

Hazlitt, Disinterestedness, and the Liberty of the Press

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Ranging across Hazlitt's varied body of work—from his earliest philosophical treatise, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), to his last major work, *The Life of Napoleon* (1828–1830)—this essay traces some of the shared premises informing Hazlitt's allied commitments to a particular epistemic and ethical ideal, disinterestedness, and to the liberty of the press. This essay argues that disinterestedness, as initially formulated in the *Essay* and then modified in his later work, is the ground of Hazlitt's commitment to the freedom of speech, and that Hazlitt should be understood as a pivotal figure in the Romantic history of the liberty of the press. Hazlitt's interest in the issue comes to a head in the controversy surrounding the publication of Southey's *Wat Tyler* in 1817, an event which spurred Hazlitt to produce some of his sharpest writing on the subject and to return to and refine his earlier concepts of disinterestedness and the discontinuity of the self. With threats to the freedom of speech, across the political spectrum and around the globe, on the rise, Hazlitt's work provides a valuable perspective of its importance, and its fragility, for liberal societies.

While he is widely recognized as one of the preeminent critics and essayists of the Romantic period, William Hazlitt is not generally regarded as an important figure in the history of the liberty of the press and the freedom of speech. There are some good reasons for this. He did not produce a sustained, systematic defence of the freedom of expression in the way that, for instance, William Godwin had before him in *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793) or that John Stuart Mill did after him in *On Liberty* (1859). His writing on the subject is dispersed throughout his multifarious works, and it takes many different guises. His thinking on the issue, moreover, was often bound up with personal antipathies and quarrels which lent a peculiar cast to his insistent championing of disinterested rational enquiry. Hazlitt was, nonetheless, one of the period's greatest proponents of free expression, and the principle animates much of his best writing.

The argument that follows for foregrounding Hazlitt in the Romantic history of free speech rests on the power of his writing on the subject, the philosophical foundations on which he sought to secure the liberty of the press, his central role in the period's most consequential legal case on free speech, and the capacity of his writing both to distil existing arguments for

the freedom of speech and to anticipate later ones. (This essay largely follows Hazlitt's lead in moving easily between 'liberty of the press' and 'freedom of speech/thought/expression', as he does, for example, in the passage on Wordsworth from 'On the Living Poets', quoted later.)¹ A corollary to this argument for inclusion in a longer history is an argument for internal coherence and development: just as Hazlitt should be recognized as a powerful voice in this history of free expression, so does free expression function as a way to make sense of what seem to be disparate commitments and values in Hazlitt's work. The gulf, which has puzzled so many of his critics, between the early Hazlitt and the mature Hazlitt—between the arid, technical moral philosophy of the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* and the animated, personal cut and thrust of his later literary criticism—becomes less strange when one attends to the trajectory of his most foundational critical concept.

I

Hazlitt's commitment to free thought and expression emerges across his astonishingly varied body of work: in his philosophical writing, his historical writing, his political writing, and his literary criticism. In his biography of Hazlitt, Stanley Jones tried to capture the principle underlying his various commitments: 'The equation was simple: he hated self-interest and oppression; he loved disinterestedness and freedom. He was entirely alive to the difficulties and complexities of turning the principle of freedom into practice, but he was equally aware of the dangers of keeping silent, during the endless discussions of these niceties, in an urgent and shameful situation.'² I turn first to Hazlitt's concept of disinterestedness, but Hazlitt's alertness to the 'dangers of keeping silent' should be kept in mind. Hazlitt was keenly aware of the frequently powerful incentives to remain silent—indeed, he sees these incentives as a lamentably defining feature of the spirit of his age, as evident in the numerous character sketches of his contemporaries—but he was, through a combination of principle and disposition, incapable of accepting anything short of unfettered thought and speech as a guiding norm.³ The freedom to express unpopular opinions—and, perhaps more importantly, the antecedent freedom to think unpopular thoughts—is, for Hazlitt, something rare and fragile, something which must be guarded and cultivated.

At the root of Hazlitt's interest in the freedom of the press was the concept at the heart of virtually all of this thought: disinterestedness. The concept is introduced in his earliest work, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action: Being an Argument in favour of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind* (1805). 'Disinterestedness' in Hazlitt's time had a slightly different shade of meaning than it does at present. Among the currently established meanings of the word, the most relevant sense of 'disinterested' ('not influenced by interest; impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced') enters the English language near the middle of the seventeenth century, but this sense is only partially applicable to the way Hazlitt uses the term.⁴ Hazlitt's use of the term in the *Essay* is closer to the first half of the definition ('not influenced by interest') than it is to the second ('impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced'), terms which, for Hazlitt, do not correspond to the realities of human thought and behaviour. As David Bromwich has pointed out, Matthew Arnold was largely responsible for adding this new meaning—that of strict impartiality—to the term.⁵ As we shall see, in his writings after the *Essay*, Hazlitt's use of 'disinterested' would approximate

¹ 'Liberty of the press' and 'freedom of speech/thought/expression' are, of course, distinct concepts, but, as in Hazlitt's own writings, the terms are often used interchangeably in philosophical and legal literature on the subject, in which the liberty of the press is conceived of as a particular kind of freedom of speech.

² Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), 240.

³ See, for example, the attack on Wordsworth's silence in Hazlitt's essay on 'The Press—Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and Bentham', quoted later in this essay. See also the character sketches in *The Spirit of the Age*, especially those of Wordsworth, Southey, and Gifford.

⁴ 'Disinterested', *OED*, *adj.* 2.

⁵ David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New Haven, CT, 1983), 86–7.

the sense previously invoked by figures like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson: the ability to appreciate the argument or the art of someone with whom one disagrees. Hazlitt's sketch of the character of Burke, among the most charitable and astute assessments of the figure in the period, is perhaps the perfect specimen of this kind of disinterestedness. As critics of Hazlitt have recognized, disinterestedness for the mature Hazlitt is the ability to see value in a member of the opposing party—not the ability to be of no party at all, which Hazlitt thinks is impossible. It is this sense of 'disinterestedness'—the ability to appreciate the argument or the art of someone with whom one disagrees—that would become most relevant to his commitment to the freedom of the press, but the early alliance of disinterestedness and natural benevolence, as presented in the *Essay*, would never recede from view. The mechanisms of self-love and other-directed love, the *Essay* aims to show, are the same: 'I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others. Self-love used in this sense, is in it's [*sic*] fundamental principle the same with disinterested benevolence.'⁶ The ability to enter into the thoughts and feelings of another is an extension of the kind of benevolence which defines disinterestedness in the *Essay*.

