**William Hazlitt and the Dissenting Art of Reading**

**Introduction**

This essay assesses the importance of the ‘art of reading’, that is to say reading aloud, or elocution, for William Hazlitt’s work.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his essays and lectures, Hazlitt makes the case for the importance of reading aloud, not only for readers, but also for authors. For Hazlitt, the quality of written style can best be assessed through the voicing of a text. In his focus on reading aloud, Hazlitt demonstrates the influence of eighteenth-century elocutionary traditions on his work, but as this essay will show, he focuses in particular on elocutionary and educational texts written by authors from the Dissenting protestant community in which he himself was educated. Hazlitt frequently refers with nostalgia to many kinds of texts from his youth, but I suggest that his engagement with Dissenting treatments of reading aloud, or ‘the art of reading’, enables him to assert a consistent, if ambivalent, loyalty to the traditions in which he was raised. Hazlitt engaged with the form and effects of vocal language throughout his career, in his accounts of his experiences as a performer or auditor at lectures, sermons, and the theatre, but his sense of the qualities of ‘the art of reading’ are most clearly discussed in his 1826 essay collection *The Plain Speaker*, which will form the heart of my discussion.

As various commentators have discussed, the ‘elocution movement’ was a highly influential and profitable aspect of educational culture in the second half of the eighteenth century.[[2]](#footnote-2) A key figure in this movement was Thomas Sheridan, an actor and teacher. In texts like *British Education* (1756), and *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), Sheridan argued that the skills currently displayed in public speaking, reading aloud and even pronunciation were a national disgrace, and he proposed remedies that might improve public speech. Sheridan’s publications and lectures were extremely popular, and he was emulated by authors keen to exploit this popularity, such as John Walker, author of *Elements of Elocution* (1781), who was, like Sheridan, a former actor. But there is also another strain in eighteenth-century elocutionary culture. From the 1720s onward, we see a series of guides to reading which do not arise out of a theatrical culture of elocution, but rather a pedagogical tradition of reading aloud with children. It is this formulation of ‘the art of reading’ which proves so important for Hazlitt. The key texts in this tradition are written by Dissenting protestants, beginning with the Calvinist Isaac Watts’s influential *Art of Reading and Writing English* (1722). Watts was followed by educators like the Arian Dissenter James Burgh, author of *The Art of Speaking* (1761), who ran a school in Newington Green in north London and moved in the Dissenting circles which included Dr Richard Price, Joseph Johnson, and later Mary Wollstonecraft. But my focus in this discussion will be another Dissenting pedagogue and elocutionary practitioner, William Enfield, tutor at the Warrington Dissenting Academy and author of *The Speaker, Or, Miscellaneous Pieces, Selected from the Best English Writers* (1774).

Hazlitt refers to Enfield’s *The Speaker* at several points in his essays and lectures, as I will discuss. Lucy Newlyn and Stephen Burley have argued for the influence of Enfield’s *Speaker* on Hazlitt’s selection of quotation in his works, and on his decision to publish anthologies of his own, such as *The Eloquence of the British Senate* (1807), and *Select British Poets* (1824).[[3]](#footnote-3) We might indeed trace Hazlitt’s facility with quotation from memory from his training with Enfield’s work, and through the great success of *The Speaker* Enfield does seem to have offered Hazlitt among others a model for the practice of producing anthologies. But I suggest that in addition to these factors, *The Speaker* has two other important functions in Hazlitt’s work. First, Enfield’s text equips Hazlitt with a model of writing and written style that is founded on the practice of reading aloud, and second, it supplies him with a way of articulating his sustained allegiance to Dissenting modes of education.

