

Keeping to William Hazlitt

That style mattered to Hazlitt cannot be in doubt. ‘An author’s style’ he judged ‘not less a criterion of his understanding than his sentiments’;¹ a test of character, as of sensations and ideas, it bodied forth the perpetually shifting relationships between human beings and the objects of their love, hatred, and indifference (in Hazlitt, even the absence of feeling is vehemently felt). An author who lacked style therefore lacked sympathetic involvement with other people, the greatest failing imaginable, since ‘Whatever interests, is interesting’.²

Hazlitt formally defined a sentence as ‘any number of words so arranged as to express distinctly any opinion or sentiment which we wish to communicate to the hearer’.³ Not fact or meaning, but the personally inflected ‘opinion or sentiment’, passed from speaker to hearer rather than from writer to reader. An implicitly or explicitly vocal commitment to his subject appears throughout Hazlitt’s prose. He championed talk of all varieties—from evasive political swagger to the repetitive intimacies of friendly chat—and he was fascinated by the differences and resemblances between speaking and writing. Nerve, warmth, and vehemence shape his conceptions of both. The artistry of his prose is evident in the way he captures the sparks and flickers of sudden, involuntary emotion and intuition, often seeming to walk a thin line between control and abandon. Recalling his theatre reviews, Hazlitt remarked that ‘there is a kind of *extempore* writing, as well as *extempore* speaking’, and the pressure under which he was typically producing his works lends them vibrancy and intensity, ‘the warmth and vividness of that ebullition of mind, from which they spring’.⁴ The benefits of spontaneity that he stressed in writing, as in speaking, are part of the value he ascribed to passion and excitement wherever he found them. In his attempts to grasp how and why such feelings come about, and to capture them rapidly in conversational prose, Hazlitt’s style achieves the seemingly impossible feat of being at once omnivorous and discriminating.

‘[T]hough we are mighty fine fellows nowadays’, observed Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘we cannot write like Hazlitt’.⁵ A brilliant journalist and critic, a philosopher, parliamentary reporter, painter, lecturer, and polemicist, Hazlitt’s versatility won him many admirers in the

nineteenth century, even if his sheer jobbing range encouraged others to sneer. His articles on boxing and racket-ball possess the same glancing, nervous energy that he discerned in ‘the most perfect prose-style’⁶ of Edmund Burke, Hazlitt’s model of ‘true eloquence’⁷ and—alongside Junius and Rousseau—the most beloved writer of his youth, a period spent in large part

admiring and wondering at the felicities of the style, the turns of expression, the refinements of thought and sentiment: I laid the book down to find out the secret of so much strength and beauty, and took it up again in despair, to read on and admire. So I passed whole days, months, and I may add, years; and have only this to say now, that as my life began, so I could wish that it may end.⁸

Life itself is dated from the moment of admiring and wondering at another writer’s prose. The sense that he will perhaps end where he started, and that that would be no bad thing, is as characteristic of Hazlitt as are the rapid transition from heights to depths and back again. He may have cherished Burke’s prose style for its ‘airy, flighty, adventurous’ quality, but he prided himself on his literary and political firmness—devoted as he was to a form of living and writing repeatedly summed up in his prose as ‘keeping’.⁹ The word describes fidelity to a cause, the grip and purpose of a sentence, and a principle of self-consistency as well as forward movement. Keeping may therefore at times be synonymous with preservation and durability, even if that itself can be turned into a joke: ‘nothing keeps so well as a decoction of spleen’.¹⁰ It captures Hazlitt’s peculiar tenaciousness and precision: his adhering to a character or subject until he has got at its essence, in a manner resembling that of the pugilist who appears in one of his best-known essays, ‘The Fight’ (1822). His style is characterized by mobility and a readiness to think on its feet, as well as by staying power: ‘It fastens upon a subject, and will not let it go’; ‘Every word should be a blow: every thought should instantly grapple with its fellow’.¹¹ Charles Lamb remarked that Hazlitt was ‘the best abused man in Great Britain; it was dangerous to be his companion, so many stones were

always flying about his ears'.¹² The prose style of this embattled character has the merits and disadvantages of being quick as well as pugnacious. Hazlitt sometimes enjoyed writing aphoristically, in the manner of Rochefoucauld, because in this contracted form of words 'A thought must tell at once, or not at all'.¹³ One of the highest compliments he can pay to another man or woman's style or appearance, or to a work of art, is to say of it that he has been 'struck'¹⁴—a word that has subsequently lost the power to be striking, just as anything described as 'interesting' no longer seems to interest anyone. These terms were not dead metaphors for Hazlitt, but agents of seductive power.