The central argument of the *Essay* is a refutation of the principle, dominant in moral psychology since Hobbes, that human action is motivated by self-interest even when it appears not to be. 'It is the design of the following Essay', he writes, 'to shew that the human mind is naturally disinterested, or that it is naturally interested in the welfare of others in the same way, and from the same direct motives, by which we are impelled to the pursuit of our own interest.'⁷ The first thing to note is the way in which the assertion that we are 'naturally disinterested' is immediately translated into what might appear to be its opposite: we are interested in others *in the same way* that we are interested in ourselves. Hazlitt rejects the arguments of rational egoism by distinguishing between past, present, and future selves. Regarding human action in the present and the past, we are guided, indeed bound, by self-interest: 'As an affair of sensation or memory, I can feel no interest in anything but what relates to myself in the strictest sense.'⁸ But, Hazlitt thinks, 'this distinction does not apply to future objects, or to those impressions, which determine my voluntary actions.'⁹ This is so because our future selves are fundamentally alien to us. We conceive of our future selves by an act of the imagination, and it is precisely the same method through which we are able to imagine the situation of others. The future is necessarily the sphere of ethical deliberation insofar as it is only in the future that we are not mechanically bound to self-interest. 'The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being, and interested in it.'¹⁰ It is in this sense, Hazlitt thinks, that self-love is fundamentally indistinct from disinterested benevolence.

This is an odd argument—a philosophically respectable one, but odd nonetheless. It rescues the idea of benevolent or disinterested action (the terms are virtually synonymous in the *Essay*, so much so that their synonymy might be said to be the argument of the *Essay* itself), by severing our future selves from our past and present selves and by asserting that our future selves are so foreign to us that they might as well be separate people (hence the equal possibility of disinterested action on behalf of others). It is only through an act of the imagination that we can conceive of future action: 'all morality, all rational, and voluntary action, every thing undertaken with a distinct reference to ourselves or others must relate to the future, that is, must have those things for it's [*sic*] object which can act only upon the mind by means of the imagination, and

⁶ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 1, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930–1934), 2.

⁷ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 1.

⁸ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 1.

⁹ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 1.

¹⁰ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 1–2.

must naturally affect it in the same manner, whether they are thought of in connection with our own future being, or that of others.’¹¹ Again, this is a philosophically respectable argument, even if Hazlitt has to go through a number of contortions related to personal identity over the course of the essay in order to maintain it: ‘I cannot therefore have a principle of active self-interest arising out of the immediate connection between my present and future self, for no such connection exists, or is possible. I am what I am in spite of the future.’¹² Hazlitt’s argument is similar in spirit to the largely Kantian argument developed by Thomas Nagel over 170 years later, in *The Possibility of Altruism*, which argues that altruism ‘depends on a recognition of the reality of other persons, and on the equivalent capacity to regard oneself as merely one among many’ and which takes a similar interest in rational disinterestedness. Nagel’s argument is opposed to ‘any demand that the claims of ethics appeal to our interests: either self-interest or the interest that we happen to take in other things and other persons.’¹³ There are, however, differences: for Nagel, altruism is a requirement of rationality; for Hazlitt, benevolence is the product of a natural disinterestedness which takes the form of imaginative engagement in accord with reason.

When Hazlitt says that ‘all morality, all rational, and voluntary action’ must relate to the future and must depend on the imagination, the implication is that it is only in the imaginative construction of the future that our reason, or morality, is free from the sorts of claims that press on our present selves (and that pressed on our past selves): in ethical deliberation (any deliberation about future conduct), we are free, Hazlitt thinks, from the immediate pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. That is to say, we are disinterested, which is another word for a kind of rational and moral freedom. Hazlitt’s argument for the possibility of benevolence, and against the dominant ethical theory of rational egotism, is an argument for disinterested thought and action. Ethical autonomy is both premise and conclusion in Hazlitt’s thinking: in his earliest philosophical work, it takes the form of a ‘metaphysical discovery’ about human nature (we are ‘naturally’ disinterested in a fundamental and unalterable sense); in his later writings, there is a sharper sense that disinterestedness, benevolence, and autonomy are more contingent phenomena, dependent on a confluence of factors, including the steady enlargement of the mind.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of Hazlitt’s claim that we are ‘naturally’ disinterested or benevolent (again, he makes both claims in the *Essay*, and the terms begin to entail each other as the argument of the essay unfolds) as a claim that we are born this way, that disinterested benevolence is innate to the mind in any easy sense:

We are not born benevolent, that is we are not born with a desire of we know not what, and good wishes for we know not whom: neither in this sense are we born with a principle of self-love, for the idea of self is also acquired. When I say therefore that the human mind is naturally benevolent, this does not refer to any innate or abstract idea of good in general, or to an instinctive desire of general indefinite unknown good but to the natural connection between the idea of happiness and the desire of it, independently of any particular attachment to the person who is to feel it.¹⁴

This seemingly technical point—‘natural’ benevolence refers not to an innate predisposition but to the way in which the conception of happiness naturally leads one to pursue it—has important implications. The argument for ‘natural disinterestedness’ promised in the subtitle of the *Essay* is perfectly compatible with—in fact, it depends upon—a self which is not initially disinterested or benevolent, but which changes over time, as it gains more experience (crucially,

¹¹ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 7.

¹² Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 48.

¹³ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford, 1970), 1.

¹⁴ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 12.

for our purposes, the experience of encountering different kinds of speech and writing). For Hazlitt, '[t]he actual desire of good is not inherent in the mind of man.'¹⁵ The 'idea of happiness' which leads one to pursue it is acquired, and the method of its acquisition would lead Hazlitt to grant supreme importance to the invention of printing and the circulation of knowledge. A prefiguration of Hazlitt's later interest in these methods of acquisition occurs in the *Essay*: 'a sentiment of general benevolence can only arise from an habitual cultivation of the natural disposition of the mind to sympathise with the feelings of others by constantly taking an interest in those which we know, and imagining others that we do not know.'¹⁶ Interest is the means to disinterestedness.

To be 'disinterested' in the way Hazlitt uses the term in the *Essay* and elsewhere, then, is not to be a blank empirical slate, untouched by prior ideas, assumptions, commitments, biases, or prejudices; nor is it an innate predisposition, a state into which we are born. It is to see, gradually and with effort, one's future self, and others, at a remove through an act of the imagination. At the heart of both Hazlitt's conception of disinterestedness and his later defence of the freedom of speech is a particular conception of the self: one that is discontinuous, composite, and perfectible. As quoted above, 'We are not born benevolent [...] neither in this sense are we born with a principle of self-love, for the idea of self is also acquired'. Later in the *Essay*: 'All individuals (or all that we name such) are aggregates, and aggregates of dissimilar things'; 'I am not the same thing, but many different things'.¹⁷ In the context of the *Essay*, these statements support the idea that there can be 'no communication' between our future selves and interests and our current selves and interests. The idea of a discontinuous self would underpin his later defences of the freedom of thought and expression—as we shall see, in more ways than one.

Disinterestedness, in the strict sense of the *Essay* (not immediately bound to the pursuit of self-interest), is marked by a kind of intellectual independence that would become central to his writings on the freedom of speech and the liberty of the press; disinterestedness in its broader sense—the ability to see the value in opposing viewpoints—is, Hazlitt thinks, practically impossible without a free press. The tendency of the freedom of thought and expression in all of his writings is towards a disinterested state of mind—that is, one that is reflective, considered, able to view things at a remove because the imagination has been sufficiently developed. The broader sense of 'disinterestedness' that develops out of the narrow one of the *Essay*—the ability to appreciate the arguments or the art of someone with whom one disagrees—would be invoked throughout Hazlitt's writings on the liberty of the press, a liberty which both requires and produces such an ability.