In the wake of Tom Paulin’s *The Day-Star of Liberty* (1998), which asserted the importance of Hazlitt’s Dissenting identity for his mature works, we have seen further studies which investigate the detail of Hazlitt’s engagement with and response to the Dissenting protestant faith of his father, and his own education within Dissenting circles.[[4]](#footnote-4) Stephen Burley’s *Hazlitt the Dissenter* (2014) offers new evidence of Hazlitt’s schooling at the New College Hackney Dissenting academy, and the influence of his father’s published work and theological practices on Hazlitt’s early writings. Burley focuses in particular on the way ‘Hazlitt’s political radicalism was deeply indebted to the practices of eighteenth-century rational dissent’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Kevin Gilmartin has broadened that enquiry to think about the importance of Dissenting traditions for Hazlitt’s account of literary expression and inheritance throughout his career, noting that ‘in becoming a writer and developing a critical vocation he continued to pay ambivalent tribute to the spiritual tradition in which he was raised’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Gilmartin suggests that Hazlitt’s debt to Dissenting traditions is apparent not only in the subjects of his work, but in the very form of his writing: ‘A dissenting heritage is evident in Hazlitt’s prose in the pattern by which reflections on the past that begin with his own experience can then reach back over generations while remaining infused with a tone of personal regret or resentment.’[[7]](#footnote-7) I suggest that Hazlitt’s accounts of his early experiences of reading aloud articulate precisely this connection between personal reminiscence and allegiance to Dissenting culture.

The connections between reading, speech and conversation in Hazlitt’s lectures and essays have also been recently discussed by commentators. In *Conversable Worlds* (2011), Jon Mee notes the importance of conversation in Dissenting pedagogy, and suggests that the ‘conversable style’ of Hazlitt’s later essays had its roots in that tradition.[[8]](#footnote-8) Jon Cook makes Hazlitt’s ‘conversational style’ a political move, in opposition to the oratory of *Blackwood’s Magazine,* and suggests that in so doing, he ‘gives priority to speech over writing’ in collections like *The Plain Speaker.*[[9]](#footnote-9) *The Plain Speaker* is crucial for my analysis too, but rather than think about Hazlitt’s treatment of the contrast between writing and speech, I focus on the moments in which they come together in the essays’ account of reading aloud. Lucy Newlyn notes that some of the essays in the *Plain Speaker* suggest Hazlitt’s ‘mistrust’ of forms of oratory, especially those which draw listeners under the spell of the speaker. She observes that ‘[t]his mistrust is not what one might expect of the Hazlitt who emerged from the Dissenting tradition, which placed its faith in elocution as a passport to intellectual and social standing.’[[10]](#footnote-10) As we will see, Hazlitt by no means subscribes to all forms of reading aloud, and is especially wary of oratory designed to overwhelm its listeners, and of the hypnotic effects of certain forms of poetic recitation. But I suggest that this ‘mistrust’ does not apply to the ‘art of reading’ pioneered by Dissenting pedagogues. The forms of reading aloud modelled in Enfield’s *Speaker* provide Hazlitt with a paradigm for educational practice and for literary expression, which honours his Dissenting heritage.

**Part I *The Speaker* at school**

William Enfield was a Unitarian Dissenter, and he published *The Speaker* with Joseph Johnson, in 1774, four years before Hazlitt’s birth. Enfield’s book extremely successful: it went into multiple editions in Britain and America, and was still being published late into the nineteenth century. It also became something of a literary phenomenon and touchstone for authors; it is mentioned in numerous texts by Hazlitt’s contemporaries, including Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, and Austen’s *Mansfield Park*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Enfield had written the book for his students at Warrington Dissenting academy, noting in his preface that *The Speaker* was ‘undertaken principally with the design of assisting the students at Warrington in acquiring a just and graceful elocution’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Enfield makes his Dissenting loyalties central to his project in *The Speaker*; he dedicates the book to the president of Warrington Academy, and praises the school for its ‘proper course of instruction for young men in the most useful branches of science and literature’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Enfield ends his dedication with a quotation from ‘OUR POETESS’, namely Anna Laetita Barbauld, daughter of Warrington tutor John Aikin, and Dissenting pedagogue, polemicist and poet in her own right. Enfield’s quotation from Barbauld’s poem ‘The Invitation’ stresses the public duties for which students at Warrington are educated:

When this, this little group their country calls

From academic shades and learned halls…

With friendly union in one mass shall blend,

And this adorn the state, and that defend. [[14]](#footnote-14)

Enfield suggests, through Barbauld, that accomplished public speech is a means for Dissenters to circumvent the proscription on their holding public office. For Hazlitt, the practice of reading aloud enables access to a different kind of public, but he seems to share Enfield’s sense of the transformative effect of the ‘art of reading’. The prominence of Barbauld’s work in the preface to *The Speaker* is matched in Enfield’s text itself. Enfield includes four of Barbauld’s poems in the anthology, and she is the only female writer to appear. Hazlitt did not often have positive things to say about Barbauld’s work, as critics have noted.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, Enfield’s *Speaker* creates an important connection between Hazlitt and Barbauld which, as I discuss in the conclusion to this essay, certainly modifies any dismissal of Barbauld on Hazlitt’s part.

