed that the spirit of the age was not necessarily a spirit of invention and original genius. Among contemporaries, his acknowledged method of collation and synthesis triggered charges of plagiarism.¹⁶ Of course, such methods were familiar to Hazlitt in his own practice as a journalist, reviewer, and practical man of letters. Marcus Tomalin has shown that, while Hazlitt criticized Murray's retrograde method, his own *New and Improved Grammar* followed traditions laid down by eighteenth-century grammarians, with terminology and examples drawn directly from predecessors that included Murray himself.¹⁷ In any event, as a casual but essentially negative "bye-way" in *The Spirit of the Age*, the account of Murray registers the author's omnivorous fascination with every aspect of early nineteenth-century British culture and society, and suggests just one way in which the sprawling portrait gallery can prove as conducive to the skeptical and localizing impulses of the New Historicism as to high Romantic accounts of visionary transcendence.

Revising Hazlitt's Politics

This same authorial range and resourcefulness has figured prominently in Hazlitt's return to critical notice. Alongside a steady stream of biographical studies, there have been recent interpretive accounts of his activity as a journalist, aesthetic theorist, literary reviewer, art and theater critic, parliamentary reporter, radical polemicist, metaphysician, grammarian, biographer, autobiographer, and enthusiastic commentator on nearly every aspect of life in early nineteenth-century London. Rescued from the margins of canonical Romanticism, he has become a remarkably versatile presence across British cultural studies, figuring in histories of journalism, religion, gender, politics, celebrity, professionalism, theater, sport, popular culture, and the visual arts.¹⁸ The ongoing reassessment of his achievement clearly follows from shifts in what we value about literary history. This is particularly evident in the sense of Hazlitt as a political essayist, who wrote with unswerving radical commitment and passion through the Napoleonic war years, the immediate postwar era that E. P. Thompson termed "the heroic age of popular Radicalism,"¹⁹ and the ensuing phase of repression and radical disarray ushered in by the Six Acts of 1819. Thompson's classic 1963 study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, was a watershed event in British labor history, and set the terms for a reconsideration of Hazlitt, in part by affording him serious consideration within the framework of a sustained analysis of the popular movement for radical parliamentary reform.²⁰ Earlier estimations of Hazlitt's political achievement can be gauged from Herschel Baker's 1962 critical biography, with its evident distaste for the "sprawling and uneven work on politics," and its unfavorable comparison between the "angry and uneven" 1819 volume of *Political Essays*, regarded as "the last of his strictly journalistic works," and the subsequent lectures and essays on English literature that are felt to secure his critical reputation.²¹ "Journalism" has been a code for published work that falls below some assumed standard of aesthetic or intellectual value, notably when applied to the *Political Essays* as a volume gathered from a decade of work for such leading liberal and radical organs as the *Morning Chronicle*, *The Champion*, *The Examiner*, and the *Yellow Dwarf*. Established literary reputations are also at issue in such assessments, as, for example, when Baker develops his account of Hazlitt's politically motivated response to Wordsworth and Coleridge as a way to "help us understand, if not condone, his rancor and vulgarity."²²

And this from a sympathetic biographer, who wrote thoughtfully about how the traditions of rational Dissent shaped his subject's political development. Other accounts of Hazlitt through the formative decades of Romantic literary studies, even those that did not conceive Romanticism as an imaginative transcendence of betrayed revolutionary expectation, found little use for a body of political writing that was formed under immediate journalistic pressures and that kept an abiding and prosaic faith with the French Revolution.²³ R. L. Brett's 1977 pamphlet for the British Council's "Writers and their Work" series is typical. A critic and editor of Coleridge and Wordsworth, Brett determined that "Hazlitt's achievement as a man of letters" was to be found "in his essays and literary criticism." These placed him in a line of polite essayists that ran from Addison and Steele to Samuel Johnson, and that was best exemplified in a detached observational manner "removed from polemics." Hazlitt's attacks on the Lake poets were considered "vituperative" in tone and "prejudiced" in judgment, evidence of a regrettable tendency "to view things through the spectacle of his own preconceptions" and, what was worse, "to confuse politics and poetry."²⁴

