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William Hazlitt and the Uses of Knowledge

by

Patricia Anne Pelfrey

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Goldsmith, Chair

Professor Ian Duncan

Professor David Bates

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## Abstract

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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While Romantic literature provides ample evidence of the pleasures of knowledge, it also reveals strong counter-examples of knowledge as overwhelming, enervating, and potentially impoverishing. What inspired this reaction, and how was it channeled through Romantic writings?

William Hazlitt is a particularly representative figure in the search for an answer to the question of why knowledge became a problem for Romantic writers because of his highly articulate awareness of the distinction between knowledge as an engine of social progress and its potentially negative role in the development of individuals. Using a range of Hazlitt's essays—from his early metaphysical treatise on identity to *The Spirit of the Age*—as well as the writings of Thomas Love Peacock, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Thomas De Quincey, this dissertation analyzes the conflicted Romantic response to knowledge and its result, a variety of efforts to define the norms and values that should govern its organization, diffusion, and control. It makes two principal arguments.

The first is that Romantic ambivalence derived from a complex of ideas and anxieties about the potentially damaging effects of certain kinds of education and learning on the brain, damage that could diminish cognitive vigor and distort the inner experience of identity. The collision between this image of the individual disempowered by knowledge and Enlightenment faith in its role as the engine of collective progress was intensified by the sheer quantity of ideas, information, opinions, theories, and discoveries that daily inundated the British reading public and critics alike. Discussions about education and learning became entangled in assumptions about the nature of the self and attitudes toward social and intellectual progress, all in the context of the need to bring order into a universe of knowledge that seemed to be expanding at a breakneck pace.

The dissertation's second argument is that Romantic ambivalence is valuable in giving us a perspective from a time when acceptance of the uncontrollable character of knowledge was not yet complete. The Romantic idea that there could be something inevitable, perhaps disturbingly inevitable, about the growth of knowledge has fallen out of consciousness in most discussions of

knowledge today. Its unceasing proliferation is widely celebrated, perhaps especially the evolving media and communication advances that have made learning a global enterprise. Useful knowledge has become the paradigm of all knowledge, rendering it immune from questions about what could or should be done about its less than beneficial outcomes. The contrast between Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1829) and Clark Kerr's *The Uses of the University* (1963), discussed in the final chapter, sheds light on the distance between Romantic attitudes and our own.

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## Introduction

*I am convinced that economic and cultural affairs, that money and literature and poetry, are much more closely linked than many people believe. Poems, like gold coins, are meant to last, to keep their integrity, sustained by their rhythm, rhymes, and metaphors. In that sense, they are like money—they are a ‘store of value’ over the long term. They are both aspiring to inalterability, whilst they are both destined to circulate from hand to hand and mind to mind.*

I have appropriated this statement, made by Jean-Claude Trichet,<sup>1</sup> the man who headed the European Central Bank during the Great Recession of 2008, as a way of introducing this dissertation because it reconciles a conflict I explore. The distance between poetic and monetary values was a literary given in the Romantic period, as it is in ours. William Wordsworth brought about a revolution in poetry because he composed poems about poor leech-gatherers and ordinary country people as if they really mattered. William Hazlitt celebrated “the People” in contradistinction to the powerful and wealthy who control society and its money. Yet Romantic (and many other) poets and critics consistently connect poetry and the other arts with wealth. “We acquire ideas by expending them,” Hazlitt wrote. “Our expenditure of intellectual wealth makes us rich: we can only be liberal as we have previously accumulated the means.”<sup>2</sup> The two kinds of currency seem to have a natural affinity, as Trichet says. The serene confidence with which he bridges the distance between them with the mediating term, *value*, seems to say that the differences are no problem at all.

This is a dissertation about another form of value, knowledge, and the many ways it can become a problem. Like poetry, knowledge is assumed to inhabit an entirely separate category of value than actual money. But unlike poetry, the immaterial wealth of knowledge seemed to evoke a remarkable level of ambivalence in certain Romantic writers. There is ample evidence of its pleasures in the literature of the period, but what particularly interests me is the counter-evidence of knowledge that produced a sense of diminution and impoverishment. What inspired this reaction, and how was it channeled through Romantic writings?

Even when you narrow the definition of *knowledge* to education, learning, and intellectual skills, as I do here, it remains a very broad term. Romantic writers tended to talk about knowledge in a similarly broad fashion, however, and the ambivalence I discuss was evident in all three domains. Thomas De Quincey thought some intellectual disciplines were dangerous to study. Hazlitt, even though he once admitted an attraction to academic life, harbored a deep distrust of traditional university education and of professional arts organizations like the Royal Academy. To an even greater degree than De Quincey did, he believed certain kinds of learning could disable cognitive skills. Both of them considered Samuel Taylor Coleridge a man whose wide-ranging erudition had crippled his intellectual power, living proof of the truth of their views. “He would have done better if he had known less,” Hazlitt snarled in his review of Coleridge’s *Lay Sermons*.<sup>3</sup>

I make two principal arguments. The first is that Romantic ambivalence about knowledge derived from a complex of ideas and anxieties about the potentially damaging effects of certain kinds of education and learning on the brain, damage that could diminish cognitive vigor and distort the inner experience of identity. The collision between this image of the individual



disempowered by knowledge and Enlightenment faith in its role as the engine of collective progress led to some inevitable contradictions. What was true for persons—that knowledge could be a threat—was not necessarily true for society at large in the longer view of history. Yet there clearly *were* problems with knowledge at the societal level. Benthamite Utilitarianism was one. The sheer quantity of information and opinion, dumped by the printing presses on a steadily growing reading public, was another, and the retrograde character of English schooling and universities was a third. Thus, discussions about knowledge and education became entangled with convictions about the nature of progress, the failure of institutions, and warring feelings of helplessness and hope in the face of the future.

One index of the period's conflicts is the various meanings that could be attached to a commonly used expression at the time, *the progress of knowledge*. It referred in the first instance to the vistas of discovery opening in scientific fields, encapsulated in Humphry Davy's statement in an 1810 lecture: "Nothing is so fatal to the progress of the human mind as to suppose our views of science are ultimate; that there are no mysteries in nature; that our triumphs are complete; and that there are no new worlds to conquer."<sup>4</sup> It was also employed in a sociological sense, to indicate the diffusion of knowledge from the elite to the middle and lower classes—a source of anxiety about its potential for radicalizing them in the post-revolutionary era. There were deep divisions over whether knowledge could make "uncultivated natures" more prone to prudence or to mischief.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the progress of knowledge could mean a regular and predictable unfolding of a succession of events, as in the progress of a disease. A supporter of greater access to education among the lower classes justified it on the preemptive grounds that "The time is past when the progress of knowledge *could* be prevented."<sup>6</sup>

It is this last idea—that there could be something inevitable, perhaps disturbingly inevitable, about the growth of knowledge—which has fallen out of consciousness in most discussions of knowledge today. Its unceasing expansion is widely celebrated, perhaps especially the constantly evolving media and communication advances that have revolutionized access to information and made learning a global enterprise. The view of knowledge as boundless and borderless leaves untouched the question of whether there are norms or values that should govern it—or if that is now even possible. Its very success in penetrating, and in so many ways improving, every corner of contemporary life has made it immune from questions about its less than beneficial outcomes and what could or should be done about them.

And this leads to my second argument, which is that Romantic ambivalence is valuable in that it gives us a perspective from a time when acceptance of the uncontrollable character of knowledge was not yet complete. What connects us with our Romantic forebears is our common status as heirs of the Enlightenment and its fascination with the creation and diffusion of useful knowledge, even though the Romantics mingled interest and skepticism in a way that most of us do not. Joel Mokyr notes the pivotal importance of the Enlightenment in establishing the intellectual infrastructure of today's knowledge economy—scientific method, scientific mentality, and scientific culture.<sup>7</sup> In the past two centuries, useful knowledge has become the paradigm of all knowledge and it is now increasingly independent from regimens of human control.

Hazlitt serves as a representative figure in this respect because of his highly articulate awareness of the distinction between knowledge as an engine of societal progress and its

potentially negative role in the development of individuals. He was a Dissenter, and thus to some extent an outsider in the dominant culture, which gave him the skeptical perspective on established authority and received wisdom that outsiders often have. He was temperamentally oppositional anyway, a searching critic of claims of superior knowledge or assertions of the sanctity of traditional practices. Hazlitt's sensitivity to the cultural currents of his time was remarkably acute, thanks to his wide-ranging interests in poetry, drama, politics, political economy, aesthetics, art, literary criticism, history, philosophy, and institutions. He provides a revealing contrast (and sometimes unexpected agreement) with the other writers I use in anatomizing attitudes toward knowledge in the period—Thomas Love Peacock, Thomas De Quincey, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The Hazlitt I discuss incorporates recent scholarly work concerning his early philosophical speculations about the nature of identity, but draws some different conclusions and takes the discussion in a different direction, toward an exploration of their influence on his later writing about knowledge. My initial close focus on Hazlitt's metaphysical theory of personal identity moves into his broadening vision of the cognitive cultural web in *The Spirit of the Age*, then to the larger canvas of Romantic knowledge and its paradoxes, and finally to the Romantic legacy in the emergence of the modern research university. The structure of the dissertation thus mirrors Hazlitt's developing account of knowledge and its shaping influence on individuals, society, and institutions.

What I see as his evolution from philosopher to psychologist is marked by two intellectual discoveries. The first is Hazlitt's theory of the fictive nature of the self (which he called his "metaphysical discovery") in his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), followed by the *Lectures on English Philosophy* (1812), in which he elaborates his own version of empiricism by laying out his agreements and disagreements with the positions of Locke, Hartley, and Helvétius. The second is his theory of the embodied nature of knowledge, which is developed in a number of later essays, especially in *Table-Talk* (1821–22).

His concept of identity, influenced by both Hume and Locke, posits a fragmentation of the self along the dimension of time. Hazlitt defines consciousness as locked into the present and the past; we are essentially strangers to our future selves. I differ from most analyses of the *Essay* by arguing that its real significance derives from Hazlitt's interrelated concepts of an unstable self and its inability to access the future, not from his argument about the natural disinterestedness of the human mind. Did he believe in the fractured nature of identity only in the special case of the metaphysical discovery, or as a permanent condition of the self? In either case, I argue, it is a theory that had a strong influence on his post-*Essay* writings, which show a marked estrangement from engagement with the future. Although a radical who never lost faith in the principles of the French Revolution, for example, Hazlitt does not look to a future perfected by revolutionary reform. His analysis of political change holds that it is ignited not by the promise of an idealized future but by existential rage provoked by the consciousness of political and social oppression. Mark Schoenfield sees a connection between Hazlitt's theory of a fragmented self and his professional commitment to journalism: the constant repetitive need to feed the daily press traps him in an alienated present that nullifies the future.

It is Hazlitt the psychologist, I argue, who escapes from the dilemma created by his theory of identity. He turns away from this essentially empty self to the body and its constant

discourse with everyday experience. His theory of what he calls tacit reason relies on the cognitive possibilities of bodily feeling and perception. There are two leading exemplars for him: the deep mind-body connection of athletic performance, illustrated in his famous essay, “The Indian Jugglers,” and the exercise of artistic talent in painting (Hazlitt’s first ambition was to become an artist). Both require attention focused toward a specific end, which implies a connection to the future. But this is a different kind of future—one that opens effortlessly to the knower because the pleasure of the moment governs the physical or intellectual exertions leading toward the goal.<sup>8</sup> Tacit reason, Hazlitt’s paradigm of ideal knowing, is a (perhaps unconscious) bow to Hartley’s physiological philosophy in that it employs a version of his body-based associationism that is refined and expanded to incorporate intentionality. It reveals knowledge as a skill that dissolves preoccupation with the self and propels us into an active and harmonious engagement with the environments we encounter. It is the only kind of knowledge he did not find problematic in one way or another.

At the same time, tacit reason as Hazlitt defines it is an essentially personal, aesthetic, and fleeting experience, not a solution to the larger problem of knowledge in society and its institutions. *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (1825), Hazlitt’s intellectual biography of the political and cultural leaders of his generation, takes us back to the alienated future of the *Essay*. Most critics agree that its theme is the failure of British society to meet the political and cultural challenges of the post-Napoleonic era. The interpretive puzzle *The Spirit of the Age* poses, however, is the apparent absence of a unifying thread linking its two dozen portraits. The *Essay* provides an answer. It sets the emotional tone and spiritual landscape of *The Spirit of the Age*, which is concerned throughout with the nature of identity. The fragmented structure of the work, and Hazlitt’s self-contradictory portraits of individuals, reflect the instability of the self and its isolation in the present. His account of 1820s Britain offers an opportunity he never takes to envision a different (and potentially more progressive) society; it is portrayed as frozen in an eternal present, estranged from the possibility of imagining its own future. Knowledge is constitutive of identity in *The Spirit of the Age*. We are what we know, and this last great work is a brilliant catalogue of the many ways in which knowledge can go wrong.

Hazlitt’s sense of societal paralysis was bound up with his conviction that British institutions were hopelessly corrupt, including—especially—Oxford, Cambridge, and the Royal Academy. His radical views of knowledge institutions are my entry point into theorizing about universities and knowledge in the Romantic period and our own. Coleridge’s *On the Constitution of Church and State* contributed the idea that universities should embody an idea, a theory that persists (in a form very different from Coleridge’s original notion) in modern discussions about universities. I have used *Church and State* (1829) and Clark Kerr’s *The Uses of the University* (1963) as guides to the evolution of the Romantic idea of a university into the contemporary multiversity that Kerr theorized. Coleridge looked inward to find the essential aim of the university in protecting the unity of all knowledge; Kerr looked outward to the demands of society and saw the prospect of an infinite expansion of instrumental knowledge. And of all the institutions that create and send knowledge around the world, none is more central than the modern research university. It is also one of the few areas in contemporary culture where useful knowledge can be seen as a problem. In the humanities, arts, and some areas of the social sciences, it is viewed as a force that has tipped the balance of the academic disciplines away from those devoted to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Kerr admired the dynamic intellectual energy of the American research university but warned that its productivity comes at a cost. Contemporary knowledge, he points out, is subject to no standards except those that support its continual proliferation and replication, a condition that approaches what we mean by the term *autonomous*. This, I conclude, returns us to the fundamental questions the Romantics asked about the progress, organization, and control of knowledge.