*The Speaker* opens with a short theoretical Essay on Elocution, which includes eight rules for effective delivery, relating to articulation, pronunciation, emphasis, pauses, and gesture.[[16]](#footnote-16) But Enfield does not solely offer prescriptive rules. He declares that ‘FOLLOW NATURE, is certainly the fundamental law of oratory’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Such ‘natural’ delivery in reading is closely related to speaking, as Enfield asks rhetorically, ‘Can a method of reading, which is so entirely different from the usual manner of conversation, be natural and right?’[[18]](#footnote-18) Fine elocution is best acquired through practice, Enfield suggests, and the bulk of his book comprises extracts for reading aloud. Enfield groups his texts by genre; *The Speaker* has eight books comprising: Select Sentences; Narrative Pieces; Didactic Pieces; Argumentative Pieces; Orations and Harangues; Dialogues; Descriptive Pieces; and Pathetic Pieces. They feature a huge range of poetry, prose and drama, and as I will discuss, many of Enfield’s selected texts were important for Hazlitt.

*The Speaker* performed an important role in Hazlitt’s formal education. Until the age of fifteen, he was educated at a small school run by his father in Wem, in Shropshire. David Halpin has described the school as teaching ‘a version of a ‘mediaeval’ curriculum’, to be distinguished from the modern practices he was later to encounter at New College Hackney.[[19]](#footnote-19) But a letter from the ten-year-old Hazlitt to his brother John in March 1788 reveals that he did have access to at least one contemporary text. Hazlitt writes:

We go to school at nine every morning. Three boys begin with reading the Bible. Then I and two others shew our exercises. We then read the Speaker. Then we all set about our lessons and those who are first ready say first… In the afternoon we stand for places at spelling and I am almost always first.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The Hazlitt and his classmates use *The Speaker* as a key part of their daily exercises. *The Speaker* is not merely a tool to refine skills in oratory and recitation; it is a text that all use together in order to master the basics of reading. As we will see, Hazlitt frequently claimed in his essays that the first books he encountered had the strongest effects on him, and we might rank *The Speaker*, a text which demonstrated to him the very basics of reading,among them.

Despite the contrast between Hazlitt’s schooling at Wem and at New College Hackney, where he enrolled at age fifteen, *The Speaker* is a text which spans the gap between the two institutions. As Halpin and Burley have shown, within a curriculum of geography, grammar, rhetoric, history, law, mathematics, astronomy, physics and chemistry, logic, metaphysics, ethics, and theology, students at Hackney also studied elocution.[[21]](#footnote-21) And the college governors at Hackney hired specialists for the purpose. The college minutes show that William Cresswick, an actor, was appointed Tutor of Elocution in 1787.[[22]](#footnote-22) Cresswick published his own reading anthology in the style of *The Speaker* titled *The Lady's Preceptor* in 1792, and intriguingly his name was also the pseudonym which Joseph Johnson selected for Mary Wollstonecraft’s response to Enfield’s *Speaker,* the reading anthology *The Female Reader*, published by Johnson in1789.[[23]](#footnote-23) It is not clear why Johnson and Wollstonecraft used Cresswick’s name, but it is likely that his professional experience and association with New College Hackney added kudos to the then unknown Wollstonecraft’s work.[[24]](#footnote-24)

By the time of Hazlitt’s attendance at Hackney the tutor in elocution was one William Trew.[[25]](#footnote-25) There is no record that Hazlitt took Trew’s classes but the college Governor’s minutes show that ‘Every Student of Six Months standing… [was required to] deliver an Oration, once in a Month’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Hazlitt would therefore have participated in the college’s culture of reading aloud. I have not seen records which prove that Enfield’s *The Speaker* was included in the library at Hackney, but by the 1790s the bookwas a mainstay of Dissenting pedagogy, and Enfield himself was a benefactor of New College Hackney, so he may well have also donated a copy. Johnson, the publisher of *The Speaker,* also had close associations with the college.[[27]](#footnote-27) So although Hazlitt often characterises *The Speaker* as a staple of his early education, it seems that he also had use of it at Hackney. Thus the principles of reading aloud that Enfield promoted remained key to Hazlitt’s learning throughout his youth.