He was the Romantic period's foremost advocate for a kind of prose which 'never loses sight of the subject'.¹⁵ His sense of 'keeping' is therefore necessarily synonymous with motion as often as it is with steadfastness, calling for an 'infinite activity of mind . . . on every occasion'¹⁶—and of the body, too. His writing moves across a variety of scenic backdrops, urban and rural, suggesting and developing analogies between mental deftness and sport. His greatest critical descendant on this score is William Empson, whose notion of 'argufying' in bracing, commonsensical terms and whose hostility to stuffiness originate in Hazlitt: 'Argufying is not only mental; it also feels muscular. Saying "therefore" is like giving the reader a bang on the nose'.¹⁷

The principle of action at work in Hazlitt's prose differentiates him sharply from his contemporary Thomas De Quincey, of whose style and syntax Vernon Lee remarked that 'verbs are not merely unimportant . . . they are also mismanaged, for his indifference to action becomes positive incapacity'.¹⁸ To Lee, who divides writers into three classes—those whose style is given chiefly to acting; those whose style is devoted to '*mere being*'; and those in whose writing 'the elements of verb and of noun are very equally represented'—such tendencies guide us to the heart of their originator:

there may be some necessary connection between the structure of a man's sentences and his more human characteristics; [. . .] style, in so far as it is individual, is but a

kind of gesture or gait, revealing, with the faithfulness of an unconscious habit, the essential peculiarities of the Writer's temperament and modes of being.¹⁹

The notion that style might be 'a kind of gesture or gait' already seems instinctively more sympathetic towards movement in writing than towards inaction (or writing as the expression of '*mere being*'). Hazlitt's verbs, like his style in general, are not complex in themselves; rather, they invite the eye and mind to construe the scene he is describing in terms, simultaneously, of thought and action, while also moving us on sharpish from one character and time and text to another:

I was going down Chancery-lane, thinking to ask at Jack Randall's where the fight was to be, when looking through the glass-door of the *Hole in the Wall*, I heard a gentleman asking the same question *at* Mrs. Randall, as the author of *Waverley* would express it. Now Mrs. Randall stood answering the gentleman's question, with the authenticity of the lady of the Champion of the Light Weights. Thinks I, I'll wait till this person comes out, and learn from him how it is.²⁰

The only self-conscious or unusual aspects of this passage are the references to Scott and the archly quaint inversion of 'Thinks I'; otherwise, there is little in the style to differentiate it from everyday speech. The shift from past to present tense and the movement of the verb to primary position in the third sentence pushes things naturally on: 'Now [. . .] stood' becomes 'Thinks I'. It is the observational, detective-style gerunds—'going [. . .] thinking [. . .] looking [. . .] asking [. . .] answering'—nudging us from speaker to gentleman to landlady, but all promoting the same single end of discovering where the fight may be, that build momentum and sustain interest. The various actions and perspectives dovetail to one purpose that takes on unobtrusively the general quality of pursuit which, in Hazlitt's writing, is synonymous with life itself:

The love of life is, in general, the effect not of our enjoyments, but of our passions. We are not attached to it so much for its own sake, or as it is connected with happiness, as because it is necessary to action. Without life there can be no action—no objects of pursuit—no restless desires—no tormenting passions. Hence it is that we fondly cling to it—that we dread its termination as the close, not of enjoyment, but of hope.²¹

