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reads
The New Writings of William Hazlitt
(2 vols, Oxford University Press, 2007)
edited by Duncan Wu

THESE TWO VOLUMES, each a little over 500 pages in length, collect more than 200 texts which can reliably be attributed to Hazlitt. The items include parliamentary reports, essays and reviews, ranging from incisive political commentary, literary and artistic analysis to witty reflections on human nature and idiosyncrasy. The diversity of subject matter has made it more appropriate to arrange them by order of publication than by subject, and they are accordingly listed in a clearly dated index. They range in length from one to over a dozen pages, while the response to the case of William Hone's conviction for blasphemy, for example, forms a sequence of articles. Each is prefaced by an explanatory Headnote supplying a detailed rationale for the editor's attribution, with additional scholarly citations where appropriate. Though on the basis of persuasive composite evidence, most texts are graded A, the fewer B and C gradings generally reflect a lack of decisive circumstantial support rather than the doubtful nature of content or style. Examples of other editors' 'Questionable Attributions' in the briefer Part III of Volume 2 effectively endorse, by contrast, Wu's careful attributions.

In a letter of 1998 to Tom Paulin referring to his recently published *Day Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*, Ted Hughes praises Paulin's fine reading of what he suggests could be seen as 'the psycho-genetics' of English prose, 'the fine blending of the psychic DNA that determines the difference between one prose style and another.' Hughes's arresting scientific analogy for Paulin's analytical method and achievement seems equally apposite for Wu's meticulous attention to the structural components of Hazlitt's style. The investigative technique necessary for identifying the distinctive idiolect of Hazlitt also requires the same 'forensic' precision and critical alertness with which Wu credits Hazlitt himself, with particular reference to his dissection of argument. Even more appropriate for the process of identification, however, is Hughes' comparison to 'reading the chemical components of a star by analysing the colour bands of its light',¹ suggesting as it does the capacity of Hazlitt's prose to reflect the light of his intelligence and illuminate the mind of the reader in its turn. This star analogy encapsulates the sparkle of Hazlitt's linguistic fluency and the complex rational structure sustaining it.

To identify such qualities demands a similarly acute receptiveness to the cast of mind and turn of phrase which distinguish this writer. Wu is alert to the rhythms of Hazlitt's 'terse, vigorous' style, and to the intellectual and creative energy which sustains its momentum without overflowing its banks.

¹ See *The Letters of Ted Hughes*, selected and edited by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 727-8.

Sensitive to the distinctive tenor of Hazlitt's written 'voice', he distinguishes both the lexical and syntactical features of his prose and 'the twists and turns of thought, packed into a small space' (II 271): as he asserts, 'though one may imitate his style, his mind is beyond imitation' (I lxi).

In the process of attribution, circumstantial evidence for Hazlitt's authorship of specific texts is supported by such persuasive stylistic markers as the paradoxical statement and the sharply apposite choice of metaphor, as in the description of William Farren's tragic acting 'having an edge like a sword – it is a fine-drawn pathos, cutting through the nerves like acid' (II 370). Wu's knowledge of Hazlitt's idiolect is shown in his alertness to such Hazlittian words and concepts as 'habitude', 'asperity', and 'keeping'² to denote a moral aesthetic of 'rightness' or togetherness. Hazlitt's extensive reading and sometimes unconventional literary and artistic preferences are other reliable indicators for his authorship of specific texts, particularly those displaying an unusually close knowledge of Shakespeare 'seamlessly incorporated into [his] thought' and frequently involving multiple and cross-referenced allusions within texts.

Wu ascribes the large number of hitherto unattributed writings to the pressure for productivity in a 'turbulent' career 'driven largely by financial need' (I lvii). Wu describes how many Hazlittian texts remained buried in the files of the journals for which he worked. The fact that so many of his texts are unauthorised is due also to the ephemeral, largely undervalued nature of journalism which requires work to be produced 'like pancakes hot and hot',³ only to be routinely consumed and discarded. Further, as a consequence of Hazlitt's outspoken radicalism in a reactionary post-revolutionary climate, his name came to have a detrimental impact on sales and was later sometimes deliberately removed from the title-pages of his books. His embattled position was confirmed by one of Hazlitt's most loyal, though tested, friends, Charles Lamb, who described him as 'the most abused man in Great Britain; it was dangerous to be his companion, so many stones were always flying about his ears'.