**Part II: *The Speaker* in Hazlitt’s *Plain Speaker***

Like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe,* Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, James Thomson’s *The Seasons* andother ‘old books’ he encountered in his youth, Enfield’s *The Speaker* appears in many of Hazlitt’s later essays and lectures.[[28]](#footnote-28) As Newlyn has discussed, Hazlitt’s *Table Talk* essay ‘On Patronage and Puffing’ analyses the performance of the celebrated child actor William, ‘Master’ Betty, in John Home’s tragedy *Douglas* (1756).[[29]](#footnote-29) Home’s play is extracted in book II of *The Speaker*, ‘Narrative Pieces’. Enfield uses the speech in which Norval, later revealed to be the son of Lord Douglas, explains his upbringing:

My name is Norval: on the Grampian hills

My father feeds his flocks; a frugal swain

Whose constant cares were to increase his store,

And keep his only son, myself, at home.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In ‘On Patronage and Puffing’ Hazlitt first discusses Betty’s treatment of the part of Norval, and focuses in particular on his vocal delivery, noting that Betty ‘murmur[ed] Æoleian sounds with plaintive tenderness’, and that his ‘tones fell and seemed to linger prophetic on my ear’.[[31]](#footnote-31) But Hazlitt then shifts from Betty’s professional performance to amateur readings, and from Home’s play as a whole to its extract in Enfield’s text, when he notes: ‘As to the understanding a part like Douglas, at least, I see no difficulty on that score. I myself used to recite the speech in Enfield’s Speaker with good emphasis and discretion when at school’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Enfield’s *Speaker* allows Hazlitt to move from auditor to speaker in his interaction with Home’s play, to enact the qualities that he finds most pleasing in the text and its performance.

Hazlitt returns to the same passage from Home’s *Douglas* featured in *The Speaker* in his introduction to the play in the *Oxberry’s New English Drama* series. Hazlitt notes: ‘Young Norval’s speech giving an account of himself to Lord and Lady Randolph, for the spirit of modest heroism and conscious worth that breathes in it, may almost be compared with Othello’s apology to the Senate, on which it is evidently modelled.’[[33]](#footnote-33) As Newlyn has noted, the suggestion that Hazlitt is thinking here of Enfield’s use of the passage in *The Speaker* is strengthened by the fact that the speech from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to which he refers immediately follows the *Douglas* speech in Enfield’s text.[[34]](#footnote-34) In these examples Enfield’s *Speaker* seems to function for Hazlitt as an aide memoire to his favourite passages from drama, as well as a catalyst for his memories of performances of those plays. But despite the way it seems to have mediated his early experiences of poetic and dramatic texts, I suggest that for Hazlitt *The Speaker* is not only an object of nostalgia, a gateway to the texts of his youth. Rather, Enfield’s treatment of elocution also offers Hazlitt a model for the principles of reading aloud, and informs his discussion of the interaction of voice and text in his essays.

The significance of Enfield for Hazlitt’s accounts of reading aloud is demonstrated most clearly in Hazlitt’s *The Plain Speaker* (1826). The echo of Enfield’s title in Hazlitt’s may only be coincidence, but Hazlitt’s choice of the phrase *The Plain Speaker* as the title for agroup of disparate and often previously published essays does seem to have been significant. As Paulin notes, Hazlitt is ‘trying to give an illusion of coherence and unity to a collection of journalistic pieces that were written over several years.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Paulin observes that the essays in the collection are united by their focus on speech, and that *The Plain Speaker* is ‘a printed text that aspires to the condition of rapid, direct, inspired speech’, noting the paring of essays like ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’ and ‘On the Conversation of Authors’, and ‘The difference between Writing and Speaking’ alongside ‘Old English Writers and Speakers’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Like Paulin, I am struck by the concentration in this volume of essays which take orality as their subject. But I suggest that it was perhaps the anthologised structure and elocutionary concerns of *The Speaker* that proved the model for this disparate collection. Hazlitt’s pronouncements in *The Plain Speaker* on the most beloved authors, the best prose styles, and the finest modes of reading certainly seem to echo earlier models such as Enfield’s.