As in so many areas of Romantic-period literary studies, Marilyn Butler set the terms for a reassessment of the role of politics in Hazlitt's literary achievement by decisively contextualizing revolution and counterrevolution alike in her 1981 survey, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830*. Butler had already resisted the more narrowly poetic canon that came to dominate English Romantic studies in North America through a sequence of monographs on Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and Thomas Love Peacock, and her subsequent history of late Enlightenment and Romantic literature "and its background" notably embraces fiction and non-fiction prose. Hazlitt figures as an engaged radical journalist, as a sturdy Dissenting sectarian and recalcitrant keeper of French revolutionary faith, and as an emerging "new professional type, the star journalist," whose literary development was shaped by trenchant attacks on Wordsworth and Coleridge and by a productive engagement with the "liberal new wave" of the Shelley and Hunt circles.²⁵ Yet, for all its revisionist energy, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* still tends to gauge reactionary and reformist energies alike through the vexed fortunes of radical expression under pressure, and in this way Butler determines that, while Hazlitt "retained the political hopes of the early 1790s" and remained "recognizably a man of the left," his achievement was finally "that of an isolated no-sayer driven

by unpropitious circumstances into himself, and into wholly notional opposition.”²⁶

This sense of an engaged political critique that becomes “wholly notional,” as much from historical circumstance as from personal temperament, raises the question of just what Hazlitt’s restless and combative political prose was meant to accomplish. Similar issues conditioned my own treatment of Hazlitt in an afterword to *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (1996), where I tested Hazlitt’s rhetoric of opposition against more activist and organizationally committed radical contemporaries, such as William Cobbett, John Wade, Richard Carlile, and T. J. Wooler. While acknowledging that Hazlitt’s critical reflections on contemporary radicalism informed my own interpretive method, I also concluded that there was a tendency in his work to translate the animating contradictions of radical culture from the charged arenas of parliamentary reform agitation and public assembly to the printed page.²⁷ Given that my central concern in *Print Politics* was popular radical activism, this contention about Hazlitt’s difference was partly a matter of perspective. In recalibrating the relationship between politics and literary form, Butler maintained that even Hazlitt’s most “restless, skeptical, self-tormenting and doubting essays” preserved the “activist potential” of Dissenting radical tradition, even as they risked collapsing upon embittered personal negation.²⁸ And across the broad terrain of *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, it is striking that Hazlitt’s political expression yields literary value, above all, through acute skeptical self-examination. While Butler acknowledges that he produced much of his literary criticism during “the highly polemical years” leading up to 1819, she contends that his “great period was to be 1820–3, when he wrote over half of his best work, the discrete pragmatic essays that read like fragments of one man’s consciousness.”²⁹ Though she does not share the acute aversion to polemic evident in Baker and Brett, Butler still tracks literary value as a movement from politics and public life to more intimate forms of self-disclosure.

In challenging some key assumptions of Anglo-American Romantic studies, Butler worked back through the eighteenth century, and identified Neoclassicism and Enlightenment primitivism as progressive developments that registered, in their retreat, the impact of a British counterrevolution upon literature and the arts during the 1790s and beyond. For Hazlitt studies, one important yield of the more nuanced and extended historical framework championed by Butler came in 1988, with a remarkable chapter

in Seamus Deane's *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England*, an unabashed "Jacobin Profile" that explicitly aimed to raise the critical discussion of Hazlitt's politics to a level already achieved in aesthetics and metaphysics. Here, radical commitment does not interfere with literary development. Hazlitt's sustained fascination with French literature and culture provides Deane with an opening to the longer eighteenth century and with a central thread of intellectual development. His insistence that "betrayal is the basic motif of Hazlitt's writings" is revealing in itself.³⁰ Yet what may be more important is that Deane does not restrict "betrayal" to the dashed hopes of London radicalism in the 1790s, but considers a wider Enlightenment framework and a longer history of political expectation. Given that Hazlitt was invoked to support a Wordsworthian shift from politics and history to imaginative apocalypse, Deane's account carries wider implications for Romantic studies. Hazlitt endlessly assessed and revisited the 1790s, a decade that has recently come to figure in literary studies as something like a discrete era, in ways that at once reinforce and complicate period conceptions of Romanticism. One crucial pivot for Hazlitt's ongoing inquiry into the 1790s was Deane's French Enlightenment, supplemented by an English Enlightenment that was mediated by familial traditions of rational Dissent. In this sense Hazlitt poses a version of what Dan White has termed "the Dissenting genealogy of Romanticism."³¹ His interest in the French Enlightenment and in the longer history of rational Dissent and sectarian Protestant faith has the effect of pressing much of what we mean by "the 1790s" back through earlier decades, even as it challenges the secularization narratives that have often underwritten Romantic periodization.³² As importantly, his habit of revisiting England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 in order to come to terms with the French Revolution of 1789 extends the historical framework for understanding Romantic revolution and revolutionary betrayal alike.³³

