STICKY HAZLITT

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Jon Mee

'something to the memory sticks at last/Whence profit may be drawn in times to come'

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805)[1]

'What sometimes surprises me in looking back to the past, is, […] to find myself so little changed in the time. The same images and trains of thought stick by me'.

('A Farewell to Essay Writing'; xvii, 316)[2]

I'd like to thank the Hazlitt Society for inviting me to give the Annual Lecture. There have been a couple of false starts and deferrals, but the idea of this lecture seems to have stuck. I don't think of myself as an expert on Hazlitt, there are plenty of people in the audience today who know much more about him than I do, but I can't shake him off, nor do I want to. Like quite a few of my talks, my title came to me before I knew what I was going to say beyond the feeling that Hazlitt sticks to me, not least through certain phrases and turns of thought that have stayed with me over forty years of studying his writing. Those attachments aren't always from the essays that appeal to others. I've always, for instance, had a particular soft spot for the review of Robert Owen's *A New View of Society*, partly because of its acute analysis, but also because of the bite and sparkle of the writing. I now wish James Grande and I had used one sentence as part of the dedication to Roy Park in the recent World's

[1] *The Prelude*, Book 3, ll. 672-3 in *William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill, 21st Century Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 348.

[2] All references in parentheses to Hazlitt's writings are to *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930-4), giving the volume and page numbers.

Classics edition: 'A man that comes all the way from the banks of the Clyde acquires a projectile force that renders him irresistible' (vii, 100).

Sometimes it is Hazlitt's barbs that I relish. Hazlitt's ability to land a hit and make it stick and twist in the flesh. The opening of *A Letter to William Gifford* (1819), for instance, is something that I find myself trying to recite from time to time with different addressees imagined:

> You have an ugly trick of saying what is not true of any one you do not like; and it will the object of this letter to cure you of it. You say what you please of others: it is time you were told what you are. In doing this, give me leave to borrow the familiarity of your style:—for the fidelity of the picture I shall be answerable.
>
> You are a little person, but a considerable cat's-paw; and so far worthy of notice. Your clandestine connexion with persons high in office constantly influences your opinions, and alone gives importance to them. You are the *Government Critic*, a character nicely differing from that of a government spy—the invisible link, that connects literature with the police. (ix, 13).

Copied out at length by Keats in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law in 1819, there is much here that is typical of Hazlitt's writing; the swelling rhythms, its parallelisms, inversions, and repetitions as he warms to the attack, with all sorts of echoes and allusions behind them, before issuing to a conclusion that seems to have a proverbial force.[3] In memory, I often garble this and other quotations from Hazlitt but retain at least the gist of the passage – its impression on me – and always in this case the arresting trope of 'the invisible

[3] Keats copied the opening in his long journal letter of 14-31 May 1819, *John Keats: Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 206-7.

link, that connects literature with the police'. Often there is a blurriness and fuzzy tactility to such impressions that is typical of sticky things that don't adhere with neatness but smear and smudge around the edges. In Hazlitt's case, I'd suggest, the smeariness is encouraged by his tendency to blend a new insight with a known quotation or familiar phrase. Take the wonderful line from 'The Periodical Press' with its familiar quotation and then sharp syntactical inversion: '"We are nothing, if not critical." Be it so: but then let us be critical, or we shall be nothing' (xvi, 213). I love those sentences. They sounded in my mouth long before I recognized Hazlitt was recycling a line from *Othello* – used more than once in his essays – before giving it a new payoff here.[4] For me, this sentence has started to become something of a motto in the world of impact, timeliness, and measurable outcomes that we academics now inhabit. What a legacy to have written that line and improved upon Shakespeare, or at least moulded him into a new shape!

Don't worry, I am not going to make this lecture into my 'Desert Island Hazlitt.' The personal turn has become popular in much recent criticism, but I am too much of a repressed East Midlander to go very far down that route. I take encouragement instead from the fact that if Hazlitt has been sticky for me then so was he for Keats, to give one of many instances, when it came to defining his own identity as a 'camelion Poet' against 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.'[5] Be that as it may, I want to spend most of my time today thinking not about Hazlitt's stickiness for others but the adhesive qualities of his own mind, what and how things stuck with him, and to what ends. 'Contact with solid substances' (vii, 117) of the kind which he feared Coleridge's ideas avoided gave Hazlitt the stuff he moulded with words, 'the rough materials, the solid substance and the glowing spirit of art' (xvi, 216). Sara Ahmed says:

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[4] *Othello*, II. i. 120.

[5] Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H.E. Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 387. Keats's vocabulary in this letter draws from 'On Gusto' and from several of his discussions of Wordsworth.