Today's assumptions about knowledge include its right to be disruptive—even its obligation to be disruptive—without any very clear idea of what it is to be disruptive *for*. In economic terms, of course, the aim is to clear away the competitively weak and the tactically unprepared. But what both history and the Romantic experience tell us is that most instrumental knowledge is intrinsically disruptive, and that its influence and consequences spread far beyond market-based pursuits into attitudes about institutions and values, and even into our conceptions of the self. Yet it is difficult to imagine any policy, any law, any regulation that could contain the influence of autonomous knowledge within its appropriate domain. As Kerr put it: what remains is to adapt. And in this respect, at least, the struggles of the Romantics can be instructive.

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My aim in this study has been to focus on a Hazlitt who is not often read, even by people who read Hazlitt—not only the *Essay*, for example, but also his *Lectures on English Philosophy*—to reveal his remarkably original and thought-provoking account of personal and collective knowledge. In doing so, I have drawn on recent scholarship into Romantic perspectives on cognition, education, and learning, especially the work of Jon Klancher (on reading audiences, Coleridge, and the London learning institutions) and Robin Valenza (on the development of the academic disciplines). My final chapter, relating early nineteenth century attitudes toward knowledge and our own, takes some speculative risks in connecting two widely separated historical periods. I do not assume any historical cause and effect at work—that it is possible to trace a direct or verifiable line of development from Enlightenment or Romantic ideas, including Hazlitt's ideas, to our own. Yet I think the literary works and perspectives I discuss reflect something more than the idiosyncratic opinions of individuals. In the introduction to her book on georgic poetry and British Romanticism, Kevis Goodman reminds the reader that Raymond Williams suggested the possibility of a pre-ideational sense of history in what he called “structures of feeling.” Before the flow of present or past experience has been crystallized into analytical form, what appears to be personal, subjective, or merely local from a historical or sociological perspective is more accurately described as “social experiences in solution.”<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense I consider Romantic ambivalence to be useful to us—as a kind of pre-history of our own experiences of knowledge.

When I was a student in the 1960s, Hazlitt was mostly enlisted by critics and professors as a commentator on other Romantic figures. Aside from a few iconic essays, such as “The Pleasure of Hating,” he was not much read or discussed. That time is long past. William Kinnaird's engaging 1978 biography went well beyond the life into Hazlitt as a thinker, including his interest in the philosophy and the psychology of the mind. Kinnaird's sense of the unity of Hazlitt's work is reflected in the fact that he was the first to give a critical analysis of *Table-Talk* as a whole, not simply as a collection of unconnected essays. David Bromwich's 1983 *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* banished the anthologized Hazlitt and created a consistently

revealing analysis of his intellectual range and originality. More recently, the 2005 publication of *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, a book of essays commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, is an acknowledgement of his contributions to the study of the mind. Though still not widely read, Hazlitt is at last being seen not only as a political polemicist and literary critic of the works of others, but as a major Romantic figure in his own right. One of the rewards of this project has been the chance to see how much Hazlitt scholarship has grown—and how much remains to be done.

Any dissertation leaves some relevant topics unexplored, and mine is no exception. Phrenology is a logical inclusion in a dissertation on Hazlitt as a cognitive psychologist. It was enormously popular in the nineteenth century and raised questions about whether education could remedy less desirable intellectual tendencies revealed in a phrenological examination, or whether the topography of the skull was destiny. Hazlitt was interested in phrenology and wrote several essays about it. He considered it a pseudo-science, although (as he acknowledged) his disagreement was expressed not on the basis of medical or other physical evidence but on the grounds of Occam's razor—that phrenology needlessly multiplied entities in the brain. If there is a bump indicative of poetic talent, he suggests, surely there are separate bumps for each kind of poetry, from epic to rhymed couplets. He also had some acute observations on how phrenology was sold to the public.

Another intriguing topic not covered here is Hazlitt's education. His biographer Herschel Baker called him "a most unlettered man of letters" with "the credo of an anti-intellectual."<sup>10</sup> De Quincey, admittedly an unfriendly source, said that "Hazlitt had read nothing. Unacquainted with Grecian philosophy, with Scholastic philosophy, and with the recomposition of these philosophies in the looms of Germany during the last seventy and odd years, trusting merely to the untrained instincts of keen mother-wit—where should Hazlitt have the materials for great thinking?"<sup>11</sup> His friends responded by pointing to his brilliant mind and the native intellectual talent that meant he could dispense with educational credentials. P. G. Patmore wrote that "Hazlitt could perceive and describe 'at sight' the characteristics of anything, without any previous study or knowledge whatever, but by a species of intellectual intuition."<sup>12</sup> Charles Lamb defended him in similar fashion against De Quincey's criticisms: "I know not where you have been so lucky as to find finer thinkers than Hazlitt; for my part, I know of none such. . . . But you must allow for us poor Londoners. Hazlitt serves for *our* purposes. And in this poor, little, inconsiderable place of London, he is one of our very prime thinkers."<sup>13</sup>

The question of Hazlitt's education leads directly to the subject of its effect on his sense of social status (he never seemed to have any doubts about his intellectual abilities). His scathing critiques of Oxford and Cambridge are strongly expressed but accurate assessments of the deficiencies of both in teaching and scholarship. Yet they have been interpreted by more than one biographer as evidence of his feelings of inferiority and exclusion. His reputation as a poorly educated journalist, always cutting corners in the rush to a deadline, has helped shape the idea that the pressures of early nineteenth-century journalism prevented him from more serious and substantial writing. Hazlitt would have rejected such a notion. He believed that productivity—and those deadlines made him enormously productive—was the mark of a creative mind. "I do not believe rapidity of execution necessarily implies slovenliness or crudeness. On the contrary, I believe it is often productive both of sharpness and freedom," he wrote.<sup>14</sup> Hazlitt offers many

keen observations about writing as a craft (painting as well), and this is a dimension of his contributions I would like to examine further.

Unsurprisingly, some of my original emphases have shifted over the course of completing the dissertation. One was to look at the link between Hazlitt's perspectives on cognition and twentieth-century cognitive theories, along the lines of Alan Richardson's thought-provoking *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*. Although I discuss what seems to me a strong connection between Hazlitt's tacit reason and Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge, this comparative approach did not become, as I first anticipated, a major theme. As my research progressed, it became increasingly clear that eighteenth and early nineteenth-century philosophy and psychology presented more than enough rich material for my purposes.

Finally, a brief abstract of each chapter:

- *Shadow in the Water*: This chapter analyzes the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) and its relationship to the British empirical tradition, David Hartley's theory of association, and what Hazlitt called his "metaphysical discovery" concerning the fictive nature of the self.
- *The Object of Feeling*: The next chapter traces post-*Essay* writings, including Hazlitt's *Lectures on English Philosophy* (1812), and the ultimate shift of his focus from epistemology and personal identity in the abstract to a psychological exploration of the relationship between the knower and the act of knowing. His writings after 1812 reflect a new appreciation of the role of the body in knowing that connects him with American Pragmatism and Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge.
- *Cognitive Web: The Spirit of the Age*: The *Essay*'s influence on the organization, structure, and meaning of *The Spirit of the Age* is the subject of this chapter. Hazlitt is generally regarded as a writer who thought ideas were best seen as a reflection of personality. I argue the reverse—that in *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt presents ideas as constitutive of identity. His unspoken premise is that we are not identities who think but thinkers who express our wavering and uncertain selves through the cognitive structures of the mind. The relationship of the individual minds of *The Spirit of the Age* to the collective cognitive processes of society and culture is a major theme of Hazlitt's exploration of the period's failure to come to grips with the challenges of its time.
- *Romantic Knowledge*: In a departure from the previous chapters' exclusive focus on Hazlitt, this one explores Romantic ambivalence about knowledge in the works of three other writers, Peacock, Shelley, and De Quincey, particularly in light of scholarly work on the arts and sciences in the period. It returns to Hazlitt at the end, however, to discuss his skeptical response to the era's attempts to organize and schematize knowledge.

- *Autonomous Knowledge*: The final chapter contrasts the idea of a university in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Clark Kerr, arguing that Kerr's *Uses of the University* is in some respects a Romantic document in its recognition of the problems inherent in the expansion of knowledge. Universities are facing new competitors and new challenges to their traditional role in today's knowledge economy. Technology, globalization, and the imperative of economic growth have contributed to making knowledge autonomous, raising new questions about consequences, organization, and control.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Irwin, *The Alchemists*, 112–13.

<sup>2</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:117.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Edinburgh Review* 43, no. 11 (November 1826).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*, 36–37.

<sup>8</sup> Hazlitt's descriptions of juggling and painting resemble a psychic state that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow*, a self-forgetful immersion in physical, emotional, or intellectual activity that brings a sense of order into consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism*, 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 119, 121.

<sup>11</sup> *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, 5:231. Quoted in McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes*, 62n27.

<sup>12</sup> P. G. Patmore, *My Friends and Acquaintance: Being Memorials, Mind-portraits, and Personal Recollections of Deceased Celebrities of the Nineteenth Century*, 3:62–63. Quoted in McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes*, 58n11.

<sup>13</sup> *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, 3:82–83. Quoted in McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:62.

## Chapter One: Shadow in the Water

*I know but two sorts of philosophy; that of those who believe what they feel, and endeavor to account for it, and that of those who only believe what they understand, and have already accounted for. The one is the philosophy of consciousness, the other that of experiment; the one may be called the intellectual, the other the materialist philosophy.*

William Hazlitt, "Preface," *An Abridgment of The Light of Nature Pursued*

*I am who I am in spite of the future.*

William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*

Between 1796 and 1812 William Hazlitt wrote a series of essays and lectures that constitute his critique of British empiricism from Thomas Hobbes to Jeremy Bentham. These "metaphysical" writings, besides taking explicit aim at the theory of association as articulated by David Hartley and his followers, join the long eighteenth-century argument over the possibility of altruism, pleasure and pain as moral motives, the nature of personal identity, and the structure of the human mind. The most important of these is *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* and its appendix, *Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvétius*. In it he challenged the idea that disinterested behavior is either a disguised form of self-interest or the product of acculturation, association, and habit. The scaffolding of his argument involved an elaborate, Hume-influenced account of personal identity. In simplest terms, Hazlitt argued that the idea of a self that endures across time is an illusion, and it is therefore also an illusion to think that our current self has anything in common with our future one. Our only avenue to the future is the imagination which, in the scenario Hazlitt has just laid out, finds it as easy to identify with the interests of other selves as with our own. Thus Hazlitt demonstrated, to his own satisfaction and "by a continuous and severe train of reasoning, nearly as subtle and original as anything in Hume or Berkeley," that disinterestedness is a fundamental characteristic of the human mind.<sup>1</sup>

Statements like this suggest high aspiration, and Hazlitt's were very high indeed: to make an original contribution to the large metaphysical questions of his time. He once described his writings as the work of a metaphysician as seen through the eyes of an artist; in looking back on his life, he wrote that "I myself have been a thinker" whose ambitions include "some love of fame, of the fame of a Pascal, a Leibniz, or a Berkeley."<sup>2</sup> He was raised in the culture of Dissent, which means that he was intellectually connected to a rich epistemological tradition represented by such figures as Thomas Reid and Joseph Priestley (who also wrote about personal identity), under whom he studied at Hackney New College. He was familiar not only with the British empiricist tradition but also with the work of such European sensationalist philosophers as Condillac, Destutt de Tracy, Helvétius, and Baron d'Holbach. He had a keen interest in the budding brain science of his day and wrote about phrenology and the theories of Gall and Spurzheim; according to Alan Richardson, their influence can be seen in his art criticism.<sup>3</sup> As Richardson argues in *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, the materialistic, brain-based psychology of such figures as David Hartley and Franz Joseph Gall threatened long-



established religious and philosophical convictions about the will, the mind, and identity. “One readily begins to see how high indeed were the stakes of neuroscientific speculation in the era: no less than the existence of the soul, the necessity of God, and the integrity of the self were in question.”<sup>4</sup>

But the *Essay* was a failure when it was published in 1805, largely ignored by critics and the public alike. In what seemed a deliberate echo of David Hume’s valedictory for his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hazlitt remarked that the *Essay* “had fallen stillborn from the press.” Nevertheless, he continued with a preface to Abraham Tucker’s *Light of Nature Pursued*, a prospectus for an ambitious (but never completed) history of English philosophy, and his *Lectures on English Philosophy*. None brought him closer to his goal.

