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# Hazlitt and the Critique of Idolatry

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that idolatry is an important and still underappreciated theme in William Hazlitt's philosophical and political writing, as well as his art criticism. It considers examples from across Hazlitt's career, showing that his theory of idolatry-critique was informed both by his early Unitarian education, and by his participation in the intellectual culture of the parliamentary reform movement during and immediately after the wars with France. In making this argument, I provide an updated account of Hazlitt's analysis of the post-Revolutionary interplay between ministerial oppression and popular consent. I will also show that these very same political dynamics drove Hazlitt to embrace an alternative, "virtuous," mode of idolatry, centered on the ambiguous figure of Napoleon Buonaparte. At a broader methodological level, I push back against the view that iconoclasm and idolatry-critique are inherently expressions of reductive dogmatism. The example of Hazlitt suggests that unflinching criticism of idols need not lead to intellectual or political sterility.

One reason to read Hazlitt is for the passages of political execration which, two hundred years later, still blister on the lips. This effect often depends on the way Hazlitt adopts the language and familiar cadences of the Bible. Today, perhaps, this is all we hear—a vague but powerful allusion to the voice of the prophets, an echo of sublimity. But we should try to listen more carefully. When Hazlitt hurls anathema on his political enemies, the specific religious allusion is often the motor of his most radical thinking. We can see this in the preface Hazlitt drafted to his 1819 collection of *Political Essays*, where, only a few pages into his criticism of the "Legitimate" defense of the Bourbon and Hanoverian monarchies, Hazlitt offers the following vision of contemporary European society:

The poor wretch immured in the dungeons of the Inquisition may breathe a sigh to liberty, may repeat its name, may think of it as a blessing, if not to himself, to others; but the wretch imprisoned in the dungeon of Legitimacy, the very tomb of freedom, that "painted sepulchre, white without, but full of ravening and all uncleanness within," must not even think of it, must not so much as dream of it, but as a thing forbid. ... They who bow to thrones and hate mankind may here feast their eyes with blight, mildew, the blue pestilence and the glittering poison of slavery, "bogs, dens, and shades of death—a

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universe of death.” This is the true moral atheism, the equal blasphemy against God and man, the sin against the Holy Ghost, that lowest deep of debasement and despair to which there is no lower deep. (7: 10)

The canon being what it is, literary historians will probably recognize the quotation here from *Paradise Lost* (2.621–22). No less important for the unfolding of Hazlitt’s argument, however, is the earlier and perhaps less instantly placeable quotation. This passage comes from another sacred text (Matt. 23.27), which describes Jesus’s rebuke to the Scribes and Pharisees for their formalism, their insistence on the letter of the Law as a way to protect their interests. Indeed, the whole chapter from Matthew is traditionally read as a warning against the evils of hypocrisy (Mason 363). It is thus crucial that the allusion should come early in Hazlitt’s preface, thereby laying the groundwork not only for his denunciation of the modern Whig as “but the fag-end of a Tory” (7: 19), but also for his notorious attack on the “self-complacency” of the radical reform movement (7: 16).<sup>1</sup> But as well as establishing Hazlitt’s preface, and the essays which follow, as a kind of extended lay sermon against political hypocrisy, this quotation also introduces another major theme of the volume. This is the theme of idolatry. For, even if the original biblical metaphor specifically represents Scribes and Pharisees as *white-washed* tombs, the phrase “painted sepulchres” points Hazlitt toward what he regards as Catholic superstition. The gleaming charnel house becomes a reliquary, which by another metonymic step leads us back to Milton, and the death-cult of Legitimacy. Tories, as Hazlitt goes on to argue later in the preface, are worshippers of the “Harlot” of civil and ecclesiastical tyranny (7: 12); they “bow the knee to Baal” (7: 18). In Hazlitt’s analysis, then, by now we are beginning to see how hypocrisy and idolatry form a single system. The subjective scandal of hypocrisy finds its natural correlate in, or is actualized at the social level by, the theopolitical scandal of idolatry.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the process by which Hazlitt developed this theory, and to explore the range of its uses. Legitimacy, for Hazlitt as for many other radicals of the period, was tendentiously equated with the reassertion of the Divine Right of Kings (Gilmartin, *Print Politics* 228); the language of idolatry-critique therefore offered itself as an obvious weapon in the fight against modern tyranny. This strategy was also shaped by Hazlitt’s Unitarian upbringing, and by the strength he drew throughout his life—as several recent studies have emphasized—from the wider historical community of Rational Dissent (Burley; Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt* 186–232). However, this community was never the sole root of Hazlitt’s analysis of political and spiritual corruption. Thus, while seeking to build on these important studies of Hazlitt’s early education, I will also be arguing that his work was powerfully original. In particular, this article will focus on the later 1810s and 1820s, when the concept of idolatry became key to Hazlitt’s understanding of the whole social psychology of reaction. My contention is that idolatry could play this loadbearing role, partly because it allowed Hazlitt to explain the apostasy of figures like Burke and Coleridge without having to resort either to the morally dubious concept of “utility,” with its pleasure-pain calculus, or to a vulgarly economic discourse about pensions and state bribery. Instead, Hazlitt could describe the triumph of Legitimacy in terms of a currently universal, but historically contingent dialectic between self-regard and ritual self-abasement.

This overview is still incomplete. Within Hazlitt's critical lexicon, "idolatry" is not only a term of disparagement and diagnosis, but also potentially of sincere reverence. To make sense of this paradox, let us briefly return to the introduction of Hazlitt's *Political Essays*, where immediately after having described the "moral atheism" of Legitimate idolatry, he goes on to invoke a redemptive alternative:

He who saves me from this conclusion, who makes a mock of this doctrine, and sets at nought its power, is to me not less than the God of my idolatry, for he has left one drop of comfort in my soul ... He who did this for me, and for the rest of the world, and who alone could do it, was Buonaparte. (7: 10)

Again, the allusive complexity of Hazlitt's writing requires close attention. The "God of my idolatry" is taken from the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet asks her suitor to swear his constancy upon his own "gracious self," rather than on the Christian God or a delicately poeticized pagan deity (2.2.112–15). She is being semi-ironic, and Hazlitt, in appropriating these lines, foregrounds the element of burlesque hyperbole in his own adoration of Napoleon. As is discussed in greater detail below, this strand of irony is a persistent tactic adopted by Hazlitt to differentiate his writings from the canting bad faith of the professors of Legitimacy. At the same time, it would be a mistake to read this passage and its network of biblical imagery as being wholly tongue-in-cheek. For one, we should recall that in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), Hazlitt enthusiastically holds up Romeo as an idolater of Juliet: "she is his only reality, his heart's true home and idol" (4: 254). Napoleon it would seem, in the preface to *Political Essays*, offers Hazlitt a similar escape from the corruptions of the world. In other words, Hazlitt's description of Napoleon as his idol is more than a mere conceit, it has genuine ethical and even a quasi-religious force.