> Emotions are both about objects, which hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects. This does not presume an object has a material existence. Objects can be imagined: a memory of something may trigger a feeling. The feeling is shaped by contact with the memory and also involves an orientation towards what is remembered.[6]

Words and phrases, physical books with 'a coarse leathern cover' like the copy of the *Social Contract* he carried home as a young man (xii, 224), memories, paintings, people, performances in the theatre, 'a child's kite in the air […] seems to pull at my heart' (viii, 258), even ideas – 'My ideas, from their sinewy texture, have been to me in the nature of realities' (xvii, 320) – these are all sticky objects. They gather to themselves clusters of feeling not easy to disentangle or unstick.

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On a more down-to-earth level, Hazlitt clearly had a very retentive memory. Charles Lamb is meant to have secured his first employment at the *Morning Chronicle* by persuading its editor, James Perry, of Hazlitt's 'singular facility in retaining all conversations at which he has ever been present,' a facility, of course, that caused Henry Crabbe Robinson to ban him from his home.[7] There was a dark side to the same tendency that dragged Hazlitt towards morbid obsession as even devoted friends like Lamb realized and he himself went to painful lengths to explore in *Liber Amoris*. But the things that stuck by him also provided viscid

[6] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 7.
[7] Quoted in Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144.

surfaces that reassured him of his own identity and even provided the grounds for his political principles. Sticky objects were at the core of his manner as an essayist: 'The most trifling objects, retraced with the eye of memory, assume the vividness, the delicacy, and importance of insects seen through a magnifying glass. There is no end of the brilliancy or the variety' xvii, 376-7). The occasion of his essays, their topic, usually comes from being struck by something, as with 'The Letter-Bell' just quoted, that reverberated with the associations that made Hazlitt with Hamlet feel 'sadness cling to his heart like a malady' (iv, 232) or more positively 'feel that [he] had links still connecting [him] with the universe, and gave [him] hope and patience to persevere' (xvii, 377). Hazlitt constantly wrestled with these associations, 'ever awake to the silent influxes of things' (xii, 278), making memory a kind of bodily and richly mediated experience – 'wrapped in the folds of the heart and registered in the chambers of the brain' (xii, 279) – that could drag him into or out of its mire. For Hazlitt, the ideas and images that stick have a quality that may be dangerous when it 'gives a body to opinion, and a permanence to fugitive belief' (xii, 266) Paraphrasing and repurposing Edmund Burke here, whose language so often stuck with him, an issue I'll return to later, the allusion is absorbed into the rhythm of Hazlitt's prose.[8] More to the point for now is the way that for Hazlitt ideas could become 'a kind of substance in my brain' (xvii, 317). Famously, when punched in the face by John Hunt, he is meant to have said: 'I am a metaphysician, and do not mind the blow; nothing but an i*dea* hurts *m*e.'[9] Ideas for Hazlitt have a weight that leaves an impression. You can see why he thought Shakespeare's great achievement was that 'what he represents is brought home to the bosom as part of our own experience' (iv, 186).

Personal recollections, including the recollection of the reading experience, seem to register on the body in Hazlitt's writing, perhaps most often through the repeated trope of the

[8] Burke writes: 'He feels no ennobling principle in his own heart who wishes to level all the artificial institutions which have been adopted for giving a body to opinion, and a permanence to fugitive esteem.' – Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Dodsley, 1790), 205.
[9] See the account given in Wu, *Hazlitt: The First Modern Man*, 199.

beating heart and pulsing blood often recalled when writing about Robert Burns: 'He had a real heart of flesh and blood beating in his bosom – you can almost hear it throb. Some one said, that if you had shaken hands with him, his hand would have burnt yours' (v, 127). Hearing the throb here is a description of reading Burns that layers the senses to convey the intensely physical effects of the writing. Reading often appears in Hazlitt as a vivid bodily experience, 'impressions that cannot be altered by time or circumstance,' as he wrote quoting in the French from *Nouvelle Heloise* in 'On my First Acquaintance with Poets' (xvii, 108). If it is that famously sticky meeting with Coleridge that is being recalled for the most part in that essay, the experience of reading Rousseau's book is registered with physical intensity in several other essays:

> Many a dainty repast have I made of the New Eloise; – the description of the kiss; the excursion on the water; the letter of St. Preux, recalling the time of their first loves; and the account of Julia's death; these I read over and over again with unspeakable delight and wonder. Some years after, when I met with this work again, I found I had lost nearly my whole relish for it (except some few parts) and was, I remember, very much mortified with the change in my taste, which I sought to attribute to the smallness and gilt edges of the edition I had bought, and its being perfumed with rose-leaves (xii, 224).