The opening essay of *The Plain Speaker*, ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’, makes repeated claims about reading and writing which seem to echo Enfield’s pronouncements in *The Speaker*. Hazlitt refers to ‘the characteristic harmony which ought to subsist between the sound and the sense’ of texts, and criticises Samuel Johnson’s prose in *The Rambler*, because it has ‘a mechanical recurrence of the same rise and fall… independent of any reference to the meaning of the text, or progress or inflection of the sense.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Here Hazlitt echoes Alexander Pope’s celebrated account of versification in *Essay on Criticism* (1711). Pope notes: ‘‘Tis not enough no harshness gives offence, /The sound must seem an echo to the sense.’[[38]](#footnote-38) The desired relation between sound and sense is a staple of eighteenth-century elocution texts, beginning with Isaac Watts’s *The Art of Reading and Writing English* (1722).[[39]](#footnote-39) Enfield follows this trend, extracting the same passage from Pope in *The* *Speaker* book III.[[40]](#footnote-40) But in ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’ Hazlitt moves beyond Pope’s truism to consider how the physical, breathing body affects the words that a reader speaks, and the effect of this process on writers:

A speaker is necessarily kept within bounds in expressing certain things, or in pronouncing a certain number of words, by the limits of the breath or power of respiration: certain sounds are observed to join in harmoniously or happily with others… &c. All of this must be attended to in writing... The words must be so arranged, in order to make an efficient readable style.[[41]](#footnote-41)

For Hazlitt, writers must keep in mind the bodily capacities of their readers, and anticipate the sounds and rhythms they will produce in reading. Prose, he suggests, is better suited to this process than verse, as ‘it seems that there is a natural measure of prose in the feeling of the subject and the power of expression in the voice’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Like Enfield, Hazlitt champions a ‘natural’ style in reading, and he suggests that this can be best achieved by English prose. Here Hazlitt differs from those contemporaries who favour the sounds and metre of poetry read aloud, as I discuss below.

But though Hazlitt’s ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’ follows Enfield closely, he also distinguishes his claims from those of earlier elocutionary culture, leaving greater room for the discretion of the reader’s and writer’s imagination. He notes, and appears to agree with, the reported opinion of John Horne Tooke, writer and political agitator, that ‘no style is worth a farthing that is not calculated to be read out’, but he adds a disclaimer, remarking that ‘the process of modulation and inflection may be quite as complete, or more so, without the external enunciation’, so that the author can fulfil their required attention to sound, breath and rhythm even in silent enunciation.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In a later *Plain Speaker* essay, ‘On the Conversation of Authors, The Same Subject Continued’, Hazlitt uses the same example of Horne Tooke’s view that all good style should lend itself to being read aloud, but he again adds that ‘there is a method of trying periods on the ear, or weighing them with the scales of the breath, without any articulate sound.’[[44]](#footnote-44) Hazlitt consistently asserts, then, that attention to the somatic capacities of the reader is important whether or not that reader will pronounce that text to an audience. Yet whether voiced or unvoiced, Hazlitt concludes that

[N]o style is good, that is not fit to be spoken or read aloud with effect. This holds true not only of emphasis and cadence, but also with regard to natural idiom and colloquial freedom. Sterne’s was in this respect the best style that ever was written. You fancy that you hear the people talking.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Hazlitt assertion that the vitality and conversational nature of Sterne’s prose is unsurpassed echoes his earlier lecture ‘On the English Novelists’ from the *On the English Comic Writers* series (1819). There, Hazlitt celebrates Sterne’s prose style as ‘at times the most rapid, the most happy, the most idiomatic of any that is to be found. It is the pure essence of English conversational style.’[[46]](#footnote-46) Enfield seems to have agreed that Sterne’s ‘conversational style’ lent itself to reading aloud, as *The* *Speaker* features eleven extracts from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*.[[47]](#footnote-47) Hazlitt’s essays do not share the same purpose as Enfield’s elocution manual, but his preference for spoken language and ‘conversational style’ suggests the sustained influence of his early exposure to Enfield’s text.