As a stylistic principle, Hazlitt's ideal of 'keeping' in prose descends from eighteenth-century conceptions of decorum in painting, the art in which he was initially trained; indeed, one of his distinctions as a prose stylist is his pictorial approach to the world.²² 'Keeping' has a specifically painterly sense, amounting to cant status, in the early decades of the nineteenth century: Susan Ferrier's novel *The Inheritance* (1824) identifies '*in keeping*' as an 'artist phrase'.²³ The *OED* in its turn defines 'keeping' as 'The maintenance of the proper relation between the representations of nearer and more distant objects in a picture; hence, in more general sense [. . .] the maintenance of harmony of composition' (1715). With this frame of reference in mind, Hazlitt can as easily read writing in terms of painting as he can interpret painting in the language of writing. Thomas Lawrence's portrait (1809–10) of Lord Castlereagh is found wanting because the syntax of the face is wrong: 'there is nothing [. . .] characteristically circuitous, involved, and parenthetical'; Hogarth shows 'alliteration in colouring'.²⁴ Of Rembrandt, Hazlitt comments that 'He had a steadiness, a firm keeping of mind and eye, that first stood the shock of "fierce extremes" in light and shade, or reconciled the greatest obscurity and the greatest brilliancy into perfect harmony'.²⁵

The *OED* credits Hazlitt himself with the broader sense of 'keeping' as 'Agreement, congruity, harmony', citing his 1819 judgement of Henry Fielding: 'There is the exquisite keeping in the character of Blifil, and the want of it in that of Tom Jones'.²⁶ In writing, then, as in painting, there is 'keeping within the bounds of sense and reason'—and 'A certain proportion must be kept'²⁷—but Hazlitt's is a more flexible, electric version of the Augustan ideals of fitness and internal coherence. One thing that such coherence does not entail is monotony, since 'Truth is not one, but many; and an observation may be true in itself that

contradicts another equally true, according to the point of view from which we contemplate the subject'.²⁸ Hence the vivid use of apposition and antithesis, comparison and contrast, in his prose. From an ethical perspective, the multiplicity of truth demands of us that we look our old opinions in the face, charting the distance and resemblance between our past and present selves. Without risking that confrontation, any individual may be accused of an 'outrageous want of keeping'.²⁹

Hazlitt himself wrote and thought very clearly, but in some respects he was also startlingly at odds with himself, and he knew it. He therefore approached with understanding those who differed from themselves, as long as they were prepared to acknowledge that difference. He pointed out that man is no 'simple animal or a logical machine', with 'all his faculties and impulses' operating 'in strict unison'; rather,

they are eternally at variance, and no one hates or takes part against himself more heartily or heroically than does the same individual. Does he not pass sentence on his own conduct? Is not his conscience both judge and accuser? What else is the meaning of all our resolutions against ourselves, as well as of our exhortations to others?³⁰

The hearty or heroic practice of hating resurfaces in another well-known essay which begins with the speaker observing 'a spider crawling along the matted floor of the room where I sit' and ends with him 'unravelling the web of human life into its various threads of meanness, spite, cowardice, want of feeling, and want of understanding, of indifference towards others and ignorance of ourselves'.³¹ The minds against which Hazlitt always protested were those without 'sincerity, modesty, and keeping'; part of the 'keeping', in that instance at least, derives from the fact that it is one of a list of three words. In writing, as in life,

nothing is good that has not a beginning, a middle, and an end; and I would wish my thoughts to be

'Linked each to each by natural piety!'³²

Syntactic collocation is evidence of how one mind associates its ideas; more vitally still, it reveals, in Coleridge's words, those 'prime links that connect the individual with the species'.³³ Hazlitt frequently chooses to round off an assertion or an entire essay, as he does in the above quotation, on and in another's words (or an approximation of them). He likes to make the link between his argument and the example of another writer the point at which his essay or argument concludes—with a wish, rather than with an assertion of truth, and by asserting his kinship with another author. But in this case he is also pointedly turning someone's words against him, because the allusion to Wordsworth is meant to cast a negative slant on that poet's betrayal of principles and opinions held in his youth. The join between two people that is the allusion, itself here concerned with joining, serves to distance the author of this essay from his subject. But such distancing through connection is a delicate business, because it calls into question a number of things: the sincerity of the original Wordsworthian utterance; the sense in which literature can or should be judged as self-expression; and the duty or not of the alluding essayist to quote faithfully and perhaps even to honour the context in which a quotation originally appeared (if he is aware of it). Hazlitt's writings are so densely populated with other people's words and phrases that they disrupt their own sense of keeping.