Memories of Rousseau are often attached not just to reading but to the physical form of the book as in 'the gilt edges' of the edition mentioned here or the intimacy of the perfume of rose leaves or the passage in 'On Going on a Journey' where he describes sitting 'to a volume of the New Eloise, at the inn at Llangollen, over a bottle of sherry and a cold chicken' (viii, 186). Sometimes the physical presence of Rousseau's book serves as a point of validation in

other memories as in ‘The Fight’ when he recalls observing ‘that Jack had a pocket volume in his hand, in which he read in the intervals of our discourse, I inquired what it was, and learned to my particular satisfaction that it was a volume of the New Eloise’ (xvii, 85).

Emily Rohrbach in a brilliant paper on Hazlitt’s bibliopolitics that she gave at the Hazlitt Day in 2019 – I’ve heard a revised version since, in Melbourne, it seems to stick with me – has talked about the way that books in Hazlitt serve to pull together ‘the individual [who] is never the same for two moments together’ (i, 29-30) described in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*.[10]

> In reading a book which is an old favourite with me (say the first novel I ever read) I not only have the pleasure of imagination and of a critical relish of the work, but the pleasures of memory added to it. It recals the same feelings and associations which I had in first reading it, and which I can never have again in any other way. Standard productions of this kind are links in the chain of our conscious being. They bind together the different scattered divisions of our personal identity (xii, 221).

Quite rightly, Rohrbach points out that when Hazlitt recounts such experiences he tends to locate them in a specific times and places with an emphasis on the book as a material object – ‘the sight of an odd volume of these good old English authors on a stall, or the name lettered on the back among other on the shelves of a library’ (xii, 222) – that attaches itself to him to give his sense of self a substance and continuity.

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[10] ‘Hazlitt’s Bibliopolitics’, at *Romantic Renewal*, annual conference of the Romanticism Studies Association of Australasia, Melbourne, 2023. I am extremely grateful to Emily Rohrbach for sharing a copy of her paper with me

I've already suggested that Hazlitt imbues particular lines and passages with a similar kind of substance. 'A thought, a distinction,' in this context, can be as hard as 'the rock on which all this brittle cargo of verbiage splits at once' (viii, 246). Such lines and phrases constitute what Coleridge called in *Biographia Literaria* 'striking passages' that seem to 'start up anew in their [readers's] minds' without reference to the text from which they were taken.[11] Interestingly, given their prevalence in Hazlitt's essays, it was passages from Wordsworth more than any other modern author that Coleridge thought had this effect on their readers. Ashley Miller has discussed the more general interest of the period's writers in the hallucinogenic experience of a passage of writing starting up before the eyes, noting especially how they are linked to the materiality of print and page.[12] Certainly Hazlitt's literary memory often worked in this way, sometimes accompanied with a sense of taste made literal:

> Tom Jones, I remember, was the first work that broke the spell. It came down in numbers once a fortnight, in Cooke's pocket-edition, embellished with cuts. I had hitherto read only in school-books, and a tiresome ecclesiastical history (with the exception of Mrs. Radcliffe's Romance of the Forest) : but this had a different relish with it, – 'sweet in the mouth,' though not 'bitter in the belly' (xii, 222).

Hazlitt's lecture 'On the English Novelists' is replete with memories of striking characters, passages, and scenes that had stuck with him from youth. Indeed Hazlitt used the phrase 'striking passages' in praising *Joseph Andrews* early on in the lecture (vi, 107). Later, Hazlitt

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[11] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. W.J. Bate and J. Engell, vol VII of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen series no. 75, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II, 106.
[12] Ashley Miller, ' "Striking Passages": Memory and the Romantic Imprint', *Studies in Romanticism* 50.1 (spring 2011), 29-53.

quoted without naming Wordsworth – whom he elsewhere castigated for abjuring novels – to give a sense of the 'tendrils strong as flesh and blood' (vi, 120) that Richardson's prose wrapped round him. Although relegated to a footnote, Hazlitt claimed that Defoe's novels 'leave an impression on the mind more like that of things than words' (vi, 107).

If there are places where such striking passages seem to rise before his eyes in the act of writing, then perhaps more often they are submerged in the text, made part of the rhythm of Hazlitt's own writing whether in or out of quotation marks. Among them are 'passages that seem as if we might brood over them all our lives, and not exhaust the sentiments of love and admiration they excite' (xii, 134). Often particular undercurrents of allusion operate under the surface of a particular essay, as if he's just been re-reading that particular text only sometimes breaking cover as quotations, like the references to *The Faerie Queen*, amusingly enough, that colour the 'William Godwin' essay in *The Spirit of the Age*. Such sources form a relatively constrained sticky palette for Hazlitt's writing: Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, arguably *As You Like It* – 'if thou hast not seen the Louvre, thou art damned' (viii, 16) and 'Mrs Goodall's Rosalind still haunts the glades of Arden' (xvii, 368) – and *The Tempest*, Milton, of course, the great eighteenth-century novelists, plus *Don Quixote*, William Cowper, usually from *The Task* (you'd want the ubiquitous 'loop-holes of retreat' on your Hazlitt bingo card), Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Burke, always Burke, icky sticky Burke.