Deane is interested in a wider European intellectual framework, and focuses on Rousseau partly to remind us that Hazlitt's French affiliations did not begin with the fall of the Bastille.³⁴ The individualism that Butler considered a recoil from political engagement becomes, in Deane's analysis, a more productive consequence of the contrarian radical engagement with Rousseau, a writer that Hazlitt prized for revealing self-expression, and that he regarded as "the founder of Jacobinism," a designation "which disclaims the division of the species into two classes, the one the property of the other" (*CW* 4: 379). This remark from a casual footnote to an

Examiner profile of Rousseau is typical of the way Hazlitt's political impulse to provoke could generate a field of animosity that was at once polarizing and potentially destabilizing.³⁵ The sharp sense of antagonism ("division of the species into two classes") was a hallmark of contemporary radical argument, but Hazlitt articulates it here in terms that require an allegiance to French Jacobinism shared by few British reformers of the early nineteenth century. And, under the sign of Rousseau, such an allegiance has the further effect of challenging the assumption, whether on the right or the left, that 1789 marked a decisive ideological break. As Deane shows, the "curious intimacy" with Rousseau helped Hazlitt cultivate his own self-awareness and refine a distinctive literary voice, even as it assisted a mobile campaign of ideological provocation that secured his identity as the consummate "Jacobin reviewer in a period of betrayal."³⁶

Despite the compelling case Deane made for the engaged precision of Hazlitt's "Jacobin" prose, and for the integration of politics with aesthetics and metaphysics in his critical practice, one of the central points for which *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England* contended—"the consistency of his political opinions"—has remained the least satisfactorily settled.³⁷ Even as efforts to rescue Hazlitt's literary achievement from political excess continue, recent decades have witnessed a disconcerting range of political Hazlitts. To Butler's introverted dissident liberal and Deane's recalcitrant Jacobin profiler of Jacobin disillusionment, we can add John Kinnaid's pragmatic "constitutional Whig," Mark Francis and John Morrow's secular libertarian, Joseph Butwin's "republican in the school of Paine," Tom Paulin's Irish-accented adherent of a "Dissenting counter-culture," Simon Bainbridge's "ambiguous, even paradoxical" Bonapartist, and Philip Harling's popular radical, operating "squarely within the conventions of late-Georgian radical journalism."³⁸ This last claim challenges even as it refines E. P. Thompson's early treatment of Hazlitt as a committed radical whose political voice was refracted by the "polite culture" of the periodical essayist.³⁹ While the canon of Romantic-period literary politics is still a work in progress, Hazlitt seems to occupy a notable position, after Burke, Paine, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin perhaps, but alongside Robert Southey, Hannah More, Anna Barbauld, William Cobbett, Charlotte Smith, Leigh Hunt, and others, as a writer of literary significance whose distinctive voice was shaped by the pressures of revolution, reaction, and reform. Yet there is surprisingly little consensus about his ideological position.