Hazlitt's perspective here is almost "wrong" by definition. While Shakespeare's literary reputation sanctioned idolatry as a form of private erotic devotion, it did not sanction extending this devotion into the public realm. As Hazlitt knew, this view of idolatry is largely alien to the Abrahamic religions—as well as within atheism.<sup>2</sup> An idol identified as such in this ethically charged context is always false and usually corrupting.<sup>3</sup> Yet in Hazlitt's work, the possibility of virtuous idolatry remains emphatic. Throughout his political writings, Hazlitt frequently insists upon his identity as both a committed idolomach and a self-defined idolater. What can this heterodox attitude mean? What is the logic of this perverse dual identification? By taking up these questions, this article will attempt to prepare the ground for a wider-ranging reassessment of Hazlitt's distinctive philosophy of freedom, as well as its continuing significance for the twenty-first century.

Given the pervasiveness of the idolatry motif in Hazlitt's oeuvre, its absence in scholarly discussion is probably linked to a more general difficulty which left-liberal writers have had in identifying an emancipatory content in either idolatry-critique or iconoclasm.<sup>4</sup> In theory, these two antagonistic responses to images can be distinguished and analyzed separately.<sup>5</sup> In practice, historians have tended to conceptualize them as inherently linked through a shared episteme—the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—and along a single continuum of symbolic and material violence (Mitchell "Iconoclasm" 173–74; "Idolatry" 59). This already presents strong barriers to taking Hazlitt's theorization of idolatry seriously. Iconoclasm, and by

extension idolatry-critique, are often dismissed as fundamentally intolerant forms of moral and political apriorism. Seen this way, “idolatry” is often just a label used to legitimate the colonial subjugation of supposedly less enlightened neighbors, or to chastise subalterns at home for their superstitiousness (Latour; Mitchell “Idolatry” 71).<sup>6</sup> What is worse, the critique of idolatry often seems to lapse into a form of magical thinking: its fixation with idols is considered unreasonable, a rage directed not only against the beauty of the divine image, but ultimately against life itself. We are told that iconoclasm ends up making a “fetish of nihilism” (Jarvis 12).<sup>7</sup> The influence of Nietzsche on many of these recent disavowals of iconoclasm is profound.<sup>8</sup> But as we shall see, Nietzsche’s arguments fit within a still longer tradition of skeptical humanism. Already in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, versions of these claims were used in loyalist polemics against the French Revolution, and against domestic reform. The common thread running through this anti-iconoclastic tradition—from Hazlitt’s time to our own—is the rejection of what is regarded as an inherently reductive pseudo-universal moral standpoint that is wedded to, and authorizes, potentially unlimited partisan violence. As such, the critique of iconoclasm is closely related to the discourse of “fanaticism,” which, as Alberto Toscano has recently demonstrated, is still often used to pathologize calls for social transformation (98–148). This crude foreclosure of political change is something which my essay seeks, in a modest way, to subvert.

### Radical traditions of critique

“Idolatry” was a term of considerable political currency in Enlightenment Britain. During Hazlitt’s lifetime there were surges of polemical interest in the concept, especially in relation to the question of Catholic Relief in the 1770s and 1820s, as well as in response to Christian missions to India in the 1810s.<sup>9</sup> Hazlitt was not indifferent to these debates; nevertheless, his interest in the subject was more deeply informed by the traditional partisan languages of idolatry-critique at either end of the political spectrum.<sup>10</sup> To arrive at a more robust appraisal of Hazlitt’s particular vision of the world liberated from idols, we must therefore attend to these competing traditions. For the most part I will be focusing on elite politics, especially the clash between Anglicans and Rational Dissenters. Yet the influence of such figures as William Cobbett, John Wade, T. J. Wooler, and Richard Carlile on Hazlitt’s own prose and habits of thinking, should not be underestimated (Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt* 51–53). These popular journalists tend to differ from Hazlitt by viewing modern idolatry in economic terms, as a metaphor for the subordination of public office to private ends (Hone; Wooler, “Close of the Year”). By contrast, Hazlitt reverses this analytical hierarchy. He often writes as if the whole present edifice of oligarchic power is simply the latest episode in a sweeping history of human folly, defined at base by different kinds of idol-worship. Hazlitt’s perspective here is strongly marked by his Unitarian upbringing, and it is this which leads me to prioritize the intellectual history of middle-class radicals, rather than of artisans, in the following pages.

The entire Unitarian faith is in some ways defined by its resistance to what Joseph Priestley defined as “[C]hristian idolatry” (1.20). Unitarians believe that all Catholics and most Protestants are idolaters of Christ. The basis for this striking claim lies in a

highly sophisticated tradition of textual scholarship. By the outbreak of the French Revolution, Unitarians had been arguing for centuries that there was no scriptural authority for the Trinity; the doctrine of Christ's co-eternal existence had only been established as orthodox at the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325)—and this doctrine had only been accepted then owing to corruptions in the translation of the New Testament, which had been seized upon by self-serving bishops. From the Unitarian Perspective, this original act of idolatry had tragically enabled a web of quasi-Pagan superstition to grow within Christianity itself. The deification of Christ had always implied, and it had eventually led to the worship of the Virgin and of angels, saints, and martyrs, their relics and images. Hazlitt would have encountered these historical arguments frequently during his early education. He would have read them in the works of Priestley and Richard Price, heard them from his tutors at the New College in Hackney, and—not least importantly—debated them with his father, the Revd. William Hazlitt Sr (Burley 9–48). However, the most abiding Unitarian influence on his own theory of idolatry did not come from among this established cadre of Dissenting intellectuals, but rather from one of the movement's most promising young firebrands in the 1790s: Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The influence of Coleridge on Hazlitt's intellectual formation, including the theological influence, has often been examined. Hazlitt's own acknowledgement of this debt, particularly in "My First Acquaintance with Poets" (1823), has helped to stimulate debate about the nature of their bond (Paulin 187–204; Natarajan 41–51). However, the more specific link, in terms of the central role which the concept of idolatry plays in each writers' work, has not yet received attention. Tracing this link is important because it enables us to see how Hazlitt was able to go beyond the anti-idolatry discourse of his allies in the 1810s and 1820s, toward something more like a "critique" in the Kantian sense of the word—that is, of an inquiry into the conditions of possibility for modern idol-worship. In Coleridge's writings, Hazlitt found two essential elements for this project that were only fitfully present in the texts of Cobbett and the other popular journalists. The first element here was Coleridge's reactivation of the traditional philosophical attack on idols as false mediators of the universal. For Hazlitt, as we shall soon see, a version of this metaphysical line of argument became central to his account of the contemporary triumph of Hanoverian *Jus Divinum*. The second element which he took was the biblically charged language of horror which Coleridge developed in his early poetry, lectures, and essays, to excoriate Britain's aggression in the French Revolutionary Wars. The interest in metaphysics which Coleridge brought to this subject certainly did not lead him to treat idolatry as a dispassionate object of speculative analysis. If anything, his language is more visceral than that of the later radical journalists. Whereas John Wade's *Black Book* (1820), for example, depicted the economic misery caused by the war as the effect of idols devouring ever larger portions of the social product (128), Coleridge did not hesitate to describe this profiteering (and the combat itself) as a new form of human sacrifice to the idol of Moloch (*Poems* 153). Similarly, in "My First Acquaintance with Poets," Hazlitt recalls how twenty-five years earlier Coleridge had preached a magnificent, radical Unitarian, sermon against the evil of those who had "inscribed the cross of Christ on banners dripping with human gore" (17.108). What gives Coleridge's anti-war rhetoric much of its phobic intensity in both instances is

the way he represents barbarism erupting from within the apparently sanitized sphere of modern politics. Coleridge did not invent this aspect of the concept of idolatry; again, this focus on civilizational regression and uncleanness was a traditional resource, internal to the conceptual history of idol-worship. Part of what made this a particularly effective strategy in the 1790s, though, was the way it enabled Coleridge to reverse the historical arguments of Edmund Burke who, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), identified Rational Dissent with the archaic “zeal” of Civil War puritans (11). Burke and his allies, Coleridge implied, were the real agents of resurgent cultic violence.