'Certain words are in [Hazlitt's] mind indissolubly wedded to certain things' (xii, 278) as he said in 'On the Difference between Writing and Speaking'. Like the song of the robin and the thrush in 'A Farewell to Essay Writing: 'To these I adhere and am faithful' (xvii, 314). The relatively constrained nature of his sources and the tendency to repeat and often internalise or adapt without acknowledgment formed the basis of De Quincey's claim

that 'Hazlitt had read nothing.'[13] The judgment came from someone who believed Hazlitt to be ignorant 'of Greek philosophy, scholastic philosophy and the German recomposition of that philosophical tradition over the last seventy odd years.' Hazlitt did choose from a relatively accessible canon as I noted above: the eighteenth-century novelists, Shakespeare, Cowper, Burke etc. De Quincey thought him guilty of 'trite quotation' comprised of the 'tritest remembrances from his most school-boy reading, [the prose] infested with tags of verse'.[14] Interestingly De Quincey made the question of personal identity key: if a thought bears 'upon it the impress of one's own individuality' then it is unlikely, claimed De Quincey, to 'bend to another man's expression of it'.[15] 'As if man were author of himself' (xi, 69), Hazlitt might have answered with the quotation from *Coriolanus* that he used in the essay on Lord Byron in *The Spirit of the Age*. What we get from Hazlitt, De Quincey claimed, is 'a series of mosaics, a tessellation made up from borrowed fragments',[16] but Hazlitt did not subscribe to the idea of personality as a continuous evolving organism:

> What other self could I find to share that influx of thoughts, of regret, and delight, the traces of which I could hardly conjure up to myself, so much have they been broken and defaced. I could stand on some tall rock, and overlook the precipice of years that separates me from what I then was (viii, 186).

The connectivity of being he writes about is much more associative, and depends upon the more contingent connections supplied by books, quotations, tags, including those recycled

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[13] These comments are taken from De Quincey's review of Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1848) that first appeared in the *North British Review* for November 1848. They are quoted here from *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by David Masson, 14 vols (London: A & C Black, 1896-7), V, 231.
[14] Ibid, 236-7.
[15] Ibid, 237.
[16] Ibid, 238.

from his own work, turns of phrase that do not necessarily originate with him but mark his style as his own.

Quotation with Hazlitt is an imprecise art that makes him a nightmare for editors. Of tags there are plenty. They give him 'ample scope, and verge enough' to develop his own style, to use one – characteristically improved – from Gray's 'The Bard' (he systematically swapped 'scope' for 'room'). In his essay on 'Minor Theatres', the 'ample scope and verge enough' feeds into another of his favoured tags: 'we pick and chuse as we will, light where we please, and stay no longer than we have a mind – saying "this I like, that I loath, as one picks pears"' (xviii, 291). Hazlitt picked these pears from *Don Quixote*. His genius 'see[s] with different eyes from the multitude' perhaps, but does not 'lose its sympathy with humanity' (iv, 76) by attaching his insights to a fairly familiar canon. His memory was retentive but not necessarily precise in its picking. Sticky is messy. He trusted his memory, rarely checked and vary rarely corrected between periodical iteration and book collection of his essays. James Grande noted a rare one from Milton's 'L'Allegro' in 'On the Pleasure of Painting' (viii, 14) where Hazlitt turns 'embowered deep in tufted trees' back to 'bosomed high in tufted trees.'[17] Sticky is malleable like blu-tack (other adhesive brands are available!). Hazlitt would make small changes and make his own improvements, often but not always adding bite, as with the rewriting of Iago's line from *Othello* that I quoted earlier. He could produce what Howe called 'synthetic or composite' quotations as in his claim that painters made the universe 'palpable to feeling as to sight' (viii, 7), merging it would seem *Othello*'s 'palpable to thinking' and perhaps *Macbeth* 'I see thee yet, in form as palpable.'[18] The changes are instructive in this case as in others. Feeling *is* palpable in Hazlitt, just as everything in Rembrandt's painting, as he said, has 'a tangible character' (iv, 78).

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[17] See William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of Controversy and Other Essays*, ed. by Jon Mee and James Grande (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 362.
[18] See *The Spirit of Controversy*, 360, on these sources. Howe's note (vii, 397), uses the phrase 'synthetic or composite'.