Wu's attributions reflect his sense of the intellectual versatility which qualified Hazlitt to write authoritatively on such subjects as metaphysics, political theory, literature and art. The first text in Volume I is attributed to Hazlitt on the grounds of a stylistic and thematic command of philosophical argument. The piece could be ascribed to him on the additional internal evidence of the writer's principled rejection of a philosophy which mechanically reduced the moral or emotional impulse of human action. Hazlitt challenges a scientific reliance on external evidence in favour of the conviction of individual 'consciousness, reflection and observation of others' (I 5), which he considered the only reliable basis of metaphysical enquiry. While

² Also examined in Paulin, Tom, *The Day Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

³ An image used by Hazlitt of William Cobbett's mental energy and discussed by Paulin in *Hazlitt's Radical Style*, p. 230.

acknowledging the rational Enlightenment's inevitable preoccupation with material reality, this writer rejects the suggestion that 'the dictates of our own consciousness, thoughts, and feelings' should be disparaged as 'deceitful and insufficient guides' (I 7).

This faith in the pre-eminence of a rationally instinctual and emotional connection with reality characterises the 'gusto' which Wu acknowledges to be Hazlitt's guiding principle, both morally and aesthetically. Hazlitt's individual commitment to the sensory, emotional and rational quality of 'gusto' strongly influences Wu's attribution to Hazlitt of texts which either evince it or explicitly use the term. Wu rightly emphasises it as a distinguishing attribute of texts on such diverse topics as political integrity, theatrical performance and the fine arts. A significant facet of this philosophy is Hazlitt's principled rejection of hypocrisy, which Wu cites as partial evidence of authorship in such texts as Hazlitt's extended commentary on the famous Hone Case.

Wu makes a persuasive case for Hazlitt's authorship of this sequence of articles for *The Yellow Dwarf* which challenged William Hone's prosecution, in 1817, for a series of 'blasphemous' parodies of aspects of the Service of the Church of England (I 290-315, no. 76). This shrewdly sardonic exposure of a flawed judicial procedure and judgement seems rightly identified by Wu as Hazlittian, as is his confident expression of faith in the commonsense, instinctive wisdom of the average citizen over institutional authority. 'The juryman', he characteristically declared, 'had the common understanding of the motives of a man's conduct, and the meaning of words' (I 302).

Hazlitt's spirited defence of democratic principles also supplies a convincing basis for attribution elsewhere, such as in *The Morning Chronicle's* extended, authoritative, and sympathetically transcribed parliamentary report of Mackintosh's speech in the Commons which questioned the Government's motives for the proposed adjournment of Parliament (21 December 1813; I 97-120, no. 23). Other political reports supply additional evidence of characteristic Hazlittian wit, as in the satirical analogy drawn between Sir John Cutler's famously darned silk stockings and Wellington's parsimonious parliamentary strategy and resistance to reform: 'Look at the texture of your stuff, Sire; bull dogs might be sifted through it. It has neither strength nor decency, but serves, on the contrary to expose the nakedness it encompasses' (8 June 1828; II, 114-123, (117), no. 129).

Like a moral musician, Hazlitt's ear is alert to the false note in argument or rhetorical style. Believing, as Wu puts it, that 'men who feel deeply have not the time to speak rhetorically' (II 323), he was always critical of the expansive, self-regarding oratory of parliament and pulpit. His consistent article of faith that true wisdom proceeds from the heart, propounded in 'On the Conversation of Authors', is used to justify Wu's attribution to him of the essay 'The Heart' in *The Morning Chronicle* of 30 October 1823 (I 503-7, no. 107), a witty reflection on the 'heart' as metaphor which seriously concludes that 'true wisdom is in the heart; all men's actions and sentiments, unless they

spring from this source, are nothing worth' (I 507).

Asserting that 'hypocrisy is generally used as a mask to deceive the world',⁴ he condemns the 'wretched cant of decorum' which prompted the Rev. Bengo Collier to allege 'immorality' in the works of Byron and Shelley ('Canting Slander', 1822; I 418). In the context of recent attacks on Hunt's editorship of *The Examiner* and *The Liberal*, and on the recently drowned Shelley, the Reverend's criticism, in Hazlitt's opinion, veils a prurience and religious hypocrisy which constitutes unwholesome self-denial and evasion. He challengingly asserts: 'I defy flesh and blood to resist the temptation of peeping behind the curtain of hypocrisy which screened the saraglio of the Right Reverend'. He declares hypocrisy to be 'a worse vice than sensuality'.