There are other ways in which Hazlitt's early conception of disinterestedness, the state in which ethical deliberation becomes possible, prepares the ground for his later interest in the freedom of speech and the liberty of the press. For Hazlitt, the conception of the self as a continuous and stable entity is an example of the kind of received wisdom that the free exchange of ideas is able to correct. Speaking of the idea that the mind can have an interest in that which is not immediately present to it, he writes: 'This kind of reasoning, which in itself is all along founded in a mere play of words, could not have gained the assent of thinking men but for the force with which the idea of self habitually clings to the mind of every man, binding it as with a spell, deadening it's [*sic*] discriminating powers, and spreading the confused associations which belong only to past and present impressions over the whole of our imaginary existence'.¹⁸ The language here anticipates the kind of language, discussed shortly, Hazlitt would later use to describe the influence of public opinion on the formation of individual judgment and the 'passive faith' of a

¹⁵ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 13.

¹⁶ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 14.

¹⁷ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 34–5.

¹⁸ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 2–3.

reading public whose discriminating powers have been blunted because of a tendency to cling to habitual thought and language.

It is this broader sense of disinterestedness to which critics of Hazlitt often appeal when thinking about its function in his political and critical writing. In the entry for Hazlitt in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Jonathan Bate is able to claim, on solid ground, that disinterestedness ‘became the underlying principle of his later writings on politics and the arts.’¹⁹ Kevin Gilmartin qualifies the point in his study of Hazlitt’s political writing: ‘Hazlitt’s critical disinterestedness, his ability to explore competing ideas and inhabit multiple perspectives, has been identified overwhelmingly with his writings on literature and aesthetics, to the point where political commitment marks the breakdown of measured critique,’ and his book has usefully rehabilitated the concept for our understanding of Hazlitt’s politics.²⁰ *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, the collection of essays marking the bicentenary of the *Essay* in 2005, observes how the concept, and others from the *Essay*, reverberates throughout Hazlitt’s writings.²¹ In the following sections, we see the extension, application, and modification of Hazlitt’s foundational principle in practice, as it relates to an issue uniquely positioned at the intersection of his literary and political thought.

II

Immediately after the publication of the *Essay* in 1805, Hazlitt’s writing, especially his political journalism and pamphleteering, shows the more capacious sense of ‘disinterestedness’ that would remain in use for the rest of his career. The title of his next publication, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs* (1806), reflects the new direction of his thinking. Written after the death of Pitt in January of that year, the work, subtitled ‘Advice to a Patriot; in a Letter Addressed to a Member of the Old Opposition’, makes a straightforward argument: Charles James Fox, made Foreign Secretary in February, should end the war with France. Hazlitt now writes from the position of an impartial spectator of global politics: ‘I may take the liberty of stating freely such observations as have occurred to an unprejudiced but not indifferent spectator on the present state of things.’²² And he begins to discern what the postulate of disinterestedness, given theoretical exposition in the *Essay*, might mean in practice: ‘In a conflict which is to decide the fate of a people, I think the greatest care should be taken to remove all doubtful or frivolous causes of debate, to suffer no sinister motives to divert their minds from the great object in which they are engaged or lessen their steady confidence in the justice of their cause.’²³

‘Disinterestedness’ in *Free Thoughts* begins to refer to more than the strict sense used in the *Essay*, i.e., the natural capacity of all human beings to act in ways guided by principles other than the immediate pursuit of self-interest. The first use of the word in the pamphlet indicates the limits of disinterestedness—how, when carried to an extreme or when divorced from other properties of the mind, it leads not to benevolence but to belligerence: ‘if our selfishness must be of that refined calculating comprehensive kind as to overlook no possibility of danger or advantage however remote or uncertain, and at the same time so inflexibly disinterested as to think no sacrifices too great in pursuit of its favourite object—it is easy to see that the world would soon be dispeopled.’²⁴ Hazlitt here voices the same concern about abstract political reasoning, as a purely rational enterprise divorced from feeling, custom, or historical circumstance, that had earlier worried Burke and that was already beginning to worry Wordsworth and Coleridge.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bate, ‘Hazlitt, William (1778–1830)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12805>> accessed 28 Sep 2023.

²⁰ Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford, 2015), 15.

²¹ *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, ed. Natarajan, Paulin, and Wu (London, 2005).

²² Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, in *Complete Works*, vol. 1, 96.

²³ Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, 96.

²⁴ Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, 101.

Hazlitt's consideration of precisely this sort of abstract political reasoning in *Free Thoughts* brings him back to his guiding concept. Recalling an earlier promise in the work 'to say something of the justice of the war in its principle' (it is difficult not to see this as an opportunity to perform the liberal, high-minded definition of disinterestedness frequently noted by critics of Hazlitt, the ability to enter into the argument of the opposite party), Hazlitt cannot bring himself to do it. It would not, in this context, lead to the desired result: 'It must lead to a train of recollections that can be of no use to us at present [...] The less we retain of a spirit of offence, and the sooner we forget ourselves in the character of aggressors, in however just a cause, the better shall we be qualified for our present posture of defence.'²⁵ To enter into the line of reasoning which would defend the war with France would be to engage in exactly the sort of untethered political rationalism Burke attacked in the *Reflections*. 'Instead then', Hazlitt writes, 'of enquiring into the abstract justice of the war (a sort of inquiry now very nearly exploded, and which would be of little use in guiding our practical conclusions)', he proposes a different sort of imaginative sympathy altogether: 'let us examine in what manner our remonstrances would be likely to be received by the government to whom they were addressed.'²⁶ He then imagines, with a characteristically (if selectively deployed) sympathetic imagination, the response of a humiliated French nation to an abstract justification of war—a French nation surrounded by hostile powers, mindful of past aggressions, and unsure of its future. In a performance of the kind of disinterestedness he does see as expedient under the present circumstances, Hazlitt writes in the voice of the French nation:

We had not forgotten the partition of Poland, the massacres of Ismael and Warsaw; and we could not satisfy ourselves but that those who had had their chief concern in these events, or had witnessed them without dismay, might have other objects in view in entering France, besides the tranquillity of the people, the restoration of order, or a disinterested regard for the safety of thrones, and the independence of Europe.²⁷

As in the previous example (an inflexible disinterestedness which sees no amount of bloodshed as too much when in pursuit of a noble end), 'disinterested' here is a cover, a cloak used by British elites to justify the perpetuation of hostilities. In both cases, 'disinterested' is equivocal, far removed from the uncomplicatedly positive sense used in the *Essay*. In *Free Thoughts*, disinterestedness becomes a more fraught mode of thinking: when isolated from other mental states or when employed inflexibly, it too easily becomes a tool to disguise the worst kinds of cant and sophism, those directed towards the promotion of war. Hazlitt himself becomes selective in how he performs disinterestedness, pointedly eschewing the imaginative projection into the minds of the apologists of war and opting instead to enter into the thoughts, and indeed the speech, of hostile powers.

Already in *Free Thoughts*, it is clear that Hazlitt was not always able to model himself the kind(s) of disinterestedness he held up as an ideal, and this discrepancy would only become more salient as his years (and the war with France) went on. Unflattering assessments of contemporaries from Francis Place to William Wordsworth attest to this.²⁸ We might add to those the assessment of Crabb Robinson, whose meeting with Hazlitt in December 1813 involved a heated argument about Napoleon. As Crabb Robinson records it:

²⁵ Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, 104.