Not long after completing the 1812 lectures, Hazlitt took a job as a Parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. This marked the beginning of a journalistic career as a critic of art, literature, drama, and politics that ended only with Hazlitt’s death in 1830. Although he returns occasionally to philosophical topics after 1812, the story goes, the burst of creative metaphysical energy is over. The view of critics from Hazlitt’s time to ours has been that the *Essay*’s value lies primarily in what it reveals about his biography.<sup>5</sup> This long-settled judgment has begun to change, however; the *Essay* has received more attention in the past decade or so than ever before, not only from literary critics but from scholars of philosophy, psychology, and sociology.<sup>6</sup>

This dissertation focuses first on the *Essay* but proceeds to his other, largely unacknowledged, contributions to the study of the mind, learning, knowledge, and the nature of the self. A study of Hazlitt the metaphysician—roughly translated into contemporary terms, Hazlitt the cognitive psychologist—presents several difficult hurdles. His formal works on the mind, consciousness, and personal identity are few. His persistent interest in these issues often emerges in essays devoted primarily to other subjects. Thus, in some respects his post-1812 reflections on cognition and consciousness are not texts but sub-texts, hidden under discussions of universities, poets, fashionable preachers, political turncoats, jugglers, and other seemingly unrelated topics. They are buried deepest in *The Spirit of the Age*, where they are expressed in the literary language of metaphor, allusion, and structure rather than in the abstract philosophical vocabulary of the *Essay*.

Yet there is enough evidence in Hazlitt’s writings to trace the arc of his psychological thinking during the twenty years between the *Essay* and *The Spirit of the Age*, and how his interests in psychological phenomena broadened to include the idea of culture, in Merlin Donald’s words, as “a gigantic cognitive web.” I argue that the *Essay* and *The Spirit of the Age* can be seen as the two poles of his exploration of the psychology of the self, and specifically his reflections on knowledge in its individual, institutional, and collective forms. In this context, the *Essay* is a both a primary document for understanding Hazlitt’s later writings and a companion document to *The Spirit of the Age*. It supplies the psychological landscape of the later work through its theory of a fragmented self, marooned in the past and present and shut off from the future. And to fully understand what knowledge means in *The Spirit of the Age*, it is necessary to begin with the epistemological foundations laid down in the *Essay*.

## Origins of the *Essay*

Hazlitt began *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* when he was a schoolboy and completed it in 1805, after more than a decade of intermittent attempts to wrestle its arguments into coherence. He did not find it easy going. In “My First Acquaintance with Poets” he describes his electrifying meeting with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798, and how Coleridge’s encouragement led him to resume work on the *Essay*, which he had put aside in frustration. During their conversation, Coleridge recommended Berkeley’s *Essay on Vision* and Bishop Butler’s *Sermons at the Rolls’ Chapel*, works that Hazlitt cites approvingly in the *Essay*’s appendix, *Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvétius*. Although it took him another seven years to complete the two, the meeting was a turning point nonetheless: “[T]hat my understanding . . . did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Essay* has several sources and several goals. It is, first, an effort to combat the school of thought that, as Jeremy Bentham expressed it, human nature labored under the dominion of “those two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.”<sup>8</sup> But it is also Hazlitt’s attempt to give a careful account of the mind’s faculties and its encounter with experience. He called it the philosophy of consciousness, and he opposes it to reductionist empiricism. A central aim of the *Essay* is to show that empiricism cannot satisfactorily explain cognitive processes, including the opportunistic way the brain seizes on every available means of making sense of experience. The body is a tool for acquiring knowledge; so are feelings and intuitive perceptions that lie below the threshold of consciousness. Ideas and sensations are different things, Hazlitt argues, and the attempt to reduce one to the other, as Hartley and Helvétius seek to do, contracts the full range of experience available to consciousness down to a narrow band of what has “already [been] accounted for”—i.e., what can be easily grasped or understood. His own philosophy, in contrast, has as its starting point the experience of consciousness, with all its complexities, redundancies, confusions, and contradictions.

But the specific focus of the *Essay* is Hazlitt’s attempt to describe the nature of identity, its relationship to voluntary and involuntary action, and how his account of these questions supports his proposition that the mind is “originally and essentially disinterested.” In this respect, the *Essay* springs from two distinct but related traditions. The first is the debate over the motives behind human behavior. This debate ranged from the views of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, and Claude-Adrien Helvétius that self-interest is a “mechanical” or automatic reflex of human nature—“Pity is only another name for self-love,” Hobbes had written—to variations on the milder theme that selfishness, whatever its origins, can be curbed through the habit of sympathy for others. Hazlitt does not specify exactly who these advocates of “a more liberal philosophy” are; David Bromwich speculates that he had in mind Adam Smith, Lord Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson.<sup>9</sup> Hazlitt’s objection to this argument is that it is grounded in a kind of misplaced identification with others, “by which means,” he says, “we come at last to confound our own interests with theirs.”<sup>10</sup> The specious moral implication of such a position is that “we ought to cultivate sentiments of generosity and kindness for others out of mere selfishness.”<sup>11</sup> Hazlitt wants to distinguish his argument from both the Hobbesian and the more benign alternatives by establishing a different basis for altruism that will be rooted in the organization of the mind itself.

The other focus of the *Essay* is the philosophy of associationism, derived from John Locke and other British empiricists, in particular the physician David Hartley. Hartley's 1749 work, *Observations on Man*, sought to combine some "hints concerning the performance of sensation and motion" in the *Principia* and *Optics* of Newton with the empiricism of Locke and his successors.<sup>12</sup> Hartley's purpose was to refute Cartesian dualism by explaining the mind in strictly physiological terms, and its operations—from memory and intellect to the passions, volition, and imagination—as governed exclusively by the principle of association. This is the framework within which Hazlitt makes his argument. A theme to which Hazlitt often returns is Hartley's aim of reducing abstract ideas to physical sensations. Hartley describes his rationale this way:

One may hope, therefore, by pursuing and perfecting the doctrine of association, we may some time or other be enabled to analyse all that vast variety of complex ideas, which pass under the name of ideas of reflection, and intellectual ideas, into their simple compounding parts, *i.e.*, into the simple ideas of sensation, of which they consist. This would be greatly analogous to the arts of writing, and resolving the colour of the sun's light, or natural bodies, into their primary constituent ones.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding how association works is of "the utmost consequence to morality and religion" because it will enable individuals to foster morally desirable tendencies and to "check and root out such as are mischievous and immoral. . . ."<sup>14</sup> This is why Hazlitt feels it necessary to deal with Hartley in making his case for altruism by arguing that all the variations of the flawed moral theory of innate self-interest are built on an equally flawed theory of the nature of the brain and its operations.

Although Hazlitt believed that associationism explained much about mental life, he had a number of objections to Hartley's version of it, including his theory of vibrations. Two are fundamental. First, contrary to Hartley's claim in the *Observations*, association is not the only principle governing mental activity. Hazlitt asserts that reason, abstraction, judgment, and imagination are independent faculties of the mind, not—as Hartley and his followers would argue—just other names for certain ways of associating ideas: "In every comparison made by the mind of one idea with another, that is perception of agreement, or disagreement, or of any kind of relation between them, I conceive that there is something implied with is essentially different from any association of ideas."<sup>15</sup>

This "something implied" is the power of the mind to organize its perceptions, not only its sensations but its reflections on those sensations. Which leads to his second objection: associationism cannot tell us anything about the *relation* between sensations, or between sensation and reflection. To illustrate, Hazlitt, employs the earthy analogy of a "heap of mites in a rotten cheese":

No one will contend that in this heap of living matter there is any idea of the number, position, or intricate involutions of that little, lively, restless tribe. This idea is evidently not contained in any of the parts separately, nor is it contained in all of them put together. That is, the aggregate of many actual sensations is, we here plainly see, a totally different

thing from the collective idea, comprehension, or *consciousness* of those sensations as many things, or of any of their relations to each other. We may go on multiplying and combining sensations to the end of time without ever . . . producing a single thought.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the insentient cheese, the human brain functions as a “common medium” in which “the same thinking principle is at the same time conscious of different impressions, and of their relations to each other.”<sup>17</sup> Hartley had said that stimuli in the environment create vibrations along the nerves that subsequently set up smaller vibrations in the medullary substance, which then generate impressions in a specific order in specific parts of the brain. Hazlitt argues that sensory data and ideas go to all parts of the brain at once, or at least in quick succession; that is the nature of consciousness. Hartley’s theory cannot explain the most basic of mental activities, thinking and feeling. Both, Hazlitt says, are inseparable because the “human mind . . . cannot feel *without* thinking.” If Hartley is correct and the brain is simply an organ that mechanically connects one impression with another according to certain fixed rules, neither thinking nor feeling is possible. Associationism according to Hartley can only lead to cognitive gridlock.

To this point, Hazlitt’s criticisms of Hartley have much in common with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s later critique in *Biographia Literaria*. Like Hazlitt, Coleridge maintains that Hartley’s theory eradicates will, reason, and judgment as “distinct powers” of the mind, and reduces cognitive activity to a division between “the despotism of outer impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory.”<sup>18</sup> But in order to prove his theory that disinterestedness is an inherent possibility of human nature, Hazlitt must do more than demolish Hartley’s explanation of the brain’s operations. If he is going to refute the Hobbesian position that self-interest is everywhere and ineradicable, and the view that the tendency toward self-interest is inevitable but can be redirected, he must establish an alternative model of the mind that incorporates the potential for disinterestedness in its basic structure.

### The “metaphysical discovery”

At the end of the *Essay*, Hazlitt tells us that he came upon his “metaphysical discovery” about humanity’s disposition to act unselfishly while reading a passage from d’Holbach’s *System of Nature*.<sup>19</sup> This passage, a description of the defiant stance of condemned atheists at the Last Judgment, led him to speculate on a moral question: would it be a virtuous gesture to offer to sacrifice himself to save twenty others from eternal damnation? His first answer is yes. But it soon occurs to him that his future self would regret what his present self had done. The two selves, he reasons, are really one, the same person at different times—“It is this continued consciousness of my own feelings which gives me an immediate interest in whatever relates to my future welfare, and makes me at all times accountable to myself for my own conduct.”<sup>20</sup>

But then he asks himself another and different question: what if the Deity were to transfer Hazlitt’s consciousness to another being, or replicate it in a hundred other beings? Are they all the same person, or is one more representative of his specific self than the others?

Here then I saw an end to my speculations about absolute self-interest, and personal identity. I saw plainly that the consciousness of my own feelings which is made the foundation of my continued interest in them could not extend to what had never been, and

might never be, that my identity with myself must be confined to the connection to my past and present being, that with respect to my future feelings or interest, they could have no communication with, or influence over my present feelings merely because they were future.<sup>21</sup>

This is the linchpin of Hazlitt's argument about why the potential for disinterestedness is a structural characteristic of human cognition: "I cannot therefore have a principle of active self-interest arising out of the immediate connection between my present and future self, for no such connection exists, or is possible." We cannot be automatically—that is, involuntarily—self-interested because our present selves have no connection with our future ones, and thus no way of knowing what our self-interest would even mean in the context of an unknown and unknowable future. To assume otherwise is a logical impossibility.

Memory, Hazlitt explains, gives us access to past experience; consciousness, which he defines "as literally the same with *conscientia*, the knowing or perceiving many things by a simple act," relays to us our feelings, impressions, and sensations as they come and go in the moment. Memory and consciousness together create our individual identities. Our sense of self grows out of contact with others. We learn that many of our own "impressions, ideas, feelings, powers" are similar to theirs. At the same time, in comparing ourselves to others we also realize that the "peculiar connection" among our various faculties and perceptions means that our reactions are not universal but distinctly our own.<sup>22</sup> This realization extends to our own bodies: "It is by the impinging of other objects against the different parts of our bodies, or of the body against itself so as to affect the sense of touch, that extends (though perhaps somewhat indirectly) the feeling of personal identity to our external form."<sup>23</sup>

But we do not have the same access to our future bodies and our future selves. We have no faculty of the mind that will telegraph in advance what sensations we will experience, say, a year from now, and how we will feel about them—only an "indistinct idea of extended consciousness." In sum, "A man's personal identity and self-interest . . . can reach no farther than his actual existence," any more than a river can flow backwards:

In short there neither is nor can be any principle . . . which antecedently gives [the individual] the sort of connection with his future being that he has with his past, or that reflects the impressions of his future feelings backwards with the same kind of consciousness that his past feelings are transmitted forwards through the channels of memory. The size of the river as well as it's taste depends on the water that has already fallen into it. It cannot roll back it's course, nor can the stream next the source be affected by the water that falls into it afterwards. Yet we call both the same river. Such is the nature of personal identity.<sup>24</sup>

Like Hume, Hazlitt asserts that what we call personal identity is merely a collection of fleeting impressions that never coalesces into a self that endures across time. And identity is not only temporary but fragmentary: "All individuals (or all that we name such) are aggregates, and aggregates of dissimilar things," Hazlitt says.<sup>25</sup> The structure of the self is irreversibly splintered.

We can never attain unity of consciousness—only “this pretended unity of consciousness,” as Hazlitt calls it, generated by time, reflection, habit, and the imagination.

### The imagination and the future

Hazlitt has defined identity in terms of what we can know, and this domain extends only to the past and the present. The future is a locked box to which we have no key. Or do we? He seems to hold out the possibility of prying open a way into the future in his concept of the imagination. “The imagination,” he says, “by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being, and interested in it.” Because the imagination works in the domain of things that have yet to occur, it is the faculty that makes us moral actors, by presenting various potential courses of action from which we can choose. The future is the realm of voluntary action, the exercise of the will.

The imagination can bring this impartiality to our mental and moral life because it has no particular bias in favor of our own interests as opposed to the interests of others. One reason, interestingly, is our physical isolation from other people, which leaves us unable to penetrate directly either their physical sensations or their inner experience.<sup>26</sup> “I can only abstract myself from my present being and take an interest in my future being in the same sense and manner, in which I can go out of myself entirely and enter into the minds and feelings of others,” Hazlitt writes. So we must use the same inner mechanism to assess their best interests in the *present* that we employ to calculate our own best interests in the *future*: the imagination. Self-interest, therefore, stimulates the same cognitive faculty, whether the interest in question is mine or that of my neighbor.<sup>27</sup>

We may be able to envision our future needs and desires more clearly than those of other people because we know ourselves better. But my imagination may present the plight of another in such vivid and compelling forms that I may actually choose to identify with his welfare rather than my own, as Hazlitt did in his thought experiment about the twenty atheists at the Last Judgment. This tendency to identify with the welfare of others can be deflected or submerged by “habit and circumstances.” Left to its own devices, human nature will pursue the good, though if we are told often enough that altruism is rare and self-interested behavior is natural, it is not surprising if we begin acting as if those statements were true.