This diversity of response has something to do with an acknowledgment that, whatever his convictions, Hazlitt developed a flexible critical method that exploited paradox and contradiction, and subjected the left as well as the right to corrosive scrutiny. In this he was motivated partly by a commitment to disinterested reflection, and partly by a growing frustration with the defeat of liberty at home and abroad. "To this pass have we been brought by the joint endeavours of Tories, Whigs, and Reformers," he wrote, surveying a dismal postwar political landscape in the Preface to the 1819 *Political Essays*, "and as they have all had a hand in it, I shall here endeavour to ascribe to each their share of merit in this goodly piece of work" (*CW* 7: 13). Here, the case for specifically *political* criticism as a dimension of his literary achievement needs to be made. Hazlitt's critical disinterestedness, his ability to explore competing ideas and inhabit multiple perspectives, has been identified overwhelmingly with his writing on literature and aesthetics, to the point where political commitment marks the breakdown of measured critique, whether this is charged to inflexibility ("prejudiced," "preconceptions") or emotional excess ("angry," "vituperative," "rancor"). In fact, there was ample room for passion and partisanship in Hazlitt's theory of disinterestedness, and one of the aims of this book will be to show that his characteristically mobile critical practice was not only consistent with but articulated through a radical political temperament. One of his most well-known (and, if he is to be believed, earliest) accounts of the principles at work in a disinterested critical imagination was recorded in the essay "My First Acquaintance with Poets," in a remark that the 19-year-old Hazlitt made in conversation with his father and their visitor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, about leading literary and political figures of the day: "I ventured to say that I had always entertained a great opinion of Burke, and that (as far as I could find) the speaking of him with contempt might be made the test of a vulgar democratical mind" (*CW* 17: 111). The willingness to slip into the language of counterrevolutionary loyalism ("vulgar democratical"), while praising the author of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, was itself telling. Throughout Hazlitt's career, Burke was a pivot for expressions of revealing critical sympathy and recalcitrant partisan outrage that are not easily disentangled.

The catalog of ideological identifications that I have offered is misleading in the sense that most of the commentators cited also acknowledge competing impulses and dispositions, which move Hazlitt's political prose in various directions, but in any case away from mainstream partisan positions,

and into what were, by the late 1810s, the more contrarian or anachronistic fringes of Jacobinism, Bonapartism, Republicanism, and rational Dissent. In Deane's account a dissident flexibility is evident in the way Rousseau gets taken up as the "counteracting influence" to Burke. Far from setting his own mind at ease, still less that of his readers, Hazlitt cultivated a "friction" between these two figures, "who represented so perfectly for him the spirit of the Revolution and its denial." It is evidence of Deane's own critical flexibility that he closes a chapter which begins as a "Jacobin Profile" by looking ahead to a "critique of the Jacobin" that took shape in Hazlitt's late response to Bentham and the philosophical radicalism of the Westminster Reformers.⁴⁰ And Deane is not alone in tracking competing impulses. One of the more striking convergences in recent Hazlitt studies has been the attention paid to a restless and contradictory 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.

The True Jacobin

Hazlitt's political criticism often develops *in resistance*, through the fiercely mobile animosity that was the subject of his perversely self-fashioning *Plain Speaker* essay "On the Pleasure of Hating." Shot through with catalogs of antipathy that risk spilling out through everyone and everything, the essay does not shy from allowing a surfeit of hostility to recoil upon the essayist himself: "We hate old friends: we hate old books: we hate old opinions; and at last we come to hate ourselves" (*CW* 12: 130). As a bravura performance, "On the Pleasure of Hating" seems calculated to test the limits of credibly expressed sentiment. But its core articulations ("I hate . . .," "We hate . . .") were essential gestures in Hazlitt's prose, and as often features of ongoing critical exploration as decisive announcements of a final position.⁴¹ In his critical method, Hazlitt was no less committed to consistency and principle than to disinterested exploration, and it would be a mistake to consider the inflexible and even prejudiced side of this equation as the special domain of politics. A radical counterpart to the pleasure of hating can be found in his definition of "the true Jacobin" as "a good hater" (*CW* 7: 151). While the core conception, "true Jacobin," was an undisguised self-portrait, it would not have been lost on Hazlitt that, in drawing the equivalent phrase