Several decades later, after Napoleon’s defeat, Hazlitt would adopt the same Coleridgean strategy of historical reversal against the fanatical enemies of radical fanaticism. But Hazlitt also added a further turn to this cycle of critique, for by this point he was often arguing against the Lake Poets themselves, who in the meantime had become apologists for the political establishment. Thus, in response to Robert Southey, who after the Battle of Waterloo publicly scoffed at the idea that “England! our country” was responsible for 5,800,000 deaths in Europe, Hazlitt simply quotes Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude” back at him (7.217). The extensive citation, a slightly modified version of pages 3 to 9 in the unlineated 1798 edition of the poem, culminates in a sweeping rejection of spiritual complacency:

... We have been too long  
 Dupes of a deep delusion!—Others, meanwhile,  
 Dote with a mad idolatry; and all  
 Who will not fall before their images,  
 And yield them worship, they are enemies  
 Even of their country!  
 Such have I been deem’d. (7.219)

In this way, Hazlitt positions the “half-inspired” Coleridge of the 1790s as a prophet against his own future bellicose nationalism (17: 109). The intention here was not just to embarrass Southey and Coleridge, by reminding them of their youthful radicalism; more fundamentally, Hazlitt was trying to make visible a paradox. The bloodshed after more than twenty years of warfare was even greater than the Lake Poets could have originally anticipated—the human sacrifices committed were even more disgusting—and yet, instead of meeting this abomination with an equally heightened resistance, the former enemies of idolatry had joined its leading proselytizers. What had happened?

## Idolatry and egotism

This question occupied Hazlitt throughout much of his later career. It is, in short, the famous question of “apostasy.” Most of the scholarship on this subject has approached it from a different angle. Rather than idolatry, which is rarely discussed, literary critics have tended to focus on Hazlitt’s analysis of modern egotism (Whale 118; White 72–73). The dominance of this interpretative framework reflects the influence of David Bromwich and Uttara Natarajan, who, for many years, have been at the forefront of attempts to recuperate Hazlitt’s *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805). In the account developed by Bromwich (150–96) and Natarajan (171–72), Hazlitt’s

understanding of apostasy can be glossed as follows: the initially defiant stance of the Lake Poets—and going further back, of Burke too—had been rooted in hubris, not principle; this same egotistical contrarianism left the one-time enemies of Pitt fatally vulnerable to ministerial flattery, eventually causing them not only to abandon, but fully to reverse their oppositional commitments of the earlier period. In many ways I find this interpretation of Hazlitt's political journalism persuasive. The concepts of apostasy and egotism are closely linked, and both can therefore be illuminated through attention to Hazlitt's *Essay*. My aim here is to place idolatry within the same matrix of texts and ideas. Doing so will enable us to understand Hazlitt's critique of idolatry better, but that is not all. Such was the importance of this concept to Hazlitt, that idolatry also casts light on the egotism-apostasy dyad, and thereby provides new insights into Hazlitt's moral philosophy as a whole.

The relationship I am positing here is one of supplementation. That is, although the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* only contains one casual reference to "idolatry" (1: 18), there are gaps throughout the argument which seem to require something like a theory of idol-worship. Thus, the concept of idolatry helps provide an answer to one of the enigmas broached, but not properly articulated, in Hazlitt's treatise: "Why does political tyranny exist?" This question is unavoidable, given the strikingly positive vision of human nature which Hazlitt puts forward in the essay. Humans, he argues, have a natural impulse toward the good. As soon as I recognize something to be good, as soon as I am made aware of it, then I naturally desire this good either for myself, or for another. Indeed, nothing in the human condition leads me to prefer my own claim here to anybody else's. The faculty which I use to associate the idea of my friend, neighbor, or even a stranger with this idea of the good—the faculty of imaginative sympathy—is the very same mental power which enables me to desire the good for my future self (1: 1–5). The polemical aim of this argument is to rebuke the tradition of rational egotism stretching from Hobbes through to Helvetius, which in Hazlitt's eyes misrepresented men as being passively conditioned by external stimuli (Garnett). As Natarajan puts it, "Hazlitt's philosophical thesis is of a domain of intellectual power, located beyond the reach of the senses. In that domain, the human being is transformed from mechanism into free agent, controlling, rather than controlled by, the material world outside" (1).

Hazlitt of course recognized that sometimes people do not put the good of their neighbors ahead of their own. Otherwise, there would be no corruption, no Legitimacy. To account for this discrepancy, in his essay, Hazlitt insists that what appears to be a selfish regard for our own pleasure actually stems from the mind's laziness, or its habitual incapacity to represent unfamiliar ideas to itself with sufficient clarity to motivate further action:

The reason why a child first distinctly wills or pursues his own good is not because it is *his*, but because it is *good*. For the same reason he prefers his own gratification to that of others not because he likes himself better than others, but because he has a more distinct idea of his own wants and pleasures than of theirs. Independently of habit and association, the strength of the affection excited is in proportion to the strength of the idea, and does not at all depend on the person to whom it relates except indirectly and by implication. (1: 12)

Selfishness is thus a question of moral ignorance or lethargy, not of inherent self-interestedness. As such, the remedy for injustice proscribed is a version of sentimental education. The imagination must be strengthened so that it can look beyond what is familiar and distinctly represent to itself the happiness of as-yet unknown friends and neighbors.

In his later writings, by contrast, Hazlitt often seems to be grappling with a different problem. Instead of the imagination's sluggishness, in the 1810s and 1820s the primary source of moral failure seems to be the opposite. It is the perverse energy of the imagination which continuously thwarts the forward march of political progress. This shift of emphasis has been noted before by Natarajan (172–73) and by John Whale (115), who disagree over the extent to which Hazlitt came to view the operations of the imagination as fundamentally inimical to the politics of reform. While Whale argues that in Hazlitt's writing there is a tragic contradiction between imaginative power and political virtue, my position is closer to Natarajan's. Like her, I believe that Hazlitt saw imagination as a necessary force in the struggle for emancipation, but one that was also in certain respects dangerously inclined to bolster the cause of tyranny. Where I would depart from Natarajan, however, is in stressing that when Hazlitt attempted to think through this dynamic, he often reached for the concept of idolatry.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, the distinctive ontology of idols—their status as inert material objects, but objects which are invested with enormous imaginative and destructive power—was more enabling for Hazlitt's philosophy than has yet been recognized.