Many Hazlitt critics have pointed out that the *Essay* contains the first formulation of his theory of the imagination as the mental faculty that makes possible both moral agency and self-transcendence through sympathetic identification with others. But Hazlitt also has things to say about the imagination that suggest a less distinctive and less powerful faculty. He does not oppose the imagination to reason, for example, as he sometimes tended to do in his later writings, but to sensation (the present) or memory (the past). And while the imagination liberates us from the prison of the moment by allowing us to project ourselves forward into the future, it can also reinforce our errors about the nature of the self. David Bromwich writes that the “imagination . . . gives us our only idea of personal identity,” but the *Essay* suggests it is a *wrong* idea.<sup>28</sup> The imagination is a potent source (along with reflection and habit) of the mistaken impression that our “indistinct sense of continued consciousness” means that we have stable identities: “As our actual being is constantly passing into our future being, and carries this

internal feeling of consciousness along with it, we seem to be already identified with our future being. . . . It is no wonder then that the imagination constantly outstripping the progress of time . . . [should] confer on my future interest a reality, and a connection with my present feelings which they can never have.” Hazlitt sometimes talks about “imaginary” ideas in the negative sense, i.e., illusory notions. The ease with which we project memories of past feelings into our supposed future self, for example, endows them with “an apparent reality and *presentness* to the imagination, so that the feelings of others can never be brought home to us in the same degree.” The point is that it is easy to read the *Essay* retrospectively, from the vantage point of the later Hazlitt, as an unvarying celebration of the creative imagination. But it also contains an important warning about the imagination’s limits.

The imagination envisions the future and builds castles in the air, even though Hazlitt has already established that the future is completely unknowable, and that the self which moves into its imaginary castles—assuming this could happen—will not be the same self that dreams them up in the present. It is true that Hazlitt underscores the imagination’s powers at several points in the *Essay*, but that is usually to refute “the advocates of the selfish hypothesis”—those who deny the possibility of genuine disinterestedness—who “would represent [the imagination] as a faculty entirely powerless.” Later, in his *Lectures on English Philosophy*, he asks the reader to suppose that we could feel the sensations of others as if they were our own. This is not possible, locked as we all are in our separate bodies. “But the imagination,” he says, “though not in the same degree, produces the same effects: it modifies and overrules the impulses of self-love, and binds us to the interests of others as to our own. If the imagination gives us an artificial interest in the welfare of others, if it determines my feelings and actions, and if it even for a moment draws them off from the pursuit of an abstract principle of self-interest, then it cannot be maintained that self-love and benevolence are the same,” i.e., that disinterested behavior is a disguised form of self-interest.<sup>29</sup> The imagination is not powerless, but it is not the strong creative force of Hazlitt’s later writings. And there are signs of doubt even in some of those later writings. The Hazlitt of *Table-Talk* (1821–22), John Kinnaird writes, while he still “loves and delights in the imagination, no longer identifies with its powers, but seeks continually to penetrate its illusions, as of all other subtle deceptions of the passional self.”<sup>30</sup> The seeds of this skepticism are already visible in the *Essay*.

The model of mental life in the *Essay* is one in which the mind has access to a rich array of cognitive experiences, both rational and non-rational, and an innate ability to organize and make sense of its external and internal impressions. But it is hemmed in by the temporal structure of consciousness—that is, by the total inaccessibility of the future—and by the intrinsic instability of personal identity. As the *Essay* unfolds, the imagination is called in to serve (among other things) as a force that unifies the self by making it a moral agent through sympathetic identification with others. Yet his description of the imagination is inconsistent, alternately emphasizing its power and its weakness. In the end, the imagination complicates rather than resolves the structural discontinuities in the *Essay*’s model of mind.

In a footnote to his discussion of David Hartley’s system, Hazlitt comments on the experience of reading him: “I confess I feel in reading Hartley something in the way in which the Dryads must have done shut up in their old oak trees. I feel my sides pressed hard, and bored with points of knotty inferences piled up one upon another without being able ever to recollect myself, or catch a glimpse of the actual world without me.”<sup>31</sup> Hartley, had he lived to read it, could have said exactly the same thing about the *Essay*. In virtually every way it is unlike what

we associate with Hazlitt's style—its shaky organization, its pattern of circling and re-circling its subject rather than hitting it head on, its strained and claustrophobic quality. It is as if Hazlitt cannot find a place to stand from which he can get a clear and comprehensive view of the mind and its operations—or his argument. Consciousness turns out to be too big, too rich, and too varied to organize. The three principles of human action he cites, with little discussion, at the end—the love of good or happiness, the love of truth, and the love of power—may “mix with, and modify all our pursuits,” but they do not confer order or coherence on inner life.

In attempting to refute the materialist views of Hartley and Helvétius that the will is driven exclusively by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain, Hazlitt hoped to open up an alternative perspective on the roots of human action. The *Essay* envisioned a boundary between thought and action lying along the point at which we try to imagine the future and the array of alternatives available to us. At this internal crossroads, he argues, we become moral agents by exercising our freedom to choose. But the odd result is that his argument is open to the interpretation that our ability to act has not been expanded but nullified. How can we choose when we have no way of penetrating our future identity and what *it* would desire, except through the uncertain avenue of the imagination? Hazlitt wants to reveal the springs of human action, but ends by suggesting that even the idea of a unified actor is tenuous at best.

### **The *Essay* reconsidered**

And that—his theory of personal identity—may be the most important contribution of the *Essay*. Raymond Martin and John Barresi, a philosopher and a psychologist who have written extensively on the history of personal identity theory, have argued that Hazlitt's originality lay in elucidating two issues that his predecessors from John Locke on had insufficiently explored.

The first is his description of how children acquire their self-concepts through a process that occurs in stages—something earlier writers had failed to address in any detail.<sup>32</sup> The second is his use of fission identity—the thought experiment in which he speculates about the implications of transferring an individual's consciousness to another being or beings. Although Locke may have presented the first example of fission identity in his speculations about the transfer of consciousness from the body of an individual to his severed finger, he did not pursue very far the ramifications for theories about the self.<sup>33</sup> Hazlitt, on the other hand, made fission identity the foundation for his argument about its unreality. In Martin and Barresi's words:

Hazlitt rejected Locke's idea that each of us has an intuitive knowledge of our own existence as a self, as well as Locke's commitment to the reflexive nature of consciousness. Instead of these, Hazlitt embraced the idea, as had Hume, that the self is a fictional construct. . . . [and] then not only conceded but embraced and celebrated the idea that the self is a fictional construct, since, in his view, it had the further implication that people have no special (“self-interested”) reason to value their future selves. . . . In a way that clearly anticipated the work of Derek Parfit and others in our own times, Hazlitt tried to explain how the idea that the self is a fiction, far from being destructive to theories of rationality and ethics, actually made them better.<sup>34</sup>



Given that most discussions of Hazlitt's theory of personal identity have downplayed its importance as a "metaphysical discovery," Martin and Baressi's reassessment amounts to a Copernican revolution in the interpretive history of the *Essay*. The shift of emphasis from altruism to identity as the *Essay*'s main event is also consistent with Hazlitt's own view. His later references to it make clear he considered the theory of identity a genuine philosophical contribution in which he took great pride.

But useful as it was to his case that the mind is naturally disposed to altruism, Hazlitt seems to have been more ambivalent about the idea of a fictional self than Martin and Baressi suggest. In the "Letter to William Gifford, Esq.," Hazlitt explains his theory of personal identity in darker terms:

For, how can this pretended unity of consciousness, which is only reflected from the past, which makes me so little acquainted with the future, that I cannot even tell for a moment how long it will be continued, whether it will be entirely interrupted by, or renewed in me after death, and which might be multiplied in I don't know how many different beings, and prolonged by complicated sufferings, without my being any the wiser for it; how, I ask, can a principle of this sort transfuse my present into my future being, and make me as much a participator in what does not at all affect me as if it were actually impressed upon my senses? . . . The next year, the next hour, the next moment is but a creation of the mind; in all that we hope or fear, love or hate, in all that is nearest and dearest to us, we but mistake the strength of illusion for certainty, and follow the mimic shows of things and catch at a shadow and live in a waking dream. . . . that self which we project before us is like a shadow in the water, a bubble of the brain.<sup>35</sup>

Here, thinking about the personal implications of his convictions about the self, Hazlitt has descended from the heights of theory to the reality of existential dread. The sense of threat in this passage clearly relates to the future. The *Essay* defined identity in terms of what we can know, and what we can know extends only to the past and the present. The result is that, whether from personal conviction or the requirements of his argument, Hazlitt has postulated a mind that is constitutionally unable to enter into a relationship with the future. He is not only saying what everyone knows—that the future is unpredictable. He is saying that the future, even as a kind of inner theater for our speculation, anticipation, and hope, is inaccessible to us. Uncertainty is not just "a structural fact about the future," as Philip Fisher says in *The Vehement Passions*. It is a structural fact about ourselves. "The elements within experience that are forced to the surface when we face the open-ended, long-term future," Fisher goes on to say, "are uncertainty and, so to speak, the cost of uncertainty in inner life."<sup>36</sup> One of the costs of Hazlitt's decision to wall off the future is to internalize a fear and distrust of the future because it is radically unknowable. While the imagination reaches into futurity to make moral choice possible for us, it cannot dissipate the sense of unreality and groundlessness we experience behind the iron bars of the present. This is a permanent condition because the future exists not only in its long-term aspect; it is always coming at us, as the present moment continually slips into the next.

When Hume examined his inner life, he found impressions and sensations but nothing that added up to a self. Hazlitt's route to a similar conclusion was different, via the notion that consciousness is inherently unstable because it is (at least theoretically) portable, not tied to a particular body. The idea of fission identity, invoked to advance the argument for human altruism, makes Hazlitt's concept of a fragmented self more ambiguous and psychologically dynamic than Hume's. This is evident in the passage from the "Letter to Gifford" with its restless, ceaselessly moving, and erratic version of consciousness that can be "renewed in me after death" or "multiplied in I don't know how many different beings." Whatever its force as a theoretical position, the denial of a permanent human identity means that, on the level of actual human experience, consciousness *is* identity, if only by default. Hazlitt says this explicitly at one point in the *Essay*: if his account of personal identity is true, he writes, "it will follow that those faculties which may be said to constitute self, and the operations of which convey that idea to the mind draw all their materials from the past and the present."<sup>37</sup>

And in fact when Hazlitt looks inside, he does find at least a version of a self: "I am who I am in spite of the future," he writes in the *Essay*. This time his stance seems more aggressive than anxious, more determined than passive. The imperviousness of the future to our aspirations and desires has the potential to consolidate our current (if impermanent) identities and ground us in the experience of the moment. We must make our choices, moral and otherwise, in an environment marked by such pervasive uncertainty that a logical reaction is existential defiance.

In his study of the evolution of the modern concept of selfhood, the philosopher Charles Taylor describes a broad empiricist trend, beginning with Descartes, toward reifying personal experience. This trend, especially pronounced in Locke's writings, encouraged "a new, unprecedentedly radical form of self-objectification. . . . [which] demands that we stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits and, by making them objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny and remaking."<sup>38</sup> Taylor sees a relationship between this extreme self-disengagement and Locke's speculations about consciousness inhabiting two bodies, or bodies exchanging consciousness. He considers the idea of multiplying or migrating selves an illusion, whether entertained by John Locke or Derek Parfit, but an entirely logical outgrowth of Locke's premise that each of us is an independent consciousness capable of remaking ourselves from the bottom up. Although there seems to be no such premise behind Hazlitt's theory of identity, it is one of the curious aspects of his thinking that he chose a self modeled on Locke and Hume. The result is a theory of personal identity that marries a strongly self-organizing mind to a permanently fragmented consciousness.

It is possible that the idea of a constantly changing self was suggested to him by Bishop Joseph Butler's discussion of Locke in *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Locke's observations on consciousness and identity, Butler writes, "have been carried to a strange length by others," and he distills these odd notions as follows:

That personality is not a permanent, but a transient thing: that it lives and dies, begins and ends, continually: that no one can any more remain one and the same person two moments together, than two successive moments can be one and the same moment. . . . And from hence it must follow, that it is a fallacy upon ourselves, to charge our present selves with anything we did, or to imagine our present selves interested in any thing

which befell us yesterday, or that our present self will be interested in what will befall us to-morrow; since our present self is not, in reality, the same with the self of yesterday, but another like self or person coming in its room, and mistaken for it; to which another self will succeed tomorrow. This, I say, must follow: for if the self or person of today, and that of tomorrow, are not the same, but only like persons, the person of today is really no more interested in what will befall the person of tomorrow, than in what will befall any other person.<sup>39</sup>

It is tempting to speculate that Hazlitt's "metaphysical discovery," as described in the *Essay*, began as a purely intellectual exercise aimed at solving a hitch in his argument: how do you demonstrate that altruism is, if not exactly innate, such a powerful human tendency that it is essentially independent of both learned behavior and such rewards as a gratifying sense of virtue? This interpretation might help explain a curious statement of Hazlitt's quoted by David Bromwich: "Near the end of his life, Hazlitt said he believed in the 'theoretical benevolence and practical malignity' of mankind."<sup>40</sup> His radical solution in the *Essay* was to reconceive personal identity as involving a serial self. The passage in the "Letter to Gifford," written fourteen years later, reflects a deeper psychological understanding of the disturbing implications of this idea.