On the issue of quotation, as on much else, Hazlitt divides his readers. Jonathan Bate thinks that the multiple allusions, while occasionally inapposite or lacking any obvious purpose, 'often help the reader to place the argument' and that they animate Hazlitt's writing with sympathy and imagination.³⁴ Duncan Wu finds the allusions 'always thought-out and amusingly apposite'. Thomas McFarland, on the other hand, thinks they are 'remarkable for their frequency, for their inaccuracy, and for their irrelevance [. . .] they generally act to muddy the meaning rather than to enhance it.'³⁵ The inaccuracy, as Bate notes, may be down to the use of different editions, or because Hazlitt was remembering what he heard in the theatre rather than what he had read.³⁶ Like Samuel Johnson, he was gifted with a 'vice-like memory' enabling him 'to reproduce whole conversations he had heard';³⁷ in their early

careers, both men exercised that faculty in the laborious task of parliamentary reporting.³⁸ The choice of quotations and the journalist's ability to command his many and varied sources is part of what Hazlitt must have meant when he remarked at the opening of one essay that 'Many people boast of being masters in their own house. I pretend to be master of my own mind. I should be sorry to have an ejection served upon me for any notions I may chuse to entertain there. Within that little circle I would fain be an absolute monarch.'³⁹

Such playful and hyperbolic references to absolute monarchy are common in the freedom-loving Hazlitt—and perhaps unsurprisingly so, given the frequency with which other voices enter into his prose without being suffered quite to overwhelm it. Affability, sociability, and hard-won domestic peace combine with the ever-present threats of usurpation and exile, culminating in the agonies of *Liber Amoris* (1823): 'Within my heart is lurking suspicion, and base fear, and shame and hate; but above all, tyrannous love sits throned, crowned with her graces, silent and in tears'.⁴⁰ Shakespeare echoes throughout these agonies, as (more generally) does a sense of the comforts of quotation, with its ability to cover individual shame in something more than personal woe: 'there are passages that seem as if we might brood over them all our lives, and not exhaust the sentiments of love and admiration they excite'.⁴¹ Alongside the homage that Hazlitt promptly and generously pays to other writers and their works, it seems as if the basis for legitimate, defensible opinion and conviction is how much it has hurt, 'the pains we have taken to ascertain it':⁴² 'Our repugnance to death increases in proportion to our consciousness of having lived in vain—to the violence of our efforts, and the keenness of our disappointments'.⁴³

'I liked his English', wrote Somerset Maugham of Hazlitt; 'It was natural and racy [. . .] neither below the weight of his matter nor with fine phrases trying to give it a specious importance. If art is nature seen through the medium of a personality, "Hazlitt is a great artist."' ⁴⁴ Maugham echoes Hazlitt's own comments on the desirability of 'raciness'—with its overtones of piquancy, gusto, and a particular kind of Englishness that eschews pomp and ceremony. Writing of Leigh Hunt, he says: 'In his light but well supported columns we find the raciness, the sharpness, and sparkling effect of poetry, with little that is extravagant or

far-fetched, and no turgidity or pompous pretension'.⁴⁵ The *OED* suggests that 'racy' in the sense in which Maugham deploys it comes into use at around the time that Hazlitt was at the peak of his essayistic career; and this sense embraces, as Hazlitt's work so often does, the common ground between writing and talking: '3.c. Of speech, writing, performance, etc.: having a characteristic vigour, liveliness, or piquancy' (1817). There is something both natural and unnatural about this kind of style. Maugham immediately responds to it as faithful to reality, whereas William Cox, in *Crayon Sketches* (1833), thinks raciness bucks against nature. Hence his praise of old English comedies as containing, unusually, 'characters rich and racy, yet natural'.⁴⁶ As both these responses imply, for Hazlitt truth to life had to combine with a certain defamiliarizing effect. He explained in his essay 'On Familiar Style' that he sought to match words to things in a congenially unsettled manner, born of attention and exactness:

It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. It utterly rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, *slipshod* allusions. It is not to take the first word that offers, but the best word in common use; it is not to throw words together in any combinations we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language.⁴⁷

The appropriateness of form to content was something to be fought for; it must never be allowed to relapse into cosiness. The pearl that is the essay therefore retains traces of the grit that irritated the oyster into action and production.