This philosophical work, as I have already noted, was particularly urgent when it came to explaining the defection of Burke and the Lake Poets. Their conduct had been symptomatic of a broader reactionary turn in British political culture. In order for Hazlitt to renew the radical challenge to Legitimacy, he needed to understand the underlying causes of their apostasy. Here, Hazlitt believed that narrowly economic explanations put forward by some of his fellow radicals were counterproductive. Not only did they fail to pay close enough attention to the facts (after all, Southey's £100 stipend as Poet Laureate was not that generous), but they also implied that the imagination was weaker than financial self-interest, and consequently that it could never play the liberatory role which Hazlitt believed would be essential (7: 233). Hazlitt thus developed an alternative analysis of apostasy, cogently expressed in the following excerpt from "On Court Influence" (1818):

It is usually supposed by those who make no distinction between the highest point of integrity and the lowest mercenariness, that Mr. Burke changed his principles to gain a pension: and that was the main-spring of his subsequent conduct. We do not think so; though this may have been one motive, and a strong one to a needy and extravagant man. But the pension which he received was something more than a mere grant of money—it was a mark of royal favour, it was a tax upon public opinion. ... Those who had never heard of or despised him before, now joined in his praise. He became a fashion; he passed into a proverb; he was an idol in the eyes of his readers, as much as he could ever, in the days of his youthful vanity, have been in his own. (7.231–32)

The connection made here between vanity and idolatry is far from accidental. Hazlitt invariably stresses that idolatry is something which the mind does to itself, and this means for him there is an organic link between idol-worship and egotism. This reflexive link is present even when the ostensible object of worship is not, as in the

above example, personal reputation, but instead an external object—like a king. To get some purchase on this, we can turn to James Mulvihill's reading of Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (1823). Reflecting on Hazlitt's political and erotic obsessions in this work, Mulvihill suggests that for Hazlitt idolatry is "a species of self-aggrandizement by which a subject willfully establishes its own perceived ideal in an object" (197). While as a general definition of Hazlittian idolatry this is probably too restrictive, the emphasis here on willfulness is essential. Indeed, for Hazlitt, idol-worship is always willful in a double sense. First, and once again unusually in the long history of idolatry-critique, Hazlitt tends to represent idolaters as fully conscious of the unworthiness of their favorite object. Instead of being benighted masses, idol-worshippers are here engaged in a knowing "fiction," in "make believe," in a "palpable and pernicious lie" (19: 259). This already points toward the second kind of willfulness that Hazlitt discovers in idolatry. To idolize something is often a way of casting our peers down, by aggressively asserting the divinity of a third party. In earlier periods, in Iceland, Egypt, and Canaan, the practice was to "paint larger pieces of wood and smear them with gore and call them Gods," and then to enslave any neighboring tribes who disagreed (19: 258). Since then, the outward forms of idolatry might have altered, but in Hazlitt's view the basic principles had remained depressingly stable. When Burke and Wordsworth heap praise on George III, they do not seriously believe in his personal excellence; rather, they use the alleged sanctity of the Crown as a weapon against their literary rivals.

### **Idolatry and abjection**

By now, the logic of my earlier claim that apostasy, egotism, and idolatry form a single matrix for Hazlitt should be becoming clearer. These states of mind and political dispositions were generated through the interplay between rampant narcissism and abjection. This was a source of weakness not only among radical intellectuals, but also among the artisanal and laboring classes. In other words, the same structure of motives that Hazlitt attributed to Southey could be attributed to people who had even less financial reward to expect from prostrating themselves. Here, Hazlitt was attempting to explain the phenomenon of popular loyalism. Other radical journalists also sometimes addressed this question using the language of idolatry-critique, but they often did so in ways which implied the lower orders were dupes, or that they passively accepted kingly rule (Wooller, "An Address"; Carlile 511). Hazlitt's concept of idolatry was conducive to a more dynamic analysis of reactionary politics, involving elements of genuine grassroots enthusiasm. Hence, he was in some ways better equipped to make sense of the energetic conservative activism which historians like Kevin Gilmartin have taught us to associate with the French Wars ("Theater of Counterrevolution"). More specifically, in his writing on king-worship, Hazlitt wanted to understand how popular expressions of loyalty to the crown could be associated with feelings of personal freedom and power. After all, civil and religious liberties were everywhere being rolled back; and yet Hazlitt recognized that for many common people Britain had never seemed greater.

The concept of idolatry was useful here for the way it allowed Hazlitt to thematize what he took to be the mutually amplificatory relationship between egotism and

servility. These character traits were both rooted in the imagination, in tendencies of the mind which Hazlitt theorized elsewhere in his literary and philosophical essays. For now, I will be calling these the “constructive” and the “awe-seeking” tendencies of the imagination; but it should be recognized that these are neologisms, and that Hazlitt himself never adopted a consistent terminology for describing them. Hazlitt was more consistent in positing idols as the natural point of intersection between the two tendencies, the point at which their opposite forces could be reconciled and combined, thereby forcing the formative power of the imagination back upon itself, like a snake devouring its own tail. This is precisely the psychic and political trap which Hazlitt examines in his 1823 essay, “On the Spirit of Monarchy.”

Immediately, the conspicuous allusion here to Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), a work which Hazlitt also refers to in the main body of his essay (19: 261), alerts us to the ambitiously multifaceted quality of his argument. With these nods to Montesquieu, Hazlitt is suggesting that different types of political system—*république*, *monarchie*, and *despotisme*—must seek to reproduce appropriate habits of thought and action in order to maintain their long-term stability (cf. Montesquieu 21–30). Thus, while the constructive and awe-seeking tendencies of the imagination might be discernible in a putative British republic, they would not enter into the same idolatrous feedback loop encouraged by the (for Hazlitt always already fused) monarchical-despotic system of government. Part of what makes the latter so dangerously powerful is that, by making honor and not virtue the primary measure of personal worth, it exacerbates the self-reflexive egotism which Hazlitt associates with apostasy. This is because in a society where honor is the chief index of value, outward show becomes more important than a person’s intrinsic merit. Furthermore, under these conditions, the imagination’s innate constructive tendency is kicked into overdrive. The more worthless the ostensible object of veneration, the more the mind exults in its own artistic triumph over material facticity:

All we want is to aggrandize our own vainglory at second hand; and the less of real superiority or excellence there is in the person we fix upon as our proxy in this dramatic exhibition, the more easily can we change places with him, and fancy ourselves as good as he ... An idol is not the worse for being made of coarse materials; a king should be a common-place man. (19: 255–56)

Hazlitt suggests that a contemptible king is a blank canvas. He both provides a license for the imagination perpetually to embellish upon reality, and at the same time remains nondescript enough to encourage acts of phantasmic identification.