A European critic of empiricism, a contemporary of Hazlitt's, could have given him a different perspective on personal identity. Maine de Biran (1766–1824) was a French philosopher, a student of Destutt de Tracy. Tracy disputed Condillac's conclusion (from his famous discussion of the statue) that the hand is the principal organ through which we come into contact with the world, arguing that this explanation omits an important step: we do not *understand* exteriority until the hand has actually touched an object and felt its resistance. This is a crucial point, Tracy believes, because Condillac's explanation of sensations "could never account for our perception of space and body without some reference to the willed movement of the percipient."<sup>41</sup>

Biran embraced Tracy's idea and took it several steps further. One was to assert that the interior awareness of voluntary effort, together with the physical movement that follows, is a primary experience fundamental to all human knowledge. Biran's general point, in opposition to Locke and Hume, is that our knowledge does not derive exclusively from the kaleidoscope of perceptions and impressions offered by the external world. His specific point is that these constantly changing sense data must be seen in terms of, and in fact imply, an internal center that receives them, "and this internal experience 'is nothing but unity amidst plurality.'"<sup>42</sup> He argued further the impossibility of satisfactorily explaining memory and attention without assuming a self that is permanent.<sup>43</sup> Our experience of our own persistent, interior willing amid the flux of sensation is what gives us our sense of self. He was familiar with Kant's system and agreed with him on "the foundational activity of the self," although he insisted that this activity could only be known through the body.<sup>44</sup>

Hazlitt went part of the way toward Biran's position. He emphasized the plurality rather than the unity of inner life, but he also argued strenuously for the mind's power to organize experience, which he called the understanding in his later *Lectures on English Philosophy*. He also shared Biran's premise that interior experience is fundamental to human knowledge. From

Bacon onward, Hazlitt believed, the word *experience* had been wrongly interpreted by sensationalist philosophers. “Our knowledge of mental phaenomena from consciousness, reflection, or observation of their correspondent signs in others is the true basis of metaphysical inquiry, as the knowledge of *facts* is the only solid basis of natural philosophy. To argue otherwise is to assert that the best method of ascertaining the properties of air is by making experiments on mineral substances.”<sup>45</sup> The difference between them, and the significance for Hazlitt’s theory, is that Biran anchors the self in our continuing inward sense of the body’s capacity for action. The body’s awareness of willing in the present moment is all the proof we need that the self exists. For the Hazlitt of the *Essay*, the experience of willing is always linked to choice, and thus to the future, where the body cannot go. Nor does he use the body as the locus of experience in the way that Biran does. Hazlitt mentions the body frequently in the *Essay*, but in the context of vibrations and fragmentary sensations, not in Biran’s integrated fashion. Still, there is one passage in the *Essay* that moves obliquely in Biran’s direction by using the body as an example of *real* unity of consciousness:

The puncture of a pin causing an irritation in the extremity of one of the nerves is sensibly felt along the whole extent of that nerve; a violent pain in any of the limbs disorders the whole frame; I feel at the same moment the impressions made on opposite parts of my body; the same conscious principle pervades every part of me, it is in my hands, my feet, my eyes, my ears at the same time, or at any rate is immediately affected by whatever is impressed on all these, it is not confined to this, or that organ for a certain time, it has an equal interest in the whole sentient system, nothing that passes in any part of it can be indifferent to me. Here we have a distinct idea of a real individuality of person, and a consequent identity of interests.<sup>46</sup>

The body can do what the mind cannot: pain may be localized in an arm or leg, but the news that we have sustained an injury is communicated throughout the entire nervous system. It could be argued that the body unifies consciousness by crowding out the future, since pain instantly mobilizes all our mental and physical faculties to deal with the crisis. Yet even when the circumstances are unpleasant, the body offers, as the mind cannot, an experience of wholeness—the “intercommunity of thoughts and feelings” that is Hazlitt’s criterion for authentic identity. Hazlitt’s interest in the role of the body in knowing emerges in his post-*Essay* writings, where his descriptions of athletic prowess, for example, sometimes have as their subtext the inner states that support movements of the body. But if he was in some way drawing on the work of Condillac, Tracy, or Biran, I have found no explicit reference to them.

Martin and Baressi see Hazlitt’s theory of identity as facing in two directions at once (a characteristic that is also true of some of his other writings, as I will discuss). It is, they write, the culmination of a line of philosophical thought that had been spun out at least since Locke. It is also the beginning of a new line of speculation that, after Hazlitt’s *Essay*, lay dormant for 150 years until the revival of interest in fission identity in the 1960s. “In sum,” they conclude, “*as personal identity theorist*, Hazlitt, like Vico before him, is a fascinating example of what is sometimes dismissed as a romantic fiction: the original and penetrating thinker whose insights and perspectives are so far ahead of his own times that they drop through the cracks of history.”<sup>47</sup>

Over time, and in direct and indirect ways, Hazlitt turns to some of the submerged implications of his theory concerning identity, knowledge, and the future. In his post-*Essay* work, he asks a different kind of question about knowledge—not just about what we can know, but about what knowledge does to us. There are occasions, especially in *The Spirit of the Age*, when knowledge itself becomes the symbolic representation of the aggressively kinetic consciousness of the “Letter to Gifford.” The unmoored nature of identity, “this indefinite unit, called *me*,”<sup>48</sup> constitutes a vacuum that knowledge can usurp, creating, to borrow Bishop Butler’s words, “another like self or person coming in its room, and mistaken for it.” On these occasions, however, Hazlitt seems to be saying that the identity created by knowledge is not a mistake but more like a case of possession: knowledge exerts a level of control over the individual that can make it, in effect, the only identity available. Under these circumstances, knowledge is not power but subjection. De Quincey, who so far as we know did not share Hazlitt’s theory of identity, nonetheless presents his own compelling version of this experience and of the fissured Romantic perspective on knowledge.

Futurity, one of the anchors of the *Essay*’s argument, remains distant and largely inaccessible in Hazlitt’s writings. “The future,” he tells us, “is like a dead wall or a thick mist hiding all objects from our view: the past is alive and stirring with objects, bright or solemn, and of unfading interest.”<sup>49</sup> The “ignorant future” is not something Hazlitt likes to contemplate. Instead he buries it in the past by brooding, in elegiac fashion, on the death of hopes he had once cherished. Imagining what may come has only one potential advantage: the anticipation of reward is a spur to ambition. But even this advantage has its limits and emotional penalties. Visions of futurity rouse the passions, even in the pursuit of the arts and sciences, and rob life of tranquility and contentment. “The ferment of the brain does not of itself subside into pleasure and soft repose.”<sup>50</sup> The past is a refuge because (unlike the future) it cannot be changed. The only possibilities it offers have already been foreclosed, ending the need for struggle.

Hazlitt maintains the *Essay*’s radical disjuncture between the future on the one hand, and past and present on the other, in his later analyses of the state of contemporary British society; he insists that the only engine of social and political progress is the consciousness of present anger engendered by past oppression. In contrast to Shelley, whom recent criticism sees as postulating a fundamental *break* between the past and the present that opens the door to an unpredictable and apocalyptic future,<sup>51</sup> Hazlitt refuses to entertain the idea of transformative futurity. As *The Spirit of the Age* and his writings on institutions will make clear, however, the latent energies of the future have not permanently disappeared into the past. They return as a static, furious present. The image of the portrait gallery, employed in the *Essay* to represent the directionless fixity of Hartleian associationism, becomes Hazlitt’s model of the structural cognitive paralysis of British society and its institutions.

Hazlitt continued to pursue the question of identity and its relation to what we can know. But he began to write about the relationship between the self and knowledge less like an eighteenth-century metaphysician and more like an experienced observer of human motivation and behavior in the cognitive web of nineteenth-century British society. The *Essay* is the first step in his transition from philosopher to psychologist.

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<sup>1</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 9:51.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt, "A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.," in *The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. Paulin and Chandler, 244.

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Park states in *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age* (pp. 11–12) that "In abandoning philosophy Hazlitt did not cease to philosophize," and argues that many of his post-1812 writings were directed at combating the influence of the ascendant Utilitarian philosophy. Yet he did not see the *Essay* as important to Hazlitt's contributions to the intellectual discourse of the period, asserting that its "intrinsic merits as a work of philosophy are slight" and that it "is not to be valued highly . . . as a positive investigation of metaphysical truth." Its significance lies elsewhere: "Dramatically, it is invaluable, both as an exhibition of character, beliefs, and attitudes, and as representative of a perennial posture of mind in the youthful idealist." Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*, 45. According to Hazlitt biographer Herschel Baker, his "first awkward little book," which "no one reads with pleasure and that few would care to read at all" at least "provided him with a reservoir for the ideas, or at any rate the emotions and convictions, that would serve him to the end." Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 142, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Hazlitt's contributions to philosophical and psychological identity theory are discussed later in this chapter. Sociologist Jack Barbalet argues that Hazlitt's *Essay* also makes an important contribution to the discussion of sociological action theory through its critique of the concept of self-interest, "the significance of which is not simply in its intrinsic value but in the fact that it remains a unique presentation of the argument." See Barbalet, "Disinterestedness and Self-Formation," 195–211.

<sup>7</sup> "My First Acquaintance with Poets," in *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt*, 501.

<sup>8</sup> Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 48. The first line of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggests that to some degree he sees sympathy as intrinsic: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it." W. P. Albrecht argues that Smith's view resembles Hazlitt's, with one difference: Hazlitt maintains that "We seek the good of another person not because, as Adam Smith seems to say, we share his suffering and therefore act automatically to reduce his pain and our own, but because the removal or avoidance of another's pain is a good in itself and immediately recognized as such." Albrecht, *Hazlitt and the Creative Imagination*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action to Which are added Some Remarks on the Systems of Harley and Helvétius*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:5.

<sup>11</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:6.

<sup>12</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:69.

<sup>17</sup> *Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvétius*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:53.

<sup>18</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Hazlitt attributes the book to Mirabaud, not to its real author, Baron d'Holbach. But he may have been referring to a much shorter work of the same title that was published anonymously and was variously attributed to Helvétius and Mirabaud. This shorter book appears to have been a selection of passages from d'Holbach's *System of Nature*.

<sup>20</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> In his *Lectures on English Philosophy* (1812), Hazlitt puts it this way: "There is no communication between my nerves and another's brain, by which he can be affected with my sensations as I am myself. The only notice or perception which another can have of this sensation in me, or which I can have of a similar sensation in another, is by means of the imagination. I can form an imaginary idea of that pain as existing out of myself; but I can only feel it as a sensation when it is actually impressed on myself. Any impression made on another can neither be the cause

nor the object of sensation to me. . . . I do not remember the feelings of any one but myself.” *Complete Works*, 2:238.

<sup>27</sup> “[I]f I wish to anticipate my own future feelings, whatever these may be, I must do so by means of the same faculty by which I conceive of those of others, whether past or future. I have no distinct or separate faculty on which the events and feelings of my future being are impressed before hand, and which shows, as in an enchanted mirror, to me, and me alone, the reversed picture of my future life. . . . I can only abstract myself from this present being, and take an interest in my future being, in the same sense and manner in which I can go out of myself entirely, and enter into the minds and feelings of others.” *Lectures on English Philosophy*, in *Complete Works* 2:238–39.

<sup>28</sup> Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:231.

<sup>30</sup> Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 270.

<sup>31</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:59.

<sup>32</sup> Martin and Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul*, 143–45. The three stages of children’s development are (1) awareness of their experience of pleasure and pain; (2) incorporation of their own past in their ideas of themselves; and (3) incorporation of their imagined futures into their self-concepts. The authors suggest that Hazlitt may have taken the first two stages from Locke, but that the third is original. Earlier in the *Essay*, Hazlitt also says that a young child initially “wills and pursues his own good not because it is *his* but because it is *good*” and because he knows his own wants and desires better than those of others (p. 12).

<sup>33</sup> Martin and Baressi, *Naturalization of the Soul*, 31–32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 9:57–58.

<sup>36</sup> Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*, 111–12.

<sup>37</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:40.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 171, 174–75.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Butler, “Of Personal Identity,” in *Personal Identity*, ed. Perry, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Hallie, *Maine de Biran*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>44</sup> Tresch, *The Romantic Machine*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> *Prospectus of a History of English Philosophy*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:114.

<sup>46</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:10.

<sup>47</sup> Martin and Baressi, *Naturalization of the Soul*, 139.

<sup>48</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:241.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:21–22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 8:30.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, “Shelley’s Metaleptic Imagination and the Future of Modern Sovereignty,” in Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignties*.

## Chapter Two: The Object of Feeling

*Only a fraction of what goes on mentally is really clean enough and well lit enough to be noticed, and yet it is there, not far at all, and perhaps available if only you try.*

Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, 1999

“Dear Sir,” Hazlitt wrote to a London merchant named Hardy in the spring of 1811, “I was obliged to leave London without discharging my promise,” which was to pay for a pair of boots. “If you can defer it until October, when I shall be in London to deliver some Lectures, by which I will pick up some money, I shall esteem it a favour, and shall be glad to pay you the interest from the time I was in London last.”<sup>1</sup> The money-making venture Hazlitt mentions was his *Lectures on English Philosophy*. He wrote Crabb Robinson a few months later with a list of the subjects he proposed to cover over the course of ten lectures, beginning with Thomas Hobbes and concluding with “an argument on natural religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Lectures were an immensely popular form of education and entertainment during the Romantic period. The diffusion of useful knowledge was an Enlightenment enthusiasm, and in the late eighteenth century new venues sprang up to meet demand. The Royal Institution, founded in 1799 at the instigation of Count Rumford (that is, Benjamin Thompson, an American loyalist who had abandoned the colonies for Great Britain during the American Revolution) and Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society, was dedicated to informing the public about the latest scientific and technological discoveries. By 1808, as Charles Lamb writes in one of his letters, there were “ten thousand institutions similar to the Royal Institution” in London, all devoted to improving the minds of an eager public.<sup>3</sup> In that same letter, Lamb relates how Coleridge had received a considerable sum for a series of public lectures (although he characteristically failed to complete the promised number), adding his conviction that “public reading-rooms [are] the best mode of educating young men. Solitary reading is apt to give the headache.”<sup>4</sup> The Russell Scientific and Literary Institution, where Hazlitt delivered his *Lectures*, emulated the older organization in offering its subscribers a library (which ultimately grew to 17,000 volumes), a reading room, and a program of lectures on various topics.