²⁶ Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, 104.

²⁷ Hazlitt, *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, 106.

²⁸ Wordsworth, lamenting the 'abuse' Hazlitt directed at himself, Coleridge, and Southey in the *Examiner*, writes in a letter to Haydon (7 April 1817) of the 'miscreant Hazlitt': 'he is not a proper person to be admitted into respectable society, being the most perverse and malevolent Creature that ill luck has ever thrown in my way' (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, ed. de Selincourt, rev. Moorman and Hill, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1970), 377). Francis Place, in a letter to Hobhouse (20 August 1819), refers to Hazlitt as 'a crazy kind of fellow wholly impelled by his feelings', as quoted in Jones, *Hazlitt*, 241.

He mixes violent temper and ill-humour and personal feelings in his judgments on public events and characters more than any man I know, and this infinitely detracts from the value of his opinions, which, possessing as he does rare talents, would be otherwise very valuable. He always vindicates Buonaparte, not because he is insensible to his enormous crimes, but out of spite to the Tories of this country and the friends of the war of 1792.²⁹

The violence of Hazlitt's political writing at this time was partly the result of his idolatry of Napoleon. A number of factors contributed to this idolatry, but Crabb Robinson hits on an important part of it: not quite contrarianism, but a principled desire to voice a heterodox opinion, to buck the general movement and feeling of public opinion and, in particular, that of the Tory press. And this, coincidentally, was not far removed from the qualities Hazlitt admired in Napoleon. As he writes in the *Life of Napoleon*, of the emperor's designation as 'the child and champion of the Revolution':

Of this character he could not divest himself, even though he wished it. He was nothing, he could be nothing but what he owed to himself and to his triumphs over those who claimed mankind as their inheritance by a divine right; and as long as he was *a thorn in the side of kings* and kept them at bay, his cause rose out of the ruins and defeat of their pride and hopes of revenge.³⁰

'A thorn in the side of kings' (italicized in the original) tells us a good deal about Napoleon's appeal to Hazlitt and about Hazlitt's own 'thorniness'. Again, this is not quite contrarianism (Hazlitt would say elsewhere that 'the spirit of contradiction is not the spirit of philosophy'), but a principled emphasis on checks to arbitrary or absolute power (even when, as here, these checks themselves take the form of arbitrary or absolute power). This is what the French Revolution, or what he would sometimes refer to as the 'true spirit of Jacobinism', would always mean, symbolically, to Hazlitt, regardless of any actual course of events. Paul Hamilton is right to say that Hazlitt conceives of the inheritance of the French Revolution as a linguistic franchise: the flip-side of Hazlitt's attraction to those who, like Napoleon, act as 'thorns in the side of kings' is his notion, expressed in *The Plain Speaker*, that 'all men who have the use of speech are kings'.³¹ Napoleon, for Hazlitt, is the political embodiment of a kind of discursive ideal.

Hazlitt concedes in the *Life* that Napoleon had a great many faults, but these faults were 'not exempt from public censure or opinion'.³² He then takes a slightly different tack in his defence of Napoleon and says that the emperor 'was not strictly a free agent. He could hardly do otherwise than he did, ambition apart, and merely to preserve himself and the country he ruled'.³³ This may be sophistry on Hazlitt's part, but it does, incidentally, anticipate Tolstoy's representation of Napoleon in *War and Peace* (the theory there is that the higher you are on the social ladder, the less free you are; Napoleon in that work is the least free of individuals). Hazlitt's remark is clarified later in the work when he describes the French Revolution as the necessary consequence of the free circulation of thought:

The French Revolution might be described as a remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing. The gift of speech, or the communication of thought by words, is that which distinguishes man from other animals. But this faculty is limited and imperfect without the

²⁹ Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, ed. Edith Morley, vol. 1 (London, 1938), 133.

³⁰ William Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, vol. 1, in *Complete Works*, vol. 13, ix.

³¹ Paul Hamilton, 'Hazlitt and the "Kings of Speech"', in *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, 70; Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker*, in *Complete Works*, vol. 12, 337.

³² Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, ix.

³³ Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, x.

intervention of books, which render the knowledge possessed by every one in the community accessible to all. There is no doubt, then, that the press (as it has existed in modern times) is the great organ of intellectual improvement and civilisation.³⁴

The theoretical premise of Hazlitt's earliest work, the *Essay*, is given its most concrete form in his last, the *Life of Napoleon*. The *Essay* had endeavoured to show that 'disinterested benevolence' is 'natural' but only in a very specific sense: not innate or guaranteed, but acquired only through 'an habitual cultivation of the natural disposition of the mind to sympathise with the feelings of others by constantly taking an interest in those which we know, and imagining others that we do not know'.³⁵ In the *Life*, 'the great organ of intellectual improvement and civilisation' is revealed to be nothing other than the press itself.

The idea, expressed in similar language, had appeared five years earlier in Hazlitt's essay on 'The Periodical Press', first published in the *Edinburgh Review* in May 1823: 'Knowledge, writing, the press was found to be the great engine that governed public opinion; and the scheme therefore was, to make it recoil upon itself, and act in a retrograde direction to its natural one'.³⁶ It is worth noting that Hazlitt refrains from giving the title of the 'great organ of intellectual improvement' or the 'great engine' of enlightened public opinion to other possible contenders: the acts of reading or thinking, the exercise of the imagination, exposure to the thoughts of others through conversation or travel, etc. It is to the press, the art of printing itself, that he attributes the march of liberty and civilization. His emphasis is on the technological means of the production of knowledge, which is to say the site at which knowledge is most vulnerable to legal or governmental action. In the most cogent study of Hazlitt's political writing to date, Kevin Gilmartin, developing Harling's sense that 'the measure of political commitment for Hazlitt remains print expression itself', observes that 'editors and publishers were often more vulnerable than authors to prosecution for seditious and blasphemous libel, in this period the leading mechanism for direct press control. Hazlitt was acutely aware of the contemporary trials of radicalism, and alert to legal pressures upon free political expression'.³⁷

Anxiety about state manipulation of the press is a recurrent theme in Hazlitt's political journalism. 'Throughout his journalistic career', David Higgins argues, 'Hazlitt was obsessed by what he saw as the corruption of literary culture by government influence and class prejudice'.³⁸ Hazlitt is especially shrewd on how certain elements of literary culture have internalized government influence and class prejudice, so that the ideological work is performed without any appearance of coercion and shutting down presses or prosecuting seditious or blasphemous libel becomes superfluous. No journal, for Hazlitt, epitomizes this sort of corruption more than the *Quarterly Review* under the editorship of William Gifford: 'Its object is as mischievous as the means by which it is pursued are odious', Hazlitt writes in his sketch of Gifford in *The Spirit of the Age*. 'The intention is to poison the sources of public opinion and of individual fame—to pervert literature, from being the natural ally of freedom and humanity, into an engine of priestcraft and despotism, and to undermine the spirit of the English constitution and the independence of the English character'.³⁹ It is this sense of betrayal, which Seamus Deane sees as nothing less than 'the basic motif of Hazlitt's writings', that animates much of Hazlitt's least disinterested (in the ordinary sense of the term) work.⁴⁰ The highest pitches of his scorn are reserved not for the acknowledged agents of 'barefaced power' but for *literary*

³⁴ Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, 38.