In Hazlitt's essays, the persona of the writer and the associative processes of his hungry, sympathetic imagination are displayed most strikingly in compound sentences. The writing both gathers and unleashes itself in long, snowballing constructions that gain in mass

and momentum in their observant, restless career, each phrase sustaining and expanding the force and range of the whole. Hazlitt's idea of an unsuccessful style might be summed up via his analysis of the French character ('French nature, or a want of nature'), in which he says 'there is no progress made, no blind impulse, no accumulation of imagination with circumstances, no absorption of all other feelings in one overwhelming one, that is, no keeping, no *momentum*, no integrity, no totality, no inflexible sincerity of purpose'.⁴⁸

The positive version of this style describes what happens in one of Hazlitt's own compound sentences, in which imagination manifests itself as a form of circumstantial accumulation, a clothing of thought that is simultaneously a movement and a purpose, a summoning of observations and resources, both driven and absorptive. In his essay 'On the Want of Money', the greedily accretive yet endlessly dissatisfied style is in one obvious sense at odds with the subject. Hazlitt is writing about the lack of something, and he does so by adding one thing on another and another and another in a sympathetic racking up of deprivations, missed opportunities, and exclusions. Equally, this is a writer for whom 'words are like money, not the worse for being common', and to whom words were indeed money, the only source of his income:⁴⁹

To be in want of [money], is to pass through life with little credit or pleasure; it is to live out of the world, or to be despised if you come into it; it is not to be sent for to court, or asked out to dinner, or noticed in the street; it is not to have your opinion consulted or else rejected with contempt, to have your acquirements carped at and doubted, your good things disparaged, and at last to lose the wit and the spirit to say them; it is to be scrutinised by strangers, and neglected by friends; it is to be a thrall to circumstances, an exile in a foreign land; to forego leisure, freedom, ease of body and mind, to be dependent on the good-will and caprice of others, or earn a precarious and irksome livelihood by some laborious employment: it is to be compelled to stand behind a counter, or to sit at a desk in some public office, or to marry your landlady, or not the person you would wish; or to go out to the East or

West-Indies, or to get a situation as judge abroad, and return home with a liver-complaint; or to be a law-stationer, or a scrivener or scavenger, or newspaper reporter; or to read law and sit in court without a brief, or to be deprived of the use of your fingers by transcribing Greek manuscripts, or to be a seal engraver and pore yourself blind; or to go upon the stage, or try some of the Fine Arts; with all your pains, anxiety, and hopes, most probably to fail, or, if you succeed, after the exertions of years, and undergoing constant distress of mind and fortune, to be assailed on every side with envy, back-biting, and falsehood, or to be a favourite with the public for awhile, and then thrown into the back-ground—or a jail, by the fickleness of taste and some new favourite; to be full of enthusiasm and extravagance in youth, of chagrin and disappointment in after-life; to be jostled by the rabble because you do not ride in your coach, or avoided by those who know your worth and shrink from it as a claim on their respect or their purse; to be a burden to your relations, or unable to do any thing for them; to be ashamed to venture into crowds; to have cold comfort at home, to lose by degrees your confidence and any talent you might possess; to grow crabbed, morose, and querulous, dissatisfied with every one, but most so with yourself; and plagued out of your life, to look about for a place to die in, and quit the world without any one's asking after your will.⁵⁰

This passage—a single sentence of 459 words—shows Hazlitt's fearless, nimble instincts with repetition and lists; his writing often seems to be a 'brow-hanging, shoe-contemplative'⁵¹ variation on Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be'.⁵² What lends the excerpt its vivacious oddity is the prominence of the infinitive verb phrase, deployed in its passive and active forms and awkwardly trailing various bits of prepositional baggage: 'to pass through', 'to live out', 'to be despised', 'not to be sent for [. . .] asked out [. . .] noticed in', and so on. In such phrases, the verb does not act like a verb at all but rather takes on the function and appearance of a noun, adjective, or adverb. It plays the role of a part of speech other than itself: these infinitive phrases are the subjects or direct objects of the sentence in which they appear, all

of them in some sense answering the question ‘What does it mean to be in want of money?’. This unusually sustained performance by verbs in roles other than those to which they are conventionally grammatically assigned directs us towards character-types who, by definition, would not ordinarily be noticed while also—and again in keeping with the subject-matter of the passage—denying them full agency and full individuality. The effect would be weaker, because more directly appealing to our sense of pathos and fellow-feeling for one person, had Hazlitt written:

If you are in want of money, you pass through life with little credit or pleasure; you live out of the world, or are despised if you come into it; you are not sent for to court, or asked out to dinner, or noticed in the street; your opinion is not consulted or else rejected with contempt, your acquirements are carped at and doubted, your good things disparaged, and at last you lose the wit and the spirit to say them [. . .]

The suspicion might well develop that this was a first-person authorial complaint lurking behind a second-person front; as it is, however, the infinitive phrases seem discreetly, sympathetically, and even comically withheld from fruition. Hazlitt’s prose delicately shoulders the pressure of so many wasted, frustrated, and deprived existences and translates those existences into something like a Hogarthian tableau, every inch of the canvas possessing interest and suffering. The slings and arrows of fortune are outrageous because they are so everyday, but Hazlitt’s banal tragedy is compelling without being devastating in the same way that ‘Gin Lane’ (1751) is compelling without being devastating. There is always something new to look at, and we don’t know exactly who these people are. The writing, like Hogarth’s engraving, urges us both to pause and to move on.

Perhaps it is his own eternal frustration that makes Hazlitt fond of and good at this type of infinitive construction, with its endlessly unconsummated potential—poised between that of the figures on Keats’s Grecian Urn and the celebrated opening of Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), with its lack of main verbs and its robust, flexible, attentive, and cumulative

style. In Hazlitt's essay, the observations are both internally felt ('all your pains, anxiety and hopes') and externally viewed ('to be a law-stationer, or a scrivener or scavenger'), encompassing matters of character and matters of circumstance; he is suddenly and comically specific ('marry your landlady') and sadly, tactfully unspecific ('or not the person you would wish'), both plural and singular. The essay touches on many alternative fates but also moves from the beginning of an individual career to the end of a life, and with an associative joy in the proximate sound and shape of (for instance) 'stationer' to 'scrivener' and 'scavenger'. Like Richard Steele, whom he admired, Hazlitt writes journalistic prose that contains novels-in-miniature. He proves that there is a wealth of things to be said about not having much money, by a writer who is generating what we are reading because he needs the cash, and who therefore implicates himself in the figure of the 'newspaper reporter'. What this prose style demonstrates is the sheer vital plurality of human nature, even in despondency. There is an intelligent fellow-feeling that darts about the essay; a quality of mind which responds to and encourages the flickering exchanges of different perspectives.

Because Hazlitt is so frequently occupied with relation and with motion—across, upwards, downwards—his use of prepositions of movement rewards attention. Given his appetite for freedom and loathing of tyranny, there is often a social implication in play: 'To *look down* upon any thing seemingly implies a greater elevation and enlargement of view than to *look up* to it'.⁵³ His repudiation of formality and of stiffness in writing, and his embrace of familiarity and liberty, mean that Hazlitt's prepositions often leap around his sentences. He is unafraid to commit a solecism by falling into 'The peculiarly characteristic arrangement, which puts a preposition at the end of a sentence [. . .] eminently an English idiom'.⁵⁴ One sniffy review of Hazlitt associated such grammatical irregularity with the political character of the writer:

We thought that our prepositions had at last found their proper stations; and would no longer be seen struggling without order, in every part of a sentence. But with Mr. Hazlitt, our prepositions, too, must be free; and, provided they are in the sentence at

all, it is of no consequence whether they take their places at the beginning or the end. ‘Richard III,’ we are told, ‘is a play that every unfledged candidate for theatrical fame chuses to strut and fret his hour upon the stage *in*.’ [. . .] Hamlet, says Mr. Hazlitt, ‘relapses into indolence and thoughtfulness *again*,’ ‘when his father’s spirit was in arms, it was not a time for the son to make love *in*,’ &c. &c. Such words as ‘drives before,’ and ‘carries with,’ are commonly used together as a verb; and in written composition particularly, they always become weak when separated from each other. Mr. Hazlitt seems to think differently. ‘Coriolanus comes,’ says he, ‘and with bravo and big words *drives* this set of poor rats, this rascal scum, to their homes and beggary, *before him*.’ So, in the next page, ‘it is,’ we are told, ‘the assumption of a right to insult others that *carries* an imposing air of superiority *with it*.’ Not contented with this clumsy mode of using prepositions, which are necessary, our author is fond of bringing in such as are merely expletive, or totally superfluous. Thus, we have the expressions, ‘so far from allowing *of* any measure;’ ‘tasting *of*,’ &c.⁵⁵