Despite Hazlitt’s careful use of Enfield’s example, however, oral expression is not given uniformly positive treatment in *The Plain Speaker* essays. In ‘On the Difference between Writing and Speaking’, Hazlitt articulates the ‘mistrust’ of oratory that Newlyn has diagnosed, and he diagnoses two troublesome aspects of spoken language. First, he criticises the ‘electrical effusions’ of popular orators like John Thelwall, which persuade, even seduce a political audience, but which ‘leav[e] no trace behind [them]’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Such oratory, he suggests, relies on an instinctive, affective response far removed from the reasoned model of oral readings he champions elsewhere in *The Plain Speaker*.And second, though Hazlitt’s explicit focus in this essay is political speech, he hints that orator’s attempts to persuade an audience come close to a more fundamental distinction between poetry and prose.

As we have seen, for Hazlitt both the feelings and the vocal expression of the reader fit the ‘natural measure’ of prose. In contrast, the recitation of poetry can eschew a ‘natural’ delivery for one which aims for power over its audience. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge are guilty of such uses of poetry, Hazlitt notes in his earlier essay ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’: ‘There is a *chaunt* in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgement.’[[49]](#footnote-49) In ‘On the Difference between Writing and Speaking’, Hazlitt articulates the same worry about the enchantment of a political audience. He asserts of Edmund Burke, for instance, that:

The principle by which he exerted his influence over others… was sympathy. He himself evidently had a strong possession of his subject, a thorough conviction, an intense interest; and this communicated itself from his manner, from the tones of his voice, from his commanding attitudes and eager gestures, instinctively and unavoidably to his hearers.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Newlyn notes that for Hazlitt political speech and poetry are united in this ability to bypass the rational faculties of their auditors, and for this reason, such oral language is untrustworthy: ‘For Hazlitt, whose Dissenting origins put him on the side of rational enlightenment, this component of poetic language was suspect. It was this that made poetry ‘fall in with the language of power’, sometimes against its own intentions.’[[51]](#footnote-51) Such ‘suspect’ oral language, however, while it might unsettle Hazlitt’s praise of reading aloud, does not fundamentally shake his allegiance to the Dissenting modes of reading modelled in *The Speaker*.

In ‘On the Difference between Writing and Speaking’, Hazlitt is concerned to distinguish writing and speech, and to give writing the victory; therefore his account of writing is stripped of the oral qualities that we saw in ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’ and ‘On the Conversation of Authors.’ In the conclusion to the essay Hazlitt declares of writers: ‘What they would say… does not lie at the orifices of the mouth ready for delivery, but is wrapped in the folds of the heart and registered in the chambers of the brain.’[[52]](#footnote-52) Again Hazlitt seems to distance his model of the finest writing from the poetry ready for recitation, in particular the writings and oral performances of Coleridge. But this dismissal of orality remains a relatively rare moment in *The Plain Speaker* as a whole. In other essays, Hazlitt retains his fascination with and faith in texts read aloud, and throughout the collection, it is clear that Hazlitt’s model for oral delivery is a Dissenting one.

Enfield had included two sermons for reading aloud in *The Speaker*. The first is ‘Of sincerity towards God and Man’ by the seventeenth-century divine John Tillotson, who though he rose to be Archbishop of Canterbury, retained strong links with the Dissenting traditions in which he was raised. And the second is ‘In Praise of Virtue’ by a much more recent Dissenting leader, Dr Richard Price, the influential theologian, mathematician and political reformer, who taught at New College Hackney until shortly before his death in 1791. In *The Plain Speaker*, Hazlitt, perhaps recalling his ‘orations’ as a divinity student at Hackney, makes the sermons of seventeenth-century protestant divines his model for a prose style for oral delivery. He singles out Bishop Jeremy Taylor, noting in ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’: ‘There is a softness in his style, proceeding from the tenderness of his heart: but his head is firm and his hand is free. His materials are as finely wrought up as they are original and attractive in themselves.’[[53]](#footnote-53) Taylor’s sermons fulfil Hazlitt’s requirements for the finest oral language; they are infused with feeling but retain the control of reason, and their style works with the bodily strengths and limits of their reader.