The idea of a lecture series appealed to Hazlitt as a ready way to obtain some much-needed income from the thinking and writing he had been doing in preparation for a projected history of English philosophy. It was an enterprise plagued with difficulties from the outset, however, not least because he lacked the established reputation that would guarantee a good turnout. Lectures were free to those with subscriptions to the Russell Institution but not to non-members, forcing him to beg his friends to buy tickets; some were offended by his approach. The first lecture in January 1812, attended by Lamb, John Thelwall, and Hazlitt’s brother-in-law John Stoddart, was a disaster. Robinson records in his diary that Hazlitt read the entire lecture in a monotone, rarely lifting his eyes from the text. His performance was so bad that Stoddart wrote him a long letter of unsolicited advice, leaving Hazlitt so dispirited that he considered abandoning the lectures altogether.<sup>5</sup> He persevered nonetheless, despite occasionally sparse



attendance and a brief hiatus in the lectures brought on by a scarcity of funds. Robinson's criticism modulated into praise as Hazlitt's speaking style and ease at the podium steadily improved over the course of the lectures. The last, delivered in April, was a resounding success. Robinson relates that Hazlitt concluded it by half-agreeing with Hume's remark that metaphysics was "perhaps . . . not worth the study, but . . . there are persons who can find no better mode of amusing themselves."<sup>6</sup>

Although he tried to get the lectures published, they did not appear during his lifetime and were lost after his death until his son resurrected them from "an old hamper which many years ago he stuffed confusedly full of MSS. and odd volumes of books, and left in the *care* of some lodging-house people, by whom it was thrown into a cellar, so damp that even the covers of some of the books were fast mouldering when I first looked over the collection."<sup>7</sup> As a result, we have only five of the original lectures, to which P. P. Howe added a separate essay, "On Abstract Ideas," in his 1930 edition of the complete works.<sup>8</sup>

Besides testifying to the often precarious and unsettled character of Hazlitt's personal life, this story sums up several realities about his career as a philosophical and psychological thinker. He was writing for a limited and demanding market (the educated public, in this case subscribers willing to pay to hear a series of lectures on a highly intellectual topic); he did not have the entrepreneurial skills to sell himself or his philosophical wares, despite his later standing as a critic of literature and politics; and his intellectual contributions were obscured—relegated to a cellar figuratively as well as literally—by having been, of necessity, scattered throughout the popular essays that were his bread and butter as a professional journalist. The *Lectures* were his introduction to the harsh discipline of the literary marketplace and the last time he was to make an extended philosophical argument before the public.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the end of Hazlitt's ambition to spend his life immersed in metaphysical questions was not an entirely unfortunate event. Although he never learned how to make either philosophy or journalism a profitable pursuit in the early nineteenth-century cultural marketplace, in other ways he used the limits it imposed to good effect. The intellectual versatility that made him a wide-ranging critic also made him sensitive to currents of thought in a culture that was teeming with new ideas about the body, brain science, education, emotion, and knowledge. The growth of new reading audiences, which so concerned Coleridge, was an opportunity to circulate his ideas in a society in which formal education, confined largely to the elite, was mostly a private affair, and periodicals were a powerful political, social, and intellectual force.<sup>10</sup>

As British scholar Tim Milnes points out, "the restructuring of knowledge" has long been recognized as a major phenomenon of the Romantic era, when discussion of philosophical topics was migrating from books to periodicals.<sup>11</sup> Hazlitt applied his exceptional intellectual gifts to the essay form with remarkable success; writing in a discursive style and on a smaller scale seemed to agree with him. His works, metaphysical and journalistic alike, are a useful vantage point for thinking about mind and knowledge in the early nineteenth century and the tensions, contradictions, and occasional harmonies of Enlightenment and Romantic perspectives.

Hazlitt's contribution to the restructuring of knowledge in the period begins with a challenge to Hobbesian materialism and evolves into a theory of embodied knowledge. In simplest terms, it is a transition to a view of mind that is more psychological than philosophical,

more dependent on ordinary experience than on epistemological absolutes, more precise than his formal metaphysical exercises were about the role of feeling and the bodily basis of knowledge and meaning. Although we can see hints of it as early as the *Essay* and the *Lectures*, this evolution takes place largely in the post-1812 writings and, I will argue, is crystallized in several of Hazlitt's essays from *Table-Talk* (1821–22).

What I hope to accomplish in this chapter is an analysis of his developing account of knowledge from several different perspectives. First is the *Lectures*, which presented Hazlitt with the opportunity to revisit some of the epistemological questions he had raised in the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* by going deeper into their roots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. After a brief excursion into the relationship between empiricism and idealism in the *Lectures* and Hazlitt's general philosophical approach, I discuss the evidence for his journey toward a more pragmatic view of knowledge, expressed in his fascination with how individuals extract and distill insights from everyday experience. And although I see connections in Hazlitt to American Pragmatism's concern with the relationship between thought and action as articulated by William James and John Dewey, the theorist I draw on—perhaps surprisingly—is the twentieth-century philosopher of science Michael Polanyi. Polanyi (1891–1976) was influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty and Gestalt psychologists. I have used his theory of tacit knowledge for two reasons: it has implications that go beyond scientific paradigms of knowledge, and it throws some light backward on Hazlitt's intuitions about cognition: that we know more than we can say, that what we have learned through this process is a reliable guide to experience, and that it has a deep connection to us as persons. An equally important point of connection to Hazlitt lies in his conception of knowledge as a skill, a topic I also discuss briefly in terms of Enlightenment ideas about work and craftsmanship.

Although this approach is admittedly eclectic, I believe it is generally consistent with trends in cognitive literary theory as it is practiced today. It is also consistent with a pronounced tendency among Hazlitt critics to trace intellectual parallels between his thought and that of later philosophers and psychologists. Raymond Martin and John Barresi are not the only scholars to find Hazlitt relevant to modern thinkers. Roy Park saw commonalities between Hazlitt's "experiential" philosophy and the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein; David Bromwich cites similarities between Hazlitt and William James, specifically but not exclusively in James's treatment of self-interest; William Kinnaird observes that there are aspects of Hazlitt's writings that mark him as "a distant forerunner" of James and John Dewey.<sup>12</sup>

But this is getting ahead of the story, which begins in 1812 with the *Lectures on English Philosophy*.

### Questions of mind

Hazlitt's intent in the *Lectures* is straightforward: to rescue mind from the tyranny of matter. He begins by condensing "the material or *modern* philosophy"—essentially, empiricism as it had developed since the time of Francis Bacon—into three sweeping claims: that "all thought is to be resolved into sensation, all morality into the love of pleasure, and all action into mechanical impulse."<sup>13</sup> Although Bacon had done "nothing but insist on the necessity of experience," the powerful influence of the materialists' ideas had, in essence, narrowed

philosophy's horizons to this small handful of flawed assumptions. His plan of attack is to demonstrate how profoundly they fall short of describing the real nature and activities of mind.

Despite this confident beginning, Hazlitt is aware of the powerful intellect he is up against: Thomas Hobbes, the father of modern philosophy, who was “too original and comprehensive to be immediately understood, without passing through the hands of several successive generations of commentators and interpreters.”<sup>14</sup> Berkeley ranks with him as one of “the two men of the greatest ability in modern times as metaphysicians, that is, with the greatest power of seeing things in the abstract, and of pursuing a principle into all its consequences”; Hume and Hartley come next—though even Hartley’s massive dissection of the association of ideas adds nothing truly substantive to Hobbes’s analysis.<sup>15</sup> Locke, on the other hand, is presented as little more than a dutiful disciple. Where Hobbes is bold and systematic, Locke is cautious and practical. He was “a lover of truth,” Hazlitt writes, but in fact most of Locke’s philosophy is either implicit or better stated in Hobbes, the Leviathan who contains all the nascent germs of materialist empiricism.

At one point in the *Lectures* Hazlitt pauses to list the ten leading ideas of Hobbes’s system that Locke and others embraced, and which Hazlitt intends “to oppose to the utmost of my ability”:

1. That all our ideas are derived from external objects, by means of the senses alone.
2. That as nothing exists out of the mind but matter and motion, so it is itself with all its operations nothing but matter and motion.
3. That thoughts are single, or that we can think of only one object at a time. In other words, that there is no comprehensive power or faculty of understanding in the mind.
4. That we have no general or abstract ideas.
5. That the only principle of connexion between one thought and another is association, or their previous connexion in sense.
6. That reason and understanding depend entirely on the mechanism of language.
7. and 8. That the sense of pleasure and pain is the sole spring of action, and self-interest the source of all our affections.
9. That the mind acts from a mechanical or physical necessity, over which it has no control, and consequently is not a moral or accountable agent.—The manner of stating and reasoning up on this point is the only circumstance of importance in which modern writers differ from Hobbes.
10. That there is no difference in the natural capacities of men, the mind being originally passive to all impressions alike, and becoming whatever it is from circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

“[Hobbes’s] strong mind and body,” Hazlitt explains in a striking image, “appear to have resisted all impressions but those which were derived from the downright blows of matter. . . . The external image pressed so close upon his mind that it destroyed the power of consciousness, and left no room for attention to any thing but itself.”<sup>17</sup>

Against this assault on consciousness, Hazlitt counters with his own conception of mind:

The principle which I shall attempt to prove is, that ideas are the offspring of the understanding, not of the senses. . . . by an idea I mean the conception produced by a

number of these [sensations] on the same conscious principle. . . . [mediated by] a common principle of thought, a superintending faculty, which alone perceives the relations of things and enables us to comprehend their connexions, forms, and masses. This faculty is properly the understanding, and it is by means of this faculty that man indeed becomes a reasonable soul. . . . That which we seek . . . namely, the nature of the mind and laws by which we think, feel, and act, we must discover in the mind, or not at all.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the three fundamental premises of “the material or modern philosophy” Hazlitt proclaims three of his own: the reality and integrity of inner experience; the active nature of the mind and its faculties; and the abstract character of all our ideas. The *Lectures* are structured around the errors Hazlitt believes led Hobbes and his sensationalist descendants astray. The most important are the following six claims:

- *The supremacy of language in defining truth.* Hobbes had asserted that language was constitutive of truth. “For True and False are attributes of speech, not of things,” he wrote. “And where speech is not, there is neither truth nor falsehood”:

The first truths were arbitrarily made by those that first of all imposed names upon things, or received them from the imposition of others. For it is true (for example) that *man is a living creature*, but it is for this reason, that it pleased men to impose those names on the same thing.<sup>19</sup>

Hazlitt denies this premise in his sixth objection to materialist philosophy—“That reason and understanding depend entirely on the mechanism of language.” What makes individuals men, he responds, quoting the Bishop of Worcester, is not the arbitrary assignment of a collective name but the fact “that the true and real essence of a man is in every one of them.”<sup>20</sup>

- *A narrow definition of “experience.”* Hobbes and his followers “confined [experience] to the knowledge of things without us; whereas it in fact includes all knowledge relating to objects either within or out of the mind, of which we have any direct or positive evidence. We only know that we ourselves exist, the most certain of all truths, from the experience of what passes inside ourselves.”<sup>21</sup>
- *A conception of the mind as inherently passive.* Despite the title of his treatise on the human mind, Locke includes “not really a word about the nature of the understanding” in it.<sup>22</sup> Locke, for example, “speaks of ideas as existing in the understanding like pictures in a gallery, or as if the whole process of the intellect were resolvable into the power of receiving, retaining, carrying, and transposing the gross materials furnished by the senses.”<sup>23</sup>
- *The assumption that ideas and objects are fundamentally simple.* Locke plunges off in another wrong direction by assuming that ideas and objects are at bottom simple, distinct, and isolated—“each impression shut up in the narrow cell of its own individuality.” As a result, Hazlitt says, “having laid in a certain stock of ideas without the necessity of the

understanding, it was thought an easy matter to build up the whole structure of the human mind without it, as we build a house with stones.”<sup>24</sup> This is the result of the building-block character of empiricism, which assumes that ideas are discrete things first drawn from experience and then put together, in mechanical, assembly-line fashion, in the brain.

- *The position that abstract ideas are derived from particular images.* In the dispute over whether ideas are images of sensations or have some status of their own, Hazlitt takes the position that all thought is inherently abstract. He rejects the nominalism of Locke and others that holds general ideas are created by abstracting common characteristics from individual examples: “as these writers affirm that all abstract ideas are particular images, so I shall try to prove that all particular images are abstract ideas.” This seeming paradox is due, he says, to the intrinsic limits of the human mind. Locke assumed that we could perceive objects one at a time. Hazlitt argues that even objects we regard as simple—the house across the road, for instance—are bristling with attributes beyond our ability to absorb. In a famous example of the impossibility of taking in the virtually infinite details of our perceptions, he draws on his experience as a painter:

Those who have consigned this business of abstraction over to the senses with a view to make the whole matter plain and easy, have not been aware of what they have been doing. . . . These spectators have no thought but they saw as much of a landscape as Poussin, and knew as much about a face that was before them as Titian or Vandyke would have done. This is a great mistake; . . . Ask a logician, or any common man, and he will no doubt tell you that a face is a face, a nose is a nose, a tree is a tree, and that he can see what it is as well as another. Ask a painter and he will tell you otherwise.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, we do have a working knowledge of our world, however inexact. “All particulars are . . . nothing but generals, more or less defined by circumstances, but never perfectly so; in this all our knowledge both begins and ends, and if we think to exclude all generality from our ideas of things, we must be content to remain in perfect ignorance.”<sup>26</sup>

Although Hazlitt presents his theory of abstract ideas as evidence of human cognitive limits, his explanation also implies the mind’s power to sort through sensory experience and impose coherence and meaning. His defense of abstract ideas is not simply a rebuttal of Locke but also part of his argument on behalf of the organizing powers of the mind.<sup>27</sup> The very limitations he describes force us to be selective about reality and are the agency through which we learn to master experience.