Prepositions and prepositional adverbs make things happen; depending on their place in a sentence, they create and may then defy anticipation. Hazlitt is standing up against bullies and arrogance in some of the examples of woeful grammar cited in this review; his syntax is not therefore ‘struggling *without* order’ but ‘struggling *with* order’ (and there is a basic prepositional difficulty in this sense within the review itself). In a contemporary Whig politician, Samuel Whitbread, Hazlitt was pleased to discover a man who ‘spoke point-blank what he thought, and his heart was in his broad, honest, English face’; here was ‘the spontaneous, unsophisticated sense of the English people’.⁵⁶ Speaking point-blank means putting your prepositions where you want them, not necessarily in their ‘proper stations’; as Coleridge noted of Hazlitt, ‘He sends well-headed & well-feathered Thoughts straight forwards to the mark with a Twang of the Bow-string’.⁵⁷ In his sketch of William Cobbett, it takes a unicorn to distract a reader from the prepositions, which are central to his image of

the man and his spirit of opposition: ‘wherever power is, there is he against it: he naturally butts at all obstacles, as unicorns are attracted to oak-trees’.⁵⁸

Christopher Ricks observes of Wordsworth’s prepositions that:

If as a poet you seek the simplest and most permanent forms of language, you are bound to give special importance to prepositions and conjunctions—those humble fundamentals, *in, up, and, but, of*, and so on. If as a poet you are concerned above all with relations and relationships, you are bound to give special importance to those words which express relationships: prepositions and conjunctions [. . .]

Wordsworth’s poetry was to be ‘important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations’ (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*). His commitment was to an exploration of all the most important relationships of man: man to nature, man to family, man to God. The humbly essential medium for all such relationships is the preposition [. . .] though all language changes, the language of prepositions changes less strikingly than most. In expressing the fundamental relationships of things, prepositions constitute a bedrock, subject no doubt to change but to change of a geological slowness.⁵⁹

The language of prepositions alters less strikingly than other parts of speech because it became worn out so long ago; as William Empson noted, ‘The English prepositions, [. . .] from being used in so many ways in combination with so many verbs, have acquired not so much a number of meanings as a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions; a tool-like quality, at once thin, easy to the hand, and weighty’.⁶⁰ These useful little words appear incessantly in a supporting role and are usually ignored; they act and interact in so many ways as to be virtually undefinable. But the relative lack of change in prepositional language is directly related to the multiple changes it may unobtrusively effect in terms of meaning within a sentence.

In 1809, Hazlitt published in William Godwin's Juvenile Library *A New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue: for the Use of Schools*.⁶¹ Signalling in the full title of the work his patriotic interest in 'the Genius' of English 'Speech', he went on to argue in the Preface against traditional grammars and the practice of using Latin and Greek as models for teaching English grammar to children.⁶² Hazlitt's instinctively democratic approach to his subject emphasizes time and again that we ought not to mistake words for things, and like his journalism the *Grammar* underlines the rich potential for viewing and phrasing matters in more than one way. It has also a sense of the force and agency implicit in prepositions and conjunctions:.