In the essay ‘On Old English Writers and Speakers’ Hazlitt declares of Taylor and his contemporaries that ‘they still keep their state apart, and there is an eloquence of the heart about them, which seems to gush from the ‘pure well of English undefiled.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Hazlitt’s short phrase in praise of Taylor is highly condensed; again he praises the natural characteristics of his prose, which are aligned with the finest qualities of both English language and culture. But there is also a religious aspect to Hazlitt’s remark. Though Taylor was an Anglican protestant, Hazlitt’s phrase ‘keep their state apart’ echoes his own and other contemporaries’ praise of Dissenting culture. Anna Laetitia Barbauld had declared in her ‘Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts’ (1790) to those who would oppose Dissenters’ rights: ‘You have set a mark of separation upon us, and it is not in our power to take it off, but it is in our power to determine whether it shall be a disgraceful stigma or an honourable distinction.’[[55]](#footnote-55) Hazlitt had followed Barbauld in celebrating Dissenters’ necessary ‘separation’, or ‘state apart’ in his 1818 essay ‘On Court Influence’, in which he declares of Dissenters that ‘Separate from the world, they walked humbly with their God, and lived in thought with those who had borne testimony of a good conscience, with the spirits of just men in all ages.’[[56]](#footnote-56) I suggest then, following Gilmartin, that Hazlitt’s engagement with the ‘art of reading’ in *The Plain Speaker* ‘begin[s] with his own experience [and] then reach[es] back over generations’ to articulate an ambivalent loyalty to his Dissenting heritage.

**Conclusion**

Our attention to the thread which connects Hazlitt’s work with that of with Enfield and Dissenting pedagogues and divines might also help us adjust our account of Hazlitt’s views of some of his contemporaries. Hazlitt makes another reference to *The Speaker* in his 1818 lecture at the Surrey Institute in London, ‘On the Living Poets’:

The first poetess I can recollect is Mrs Barbauld… I became acquainted with her poetical works… in Enfield’s Speaker; and remember being much divided in my opinion at that time, between her Ode to Spring, and Collins’s Ode to Evening. I wish I could repay my childish debt of gratitude in terms of appropriate praise.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Enfield’s *Speaker* is clearly the frame through which Hazlitt experienced Barbauld’s work as a child; here he compares Barbauld’s ‘Ode to Spring’ with another poem featured in Enfield’s anthology, William Collins’s ‘Ode to Evening’. We have seen the degree to which Enfield aimed to showcase Barbauld’s work in *The Speaker*, and in Hazlitt’s memories the work of Enfield and Barbauld is strongly aligned. Hazlitt does not offer out and out praise of Barbauld in his lecture. William Keach has interpreted his remarks as condescension on Hazlitt’s part, and Marlon Ross notes that: ‘By limiting Barbauld’s poetry to a phase of childhood, he subordinates her influence upon him and upon the literary tradition as a whole.’[[58]](#footnote-58) Hazlitt certainly offers few positive comments about Barbauld’s writings in his works as a whole, and to call his general attitude to women writers ‘condescending’ is perhaps rather too polite; he notoriously remarked in his *Table Talk* essay ‘On Great and Little Things’: ‘‘I have an utter aversion to Bluestockings. I do not care a fig for any woman who even knows what *an author* means’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Barbauld was certainly a bluestocking, associate of Elizabeth Montagu, and Elizabeth Carter; and yet she was also a committed and vocal Dissenter, as we have seen.[[60]](#footnote-60) So in the context of his discussion of *The Speaker* among his early reading, a volume in which Barbauld features so prominently, I suggest that Hazlitt’s search for ‘appropriate praise’ for his childish debt of gratitude is genuine, and another marker of the loyalties to Dissenting traditions which ‘still keep their state apart’ and which shape his account of reading and writing.