“good hater” from Samuel Johnson, he alluded to a famous Tory expression of partisan affection for a man (Richard Bathurst) esteemed for his hostility to the Whig party.⁴² Hazlitt’s Jacobinized version of the “good hater” emerged in the “Literary Notices” department of the *Examiner* in December 1816 and January 1817, through a series of bitter skirmishes with John Stoddart, an attorney who became leader writer and later editor of *The Times* newspaper—and who was also the brother of Hazlitt’s soon-to-be-estranged wife, a vexed personal connection that no doubt intensified the controversy. Opening on the first of December under the title “The Times Newspaper,” the series continued as the *Examiner* leader under the general heading “Illustrations of The Times Newspaper” through two weekly parts, “On Modern Apostates” and “On Modern Lawyers and Poets,” included a letter to the editor that Hazlitt signed “Scrutator,” and then closed on the 12th of January with “The Times Newspaper. On the Connection Between Toad-Eaters and Tyrants.”⁴³ This *Examiner* material followed on from a longer sequence of attacks, conducted in the *Courier* and *Morning Chronicle* as far back as 1813, in which Hazlitt took on the increasingly anti-Napoleonic *Times* and particularly Edward Sterling in the guise of “Vetus,” the newspaper’s fiery correspondent in support of a zealous war policy.⁴⁴ This was a heterogeneous form of late war and postwar political journalism, canvassing British motivations for war with Napoleonic France and plausible terms for peace, and ranging from abstract principle to sharp personal invective, with argument regularly spilling over to other issues and enemies, notably Coleridge and Southey and the supposed “apostasy” of the Lake poets from an early commitment to the cause of liberty. The pivotal role of *The Times* controversy in eliciting Hazlitt’s combative radical energies was reinforced when most of this work was gathered and reprinted as a sequence in the *Political Essays*.⁴⁵

Personal combat certainly encouraged the kind of embattled self-dramatization that Marilyn Butler has associated with Hazlitt the idiosyncratic loner. But, despite the distractions of a wounded ego, *The Times* series returned again and again to a committed resistance to established power, and to affiliations with the radical reform movement. Even where such affiliations were not explicitly announced, they were embedded in the way Hazlitt’s political prose divided the world between despotism and liberty, and between elite corruption and popular right, with corresponding expectations about social catastrophe in the absence of political reform.⁴⁶ Although the first-person plural of Hazlitt’s “we hate” was often, in itself,

an unthreatening convention of the eighteenth-century periodical essay, his political writing tested another more antagonistically conditioned “we” that achieved plurality through an identification with popular dispossession. Such a collective voice was entirely characteristic of the contemporary radical press, as were the uncertainties besetting it. In this sense at least, one element of Hazlitt’s mobile critical practice—the willingness to find a public voice on an immediate occasion and against a particular antagonist—linked him with the prevailing strains of popular radical argument, even as he often developed that public voice in ways that resisted easy identification with the parliamentary reform movement. Of course, parliamentary reform agitation was itself a province of heroic self-dramatization on the part of individual journalists and leaders, with predictably enabling and disabling consequences for collective action, all of which Hazlitt trenchantly diagnosed in his critical reflections on the reformist temperament and the radical sectarian tradition.

Rather than extending into politics the later malevolent self-portrait of “On the Pleasure of Hating,” the conception of the Jacobin as “good hater” refines the political terms of that portrait, since the “new monster, Legitimacy” (*CW* 12: 136)—Hazlitt’s *bête noire* of post-Napoleonic triumphalism—already holds a privileged position in the final paragraph of the *Plain Speaker* essay. And there is a striking version of a related impulse, the critical self-portrait *through another*, in Hazlitt’s skeptical yet admiring treatment of another good hater, William Cobbett. Allowing that “no one can stand against” this gigantic partisan in the contemporary field of periodical warfare, Hazlitt nevertheless found that Cobbett wanted “principle” because he found himself and his public voice only through the resistance offered by antagonists: “His principle is repulsion, his nature contradiction: he is made of mere antipathies” (*CW* 8: 53, 55). The problem of hating well was also a problem of maintaining principle in resistance to power. Hazlitt’s habit of taking his own bearing with reference to such movements as English rational Dissent and French Jacobinism, and such historical events as the Protestant Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, can seem a deliberately rearguard attachment to lost causes, the inevitable resort of a temperament disposed to disenchantment. Yet his restless movement back through time also indicates an effort to animate radical hostility in ways that are sufficiently principled and historically embedded so as not to reduce to the “mere antipathies” of the famously mercurial editor of the *Political Register*.