- *A neglect of the mind’s self-organizing powers and how they also generate ideas.* Locke, of course, includes the mind’s reflection on its own operations as an internal sense and (along with sensation) as a source of ideas. But Hazlitt does not consider this to be an improvement on Hobbes’s more reductionist view:

Not sensation and reflection, but sensation and the operations of our own minds are more properly the source of our ideas, that is, these two furnish *materials* for our reflection. . . . for in consequence of separating the operations of the mind in a manner from the mind

itself, and making them exist only as objects for its contemplation, Mr. Locke has been satisfied with considering those operations as acting upon the mind like external things, not as emanating from it. Thus, by a general formula, all of our ideas of every kind are represented as communicated to the mind by something foreign to it, instead of growing out of, and having a part of its own nature and essence. [emphasis added]<sup>28</sup>

And here Hazlitt gets to the heart of his argument: “*The mind alone is formative*, to use the words of a great German writer [Immanuel Kant]; or it is that alone which by its pervading and elastic energy unfolds and expands our ideas, that gives order and consistency to them, that assigns to every part its proper place, and fixes it there, and that frames the idea of the whole.” Hazlitt believes Locke’s oversimplification of the relationship between mind and experience to be the source of most of his misconceptions in the *Essay on Human Understanding*; he knows that the mind is aware of relations, but not that “this principle is at the bottom of all ideas whatever.”<sup>29</sup>

Locke is correct that there are no innate ideas, but the mind contains its own laws governing the ways we organize experience. These are “general principles or forms of thinking, something like the moulds in which any thing is cast, according to which our ideas follow one another in a certain order, though the knowledge, *i.e.* perception of what these principles are, and the forming them into distinct propositions is the result of experience. . . . The long controversy between Locke and Leibnitz with respect to innate ideas turned up the distinction here stated, innate ideas being thus referred not to the actual impression of objects, but to the forms or moulds existing in the mind, and in which those impressions are cast.” The difference between Locke’s and Leibnitz’s positions is like the difference between “a piece of free stone” that can be sculpted into any shape whatever, and “a piece of marble strongly ingrained, with the figure of a man or other animal, inclosed in it, and which the sculptor has only to separate from the surrounding mass.”<sup>30</sup>

This discussion reads very much like a gloss on Hazlitt’s earlier statement that “the mind alone is formative,” with all its Kantian reverberations. But the connection, though real, is limited. In *Emmanuel Kant in England*, René Wellek concludes that Hazlitt’s agreement with Kant rests largely on two fundamental points: “a recognition of the creative and combining activity of the mind and its central unity combined with the implied rejection of the mosaïque psychology of associationism.”<sup>31</sup> The “mosaïque” character of associationism derives from its assumption that the idea or image is the basic unit of mental life.<sup>32</sup>

## **Errors and assertions**

The *Lectures* read very much like an introductory course in philosophy: a brisk march through several centuries of major thinkers by a professor with strongly held, even nationalistic, views (French philosophers, especially Condillac, do not come off well). Hazlitt’s review of empiricism’s errors, with some brief excursions into Berkeley’s idealism, was intended to clear the ground for a conception of mind quite different from Enlightenment paradigms: less reductive and subordinate to sensation, more assertive about the mind’s ability to perceive not just things but “the relations of things,” and, in the moral domain, strenuously opposed to any theory of human choice and action that relied exclusively on the principles of pleasure and pain

(I have not gone into Hazlitt's discussion of disinterestedness in the *Lectures* because it tracks closely his analysis in the *Essay*).

The Hazlitt that emerges from the *Lectures* is—like Maine de Biran—predominantly a “reformer” of empiricism who wants to correct its missteps even as he acknowledges the utility of associationism to explaining mental processes. Yet the *Lectures*, with their discussion of the “moulds” of the mind, also suggest why it is not always easy to categorize him as an entirely empiricist thinker. Recent scholarship has challenged the longstanding idea that when Hazlitt rejected Kantianism (one explanation being that, having absorbed Coleridge's version of Kant, he considered the philosopher too “mystical”) he also rejected idealist philosophies wholesale. Uttara Natarajan, for example, argues that while Hazlitt often writes in the language of empiricism, his ideas are frequently “startlingly close” to positions expressed by such German philosophers as Schiller, Schlegel, or Kant. In Natarajan's account, the traditional critical contrast between Hazlitt's realism and Coleridge's idealism has been overdone. Hazlitt's philosophy represents “a particularly rich hybrid” of empiricism and idealism.<sup>33</sup>

Tim Milnes asserts that idealism is a latent dimension of Hazlitt's primarily empiricist theory of knowledge. Hazlitt embraced the Lockean view, he says, that knowledge consists in “a relation between persons and objects rather than between persons and sentences,” and that “[d]irect acquaintance with objects forms the foundation of thought for Hazlitt. . . .”<sup>34</sup> In the *Lectures*, at least, Hazlitt has Hobbes in mind when, in the sixth of his ten objections to modern philosophy, he denies that truth is a matter of relations between persons and language. But Milnes's larger point is that this denial created an important epistemological conflict for Hazlitt: “the object must be mastered, but there is no *a priori* basis for the veracity of the mind's projections.” This philosophical dilemma led him to “a kind of *immanent* idealism, an intensification of Hume's notion of the projective power of the mind which nonetheless struggled to ‘ground’ itself.”<sup>35</sup>

Milnes writes from the general position that Hazlitt, along with other Romantic prose writers interested in philosophical questions, was working in an environment troubled by the attack on knowledge embodied in Humean skepticism. In particular, Hume's argument that statements of value could be neither proven nor disproven threw into question the very foundation of social and religious belief about moral principles and responsibilities. The results, he says, were twofold. The sheer difficulty of assembling a convincing refutation of Hume was so formidable that it led Hazlitt, Wordsworth, and Coleridge to internalize a kind of approach-avoidance attitude toward the whole enterprise of epistemology. Their works reflect an alternation between intense involvement in theorizing about knowledge and an “erasure” of that knowledge, a flight from philosophizing toward—in Hazlitt's case—“epistemic theories of common sense, association, and the self-verifying faculty of reasoning imagination.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The instrumentality of feeling**

While I agree that Hazlitt's empirical and idealist strains enhanced rather than contradicted each other, his writings also offer ample support for Milnes's claim that the object was indeed his starting point. Yet I think what Milnes sees as Hazlitt's abandonment of formal epistemology is better seen as a redefinition of the problem of knowledge. What primarily interests Hazlitt is not a rationally based assurance of “the veracity of the mind's projections” but

the potential of the object to open into a new experience of knowledge. The outlines of this way of thinking are faintly visible even in the *Essay*, but it really takes shape in the years after the *Lectures*, as he begins to look at knowledge not simply in terms of empiricism or idealism but in the context of the body.

For Hazlitt, the road to the object is often not through the intellect but through the feelings. In the *Essay*, for example, Hazlitt makes an unflattering contrast between the English and the French, who (he writes) tend to have a superficial grasp of things because the “sensitive principle” is weaker in them than in the English. “[I]t is characteristic of the French that their feelings let go their hold of things almost as soon as the impression is made. . . . The English on the other hand . . . are in the habit of retaining individual images and of brooding over the feelings connected with them. [The French] want neither feeling nor ideas in the abstract; but there seems to be no connection in their minds between the one and the other . . . . Their feelings do not grapple with the object.”<sup>37</sup>

Implicit in this observation are the cognitive possibilities of the body as the locus of feeling. “Brooding” over a felt reaction is a way of stimulating mental processes that bring the feeling’s cognitive implications to consciousness. In an essay from *Table-Talk*, for example, he describes a portrait of Cromwell as revealing his “high-reaching policy and deep designs.” How do we know this? “First, by feeling it: and how is it that we feel it? Not by pre-established rules, but by the instinct of analogy, by the principle of association, which is subtle and sure in proportion as it is variable and indefinite.”<sup>38</sup> Hazlitt rejected phrenology as a pseudo-science, but believed the body has a language that the mind is naturally attuned to read.

John Kinnaird expresses this body-based aspect of Hazlitt’s thinking through a similarity and a contrast with Coleridge. “[T]hey both insist on life-intuition as the principle of all knowledge: Coleridge’s ‘primary imagination’ corresponds to ‘the conscious principle’ which Hazlitt sees as ‘the common sense’ of the bodily senses,” but unlike Coleridge, “Hazlitt does not let the dualism of body and mind develop into a contradistinction of opposed tendencies; for him the mind has organic intuitions not merely because its activity is distinct from the bodily senses but because it always acts *as* the mind of an individual body.”<sup>39</sup>

And in emphasizing the cognitive potential of the body, Hazlitt moved toward an idea that becomes central to his concept of knowledge: that the process of knowing involves a crucial personal dimension. As his example of French versus English sensibility suggests, he has a deep interest in the process of acquiring knowledge—how it feels to begin to grasp something, the “feeling of knowing” that cognitive scientist Antonio Damasio says is inseparable from our ability to have a sense of selfhood and an orientation toward our environment. Knowledge must be patiently assimilated into the knower’s consciousness as the body assimilates a shock to its physical integrity. It cannot simply be a matter of inert memory; it must be integrated into the personality and its relationship to other knowledge in consciousness understood. Hazlitt frequently emphasized the linkages among the various operations of body and mind—that these linkages are as much a part of what we know and how we know it as sensory data.



## The Indian Jugglers

Many of these strands come together in “The Indian Jugglers,” an essay from *Table-Talk*, published in 1821–22. In this seminal essay, Hazlitt explores the knowledge of the body and its claims.

William Bewick, a painter and friend of Hazlitt’s, tells a story that may illuminate the genesis of “The Indian Jugglers.” Hazlitt had met the anatomist Sir Anthony Carlisle at the home of Basil Montague and was struck by a comment Carlisle made on “the uselessness of poetry.” Curious to learn more of him and his opinions, Hazlitt went with Bewick to a talk on anatomy Carlisle gave at the Royal Academy. Earlier lectures had included performances by “Indian or Chinese jugglers” to demonstrate “what suppleness training may produce in the frame of man.” It is not clear from Bewick’s account whether the jugglers performed on the evening Hazlitt attended, but in any event he was unimpressed with Sir Anthony and concluded that such a person was incapable of understanding the value of poetry.<sup>40</sup> “The Indian Jugglers” takes up the issue raised by Carlisle’s dismissal of poetry—and by extension other kinds of creative accomplishment—and discusses it in the context of the body and *its* capacities.

On the face of it, “The Indian Jugglers” argues for the superiority of artistic and imaginative achievement. Despite his admiration for the near-magical agility of the human body displayed in the jugglers’ performance, Hazlitt comes down firmly on the side of artistic creation as a far more difficult enterprise. He does this primarily by suggesting that the difference between juggling and writing or painting is analogous to the difference between training and education. Training is directed to specific and narrowly defined ends, while art requires much more elusive and open-ended abilities: “But the artist undertakes to imitate another, or to do what nature has done, and this it appears is more difficult, *viz.*, to copy what she has set before us in the face of nature or ‘the human face divine,’ entire and without a blemish, than to keep up four brass balls at the same instant; for the one is done by the power of human skill and industry, and the other never was nor will be.” As a result, Hazlitt says, he admires the artist Joshua Reynolds more than the famous rope-dancer Richer.

Artistic power “is indifferently called genius, imagination, feeling, taste: but the manner in which it acts on the mind can neither be defined by abstract rules, as is the case in science, nor verified by continual unvarying experiments, as is the case in mechanical performances.” The essay does not conclude with this grand statement, however, but with a tribute to John Cavanagh, the famous fives-player (fives was a version of handball)—a point I will return to.

Herschel Baker sees “The Indian Jugglers” as “celebrating merit” in both its physical and intellectual manifestations.<sup>41</sup> Roy Park argues that the essay is a rejection of abstract system-making in favor of an existential openness to experience, defined as “the poetic response [which] alone possesses ‘the trembling sensibility which is awake to every change and every modification of its ever-varying impressions’ (viii. 83).”<sup>42</sup> David Bromwich writes that “‘The Indian Jugglers’ offers Cavanagh as a test case for distinguishing the artistic from the mechanic. The truth is that only Hazlitt’s ability to see the depth of art in the surface of mechanical skill . . . has made the question an interesting one.”<sup>43</sup>

There is another way of reading the essay, however, which assumes that Hazlitt had a different aim in mind. It presents a line of speculation that grows out of the essay's origins in a medical view of the body as a machine.