³⁵ Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, 14.

³⁶ William Hazlitt, 'The Periodical Press', in *Complete Works*, vol. 16, 233–4.

³⁷ Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*, 48.

³⁸ David Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine* (London, 2005), 102.

³⁹ Hazlitt, 'The Spirit of the Age', in *Complete Works*, vol. 11, 124.

⁴⁰ Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 142.

figures who have betrayed what Hazlitt sees as literature's natural alliance with 'freedom and humanity'.

If the lengthy encomium on the liberty of the press in the *Life of Napoleon* is an answer to the question implicitly raised in the *Essay* (how, exactly, does one become more disinterested and benevolent? That is to say, how does one realize one's nature?), then it is perhaps no accident that Hazlitt returns to his foundational concept here:

From the moment that the press opens the eyes of the community beyond the actual sphere in which each moves, there is from that moment inevitably formed the germ of a body of opinion directly at variance with the selfish and servile code that before reigned paramount, and approximating more and more to the manly and disinterested standard of truth and justice.⁴¹

Hazlitt's earliest philosophical idiom, that of disinterestedness, recurs here, in his final work. Through the circulation of printed matter, 'A public sense', he writes, 'is thus formed, free from slavish awe or the traditional assumptions of insolent superiority, which the more it is exercised becomes the more enlightened and enlarged, and more and more requires equal rights and equal laws'.⁴² Throughout his works, Hazlitt repeatedly returns to this idea of a 'public sense' or 'public opinion', which is treated at length in a work that would be profoundly important to Hazlitt, as it would be for so many of his contemporaries, Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Both Godwin and Hazlitt, like Hume before them, were preoccupied with the concept of a 'public sense', or 'public opinion', often regarded as a coherent and identifiable entity in ways which might seem strange to more modern readers. They were especially attentive to how precarious it is, how easily it is manipulated, but also how susceptible it is to refinement. As Hazlitt notes in his essay 'On Consistency of Opinion':

There is a craving after the approbation and concurrence of others natural to the mind of man [...] Public opinion is always pressing upon the mind, and, like the air we breathe, acts unseen, unfelt. It supplies the living current of our thoughts, and infects without our knowledge. It taints our blood, and is taken into the smallest pores. The most sanguine constitutions are, perhaps, the most exposed to its influence. But public opinion has its source in power, in popular prejudice, and is not always in accord with right reason, or a high and abstracted imagination.⁴³

The press, for Hazlitt, plays an essential role in improving public opinion, as it democratizes our sentiments, refines our reason, and enlarges our imagination. The free circulation of knowledge is inhospitable to feelings of 'slavish awe', on one end, and 'insolent superiority', on the other; it leads public opinion to what he calls a 'disinterested standard of truth and justice'.

Hazlitt's insistence in the *Life of Napoleon* that the French Revolution might be viewed as 'a remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing' is anticipated in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825). In his character of Sir Francis Burdett—the MP and leader of the radical reform movement who is, for Hazlitt, a model of disinterestedness ('He is never violent or in extremes, except when the people or the parliament happen to be out of their senses')—Hazlitt writes that he labours under one error and one error only: 'the wanting to go back to the early times of our Constitution and history in search of the principles of law and liberty', i.e., popular constitutionalism.

⁴¹ Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, 40.

⁴² Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, 41.

⁴³ William Hazlitt, 'On Consistency of Opinion', in *Complete Works*, vol. 17, 27.

Liberty, in our opinion, is but a modern invention (the growth of books and printing)—and whether new or old, is not the less desirable. A man may be a patriot, without being an antiquary.⁴⁴

In his study of Hazlitt and late-Georgian radical polemics, Philip Harling notes that this resistance to constitutionalist arguments is a distinguishing feature of Hazlitt's political journalism, a journalism that was in many other respects in keeping with that of his radical contemporaries. 'What set Hazlitt conspicuously apart from Hunt, Cobbett, Sir Francis Burdett, Major John Cartwright and other polemicists was his refusal to resort to popular constitutionalism to express discontent with restorationist Europe.'⁴⁵ Even violent British radicals, Harling notes, 'invoked the notion of "traditional" English freedom to legitimate opposition to the growth during the eighteenth century of the influence of the crown and its ministers.'⁴⁶ There are two kinds of intellectual independence at work here: a refusal, as Hazlitt might see it, to submit to the dead letter of 'ancient' liberty and a refusal to echo the arguments of even those contemporaries with whom he was most sympathetic if there is an important matter of principle between them. As it expanded in scope, disinterestedness for Hazlitt would come to encompass both kinds of independent judgment. If the press is the material and efficient cause of liberty itself, then disinterestedness becomes the means by which we refine the conception of liberty according to the authority of an independent intellect, aware of a fickle public opinion from which it maintains an appropriately sceptical distance.

If we keep the precarity of public opinion in mind at all times—the ease with which it is perverted, but also its capacity for improvement if a free press is combined with a disinterested judgment—then we can begin to make sense of what seem to be opposed views in Hazlitt's work. Jon Cook has observed the marked contrast between Hazlitt's view of public opinion in his writings on the French Revolution, including the *Life of Napoleon*, and the view expressed in his essay 'On Public Opinion', first published in the *London Weekly Review* (19 January 1828).⁴⁷ In the latter essay, Hazlitt likens the 'passive faith' of the reading public to what he sees as the mindless devotion of the continental Catholic.

I walk into a church in Paris, where I am struck with a number of idle forms and ceremonies, the chaunting of the service in Latin, the shifting of the surplices, the sprinkling of holy-water, the painted windows 'casting a dim religious light, the wax-tapers, the pealing organ: the common people seem attentive and devout, and to put entire faith in all this—Why? Because they imagine others to do so, they see and hear certain signs and supposed evidences of it, and it amuses and fills up the void of the mind, the love of the mysterious and wonderful, to lend their assent to it. They have assuredly, in general, no better reason—all our Protestant divines will tell you so. Well, I step out of the church of St Roche, and drop into an English reading-room hard by: what am I the better? I see a dozen or a score of my countrymen, with their faces fixed, and their eyes glued to a newspaper, a magazine, a review—reading, swallowing, profoundly ruminating on the lie, the cant, the sophism of the day! Why? It saves them the trouble of thinking; it gratifies their ill-humour and keeps off *ennui*! Does any gleam of doubt, an air of ridicule or a glance of impatience pass across their features at the shallow and monstrous things they find? No, it is all passive faith and dull security; they cannot take their eyes from the page, they cannot live without it.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, 141.

⁴⁵ Philip Harling, 'William Hazlitt and Radical Journalism', *Romanticism*, 3 (1997), 53–65.

⁴⁶ Harling, 'William Hazlitt and Radical Journalism', 55.

⁴⁷ Jon Cook, *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1991), 384.

⁴⁸ William Hazlitt, 'On Public Opinion', in *Complete Works*, vol. 20, 306–7.