The Indian Jugglers' pursues the idea that 'objects, like words, have a meaning; and the true artist is the interpreter of this language, which he can only do by knowing its application to a thousand other objects in a thousand other situations' (viii, 82). This is the facility – 'the tact of style […] more ambiguous than that of double-edged instruments' (viii, 81) – that informs Hazlitt's own purposeful repurposing of quotation and allusion. Take the submerged allusion to Coleridge in the definition of 'the Spirit of Monarchy' as 'nothing but the craving in the human mind after the Sensible and the One' (xix, 255), or the 'passing from subject to subject' that makes Coleridge seem 'to float in air, to slide on ice' (xvii, 113) where the allusion to 'Kubla Khan' becomes the cue for an attack on the poet's 'fluency and flippancy' (xvii, 114). In the essay on Godwin in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt insists that the pull of ties of sense, custom, authority, private and local attachment (effectively the stickiness of the human mind) does not mean that reason 'is no rule at all'. Instead it is 'the guide, the stay and anchor of our purest thoughts, and soul of all our moral being' (xi, 21), the means to review and make decisions about the affections that cling to us. Rewriting and repurposing 'Tintern Abbey' here suggests that local attachments are not the end of our moral being, even if they may be their starting point.[19] Rereading for this lecture, I found that Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' recurs more often than I had remembered, frequently transposing its 'radiance that was once so bright' onto painful memories of the radical potential of the 1790s that nevertheless serve to connect Hazlitt to himself and to indict others of apostasy.[20]

Often the allusive power is worked deep into the prose, underlying its familiar rhythms before issuing in the epigrammatic power identified by Keats when he described 'that sentence about making a Page of the feelings of a whole life […] like a Whale's back in a Sea of Prose.'[21] Take one of the several descriptions of his father, among the most

[19] 'Tintern Abbey, ll 110-12,' in Gill (ed.) *William Wordsworth*, 52.
[20] 'Ode ("There was a Time")'; ibid, 285.
[21] Keats to Leigh Hunt, 10 May 1817 (*Letters*, I, 138).

powerfully adhesive objects in his mind, here from 'On Court Influence', where the prose swells with biblical and proverbial tags before issuing the direct barb designed to puncture and stick in the flesh of Southey and his friends:

> This creed, since profaned and rendered vile, they kept fast through good report and evil report. This belief they had, that looks at something out of itself, fixed as the stars, deep as the firmament, that makes of its own heart an altar to truth, a place of worship for what is right, at which it does reverence with praise and prayer like a holy thing, apart and content: that feels that the greatest being in the universe is always near it, and that all things work together for the good of his creatures, under his guiding hand. This covenant they kept, as the stars keep their courses: this principle they stuck by, for want of knowing better, as it sticks by them to the last. It grew with their grouth, it does not wither in their decay. It lives when the almond-tree flourishes, and is not bowed down with the tottering knees. It glimmers with the last feeble eyesight, smiles in the faded cheek like infancy, and lights a path before them to the grave! – This is better than the life of a whirligig Court poet (vii, 242).

It was a passage Hazlitt rewrote more than once, always with this sense of the pull on his heart of his memories of his father in his pulpit or at work among his rows of beans, but not always delivered with this scorpion sting in its tail.

Memory for Hazlitt is frequently tied to time and place, or what we might call a mis-en-scene. His father is placed 'in the garden to gather broccoli-plants or kidney-beans of his own rearing' (xvii, 110). The sticky mess of his feelings about this scene is presumably why he felt he could never explain the effect of 'the scent of a beanfield crossing the road' (viii, 183) to any companion going with him on a journey. It is not then just striking passages that

rear up in Hazlitt's mind to make their claim upon him. Memories and ideas in Hazlitt have the clinging palpability of things. His preference for journeying alone, which disappoints Rebecca Solnit in her account of the essay, is partly predicated on his sense of the near impossibility of disentangling this dense knot of association – barely discoverable to himself – to anyone else:

> It is not merely that you may not be of accord on the objects and circumstances that present themselves before you – they may recal a number of ideas, and lead to associations too delicate and refined to be possibly communicated to others. Yet these I love to cherish, and sometimes still fondly clutch them, when I can escape from the throng to do so (viii, 183).[22]

Unitarian educationalists like Anna Laetitia Barbauld and her brother John Aikin had suggested that affective objects of all kinds were crucial to early education. Contrary to the account given by romantic critics, though, they were sceptical of the modelling of environment to give precise associational effects, as Joanna Wharton has shown.[23] I've often wondered what part such ideas had in Hazlitt's own childhood. 'There is hardly any object entirely devoid of expression' (iv, 77), he wrote: the expressive sap of objects is what makes things stick and provides a resin to hold the self together, however precariously. For Hazlitt the stickiness of objects – things, paintings, quotations, books, and memorable places – were all means of recollecting the self, not simply of remembering but re-collecting or drawing a self together.

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[22] See Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2022), 119-20.
[23] See Joanna Wharton, *Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind 1770-1830* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018).