This brings us back to Mulvihill’s definition of Hazlittian idolatry, as “a species of self-aggrandizement by which a subject willfully establishes its own perceived ideal in an object.” So far, this aptly expresses the movement of Hazlitt’s argument. Things become more complicated, however, slightly later in the essay, when Hazlitt shifts focus from the “constructive” to what I am calling the “awe-seeking” tendency of the imagination. The transition is fairly rapid, coming as it does within the space of a single paragraph:

Superstition nursed, with peculiar zeal, her rickety, deformed, and preposterous offspring. She passed by the nobler races of animals even, to pay divine honours to the odious and unclean – she took toads, and serpents, cats, rats, dogs, crocodiles, goats, and monkeys,

and hugged them to her bosom, and dandled them into deities, and set up altars to them, and drenched the earth with tears and blood in their defense; and those who did not believe in them were cursed, and were forbidden the use of bread, of fire, and water, and to worship them was piety, and their images were held sacred, and their race became Gods in perpetuity and by divine right. (19: 258–59)

We are carried here from the ridiculous, to something approximating the Burkean sublime. This is what I meant earlier, when I spoke about the constructive and awe-seeking tendencies of the imagination being in some ways opposed. We must recall that for Burke, as famously described in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), an encounter with a truly sublime object agitates the body, while robbing the mind of “all its powers of acting and reasoning” (47). The delight which people derive from this kind of experience would seem, therefore, to run directly counter to the constructive tendency of the imagination. This contradiction can be diminished if we follow Natarajan in emphasizing those moments when Hazlitt implies that the mind actually produces the awe it apparently seeks out in external objects (43). Nevertheless, this does not fully remove the sense that idols concentrate within themselves two antithetical and polarizing tendencies. Idols are both more fascinating the more objectively trivial they are, and they take a stronger hold over the mind the more dreadful they become. This sense of dual polarization goes beyond the traditional phenomenology of idolatry-critique and is distinctively Hazlittian. In sources up to and including the Old Testament, false gods were already described as both ridiculous and terrible (Assman 27); but never before had a writer so starkly suggested that the twin impulses were tendentially exponential. Hazlitt radicalizes the concept of idolatry in this way, partly so that he can describe the reigns of George III and George IV as the purest expression so far of the spirit of monarchy. No reigns, in his view, have been responsible for more bloodshed in Europe; no reigns have pretended to stake everything for a more absurd cause (the restoration of the Bourbons); and no reigns have been marked by more buffoonish personal incompetence. However, because this combination of faults found an echo in the idolatrous tendencies of the public’s imagination, they were converted from weaknesses into unexpected sources of political strength.

At this point, I anticipate that some readers will have doubts about the overall convincingness of Hazlitt’s arguments. Even when we move to address his theory on its own terms, recognizing the Idealist basis of Hazlitt’s political philosophy, we might feel that the conclusions he reaches here are undermined by their dependence on a series of startling logical paradoxes. There is obviously something to be said for adopting a properly skeptical perspective. I am certainly not recommending that, in embracing Hazlitt’s arguments about idolatry, we now disregard the economic and institutional factors which historians have traditionally credited with the Hanoverian regime’s stability (Royle 139–98). Nevertheless, we should not let the narrowly psychological focus of Hazlitt’s arguments obscure their insights. Nor should we dismiss his theory out of hand for its counter-intuitive, sometimes dialectical, presentation. We need to recognize that Hazlitt’s political essays were always intended as rhetorical interventions into a field of symbolic conflict. In this context, it becomes easier to grasp the satirical verve of Hazlitt’s thesis of dual polarization, with its

amenability to rapid switches across literary registers, its equal potential for escalating crescendos of enthusiasm, and moments of bathetic deflation. The purpose of such virtuosity was not merely to entertain Hazlitt's readers, but also, and more fundamentally, to sustain the moral capacity to resist Legitimacy, in the face of what we have already seen Hazlitt describe as near-total defeat. This latter point requires us to take seriously the analytical, as well as the rhetorical, dimension of Hazlitt's writing on idolatry. If he believed that monarchical power was now suffocatingly absolute, then one side of this impasse was explained by the strength of the reactionary bloc, underpinned by collective idol-worship. The other side of the problem was the historic weakness of British radicalism, which for Hazlitt could also partly be explained through recourse to the concept of idolatry. Only here, it was a very different relationship to idols which needed to be theorized.

### The weakness of iconoclastic philanthropy

The problem with nineteenth-century radicals was not that they were excessively fond of idols, but rather that their mode of idolatry was feeble. As Hazlitt puts it in his preface to *Political Essays*, describing the character-type of the radical reformer, the "Goddess of his idolatry is and will always remain a cloud, instead of a Juno" (7: 16). Hazlitt's broader claim here is that radicals are temperamentally unsuited to cooperating, and that as a result their political ambitions are rarely achieved.<sup>12</sup> On a first reading, the particular significance of the reference to idolatry here might appear glancing—or, bearing in mind that by this point in the preface Hazlitt has already described Legitimacy as a death-cult, it might appear like a stray motif, introduced to balance out the implied antithesis between the lackluster radicals and their dangerously cohesive enemies. It does have this stylistic purpose of course; but from my foregoing arguments, it should be clear that Hazlitt's references to idolatry are usually philosophically charged. In this case, Hazlitt is playing on the idea that modern political reformers are the direct heirs of the Reformation. Their inability to compromise, their dogged insistence on "the supremacy of conscience" (7: 15), is born of the same schismatic spirit which animated the Puritans of the seventeenth century. This argument, which Hazlitt returns to throughout his writings on the weaknesses of British radicalism (e.g. 4: 46; 12: 181; 20: 322), is clearly in some ways another elegant *détournement* of Burke's thesis in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. At the same time, Hazlitt's thinking here is informed by an analysis of the internal radical debates of the 1790s. These debates had generated theoretical limitations which he felt the current parliamentary reform movement had yet to overcome.

More specifically, in his criticism of the impotently nebulous quality of radical idols, Hazlitt was thinking about the influence of William Godwin. "No work in our time," Hazlitt believed, "gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*" (11: 17). Hazlitt greatly admired the kinetic, almost pugilistic force of Godwin's 1793 text. But he also believed that it had sent many radicals down an intellectual cul-de-sac, and in the process had exacerbated their fractiousness. The philosophical basis of this criticism, as is well known, derived from Hazlitt's rejection of Godwin's impartialist epistemology and ethics (Bromwich 79–86). However, unsurprisingly the connection here to Hazlittian idolatry-critique

has not yet been studied. The crucial mediating concept is “abstraction.” Abstraction both plays a central role in Godwin’s ethical philosophy, and for Hazlitt is connected to the present desultoriness of radical idols.<sup>13</sup> To grasp Hazlitt’s argument fully, in a moment it will be necessary to parse his and Godwin’s contrasting claims about abstraction and human nature. Yet before turning to examine these passages in more detail, it is worth pausing to reflect on the other features of Godwin’s work which encouraged Hazlitt to associate it with iconoclasm.