This view does seem to be opposed to the writings on the French Revolution, in which the free circulation of printed matter inevitably led to liberty and truth. The picture painted here is much closer to Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language', which practically synonymizes bad writing with writing that 'saves us from the trouble of thinking'. The liberty of the press, Hazlitt suggests, is inconsequential if not conjoined with readerly discernment and independence of thought.

This might seem common-sensical enough, but Hazlitt, in a characteristic complication of an original, intuitive premise, warns against an unintended consequence of precisely this kind of readerly discernment and independent thought: the sectarianism that tends to develop whenever a group of free-thinkers gets together. In his essay on 'Sects and Parties', first published in *The Atlas* (2 August 1829), he writes:

People who set up to judge for themselves on every question that comes before them, and quarrel with received opinions and established usages, find so little sympathy from the rest of the world that they are glad to get any one to agree with them [...] The mind sets out indeed in search of truth and on a principle of independent inquiry; but is so little able to do without leaning on someone else for encouragement and support, that we presently see those who have separated themselves from the mere mob, and the great masses of prejudice and opinion, forming into little groups of their own and appealing to one another's approbation, as if they had secured a monopoly of common sense and reason.⁴⁹

Ever attentive to the frailties of human psychology, Hazlitt recognizes the ease with which free-thinking can turn into group-thinking. This is a thoroughly Hazlittian move insofar as it is the argument of a dissenter among Dissenters. It anticipates a point made in the most robust defence of the freedom of speech on record, Mill's *On Liberty* (1859): 'I acknowledge that the tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by freest discussion, but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby.'⁵⁰ As Hazlitt puts it in his essay 'On the Tendency of Sects': 'There is a natural tendency in sects to narrow the mind', and the 'perpetual caviling' among sectarians prevents 'any great enlargement of mind, or original freedom of thought.'⁵¹ The liberty of the press for Hazlitt does not, in itself, produce free-thinking writers and readers; it can, in fact, promote a blandness and uniformity of opinion, as writers begin to copy other writers and readers begin to copy other readers. As he memorably puts it in his *Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth*: 'Modern authorship is become a species of stenography; we contrive even to read by proxy.'⁵² The question Hazlitt poses in a number of writings is this: what good is the liberty of the press if other kinds of constraints on speech, internal or external, limit the kinds of things one would want to say? To return to the essay on 'Sects and Parties':

The imprimatur of the Star-Chamber, the *cum privilegio regis* is taken off from printed books—what does the freedom of the press or liberality of sentiment gain, if a board of *Utility* at Charing-cross must affix its stamp, before a jest can find its way into a newspaper, or must knock a flower of speech on the head with the sledge-hammer of cynical reform?⁵³

The reference to 'a board of *Utility* at Charing-cross' is an allusion to Francis Place and to his 'Charing Cross Library', the political workshop behind his store at 17 Charing Cross. Constraints on free expression, Hazlitt thinks, come not only from 'above', from the Star-Chamber,

⁴⁹ William Hazlitt, 'Sects and Parties', in *Complete Works*, vol. 20, 264.

⁵⁰ John Stuart Mill, 'On Liberty', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson, vol. 18 (Toronto, 1963–1991), 257.

⁵¹ William Hazlitt, 'On the Tendency of Sects', in *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 47–8.

⁵² Hazlitt, 'Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth', in *Complete Works*, vol. 9, 319.

⁵³ Hazlitt, 'Sects and Parties', 265.

but can also emerge from ‘below’, both from well-meaning reformers and from professional critics and arbiters of public taste, the group Hazlitt would ominously refer to in his ‘Letter to William Gifford’ as the ‘literary police.’⁵⁴

III

The allusion to the Star-Chamber in ‘Sects and Parties’ is noteworthy. The Star-Chamber had ceased to function in its official capacity in the middle of the seventeenth century, but its spirit lived on in the Romantic period in a more diffuse and inchoate way, as Thomas Keymer has recently shown in great detail.⁵⁵ Robert Southey, in a letter from August 1792 and in reference to a subversive work now lost, says that, as he has ‘no wish to fall under the inquisitorial jurisdiction of our new Star chamber—to lose my hand nose & ears like Lilburne or the Englishman whom Elizabeth punishd [*sic*] for writing against her intended marriage with Anjou—or to run away like Ridgeway—my poor imitation must lie in my desk.’⁵⁶ Southey’s seditious bent was not long-lived: he would voice strong opposition to the freedom of the press even before his laureateship began in 1813 (he writes in a letter to Rickman of May 1812, ‘This I am certain of, that nothing but an immediate suspension of the liberty of debate & the liberty of the press can preserve us. Were I minister I would instantly suspend the Habeas Corpus, & have every Jacobine Journalist confined, so that It should not be possible for them to continue their treasonable vocation’).⁵⁷

It is the publication in 1817 of Southey’s *Wat Tyler*, though, that most directly involves Hazlitt. *Wat Tyler*, the three-act tragedy on the leader of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, was composed during and immediately after the Treason Trials of 1794, and it reflects the spirit of that fevered year. It remained unpublished until 13 February 1817. ‘How it has got to the press’, Southey said at the time, ‘or by whose means, I know not.’⁵⁸ In a letter to Rickman of 2 March: ‘The sins of my youth are risen against me. Some rascal has just published a piece of sedition written in 1794, and peppered like a Turkeys gizzard.’⁵⁹ Hazlitt’s response to the work appeared in *The Examiner*, 9 March 1817, and it is unforgiving. His strategy is to wonder how the author of *Wat Tyler* could be identical to the author of Southey’s latest piece of reaction, his review of a number of pamphlets on Parliamentary reform in the *Quarterly Review*. Hazlitt became aware of Southey’s review soon after it appeared in February 1817, and he quotes from it repeatedly in his *Political Essays*. A private memorandum at the time from Southey to the Prime Minister argued that ‘The main thing needful is to stop the seditious press’ and, as a way of going about this, suggested the suspension of *habeus corpus*, the arrest and then the transportation of Cobbett, Hone, and the *Examiner* group.⁶⁰

Hazlitt’s piece begins by (mis)quoting the famous lines of Wordsworth’s ‘My Heart Leaps Up’:

‘So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man:
So shall it be when I grow old and die.

⁵⁴ William Hazlitt, ‘Letter to William Gifford’, in *Complete Works*, vol. 9, 33.

⁵⁵ See Thomas Keymer, *Poetics of the Pillory: English Literature and Seditious Libel, 1660–1820* (Oxford, 2019), 261–72.

⁵⁶ Robert Southey, letter to Grosvenor Charles Bedford (6 December 1792), in *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Pratt and Packer, i, Letter 34 <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEed.26.34.html> accessed 28 Sep 2023.

⁵⁷ Robert Southey to John Rickman, 18 May 1812, in *Collected Letters*, iv, 2096 <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_Four/HTML/letterEEed.26.2096.html> accessed 28 Sep 2023.

⁵⁸ Southey to Messrs. Longman and Co., 15 February 1815, in *Collected Letters*, v, 2920 <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_Five/HTML/letterEEed.26.2920.html> accessed 28 Sep 2023.