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No place is a richer repository for the recollection of the self in Hazlitt than the theatre as essays like 'The Free Admission,' 'Minor Theatres,' and 'On Actors and Acting' all reveal. Recollections of the theatre are always tied to the sticky enveloping warmth of its hot-house atmosphere:

> The noise, the glare, the warmth, the company, produce a sort of listless intoxication, and clothe the pathos and the wit with a bodily sense. There is a weight, a closeness even, in the air, that makes it difficult to breathe out of it (xvii, 369).

The very thought of writing on the minor theatres is presented by Hazlitt as having a physical effect on him:

> Indeed, we are not a little vain of the article we propose to write on this occasion; and we feel the pen in our hands flutter its feathered down with more than its usual specific levity, at the thought of the idle, careless career before it (xviii, 291).

The flutter of the quill suggests a flutter about the heart as the thought of the theatre draws his mind out of itself and into the vivid scene of an opening night:

> Only another moment, and amidst blazing tapers, and the dancing sounds of music, and light throbbing hearts, and eager looks, the curtain rises, and the picture of the world appears before us in all its glory and in all its freshness. Life throws its gaudy shadow across the stage (xviii, 293).

And if the idea of the theatre brings with it the embodied feelings of 'throbbing hearts, and eager looks,' so too could the most ephemeral of associated objects, like the first encounter with 'that odd-looking thing, a play-bill, […] left at our door in a little market town in the country', form 'an epoch in one's self' (xviii, 294). Hazlitt's 'vivid delight' (iv, 155) – as he puts it in *The Round Tabl*e version of 'On Actors and Acting' – in the things and people of the theatre runs through his essays. None looms larger than Sarah Siddons. She is one of those magnetic personalities whose power of attraction 'through long years of solitude' connects his present with his past: 'her face has shone as if an eye had appeared from heaven, her name has been as if a voice had opened the chambers of the human heart or as if a trumpet had awakened the sleeping and the dead' (v, 312).

Actors themselves are important to Hazlitt not simply in terms of personal recollection but because they stand for a truth of human identity by the very quality that was the basis of the anti-theatrical prejudice: 'their very thoughts are not their own' (iv, 153). It is of course this charge that De Quincey made against Hazlitt, but Hazlitt himself regarded it as no slur. Beginning with the opening quotation from *Hamlet*, a warm current of allusion to and quotation from the tragedies – some only half remembered – runs through 'Actors and Acting'. It is precisely the fact that actors are always wearing someone else's clothes, just as he slips in and out of his Shakespearean garb, that makes them 'the motley representatives of human nature' (iv, 153). Being taken out of one's self by and in the theatre, though, also has a political role in Hazlitt's thinking. 'Objects become sticky or saturated with affect,' writes Sara Ahmed, 'as sites of personal and social tension.'[24] The theatre is one of those sites in Hazlitt. Emily Rohrbach notes his penchant for using books as objects that take him back to

[24] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

the 1790s to affirm the integrity of his political principles.[25] Hazlitt's theatrical recollections also provide a yardstick for the political posturing of the present:

> We feel more respect for John Kemble, in a plain coat, than for the Lord Chancellor on the woolsack. He is surrounded, to our eyes, with a greater number of imposing recollections: he is a more reverend piece of formality; a more complicated tissue of costume. We do not know whether to look upon this accomplished actor as Pierre or King John or Coriolanus or Cato or Leontes or the Stranger. But we see in him a stately hieroglyphic of humanity; a living monument of departed greatness; a sombre comment on the rise and fall of kings (iv, 155).

The political role of the theatre, though, for Hazlitt is not entirely retrospective and has to do with its continuing role as 'a test and school of humanity' (xviii, 272): 'One way in which public exhibitions contribute to refine and humanise mankind, is by supplying them with ideas and subjects of conversation and interest in common' (iv, 154).

The theatre draws us out of our 'go-cart of prejudices,' another great Hazlitt tag, if one – as far as I can tell – that he only plagiarises from himself. Sharing the vivid experience of Kemble's performance as King John aids the reversal of the 'icy hand of experience' that 'freezes up and crusts […] over' the 'warm current of the imagination' (v, 345). The political alchemy of urban institutions like the theatre is made clearer in 'Londoners and Country People,' which begins with one of the most famous uses of the 'go-cart' trope. The 'go-cart of local prejudices and positive illusions' (xii, 69) shared by Londoners may tend towards self-satisfaction, but it is continually encountering sticky surfaces that pull the city-dweller into new shapes denied to country dwellers: 'We have little disposition to sympathy, when

[25] 'Hazlitt's 'Bibliopolitics'

we have few persons to sympathise with: we lose the relish and capacity for social enjoyment, the seldomer we meet' (xii, 75).