Especially relevant here are those moments in *Political Justice* when Godwin himself attacks the idolatry of monarchical government. He does so on two closely related occasions, clustered together in a manner that Hazlitt could hardly have failed to have noticed. In one place Godwin insists that any king or president will be a less reliable custodian of executive power than a council, because individuals are more easily swayed by personal antipathy and “blind idolatry” (243). In another place, a few pages earlier, he insists that kingly power always encroaches on the sovereignty of independent reason:

Can an honest man consider himself as the subject of any thing but the laws of justice? Can he acknowledge a superior, or hold himself bound to submit his judgments to the will of another, not less liable than himself to prejudice or error? Such is the idol that monarchy worships in lieu of the divinity of truth and the sacred obligation of public good. (241)

Many radicals during this period invoked the concept of idolatry for similar anti-monarchical purposes, but this did not mean that they were drawing deeply on scriptural precedents. Nevertheless, in Godwin’s case we can be fairly certain that his references to idolatry were theologically pointed. Before studying the writings of the *philosophes*, which prompted him to strike out on a new path, Godwin had served for several years as a Dissenting minister (1779–83). Like Hazlitt, he had been raised a Dissenter, and this education—even if he later questioned it—continued to inform his mature philosophy (Philp 15–37). In other words, the Anglican critics of *Political Justice* were right when they concluded that it was a theologically subversive work. These readers not only condemned the passages attacking the national church, but also the book’s broader and, from their perspective, more insidious aim to construct a moral system independent of revealed religion (Graham 76–83). Even some radical Unitarians—who, at this stage, still numbered Coleridge among their ranks—were hostile to what they saw as the perniciously Deistic tendency of Godwin’s arguments (Roe 112–16). Meanwhile, Hazlitt had been following these debates closely. Even as a young man in the 1790s, he had been poised somewhere between being a bystander and an active participant. Thus, in “My First Acquaintance with Poets,” Hazlitt vividly recalls that when Coleridge first visited him at his home in Shropshire, he had warned him against the theological “presumption” of Godwin’s philosophy (17: 112). And Hazlitt may still have had this original warning ringing in his ears while writing *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), when he described Godwin as a committed enemy of “the Moloch of Legitimacy” (11: 26). This phrasing would probably have come readily to Hazlitt anyway, but it does inevitably take on additional force when applied to Godwin. For not a few of his orthodox and Dissenting critics, the Godwin of *Political Justice* was the very type of the modern image-breaker.

Such steadfast enmity to Legitimacy was always worth celebrating. Yet, in Hazlitt's mind, Godwin's total ban on idolatry also seems to have become associated with some of the most problematic features of his work. This is where Godwin's handling of the concept of abstraction was particularly contentious. Hazlitt recognized that the fundamental operation of Godwin's ethics lay in abstracting from local obligations and affections, in order to reveal an impersonal greater good. In light of Godwin's reputation as a sceptic and infidel, from this fact alone it was possible for Coleridge, in "Modern Patriotism," to infer a connection to anti-Christian idolatry-critique. After all, Deists had long argued that Christianity's conception of the divine was too anthropomorphic—that is, that it had not yet achieved a high enough level of abstract universality. The sense that there was a significant degree of overlap between these Deistic arguments and Godwin's philosophical method was further heightened by his commentary on the errors of revealed religion. In one infamous chapter of *Political Justice*, Godwin suggested that Christ's precept "that we should love our neighbour as ourselves" was not "modelled with the strictness of philosophical accuracy" (53). Instead of valuing everyone equally to ourselves, Godwin claims, we should discriminate according to the objective "benefit" that people contribute to society (54). Hence, in a widely quoted thought-experiment from the same chapter, Godwin argues that if the influential reformist author François Fenelon were trapped in a burning building, and if his own wife were also stuck there, justice would require him to "save the life of Fenelon at the expence of the other" (53). It is not difficult to see why this passage provoked controversy, and why for Christian readers Godwin's text could so easily be linked to both iconoclasm and hypocrisy.<sup>14</sup> On this, at least, the Anglican bishop Samuel Parr and the radical Coleridge of the 1790s agreed. For all his posturing as an austere enemy to the idols of revealed religion, Godwin's philosophy tended to libertinism. His arguments were a powerful solvent of traditional morality, but they put nothing feasible—nothing which Parr considered within the capacity of human "physical powers"—in the place of Christian love, charity, and gratitude (4). Hazlitt's criticism of *Political Justice* was similar. In *The Spirit of the Age*, he too suggests that Godwin's scheme failed to create new solidaristic networks in place of those it undermined (11: 21). This same analysis must feed into his preface to *Political Essays*, where reformers are described as an implicitly materialist, if not quasi-atheistic, "collection of atoms whirled about in empty space by their own levity" (7: 17). This is perhaps the closest Hazlitt comes to those more recent theorists, who have argued that iconoclasm makes a nihilistic fetish out of absence. Or equally, and more directly, this is the closest Hazlitt comes to Coleridge's apostatizing argument in 1816 that Jacobins would "sacrifice each to the shadowy idol of ALL" (appendix vii–viii).

However, as much as Hazlitt's commentary sometimes mirrors the Christian *apologia* of Coleridge, the ultimate grounds for his objection to Godwinian abstraction were importantly different. Here I am not just talking about the political gap that had opened up between Hazlitt and Coleridge by the 1810s; even before the latter's reactionary turn, there had been serious theological differences between his and Hazlitt's criticisms of abstract philanthropy. For Hazlitt, the limitations which prevented people from embracing this moral system were not in the first instance to be attributed to providence, as they were for Coleridge. Rather, these human weaknesses could be explained wholly by reference to natural causes. In fact, these

weaknesses were rooted in the same tendencies of the mind which we have already seen Hazlitt analyze, first in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, and later in “On the Spirit of Monarchy.”

Hazlitt saw the imagination as the dynamic principle behind all human activity, including moral activity. If an action is to be realized first it must be imagined. Moreover, in Hazlitt’s philosophy, it often feels like the process of imagining an action really means picturing it to oneself. For a key example we can refer back to Hazlitt’s discussion of the so-called “natural” self-interestedness of children. Hazlitt argues that a child “prefers his own gratification ... not because he likes himself better than others, but because he has a more distinct idea of his own wants and pleasures than theirs” (1: 12). There are other passages in the treatise which also imply that the more distinctly visualized a potential good is, the greater its motivating force. Already, then, it is not hard to see why the austere, neo-Stoic, and aniconic dimension of Godwin’s ethical philosophy would have struck Hazlitt as fundamentally mistaken. These went against the grain of human nature. Moreover, as we have already seen, in his later political journalism Hazlitt emphasized that the visual orientation of the imagination, in combination with its constructive and awe-seeking delight in embellishment, gave humans a strong natural bias toward idolatry. Godwin had failed to take these factors into account; he had not stopped “to avail himself of the supplementary aids of an imperfect virtue” (11.19). He had not therefore recognized the value of what for Hazlitt became a crucial concept: the concept of the virtuous idol.