⁵⁹ Southey to Rickman, 14 February 1817, in *Collected Letters*, v, 2917 <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_Five/HTML/letterEEed.26.2917.html> accessed 28 Sep 2023. For a recent and convincing account, based on new evidence, of how the piece came to be published, see Daniel White, ‘The Case of the Nocturnal Amanuenses: New Evidence in the *Wat Tyler* Affair’, *Modern Philology*, 118 (2020), 277–303.

⁶⁰ C. D. Yonge, *The Life and Administration of Lord Liverpool* (London, 1868), ii, 298–9.

The child's the father of the man:
 Our years flow on
 Link'd each to each by natural piety.'—WORDSWORTH

Hazlitt then applies Wordsworth's philosophical premise to Southey's case:

According to this theory of personal continuity, the author of the Dramatic Poem, to be here noticed, is the father of Parliamentary Reform in the *Quarterly Review*. It is said to be a wise child that knows its own father: and we understand Mr. Southey (who is in this case reputed father and son) utterly disclaims the hypostatical union between the *Quarterly Reviewer* and the Dramatic Poet, and means to enter an injunction against the latter, as a bastard and imposter [...] We should not, indeed, be able to predict that the author of *Wat Tyler* would ever write the article on Parliamentary Reform; nor should we, either at first or second sight, perceive that the *Quarterly Reviewer* had ever written a poem like that which is before us: but if we were told that both performances were literally and *bonâ fide* by the same person, we should have little hesitation in saying to Mr Southey, 'Thou art the man.'⁶¹

It is an effective line of attack, albeit on an easy target (Southey himself seems to have sensed how exposed he was). One should note, though, that Hazlitt returns here to the philosophical problem, the theory of personal identity, or 'continuity', of his first major work, the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*. There, Hazlitt goes to great lengths—he spends most of the work on it—to convince himself and the reader that there is no real connection between present and future selves ('I cannot therefore have a principle of active self-interest arising out of the immediate connection between my present and future self, for no such connection exists, or is possible. I am what I am in spite of the future'). Here, Hazlitt invokes the theory of personal continuity, but he keeps it at arm's length—he must borrow the premise from Wordsworth. It might be tempting to see this as a sign of Hazlitt's philosophical consistency on the issue (i.e., I did not believe in the theory of personal continuity then, and I do not now), but one suspects it is nothing so high-minded as that. He is firing shots at a vulnerable target, and Wordsworth's lines gave him some ready ammunition. More likely, I think, is that Hazlitt simply found the idea of deploying Wordsworth against Southey—one Lake School turncoat against another—too tempting to resist. The allusion to the second book of Samuel—in which Nathan says to King David 'Thou art the man' (2 Samuel 12:7) when David does not recognize himself in the story Nathan has just told—supports the idea that Hazlitt did indeed adhere to an intuitive conception of the continuity of the self, outside of the strictly ethical context of the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*.

Two weeks after Hazlitt's attack on Southey in *The Examiner*, Coleridge came to Southey's defence in *The Morning Chronicle*, which, in turn, provoked a further response from Hazlitt in *The Examiner* of 30 March. Here, Hazlitt seizes on Southey's attempt to have *Wat Tyler* suppressed not for seditious libel but for infringement of literary property, an attempt thwarted by Lord Chancellor Eldon's judgment against him, which was based on the idea that 'there can be no property in what is publicly injurious'. After Southey's failed attempt at an injunction, *Wat Tyler* single-handedly outsold the rest of Southey's other works for many years after. 'The result', Keymer notes, 'was that a work recommended for suppression by its own author, and a work the senior lawyer in government thought publicly injurious, was projected into bestseller status by a flood of uncontrolled reprints.'⁶² Hazlitt seizes on what was quickly becoming a farce in his response to Coleridge:

⁶¹ William Hazlitt, 'Wat Tyler', in *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 168.

⁶² Keymer, *Poetics of the Pillory*, 269.

The best thing for Mr. Southey (if we might be allowed to advise) would be for his friends to say nothing about him, and for him to say nothing about other people. We have nothing to do with Mr. Southey 'the man,' or even with Mr. Southey the apostate; but we have something to do with Mr. Southey the spy and informer. Is it not a little strange, that while this gentleman is getting an injunction against himself as the author of *Wat Tyler*, he is recommending gagging bills against us, and the making up by force for his deficiency in argument!⁶³

It is around this time that Wordsworth refers in a letter to 'the miscreant Hazlitt,' who is 'not a proper person to be admitted into respectable society, being the most perverse and malevolent Creature that ill luck has ever thrown in my way.'⁶⁴

Hazlitt would keep up the fight. The following year, in January 1818, he published a piece on 'The Press—Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and Bentham' in John Hunt's radical weekly, *The Yellow Dwarf*. He notes in the essay that a debate about the liberty of the press has been happening in the French House of Commons and that one M. Jollivet made an elaborately argued plea to limit the freedom of the press, as 'the passions of men are too impetuous, to permit the Press that liberty which some demand'. While Jollivet seems to recognize some value in a free press, he insists that '*The real national representation is in the King*', from which all other representation emanates. A free press is, therefore, superfluous: the people already have their organ of representation in the figure of the king. This is, Hazlitt writes, an 'exquisite morceau of political logic', and he wishes to know what Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth make of it:

As to Mr. Wordsworth, another of these heroic deliverers, he is 'a full solemn man,' and you cannot get much out of him. But we should like to hear his opinion—Aye or No—of M. Jollivet's allied notions of liberty and the rights of man [...] Is this repose, the repose of lasting slavery and avowed, bare-faced annihilation of the rights of human nature, the consummation devoutly to be wished, which kindled in him so much disinterested zeal against all his old friends and feelings? If he were to say so, the very echoes of his favourite mountains, 'with thousand-fold reverberation,' would contradict him. But he says nothing. He is profoundly silent. He will not answer Mum to our Budget. From the elevation of his former well-timed enthusiasm against tyrants and conquerors, he slid into a place: and he will never rise out of it by any ill-timed intemperance.⁶⁵

The apparent paradox of 'disinterested zeal' is important here. 'Disinterested zeal' is a perfectly adequate way to describe much of Hazlitt's own writing, or at least the condition to which it aspires. It should be evident by now that 'disinterested', for Hazlitt, does not mean that which is dry, flat, moderate, or tepid; it is perfectly compatible with a kind of zeal. Here, though, 'disinterested' is ironic; it is a shot at the personal advantage Wordsworth had gained at this time, through his government position as Distributor of Stamps and through his ingratiation with the House of Lowther in the Westmorland elections. It is this personal advantage, this personal interest, that Hazlitt thinks keeps Wordsworth silent on matters such as this. As Hazlitt writes with regard to Southey in the *Wat Tyler* piece, 'A man may change his opinion. Good. But if he changes his opinion as his interest or vanity would prompt, if he deserts the weak to go to the stronger side, the change is a suspicious one! and we shall have a right to impute it rather to a defect of moral principle than to an accession of intellectual strength.'⁶⁶

Hazlitt did conceive of this kind of questioning as a right, just as he sees an intimate connection between this mode of questioning in the context of literary criticism and the mode of

⁶³ William Hazlitt, 'The Courier and "The Wat Tyler"', in *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 177.

⁶⁴ Wordsworth, *Middle Years*, vol. 2, 377.