Hazlitt was replaying an argument he had used in his review of *The Excursion*, where he had complained that Wordsworth's Lake District had 'no taverns, no theatres, no opera, no pictures, no public-buildings, no crowded streets, no noise of coaches, or of courts of law' (iv, 122). Wordsworth's aversion to novels is associated with this deficit in urban institutions:

> Persons who are in the habit of reading novels and romances, are compelled to take a deep interest in, and to have their affections strongly excited by, fictitious characters and imaginary situations; their thoughts and feelings are constantly carried out of themselves, to persons they never saw (iv, 123).

Books become, and here the review dips into Lord Bacon, 'a discipline of humanity' (iv, 123). Hazlitt had used the phrase before – in 'Of Classical Education' (iv, 4) – and he used it again of the theatre in 'The Free Admission' (xvii, 367). Novels and the theatre are part of the urban experience that at the end of 'On Londoners and Country People' is imagined as a discipline of politics:

> We are gregarious, and affect the kind. We have a sort of abstract existence; and a community of ideas and knowledge (rather than local proximity) is the bond of society and good-fellowship. This is one great cause of the tone of political feeling in large and populous cities. There is here a visible body-politic, a type and image of that huge Leviathan the State. We comprehend that vast denomination**,** the *People,* of which we see a tenth part daily moving before us; and by having our imaginations

> emancipated from petty interests and personal dependence, we learn to venerate ourselves as men, and to respect the rights of human nature. (xii, 77)

The vivid spectacle of the urban scene - including the theatre itself - draws its citizens out of the carapace of self and opens out the possibility of a democratic public sphere (if I were a flippant person, I would say it was Habermas plus affect).

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For Hazlitt, 'our limited, imperfect, and mixed being,' another of those tags, by the way, that have always stuck with me, even if I always get the adjectives in the wrong order, militates against Godwinian or Benthamite reform: the kind of reform that would 'reduc[e] law to a system, and the mind of man to a machine' (xi, 6). Bentham neglected the fact that 'our moral sentiments are made up of sympathies and antipathies, of sense and imagination, of understanding and prejudice. The soul, by reason of its weakness, is an aggregating and an exclusive principle; it clings obstinately to some things, and violently rejects others' (xi, 8-9). The stickiness of our natures may clog up change, but it has within it the potential elasticity to feel the draw of other experiences. For Hazlitt, this included the possibility that vivid associations might re-illuminate points of potential in the past that could have made our present very different.

The complexity of his feelings on this issue helps explain why Edmund Burke is everywhere in Hazlitt's prose. Burke stands as the political philosopher of custom and habit, of prejudice as a fundamental feature of the mixed being. Hazlitt prided himself – according to 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' – on the idea that 'speaking of him with contempt might be made the test of a vulgar democratical mind' (xvii, 111). The last phrase is not – I

think – a negative reference to either the manner or ideology of Painite radicalism. One can often hear the rhythms and language of Thomas Paine in Hazlitt's prose, not least when following the outline of the attacks on Burke in *Rights of Man*:

> He constructed his whole theory of government, in short, not on rational, but on picturesque and fanciful principles; as if the King's crown were a painted gewgaw, to be looked at on gala-days; titles an empty sound to please the ear; and the whole order of society a theatrical procession (vii, 228).

Recall Paine's 'gewgaws' that separate Burke from 'the genuine mind of man' to leave him only with 'titles […] like circles drawn by the magician's wand.'[26] What Hazlitt sees as 'vulgar' is not Paine's effective and affective popular radicalism but the failure of philosophical radicals like Bentham to see that the sticky power of custom and habit – and with it the power of Burke's prose – cannot simply be legislated away. Bentham 'has not allowed for the *wind*,' says Hazlitt, making the allusion to *Ivanhoe* stand for the 'varieties of human nature, and the caprices and irregularities of the human will' (xi, 8) that he took to be the matter of the novel as a genre. Burke's prose provides a similar kind of education in the stickiness of attachment, if one that Hazlitt thought had become jammed in the wrong places.

Of course, Burke *was* for Hazlitt a great stylist. Burke's rhythms – as much as his words – underlie some of the most purple passages of Hazlitt's political prose. I find it hard, for instance, to read this passage from 'On the Spirit of Monarchy' without thinking of it as a gender-flipped parody of Burke's famous eulogy of Marie Antoinette:

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[26] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), 70-1.

> What female heart can indeed withstand the attractions of a throne – the smile that melts all hearts, the air that awes rebellion, the frown that kings dread, the hand that scatters fairy wealth, that bestows titles, places, honour, power, the breast on which the star glitters, the head circled with a diadem, whose dress dazzles with its richness and its taste, who has nations at his command, senates at his controul, 'in form and motion so express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a God; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!' (xix, 262).

The lines that follow the *Hamlet* quotation in the original – 'And yet, to me, / what is this quintessence of dust / man delights not/ me: no, nor woman neither' – are an unspoken riposte to the passage that lies beneath Hazlitt's own.[27] Burke's affections are attached to an object for which Hazlitt can feel no sympathy.