Hazlitt's intolerance of falsity had influenced his changing views of Coleridge and explains Wu's confident attribution to him of a review which expresses his ambivalent response to the poet (II 123-35, no.130: London Weekly Review, 14 June 1828). Although surprisingly not acknowledged by Howe or Waller and Glover, this commentary, along with a review of Wordsworth's poetry, both reinforces and extends existing knowledge of Hazlitt's opinion on, and relationship with the Lake poets. Endorsing the recklessly passionate over the cautious, diplomatic response, Hazlitt noted how Coleridge's youthful denunciation of Pitt's policies may have been rash but had demonstrated 'the heartiness of gusto, which nothing but honesty can inspire' (II 130), and sadly contrasts with his current servile 'Legitimacy'. At the same time the review supplies further evidence, echoed elsewhere, of Hazlitt's capacity to dispassionately acknowledge his youthful hero's creative gifts. 'Let us however, grant, that in spite of his obscurity and imperfections, that Mr. Coleridge is a poet; and that in denying him to be one, (as we once did), we were unjust' (II 128).

In accordance with his own consistent emphasis on the virtue of 'plainness, directness, truth' (Paulin, *HRS*, 187), Hazlitt nevertheless criticises the complex opacity of Coleridge's rhetoric. Discounting any claim to be one of the select, 'mystical' eight in London who, according to one of the initiate, were privileged to understand Coleridge, Hazlitt wittily dramatises the mysterious but obscure power of his language: 'His friends assert that his meaning escapes us only because, like a river rolling through Alpine chasms, its meaning lies too deep to be reached by the eye; his adversaries insinuate that the stream of his thought appears deep, because it is muddy' (II 127). Despite crediting Coleridge with poetic powers, Hazlitt makes his characteristic distinction between a creative inspiration rooted in the gusto of passionate conviction, and a cerebral facility: 'Mr. Coleridge's is the poetry of study, and meditation, and labour, and appears what it is: genuine poetry is truly the offspring of inspiration: it is the soul itself, melting with its own fire, and running spontaneously into beautiful forms' (II 129). The imagery of molten

⁴ *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto 1998), VI, 282; cf. *NWWH*, I, 310.

heat for inspired creativity is indisputably Hazlittian in its power and conception. As is his acerbically double-edged praise for Coleridge's poetic facility: 'His fertile fancy and high-sounding language are well-adapted for casting a glitter over a string of moral and other truths, for rendering it agreeable. He might have written a good poem on the nature of things, on agriculture, on fishing, on fowling, or on political virtue or consistency' (II 129).

The personal antagonism between Hazlitt and Coleridge helps Wu attribute to Hazlitt an unfavourable 1816 Edinburgh review of Coleridge's 'Christabel' and other poems, credited by previous authors largely to the Journal's editor, Francis Jeffrey.⁵ More recent evidence of Jeffrey's flat denial of authorship challenges this assumption, as do expressions of mutual bitterness and resentment in letters exchanged (with other correspondents) by Coleridge and Hazlitt at the time. Wu also cites Hazlitt's refusal to deny responsibility for the review despite its potentially damaging repercussions. It is a convincing attribution, but, in the context of contemporary and subsequent praise for 'Christabel's haunting originality, not one which flatters Hazlitt's critical judgement: in this case he let an emotional relationship obscure his critical objectivity. The indignant responses Hazlitt's review provoked from Shelley and Byron were not untypical of the controversy which many of Hazlitt's independent judgements courted and which, as Wu demonstrates, characterised the combative – and courageous – spirit of the man.

Volume II is also distinguished by an illuminating review of Wordsworth's *New Poetical Writings*, published in *The London Weekly Review*, 1827 (II 32-44, no. 115). Wu endorses Jules Douady's assessment of this as incontestable Hazlitt on the grounds of stylistic features and references echoing those in other Hazlitt texts. They include Hazlitt's unusual admiration for Wordsworth's 'Laodamia' which he had already described in *The Spirit of the Age* as 'exquisite', breathing 'the pure spirit of the finest fragments of antiquity' (II 33). Further, the reviewer's judgement of Wordsworth accords with Hazlitt's suggestion elsewhere that the poet avoided the field of active challenge and political engagement in a preference for meditative seclusion. One may feel the judgement expressed in the review underestimates Wordsworth's mental vigour in emphasising his placid domesticity—'He has a dreamy softness, the softness of woman in his fancy [...] his mind expands among bleating lambs and daisies'—but still acknowledge the Hazlittian conception and language, and perhaps the justice of the observation that the poet's vision lacks the scale, the independent imagination and heroic risk-taking of genius which 'sometimes dashes metaphors or similes into fragments, and piles their shattered members on each other' (II 37). Hazlitt's essential appreciation of Wordsworth's creative power in his final acknowledgement that the poet 'has some right to appeal to posterity' nevertheless illustrates his capacity for a fair, if qualified,

⁵ 'Review of S. T. Coleridge, *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and The Pains of Sleep*', *Edinburgh Review*, 27 (September 1816); *NWWH* I, 203-217, no. 45.

judgment of merit. Wu identifies this balanced assessment of the poet's 'littleness and greatness' as distinctively and admirably Hazlittian, declaring that 'It is hard to think who else would be capable of constructing such a well-balanced case' (II 36).