⁶⁵ William Hazlitt, 'The Press—Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and Bentham', in *Complete Works*, vol. 19, 203–4.

⁶⁶ Hazlitt, 'The Courier and "The Wat Tyler"', 180.

interrogation in relation to politics. In the same month that his essay on the press appeared in *The Yellow Dwarf*, Hazlitt delivered his second course of public lectures (the first having been that on English philosophy in 1812), this time on 'The English Poets'. His association of criticism of the Lake School poets, on the one hand, and the liberty of the press, on the other, continues here:

Mr Wordsworth is at the head of that which has been denominated the Lake school of poetry; a school which, with all my respect for it, I do not think sacred from criticism or exempt from faults, of some of which faults I shall speak with becoming frankness; for I do not see that the liberty of the press ought to be shackled, or freedom of speech curtailed, to screen either its revolutionary or renegade extravagances.⁶⁷

Hazlitt goes on to rehearse a familiar literary history: poetry towards the end of the eighteenth century had grown 'trite, insipid, and mechanical' in the hands of the followers of Pope. 'It wanted something to stir it up', Hazlitt says, 'and it found that something in the principles and events of the French revolution.'⁶⁸ The problem, Hazlitt thinks, is that things were carried to the opposite extreme. 'The object', he says, 'was to reduce all things to an absolute level; and a singularly affected and outrageous simplicity prevailed in dress and manners, in style and sentiment.'⁶⁹ Hazlitt's reference to the respect he has for the Lake school is probably sincere; the passages quoted above present a more antagonistic and score-settling critic than he actually was. His criticism is full of some of the most enduring and even-handed assessments of the major Romantic poets we have. He is, though, equally sincere in his belief that poets like Wordsworth are not 'sacred from criticism or exempt from faults', and his mode of speaking 'with becoming frankness', an inheritance of his Unitarian background and the systematization of Dissent in Godwin's *Political Justice*, is ultimately a way of keeping people honest. He champions the values of disinterestedness, the freedom of thought, and the liberty of the press precisely because of the human tendency to lie to ourselves and to adopt a kind of cant when speaking to others.

IV

The freedom of speech remains a salient, and divisive, political issue. The terms of the present debate might seem far removed from the concerns of Hazlitt and his contemporaries, but the fundamental principles and questions remain much the same. What are we allowed to say? Who can claim the authority to control speech, under what conditions and to what ends? Is disinterestedness, in its broadest sense, a guiding cultural value, or do we view the concept with tough-minded suspicion, under the assumption that there are only ever competing ideological interests and that disinterested benevolence is a naïve and dangerous illusion? If disinterestedness is a guiding cultural value, do we view the freedom of speech as a powerful tool in promoting it? The needle on this particular issue moves almost daily, so any assessment is bound to be provisional. With that in mind, the emerging liberal consensus seems to be that there is no real problem with free speech at all, that there is only a manufactured crisis serving reactionary ends. Such a view might make sense when the problem is seen, as it usually is, through the lens of the periodic 'culture wars' of a handful of developed countries; it is less plausible when viewed in light of global trends.

Some free-speech scholars see a long period of increasing freedom of expression coming to an end; we are, they argue, witnessing the dawn of a 'free-speech recession', as the human rights lawyer and global expert on free speech, Jacob Mchangama, has put it in his excellent survey of present conditions in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*. His report is sobering:

⁶⁷ William Hazlitt, 'On the Living Poets', in *Complete Works*, vol. 5, 161.

⁶⁸ Hazlitt, 'On the Living Poets', 161.

⁶⁹ Hazlitt, 'On the Living Poets', 162.

According to V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), a research institute that analyzes global democracy, 2020 saw substantial declines in the respect for freedom of expression in 32 countries; in the year before that, censorship intensified in a record-breaking 37 countries. These developments had terrible consequences for the media and reporters. The Committee to Protect Journalists documented the imprisonment of 1,010 individual journalists between 2011 and 2020, an alarming 78 percent increase from the previous decade.⁷⁰

This 'free-speech recession' is not only happening in states and territories which have taken an explicitly authoritarian turn (India, Egypt, Hong Kong, Hungary, Poland); it is happening in liberal democracies.

Since 2008, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, western European countries have experienced a sharp decline in civil liberties as 'infringements of free speech... have increased'. In recent years, both the European Commission and the governments of Austria, Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom have pursued what the German political scientist Karl Loewenstein termed 'militant democracy': the idea that democracies may deny basic democratic freedoms to those who reject basic democratic values.⁷¹

In the United States, efforts to curb the freedom of speech have come from both the left and the right.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education documented more than 500 attempts between 2015 and 2021 to professionally sanction scholars for engaging in constitutionally protected forms of speech. Over two-thirds of the scholars targeted for speech involving race or gender faced investigations, suspensions, censorship, demotion, or termination [...]. As president, Donald Trump attacked the media as 'the true Enemy of the people', proposed tightening libel laws, and advocated punishing people who burn the American flag, an act protected by the First Amendment [...]. Several states and a bipartisan majority in the U.S. Senate have adopted or promoted laws punishing businesses for supporting boycotts of Israel and Israeli settlements, despite federal court rulings that the right to boycott to influence political change is protected by the First Amendment.⁷²

In liberal, Western democracies (and especially in university contexts), much of the current debate hinges on what constitutes harm or offence. Hazlitt's posthumously published *Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation* (1836) may prove instructive in this context. Speaking of the harm which might result from hearing certain opinions or even expressions of contempt, Hazlitt writes:

It may be urged that material agency, or force, is used in the adoption of sounds or letters of the alphabet, which I cannot help seeing or hearing. But the injury is not here, but in the moral and artificial inference, which I am at liberty to admit or reject, according to the evidence [...]. I am judge of my own interests, because it is my affair, and no one else's; but by the same rule, I am not judge, nor can I have a *veto* on that which appeals to all the world, merely because I have a prejudice or fancy against it.⁷³

⁷⁰ Jacob Mchangama, 'The War on Free Speech', *Foreign Affairs*, 101 (March/April 2022), 117–30 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-02-09/war-free-speech-censorship>> accessed 28 Sep 2023.

⁷¹ Mchangama, 'The War on Free Speech', 120.

⁷² Mchangama, 'The War on Free Speech', 121.

⁷³ William Hazlitt, *Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation*, in *Complete Works*, vol. 19, 314.

Here, as elsewhere, Hazlitt voices a principled defence of free speech premised on the power of the independent mind—a mind that is, significantly, a suitable judge of its own interests but ill-equipped, because never in a state of pure or perfect disinterestedness, to act as a judge of that which appeals to the whole world (again, Hazlitt anticipates the arguments of Mill). When his writings on the subject are viewed in the round, Hazlitt does not emerge as what is now called a ‘free-speech absolutist’ (few serious thinkers on the subject are, with important exceptions made for the incitement of violence, hate speech, defamation, contractual language, etc.), but his default position under ordinary circumstances is almost always to encourage the unfettered circulation of thought and speech. His writings, especially those involved in the most contentious political and literary debates of his time, often demonstrate the limits of his own disinterestedness. But they also demonstrate his sense, unmatched among his contemporaries, that a free mind, a disinterested mind, is impossible without a culture of free expression.

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