This was another inherently multifaceted and paradoxical concept, but one which thereby answered many of the problems which Hazlitt associated with post-Godwinian radicalism. The virtuous idol was the concrete embodiment of the ideal of popular liberty; it combined reason and passion; its cult was the equal celebration of personal power and universal benevolence, the one and the many. Such figures were inevitably rare. Yet throughout his writings Hazlitt was able to point to a number of examples from history and contemporary life. Thus, in a comprehensive treatment of this subject, it would be important here to discuss both Shakespeare and the young woman who inspired Hazlitt’s tortured devotion in *Liber Amoris*, the unfortunate Sarah Walker.<sup>15</sup> There is evidently not space in the final pages of this article for such wide-ranging analysis. Instead, and by way of conclusion, in what follows I will restrict my attention to just one, crucial, Hazlittian idol.

### **Faithfulness to images of the good**

There is a difficult transition to navigate here between the critical and propositional sides of Hazlitt’s political philosophy. While on the face of things Napoleon marks the threshold at which Hazlitt moves from criticism to advocacy, the starkness of this transition is contested by Natarajan, Mulvihill, and Bainbridge. For these critics, I am probably going too far by terming Napoleon a “virtuous idol.” For them, what is most interesting about Hazlitt’s writings on Napoleon is that they end up qualifying the positive celebration of the idol by emphasizing his potency as a negative force, as the scourge of Legitimacy. Mulvihill, for example, draws attention to the crucial passage in *Liber Amoris* in which the protagonist, “H,” smashes a small statue of Napoleon which he had previously gifted to his desired love-object, the unfortunate “S.” As Mulvihill

notes, Hazlitt leaves his readers in no doubt that this is a form of iconoclasm, H having already told S, in the same ambiguous Shakespearean phrasing we encountered in the preface to *Political Essays*, that the statue represents “*the God of my idolatry*” (11: 112). The force of this semi-autobiographical scene of image-breaking, Mulvihill argues, is precisely to distance Hazlitt’s “Napoleonic ideal” from the sometimes-religious intensity of his own identification with that ideal. Put differently, in Mulvihill’s reading, Napoleon’s value for Hazlitt is as a profane, or demystifying, idol. By aping the style of the other European rulers, Napoleon subverts the traditional claim of the *ancien régime* to divine status, as well as his own modern (inadvertently mock-) tyranny. Meanwhile, the focus of Bainbridge’s commentary is similar, insofar as he draws attention to complex tonal fluctuations in Hazlitt’s Napoleonic panegyric. In particular, Bainbridge, draws attention to the way that Hazlitt’s depictions of Napoleon as a kind of mirror-image to Louis XVI can shift between positing him as an antithesis to the deposed king, and positing a horizon of convergence (198).

These are both undoubtedly rich accounts of one tendency in Hazlitt’s writing. What makes them more persuasive is the fact that neither Bainbridge nor Mulvihill denies the presence of a more genuinely consecratory tendency in Hazlitt’s work. Nevertheless, both would probably still argue that Hazlitt himself regarded this complexly authentic-and-parodic mode of worship as a concession to political circumstance. The subtext they detect runs something like this: “If humans really are idolaters by nature, then to make the best of this bad situation, radicals should latch onto Napoleon as a kind of anti-idol.” Again, this strikes me as a persuasive but partial summary of Hazlitt’s thought. I am interested in those moments when Hazlitt entertains the idea that there might be something emphatically good about Napoleonic idolatry.

What enables Hazlitt to attempt this shift from an instrumental to a moral justification is the sense that there is something qualitatively different about idolizing Napoleon compared to idolizing other European monarchs. This difference means that, notwithstanding those troubling areas of convergence between Napoleon and Louis XVI, the resemblance between the two regimes cannot collapse into full identity. The source of this crucial distinction lies not just in the different “content” of the idolized object, but also in the different “form” of cognition that each encourages. Idolizing Napoleon mobilizes different and better tendencies of mind than idolizing his aristocratic counterparts. This interpretation of Hazlitt’s argument brings me once again into slight tension with Natarajan’s scholarship. Indeed, for Natarajan, part of what is remarkable about Hazlitt’s moral theory is precisely that there is no substantive difference between the mental operations involved in radical and reactionary idol-worship. Instead, she argues, both depend on the same morally neutral “self-projecting tendency” (176). My sense here is that while Natarajan’s work presents an important corrective to certain earlier accounts of Hazlitt’s moral philosophy, which tried to claim he identified virtue with impersonal even-handedness, she nevertheless hypostatizes the role of the self in his ethical thought. It seems to me that Hazlitt attempts to discriminate between different kinds of self-projection, especially in his writings on idol-worship. This understanding of his philosophy grows out of my earlier analysis of Legitimate idolatry, where I drew attention to what Hazlitt often represents as a toxic process of dual polarization. An essential facet of this process is that the external object of devotion should be as

contemptible as possible, both to enable worshippers egotistically to condescend to their false god, and to enable them to give full rein to their own constructive (that is, “projective”) mental powers. However, and this brings us to the core of my disagreement with Natarajan, this same condescending attitude is impossible with Napoleon. No matter what levels of hubris and political error Hazlitt is willing to acknowledge in the self-crowned Emperor of France, the fact remains that he—like many other observers—still finds Napoleon to be a figure of astonishing personal merit. This then raises the question of what idolizing somebody objectively impressive would do to the mind, compared to idolizing the modern-day equivalent of a blood-smeared lump of wood.

One particular resource which we can draw upon here is Hazlitt’s art criticism. This conjunction is far from arbitrary. Hazlitt not only often plays with the concept of idolatry in his commentary on favorite works of art, but also, as we have already seen in *Liber Amoris*, he occasionally figures Napoleon himself as a kind of art-object. Indeed, when we look closer, there are a whole range of links in Hazlitt’s writing between the idolatry of the defiant Napoleonist and the idolatry of the passionate art-lover. Throughout his writings on art—whether he is reviewing the pedagogical value of Greek tragedy, or he is describing the latest Scottish novel—Hazlitt attributes special moral value to honoring works that lie beyond our own productive capacity (8: 9; 11: 71).