In working toward his definition of the true Jacobin as “good hater” in the last *Examiner* essay, “The Times Newspaper. On the Connection Between Toad-Eaters and Tyrants,” Hazlitt first revisited an earlier phase in the exchange with Stoddart:

We formerly gave the Editor of *The Times* a definition of a true Jacobin, as one “who had seen the evening star set over a poor man’s cottage, and connected it with the hope of human happiness.” The city-politician laughed this pastoral definition to scorn, and nicknamed the person who had very innocently laid it down, “the true Jacobin who writes in the Chronicle,”—a nickname by which we profited as little as he has by our Illustrations. Since that time our imagination has grown a little less romantic: so we will give him another, which he may chew the cud upon at his leisure. (*CW* 7: 151)⁴⁷

This self-conscious glance back over the published record of a personal controversy is a complex polemical gesture, moving in more than one direction. Hazlitt was not at his best in response to attacks on his person, particularly nicknames. John Gibson Lockhart’s *Blackwood’s* epithet, “pimpled Hazlitt,” yielded the notoriously weak objection that “I am *not* pimpled, but remarkably pale and sallow” (*CW* 9: 10).⁴⁸ By contrast, the response to Stoddart sets out from a controlled irony, and a willingness to embrace and recast a nickname in a way that suggests a combatant rising to his own superior powers. The sense that revisiting earlier blows can advance a present contest gets reinforced as Hazlitt reaches back through Stoddart’s counterattack to his own earlier Jacobin “evening star” passage in a January 1814 letter to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, titled “Dottrel-Catching” and signed “Eiconoclastes Satyrane.” This letter was also reprinted in *Political Essays*, though without the passage in question,⁴⁹ so that even readers of the volume were reminded of the journalistic forms of correspondence and address that shaped periodical warfare. Yet mingled with this eager combat was a weary skepticism about the effectiveness of public controversy. Nicknames and illustrations seem mutually unprofitable, yielding little beyond an escalation in personal antagonism, so that, in repeating his own earlier Jacobin sallies, Hazlitt promises little more than “cud” for Stoddart’s leisure hours. Ironically, advancing “pastoral” terms against Stoddart the “city-politician” tends to reverse the metropolitan identity that Hazlitt increasingly cultivated in his critical prose, notably in response to Wordsworth. Where there is a sense of forward progress rather than endless contradiction, it lies in the movement from an earlier “pastoral definition” guided by “romantic” imagination to the more furious assault

afforded by the *Examiner* series. The tension between weary skepticism and aggressive polemic accords with Hazlitt's tendency in his later years to coordinate a rhetoric of radical opposition with deepening personal disenchantment and a more sober estimate of the diminishing fortunes of the parliamentary reform movement, particularly as he looked back through the revolutionary expectations of the 1790s to a longer radical Protestant heritage of political resistance in the cause of liberty.

Such retrospection was at once historical and intensely personal, and in that sense not divorced from the revealing "fragments of one man's consciousness" admired by Marilyn Butler. Indeed, the traumatic pressures of history often dislodged those fragments and made them available for literary representation. Hazlitt confirmed this in December 1820 in the *London Magazine*, when he developed the same image of the evening star and cottage in his *Table-Talk* essay "The Pleasure of Painting." The passage was triggered by the uncertain memory of having taken the portrait of his father at the Unitarian meeting house in Wem in 1805:

I think, but I am not sure, that I finished this portrait (or another afterwards) on the same day that the news of the battle of Austerlitz came; I walked out in the afternoon, and, as I returned, saw the evening star set over a poor man's cottage with other thoughts and feelings than I shall ever have again. Oh for the revolution of the great Platonic year, that those times might come over again! (*CW* 8: 13)⁵⁰

As we will see, the figure of the Reverend William Hazlitt and the Dissenting traditions he represented often triggered an acutely sentimental response, intensified here by the tenuousness of memory, and by a sense of impossible yearning for the optimism of 1805 at the signal moment of Napoleon's military triumph over the Third Coalition. What is confounding about the tone and temporal structure of this passage is the way radical conviction is asserted even as it is attached to a setting star that seems as irrevocably lost as the victory at Austerlitz. Tom Paulin captures the competing dynamics of expectation and loss, of intimacy and distance, that flow through this vivid memory of portraiture: "In a moment of victory, Hazlitt's hero Napoleon completes this elegy for his outspoken father—an elegy that also celebrates and mourns his own youthful idealism, as well as catching the closeness shared by father and son while the portrait was in progress in the chapel at Wem."⁵¹ Yet it would be a mistake to read the recurrence of the setting star, even in the late *Table-Talk* essay, as somehow