Prepositions are [. . .] a class of words expressing certain relations between objects. This alone, however, does not properly constitute them a separate part of speech, for there are other parts of speech, as verbs, adjectives, &c., which often express the same relations between objects. The characteristic difference therefore between these and other words arises from the manner of expressing the same ideas, *i.e.* from the mode of *construction*. Thus whether we say *Man's* nature, *human* nature, or the nature of *man*, we express the same connections between our ideas. So again we say, His house *joins* mine, or *faces* mine, which expresses our meaning as fully and as clearly, and more concisely, than by the help of the preposition. Here the *relation* is included either in the meaning of the words themselves, or in their form. Or where the connections is so immediate and obvious as not to be mistaken, we do not employ prepositions; as we say, He is reading a book, instead of *in* a book. But where the connection is neither implied by the words themselves, nor necessarily and immediately understood, then we have recourse to prepositions, which are in fact words signifying those relations we want to express, and which we place in a kind of parenthesis between other words to demonstrate the particular relation which subsists between the words so together.⁶³

Hazlitt's portrait of Wordsworth, which wrestles with a figure not 'necessarily and immediately understood', is duly studded with those indecorous prepositions, encouraging us to think about the relation subsisting between biographer and subject, poet and reader, author and world:

[Wordsworth's poetry] partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments [. . .] There is a lofty philosophic tone, a thoughtful humanity, infused into his pastoral vein. Remote from the passions and events of the great world, he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man, and ingrafted his own conscious reflections on the casual thoughts of hinds and shepherds [. . .] the tall rock lifts its head in the erectness of his spirit; the cataract roars in the sound of his verse; and in its dim and mysterious meaning, the mists seem to gather in the hollows of Helvellyn, and the forked Skiddaw hovers in the distance.⁶⁴

A causal relationship is suggested but not asserted between 'Remote from' and 'communicated [. . .] to': does the poet stand necessarily apart from, and above, those he describes, and is that remoteness the necessary basis for his communication? This was a key issue in Hazlitt's angry response to Wordsworth's 'dereliction of his first principles', but here at least he has the discretion to put it less forcefully than he might.⁶⁵ His prepositions—'of', 'with', 'on', 'from', 'to', 'in'—make the ground of the argument and the position of the writing shift and shift again. He employs these little words (as Empson said) continuously in several dimensions, across texts and landscapes, moving into and out of the character of his subject; 'The eventfulness of language makes its choice, but with quiet surprise, and with a sense of the alternative'.⁶⁶ 'Communicated [. . .] to' leads you to expect that the recipient of the 'to' will be the final link in the chain of this communication; that the interest and dignity being communicated from the poet will end there. But that, as it turns out, is just the beginning. In

this echo chamber, interest and dignity are communicated ‘to the primal movements of the heart of man’, and thereafter to the reader’s answering human heart. The dozens of in-words that appear throughout the portrait of Wordsworth (‘interest’, ‘ingrafted’, ‘infused’, ‘internal’, and so on) are reinforced by prepositions also locating one thing inside another, but those prepositions are perpetually being adjusted to different settings and perspectives.⁶⁷

In the case of characters to whom Hazlitt responds as vigorously and contradictorily as he does to Wordsworth, prepositions can signal the awkward rush of conviction, responsiveness, and resistance to another point of view, the flow of an argument that picks up and stumbles over materials that seem at one moment intuitively, instinctively apposite and at another as cause for recoil. It is to his credit that the remnants of his mixed feelings are left honestly to stand, without destroying the coherence of the work in which they appear. To Hazlitt’s style might be applied his judgement of literary conversation: his prose may sometimes be ‘very absurd, very unsatisfactory, and full of turbulence and heart-burnings; but it has a zest in it’⁶⁸—a zest that cannot be found anywhere else. It is ‘the glittering expanse of a profound and restless imagination!’⁶⁹

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¹¹ 'On the Conversation of Authors' (1820), in *Complete Works*, vol. 12, p. 32; 'On the Prose-Style of Poets', in *Complete Works*, vol. 12, p. 11.

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¹⁴ See e.g. the Preface to *Characteristics*: 'I was so struck with the force and beauty of the style and matter' (*Complete Works*, vol. 98, p. 165); 'Pictures at Burleigh House': 'I did not

see the small head of Queen Mary by Holbein, which formerly struck me so forcibly' (*Complete Works*, vol. 10, pp. 66–7).

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- ⁵² Other instances of his long runs of infinitives include the sentence beginning 'To see the golden sun and the azure sky, the outstretched ocean, to walk upon the green earth, and to be lord of a thousand creatures...', 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth', *Complete Works*, vol. 17, p. 192.
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