Elsewhere, Hazlitt's use of painterly images aids identification, as in the case of a review of Leigh Hunt for the *London Weekly Review* of 1828 which describes him in strikingly sensory terms as 'excelling in the exact painting of familiar things', and 'spreading his language just 'as a sculptor does his plaister, over objects' (II 79). Hazlitt admires Hunt's vividly expressive, truthful writing, in which the reader feels 'the cold wind whistling about your ears [...] and hear[s] the rain pattering on your umbrella' (II, 82) for its gusto, or truth to real, felt experience. Hazlitt's holistic gusto engaged the senses as fully as it did mind and heart. After learning of Hazlitt's death, Hunt paid him an equivalent metaphorical compliment by describing the illuminating insights of his art criticism as casting a 'light like a painted window.' His suggestion that it was 'exquisite in its relish of poetry' shows how the arts were interrelated in Hazlitt's receptive imagination (II 81).

Hazlitt's informed passion for the theatre and for truthful performance are further criteria for attribution. The reviews for *The Atlas* which Wu includes are remarkable for their knowledge of theatrical culture and individual actors' careers. They are also distinguished by an acute sensitivity to performance technique in the detail of actors' expression, gesture, the modulation of the voice, and the psychological truth they collectively communicate, as in his praise for Fanny Kemble's 'deference to truth and nature' (II 338), and the actor Mr. Farren's precise portrayal of a character who 'blows his nose as if it were an affair of superfluous elegance, and not of necessity' (II 329). The fact that this quality of truth to nature is identified in several theatrical reviews as 'gusto' would seem to remove any doubts as to their authorship.

Wu's selected writings are particularly rewarding in seeming to reflect the chequered progress of a personal history. The tones and voice of the essays intimate Hazlitt's varied experiences and increasing isolation as his life drew to its premature close. Wu remarks on the meditateness of the way in which farewell good wishes in the theatrical reviews express a poignant sense of closure. Hazlitt's writings might consequently have become clouded with melancholy at the deepening consciousness of irreparable ill health and public indifference. There is a poignancy, as well as a shrewd metaphysical insight in Hazlitt's representation, in 'The Disappointed Man' (II 375-81, no. 196: *The Atlas*, 27 June 1830), of the ever retreating and chimerical future as a blank: 'all made up of dreams that shall never be realised', 'the ghost of a shadow' which disappoints our unfounded expectations (II 378). However, the balanced humour of his humanity seems to have prevented the indulgence of self-pity to which he might be felt entitled. He can engage rationally and critically with a sense of personal grievance or betrayal: 'And pray, what right has a man to be disappointed?', concluding with a favourite Hazlittian paradox: 'a man might

very naturally be disappointed if he were not disappointed.' Life depends on our senses, he might assert, and since the future promises us no more than the ghost of a dream, we should cherish the certainty of present experience. In view of his fractious relationship and general preoccupation with the public, Hazlitt is surely the author of the astute meditation 'The Public' (II 385-9, no. 198: *The Atlas*, 1 August 1830), on the equally invisible collective authority of public judgement which so arbitrarily shapes reputation. Wu remarks on the characteristically Hazlittian play of thought and of syntax in the review's paradoxical observation that 'Compounded of fallible beings, it is infallible in its judgements. Consisting of partial beings, it is most impartial' (II 386).

Hazlitt remains engaged in dialogue with an existing and potentially expanding public in the voice which stubbornly asserts itself in these newly collected writings. In his work so far anthologised and in more perhaps still waiting to be unearthed his short mortal life will continue in the active engagement of reading and thinking. He will continue to interrogate our assumptions, challenge our littlenesses, provoke, move even to tears, perhaps, and to laughter. According to Leigh Hunt's final tribute to Hazlitt in *The Tatler*, on September 20th, 1830, he was 'one of the profoundest writers of the day, an admirable reasoner (no one got better or sooner to the heart of a question than he did), the best general critic that ever appeared, the greatest critic on art that ever appeared, an untameable lover of liberty, and with all his humour and irritability (of which no man had more) a sincere friend, and a generous enemy' (II 81).

But to leave Hazlitt with the final word:

If the few and scattered sparks of truth, which I have been so much at pains to collect, should still be kept alive in the minds of such persons, and not entirely die with me, I shall be satisfied. (II 383)

Wu's meticulous editorship has helped to ensure that the sparks are kept alive and fanned into a steadily burning fire.