Preparing for this lecture I was struck by how often Hazlitt quotes from Burke's *A Letter to a Noble Lord* rather than the better-known *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Take the reference to the 'grand carnival of our age' (xvii, 54) at the beginning of 'On Fashion' (a joke, I think, about the unworthiness of Burke's objects of affection) or – another joke – in the reference to Cobbett 'toss[ing] and tumbl[ing] about his unwieldy bulk' (viii, 57). Hazlitt claimed *A Letter to a Noble Lord* to have been the first thing he read by Burke, not as a book but in a newspaper series, and it dazzled him immediately: 'Burke's style was forked and playful as the lightning, crested like the serpent. He delivered plain things on a plain ground; but when he rose, there was no end of his flights and circumgyrations (xii, 228).

In many ways, *A Letter to a Noble Lord* is Burke's most democratic text. Its contrast of the aristocratic privileges of the reforming Duke of Bedford with Burke the commoner's

[27] *Hamlet*, II. ii. ll 309-11.

own more meritocratic service to the state reveals the potential for his affections to have been projected onto more egalitarian objects. How then must Hazlitt have enjoyed using Burke's phrase 'public creature' – taken from *A Letter to a Noble Lord* – in the peroration of 'On Londoners and Country People' discussed above: '[M]an in London becomes, as Mr. Burke has it, a sort of 'public creature.' He lives in the eye of the world, and the world in his (xii, 77). For Hazlitt, I believe, Burke's short-circuiting of the affective powers around entrenched power and national prejudice betrayed his own capabilities as 'a public creature' in the democratic sense explored by 'On Londoners and Country People'.

Hazlitt's prose everywhere registers the pull of Burke's brilliance. It incorporates its rhythms and annexes phrases great and small. Copies of *Reflections* and *Paradise Lost* were the bibliographic objects that laid the foundations of his reading life as he recalled in 'On Reading Old Books':

> I remember, as long ago as the year 1798, going to a neighbouring town […] and bringing home with me, 'at one proud swoop,' a copy of Milton's Paradise Lost, and another of Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution—both which I have still; and I still recollect, when I see the covers, the pleasure with which I dipped into them as I returned with my double prize (xii, 227).

The effect is in keeping with the notion that one cannot simply transcend the stickiness of affect in the name of deliberative reason. For Hazlitt, as David Bromwich suggested long ago now, the power of abstraction, as in the ability of Londoners to find an 'abstract existence' (xii, 77) beyond the go-cart of their own prejudices, is not the Arnoldian disinterestedness

that stands outside attachment, but precisely an attachment to a point of interest that shakes our previous assumptions.[28]

Hazlitt's idea of abstraction, as Bromwich also pointed out, was also very different from Burke's in this regard. Burke wrote in *Reflections*: 'I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions and human concerns on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness of solitude of metaphysical abstraction'.[29] The first part of this quotation shows where Hazlitt overlapped with Burke, but he would never have thought of abstraction as 'stripped of every relation,' as 'On Londoners and Country People' makes clear. Instead 'abstraction' for Hazlitt implies a point of adherence that can reshape the clinging relations of custom and habit: 'We must have some outstanding object for the mind, as well as the eye, to dwell on and recur to – something marked and decisive to give a tone and texture to the moral feelings' (xii, 50). Free speech for Hazlitt was not simply freedom from constraint but the product of attachments: 'I say what I think; I think what I feel. I cannot help receiving certain impressions from things; and I have sufficient courage to declare (somewhat abruptly) what they are' (v, 175). This is the malleability that could give 'a body to opinion' without necessarily reifying it into the pretended 'permanence' of the Crown that Burke had projected as the proper object of the national affections. Hazlitt's 'project of emancipation,' to use the phrasing of Bruno Latour and Monica Girard Stark, 'obliges us not to confuse living without control with living without attachments.'[30] Burke was as guilty of this confusion as Bentham for Hazlitt who instead looked, as Latour and Stark have it, 'to replace the ancient opposition between the attached and the detached with the substitution of good and bad attachments.'[31]

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[28] On the distinction from Arnoldian disinterestedness, see David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 79-80 and 86-8.
[29] Burke, *Reflections*, 10. See Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 76-7.
[30] Bruno Latour and Monique Girard Stark, 'Factures/Fractures: From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 36, *Factura* (Autumn, 1999), 20-31 (p. 29).
[31] Ibid.

My own attachment to Hazlitt, for good or ill, is the draw of his sense of the affective entanglement of the personal with the political, the occasional with the reflective, the pedestrian with the thinking, that has been so much a part of the revival of the essay in the hands of those writers like Rebecca Solnit who continue to throw a colouring of the imagination over many topics and never propose to stand outside what they describe.

UNIVERSITY OF YORK