1. ‘The art of reading’ is a common means of describing elocutionary practice in the eighteenth century, beginning with Isaac Watts’s *The art of reading and writing English: or, the chief principles and rules of pronouncing our mother-tongue, both in Prose and Verse* (London, 1722). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Patricia Michaelson, *Speaking Volumes: Women, reading and speech in the age of Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 45; see also Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-century Home*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Peter De Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 146-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Burley, *Hazlitt the Dissenter: Religion, Philosophy and Politics, 1766-1816* (Palgrave, 2014), 40; Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt’s Radical Style* (Faber, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Burley, *Hazlitt the Dissenter*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 243, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jon Cook, ‘Hazlitt, Speech and Writing’ in *Journalism, Literature and Modernity: From Hazlitt to Modernism* ed. Kate Campbell, 15-37 (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 22-23, 35. See also Tristram Wolff, ‘Talking with Texts: Hazlitt’s Ephemeral Style’, *Representations* 137 (2017): 44–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism*, 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Clarendon Press, 1991), 85-86; Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford University Press, 1990), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. William Enfield, *The Speaker: or, Miscellaneous Pieces, Selected from the Best English Writers, and Disposed under Proper Heads, with a view to Facilitate the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1774), n.p. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See for instance Felicity James, Ian Inkster, ‘Introduction’, in *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle, 1740–1860,* eds, Felicity James, Ian Inkster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Enfield, *The* Speaker, vii-xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. David Halpin ‘Hazlitt’s Learning: A Real and Negative Education’ *Hazlitt Review* (2009) 49-65: 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. William Hazlitt to John Hazlitt, March 1788, Hazlitt *Letters*, 45-46, cited in Halpin, ‘Hazlitt’s Learning’, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Halpin, ‘Hazlitt’s Learning’, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Stephen Burley, *New College, Hackney (1786-96): A Selection of Printed and Archival Sources*, Dr Williams’s Centre for Dissenting Studies, 36, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mr Cresswick, *The Lady's Preceptor; or, a Series of Instructive and Pleasing Exercises in Reading* (G. G. and J. Robinson, 1792); Mr Cresswick [Mary Wollstonecraft], *The Female Reader; or Miscellaneous Pieces in prose and Verse* (J. Johnson, 1789). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For more on Wollstonecraft’s *Female Reader* see Moira Ferguson, ‘Mary Wollstonecraft and Mr. Cresswick’, *Philological Quarterly* 62: 4, (1983): 459-475. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Burley, *New College, Hackney*, 39-40, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 121-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On ‘old books’ see ‘On Egotism’, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt,* ed. P.P. Howe, vol. 12 (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930-34), 164, and ‘On Reading Old Books’, ibid., 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism,* 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Enfield, *The Speaker*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. William Hazlitt, ‘On Patronage and Puffing’, in Howe ed., vol. 8, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Hazlitt, ‘Douglas’ in Howe, ed., vol. 9, 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism*, 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Paulin, *Day-Star of Liberty*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hazlitt, ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 5, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 2nd edition (W. Lewis, 1713), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Watts, *The Art of Reading*, 52-53. See also Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, ed. Peter Jones 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005) vol. 2, 436; John Rice, *An Introduction to the Art of Reading with Energy and Propriety* (London, 1765), 185-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Enfield, *The Speaker,* 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Hazlitt, ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hazlitt, ‘On the Conversation of Authors, The Same Subject Continued’, in Howe, ed., vol. 12, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Hazlitt, ‘On the English Novelists’, in Howe, ed., vol. 6, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Enfield, *The Speaker*, 30, 32, 34, 80, 186, 187, 222, 223, 225, 296, 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Hazlitt, ‘On the Difference between Writing and Speaking’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 264-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’ in Howe, ed., vol. 17, 118. On Hazlitt’s treatment of oratory and recitation in this essay, see Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism,* 333-39; Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt*, 207-8; Jonathan Mulrooney, ‘Sounding on His Way: Coleridgean Religious Dissent and Hazlitt’s Conversational Style’, in *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion*, ed. J. Robert Barth 176-92 (New York: Fordham UP, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Hazlitt, ‘On the Difference between Writing and Speaking’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 337. Newlyn cites Hazlitt’s lecture on Coriolanus in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*,Howe, ed., vol. IV, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Hazlitt, ‘On the Prose Style of Poets’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hazlitt, ‘On Old English Writers and Speakers’, in Howe ed., vol. 12, 321. Hazlitt cites Edmund Spenser’s description of the style of Geoffrey Chaucer. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ‘An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts’ in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, eds. William McCarthy, Elizabeth Kraft (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2002), 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Hazlitt, ‘On Court Influence’, in Howe, ed., vol. 7, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Hazlitt, ‘On the Living Poets’ in Howe ed., vol. 5, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 256; William Keach, “A Regency Prophecy and the End of Anna Barbauld's Career,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 33:4 (1994), 569–577, 577. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Hazlitt, ‘On Great and Little Things’, in Howe, ed., vol. 8, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. On Barbauld and the Bluestocking circle, see Mee, *Conversable Worlds,* 118-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)