The tendency of mind which Hazlitt most often associates with this candid appreciation is, as I have already hinted, close to being the direct opposite of the Legitimate idolaters’ self-important and self-degrading fantasies. Rather than concentrating the mind inwards, close attention to genuinely impressive artworks launches the spectator’s thoughts toward the universal, and the outer limits of collective human accomplishment:

There are things which are cognisable only to sense, which interest only our more immediate instincts and passions; the want of food, the loss of a limb, or of a sum of money: there are others that appeal to different and nobler faculties; the wants of the mind, the hunger and thirst after truth and beauty; that is, to faculties commensurate with objects greater and of greater refinement, which to be grand must extend beyond ourselves to others, and our interest in which must be refined in proportion as they do so. (6: 146)

The inherently refining objects of idolization which Hazlitt is describing here are paintings. He is thinking especially of works made by Raphael, Titian, and Correggio, some of which he had seen at the Louvre in 1802. This is where Napoleon re-enters our discussion on Hazlitt’s aesthetics, for it had of course been Napoleon who had brought these paintings to the Louvre following his military victories in Italy. There is an important way in which Hazlitt’s descriptions of these act of imperial conquest and confiscation echo the claims, long made in Revolutionary France, that, in seizing ecclesiastical treasures, the enlightened citizenry were liberating paintings of religious subjects from their cloistered environment, and thereby rescuing them from their former status as idols and ornaments of despotism (McClellan 168–69). At the same time, Stephen Cheeke is surely right to argue that for Hazlitt the Louvre is not a purely secular space, in which artworks become autonomous, but instead one in which the political and religious meanings of paintings are densely overlaid. “For

Hazlitt,” Cheeke writes, “the human faculty for artistic creation is somehow cognate with a principle of divinity both in his nature and in the world” (120). This is a precise description of Hazlitt’s heterodox aesthetics. However, it is a description which can be sharpened further by noting, as Cheeke himself does not, that when Hazlitt wishes to think through the common spark of divinity in art and man, he often turns to the concept of idolatry.

Thus, for Hazlitt, Raphael’s *Transfiguration* and Correggio’s *Madonna of St Jerome* remain idols in Napoleon’s Louvre, even if they are no longer Catholic idols. They are certainly morally purer idols than Napoleon himself ever was, not least because they cannot physically subjugate their devotees. Yet at the same time, Hazlitt believed that the fact that it had been the latter’s conquests which had brought the paintings to France served to highlight the analogy which, on a deeper level, already existed between the general’s and the artists’ respective feats of “genius” (13: 213; 19: 127). It is this which makes worshipping a Madonna by Correggio comparable to worshipping Napoleon, and which in both cases attaches the moral agent more firmly to the cause of human dignity. To acknowledge the full majesty of each may cost us some personal pride; but if we can bear it, this newfound sense of humility also raises our estimation of the potential of the species. Such at least is how I make sense of the following description of Napoleon, which comes once more from the preface to *Political Essays*: “If he was ambitious, his greatness was not founded on the unconditional, avowed surrender of the rights of human nature. But with him, the state of man rose exalted too” (17: 12).

This analysis opens up a slightly unfamiliar perspective on Hazlitt’s Napoleonic idolatry. For usually, when literary historians have examined the role of Napoleon in Hazlitt’s post-1815 writings, they have described him as a figure who serves to concentrate, fix, and confirm the political passions—that is, for better or for worse, Napoleon-worship emerges as the summation of Hazlitt’s obstinate refusal to adapt to the times (Butler 170; Thompson 70). Clearly this is partly right; and I have tried to emphasize this “stabilizing function” of virtuous idolatry in my commentary on Hazlitt’s criticisms of Godwin. Nevertheless, in the above passages we get an intimation of another dynamic at play. Instead of just anchoring the resistant subjectivity of the anti-Legitimate partisan, the idol of Napoleon also helps to modify and refine that subjectivity. There is a movement here of enthusiastic elevation, one comparable to the enthusiasm inspired by the Grand Style in art. In each of these examples, no doubt the specific object of adoration is essential. There could be no upward flight without the painting, or without Napoleon to catalyze it. Yet, at the same time, the object is not the final resting point of the worshipper’s newly inflamed imagination. This helps to explain why Hazlitt was able both to glorify and subtly parody Napoleon in the ways that Bainbridge and Mulvihill have detailed. Sometimes the line is blurred, but more often than not Hazlitt describes Napoleon not as the full embodiment of liberty, but rather as a living allegory, through which glimpses of the properly liberated human condition are visible. We do not have to go along with Hazlitt’s commitment to liberal meritocracy to find something valuable in his handling of this motif. For, with this theorization of Napoleon’s prefigurative role, Hazlitt was able to combine absolute fidelity to a defeated cause with, in the very same breath, a searching criticism of the historical limitations of that cause. The virtuous

idol in Hazlitt's writing is often consigned to the past, embattled, or even destroyed; but this does not stop them from harboring unexpected, perhaps inexhaustible, resources for future personal and social transformations.

## Notes

1. Hazlitt's criticism of the parliamentary reform movement has provoked contrasting assessments, even among sympathetic literary historians. See Butler's influential criticism (155–77); and for a reassessment, Gilmartin's *Print Politics* 227–33.
2. Religious criticisms of idolatry are charted by Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft in their introduction (1–18). The role of idolatry in atheist critiques of religion is explored by Halbertal and Margalit 112–15.
3. However, some commentators in the Christian tradition were willing to argue that the Hebrews had been won over to a more virtuous mode of civil government through idolatry of Jehovah. See Coleridge, *Complete Works* 1: 123–45. It seems unlikely that Hazlitt knew this argument, otherwise he would have quoted it.
4. There are three important exceptions: Mulvihill; Bainbridge 183–207; and Natarajan 175–76. I engage closely with each source later in this article.
5. The most sensitive scholarship does discriminate. I adopt the distinction between “iconoclasts” and “iconomachs” above from Aston 18.
6. Of course, this essay does not seek to recuperate the colonial discourse of idolatry-critique, which Mitchell, especially, has analyzed with admirable rigor.
7. It should be noted that, like Aston, Jarvis does discriminate between idolatry-critique and iconoclasm.
8. Most obviously in Mitchell's work, but see also Halbertal and Margalit 8.
9. For the debate in the 1770s, see Haydon 195–96; for the 1820s, see Morrow 127–30. For the increasingly hostile contemporary representations of Hinduism, see Gilmartin, “Religious Modernity” 644.
10. For Hazlitt on the 1828 repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, see 20: 309; and for his satirical inversion of Anglican attacks on Hinduism, see 7: 68.
11. Natarajan does briefly analyze Hazlitt's concept of idolatry (as I will discuss below), but it remains peripheral to her overall argument.
12. This requires comment, as Hazlitt himself was often identified as uncooperative in the radical cause during his life time, a criticism which is still sometimes raised in modern scholarship. See, for example, Butler 173, and Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt* 48, 61. As I show in a forthcoming article, “Hazlitt and the Contradictions of Party-Spirit,” we must carefully parse his responses to different tendencies within the reform movement. While Hazlitt was certainly uncooperative with figures he deemed excessively radical—Francis Place, James Mill, Major Cartwright, and Henry Hunt—he sometimes collaborated closely with reformers who were seeking to build a united anti-Tory front with the liberal Whigs.
13. This is not to deny Natarajan's claims about the frequently constructive role of abstraction in Hazlitt's philosophy (136–41).
14. On the contemporary notoriety of this passage, see Singer, Cannold, and Kuhse 76–77.
15. Sarah Walker was the daughter of Hazlitt's landlord at a lodging house off Chancery Lane. Much of the scholarship has focused on whether his advances were purely coercive or in some measure reciprocated, and to what extent these facts should inform our understanding of the partly fictionalized plot of *Liber Amoris*. For an overview, and a somewhat apologetic contribution to the debate, see Wu.

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