Hazlitt plunges immediately into his subject:

Coming forward and seating himself on the ground in his white dress and tightened turban, the chief of the Indian Jugglers begins with tossing up two brass balls, which is what any of us could do, and concludes with keeping up four at the same time, which is what none of us could do to save our lives, nor if we were to take our whole lives to do it in. Is it then a trifling power we see at work, or is it not something next to miraculous?<sup>44</sup>

In its combination of suspense (will he drop one of the balls?), physical grace, and ease of execution, expert juggling dazzles and delights. Hazlitt then goes on to lament the awkwardness and lameness of his own essays in comparison. In intellectual work, “[t]here is no such power or superiority in sense or reasoning. There is no complete mastery of execution to be shewn there: and you hardly know the professor from the impudent pretender or the mere clown.” But that, it turns out, is the key to the greater importance of imaginative accomplishment. The poet or artist must create without specific rules to guide her efforts or indisputable criteria by which the excellence, or lack of excellence, of what she has made can be judged. There is also the question of enduring significance. However difficult it is to say what great art consists of, the process of time winnows the meretricious from the meritorious; art speaks to us over the course of generations, while the achievements of the living body are necessarily fleeting. Hazlitt’s meditation on the nature of creative accomplishment ultimately leads him to the conviction that “greatness is great power, using great effects. . . . great results springing from great inherent energy.”

Yet he ends the essay not with artistic creation but with an account of the athletic prowess of an Irish handball player—actually an obituary of John Cavanagh he had written earlier for the *Examiner*. The discussion of Cavanagh returns to the theme of the body’s capabilities, but this time Hazlitt radically narrows the gap between intellectual and other kinds of accomplishment. “It may be said that there are things of more importance than striking a ball against a wall—there are things indeed which make more noise and do as little good, such as making war and peace, making speeches and answering them, making verses and blotting them; making money and throwing it away.” Moreover, Cavanagh’s bodily skill is inseparable from arresting qualities of mind: “His eye was certain, his hand fatal, his presence of mind complete. . . . He saw the whole game, and played it . . . . He had equal power and skill, quickness, and judgment. As it was said of a great orator that he never was at a loss for a word, and for the properest word, so Cavanagh always could tell the degree of force necessary to be given to a ball, and the precise direction in which it should be sent. . . . Cobbett and Junius together would have made a Cavanagh.”<sup>45</sup>

The section on Cavanagh is a process of readjusting the place of athletic prowess on the scale of significant achievement; it is no longer relegated to the lowly position of a striking but ultimately trivial skill. The link between creative achievement and athletic success is that both require and generate a particular kind of attention: “He who takes to playing at fives is twice young. He feels neither the past nor future ‘in the instant.’ . . . He has no other wish, no other thought, from the moment the game begins but that of striking the ball, of placing it, of *making*

it.” The alienation from the future, prominent in the *Essay*, has vanished because there is no future; only the moment matters. Cavanagh’s self-forgetfulness and concentration, his relaxed alertness, are nothing more (or less) than the ability to organize attention toward a goal, and that process is as important in intellectual as in physical endeavors. Hazlitt’s description of Cavanagh in action, even though he says it was written “apparently between jest and earnest,” suggests that he is still unsatisfied with his sweeping conclusion about mind versus body. It is as if there is a nagging something about the body and its capacities that has escaped the net of his earlier argument.

This something is revealed in his analysis of the body in motion. In the clarity of its standards, mechanical agility is more rigorous than writing, say, because failure is instant and obvious; if a juggler drops a ball, there can be no difference of opinion on whether he has mastered his task. The goal of juggling, or any test of physical skill, is to perform certain movements in a particular way. Success depends on habit, acquired through faithful practice that unfolds in a series of steps: “There is then in this sort of manual dexterity, first a gradual aptitude acquired to a given exertion of muscular power, from constant repetition, and in the next place, an exact knowledge how much is still wanting and necessary to be supplied. The obvious test is to increase the effort or nicety of the operation, and still to find it come true”:

The muscles ply instinctively to the dictates of habit. Certain movements and impressions of the hand and eye, having been repeated together an infinite number of times, are unconsciously but unavoidably cemented into closer and closer union; the limbs require little more than to be put in motion for them to follow a regular track with ease and certainty; so that the mere intention of the will acts mathematically, like touching the spring of a machine, and you come with Locksley in *Ivanhoe*, in shooting at a mark, “to allow for the wind.”

The body is an exquisitely tuned feedback mechanism. Once we have acquired the habit of juggling, fully incorporated its various physical demands into our minds and our musculature, “the mere intention of the will acts mathematically, like touching the springs of a machine. . . .” The body is not like consciousness, debating its choices amid the messy ambiguity of competing goods; will has been entirely subordinated to the requirements of action. It is the automatic character of physical acts, the precise calibration of exertion to outcome, that accounts for “mechanical excellence,” in stark contrast to “the inefficacy and slow progress of intellectual . . . excellence.”

“Mechanical” had been a negative term in both the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* and in the *Lectures on English Philosophy* because Hazlitt used it as a shorthand way of representing the fallacious argument that our wills reflexively gravitate toward whatever serves our interests and that mind is entirely governed by matter. In the context of the body, however, “mechanical” acquires a more positive connotation. The automatic character of certain physical acts—the total absence of conscious thought or advance planning—is the foundation of extraordinary athletic achievement. The body “knows” how to do it, and the mind comes limping after. Somehow the body is able to integrate the many different demands of the task—balance, timing, dexterity—in a way the mind cannot easily duplicate in intellectual work.

The philosopher Michael Polanyi called this kind of instinctual cognitive act “tacit knowledge.” He points out that there are two terms, or elements, in every instance of tacit knowing: a set of particulars, and a larger meaning derived from them in a way we cannot explain. One example would be how we recognize a face, even though we cannot define exactly what it is that makes one face so instantly distinguishable from another. Polanyi cites another example, an experiment in which individuals were presented with a large number of nonsense syllables and given an electric shock after a particular syllable or syllables were spoken. After several repetitions, the subjects learned to correctly associate certain syllables with an impending shock. However, they could not identify the precise syllables that telegraphed this information to them—hence their knowledge was “tacit” or incapable of articulation. In this particular example of tacit knowing, the first term is the relevant nonsense syllable or syllables and their association with an imminent shock; the second term is the shock itself. Polanyi explains that tacit knowing is a process in which we use the first term to focus our attention on the second: “We know the electric shock, forming the second term, by attending to it, and hence the subject is *specifiably* known. But we know the shock-producing particulars only by relying on our own awareness of them for attending to something else, namely the electric shock, and hence our knowledge of them remains *tacit*. . . . Such is the *functional relation* between the two terms of tacit knowing: *we know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second* [emphasis in text].”<sup>46</sup>

This kind of knowing, which Polanyi described as focal and subsidiary awareness, is the foundation of the Indian Jugglers’ performance. The body can attain the necessary speed, precision, and physical agility only by suppressing consciousness of the minute adjustments of muscle, hand, and eye and focusing on the goal, which is keeping the balls moving through the air in a given order and at a regular speed. Any effort to become conscious of a particular movement—say, whether the hand is correctly positioned to catch the nearest ball—is counter-productive; it could bring the entire process to a disastrous halt.

We could say that the phenomenon Polanyi describes is a process of knowing by not knowing (he later uses the example of riding a bicycle—try to think about how you do it and you cannot). For all his passion in defending the greater complexity and significance of artistic labor, Hazlitt seems to sense that there are ways in which the tacit knowledge of the body is not at all inferior to its intellectual or imaginative counterpart. First, there is something in the accomplishment of the Indian Jugglers that goes beyond the merely mechanical and habitual: “It is skill surmounting difficulty, and beauty triumphing over skill.” The triumph of beauty over skill in the mundane act of juggling takes it out of the narrow category of training and into the realm of the aesthetic and creative. The jugglers’ performance is a model of self-mastery, which helps account for the tone of admiration and wonder in Hazlitt’s description of them. Second, and even more important, it can be argued that the ability of the body to attend from particular sensations to a larger goal offers a model of intellectual insight, as in Hazlitt’s famous observation from “On Genius and Common Sense”:

It is asked, “If you do not know the rule by which a thing is done, how can you be sure of doing it a second time?” And the answer is, “If you do not know the muscles by the help of which you walk, how is it you do not fall down at every step you take?” In art, in life, in taste, in speech, you decide from feeling, and not from reason; that is, from the impression of a number of things on the mind, which impression is true and well-

founded, though you may not be able to analyse or account for it in the several particulars.<sup>47</sup>

There are certain forms of knowledge that the mind, like the body, can only acquire by *not* concentrating attention too narrowly or specifically. Too much consciousness hobbles the amazingly complex physical movements required in many forms of athletic performance; too much rational clarity blocks insight. The mind selects particulars from its welter of impressions and in some unarticulated but cognitively coherent way comes to a conclusion about them. In the same essay—“On Genius and Common Sense”—Hazlitt describes this process in terms of the theory of association:

Once more I would say, common sense is tacit reason. [It] is the just result of the sum-total of . . . unconscious impressions in the ordinary occurrences of life . . . By the law of association, as laid down by physiologists, any impression in a series can recal any other impression in that series without going through the whole in order: so that the mind drops the intermediate links, and passes on rapidly and by stealth to the more striking effects of pleasure or pain which have naturally taken the strongest hold of it. By doing this habitually and skillfully with respect to the various impressions and circumstances with which our experience makes us acquainted, it forms a series of unpremeditated conclusions on almost all subjects that can be brought before it, as just as they are of ready application to human life; and common sense is the name of this body of unassuming but practical wisdom.<sup>48</sup>

Hazlitt is trying here to incorporate the empiricist associationist perspective into a broader and more active theory of perception. This passage also harks back to his theory of abstract ideas. We do not even try to distinguish the swarms of particular impressions stimulated by the senses, but our minds are nevertheless engaged an unconscious sorting of their potential meaning for us. Consciousness selects the signals it needs to meet the demands of life from the minutiae of our daily rounds. In this passage, the principle of association and the experience of pleasure and pain are no longer the defining architecture of the mind but its tools. As we saw in “The Indian Jugglers,” he begins to look at attention—how we direct our mental energies and the physical and cognitive states the act of attending stimulates—as an entry point into the mind’s ability to know. His concentration on athletic skill is significant. It centers on the mind/body connection without becoming enmeshed in explanations of mental events at the level of micro-movements of the nerves—Hartley’s vibrations—that were simply beyond the ability of both introspection and the experimental capabilities of early nineteenth-century science to explain. In terms of Hazlitt’s thinking about how we know, this is an advance from the *Essay* and the *Lectures*. He has gone from attacking the mechanical logic of associationism to postulating a view of knowledge that depends on a fluid and constantly self-adjusting balance between the knower and what he knows.

When Hazlitt describes how we create our store of tacit reason by combining the unconscious experience of everyday life with the mental laws of association, the two most important words are *habitually* and *skillfully*.<sup>49</sup> In this definition, knowledge is the product of action. It grows out of the lived experience of the body as a repetitive practice and a skill. “One great proof and beauty of works of true genius, is the ease, simplicity, and freedom from

conscious effort which pervades them,” he wrote in an 1820 essay on Sir Joshua Reynolds. In Hazlitt’s (not always consistent) usage, the opposite of this form of unconscious knowledge is learning, defined in one of its eighteenth-century meanings as an ornament intended to burnish an individual’s social image or persona. As the term “ornament” implies, learning in this definition is an embellishment quite separate from the individual, an intellectual add-on. Knowledge, as Hazlitt discusses it in this essay and in “The Indian Jugglers,” is neither external nor acquired wholesale, but something that emerges from the individual’s own experience of exercising a skill. Polanyi’s concept of knowledge is relevant: “I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill,” he wrote in *Personal Knowledge*. “Clues and tools are things used as such and not observed in themselves. They are made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change in our own being.”<sup>50</sup> In this respect, knowing-as-skills resembles craftsmanship, which points to yet another dimension of Hazlitt’s contrast between intellectual and bodily accomplishment.

This is evident in Hazlitt’s descriptions of the experience of painting, a profession he had once aspired to. When he thinks about the cultivation of talent, he gravitates toward painting as a model. “There is a pleasure in painting which none but painters know,” is the opening sentence of *Table-Talk*. “The mind is calm, but full at the same time. The hand and eye are equally employed. In tracing the commonest object, a plant or the stump of a tree, you learn something every moment, you perceive unexpected differences, and discover likenesses where you looked for no such thing.” This combination of peace and repletion occurs, he says, when you leave the battleground of writing and verbal combat. Painting strengthens the sense of self by offering surprising opportunities for perception. Painting is one of the fine arts, but here Hazlitt discusses it almost as a craft, the training of the hand and eye to produce a tangible and beautiful object. In an essay about the relationship between learning and practice—“On Application to Study”—his delight in painting spills over into a discussion of writing. The feeling of struggle that marks his occasional complaints about a life of constant writing is nowhere to be found in this essay, replaced by images of abundance as he explains how industry develops skill and skill encourages industry: “[W]e acquire ideas by imparting them. Our expenditure of intellectual wealth makes us rich: we can only be liberal as we have previously accumulated the means.” And he returns continually to the sense of power and vigor artistic work opens up to its practitioners. The old masters of painting, as prolific as they were talented, continue to enrich those who follow and learn from them: “The stream of their invention supplies the taste of successive generations like a river.”<sup>51</sup> Through their works, their skillful coordination of eye and hand with imagination, the great artists instruct us in the canons of taste. Where words fail, the image gives life.

In *The Craftsman*, sociologist Richard Sennett explains how that iconic Enlightenment work, Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, was aimed (in Diderot’s words) at elucidating “not only the fields already covered by the academies, but each and every brand of human knowledge,” including the field of skilled workmanship.<sup>52</sup> The purpose of the *Encyclopedia* was to “get its readers out of themselves and into the lives of artisan craftsmen . . . to enter into a realm in which contentment with ordinary things made well reigns.” The illustrations, which show glassmakers, printers, typesetters, craftspeople, and other workers in lowly occupations plying their trade with apparent satisfaction, were necessary because of a difficulty Diderot encountered early on: the workers he spoke to could not find the words to accurately describe what they did and, despite his interviews and investigations, neither could Diderot or his collaborators. This

was the case because work requiring physical movement often relies on tacit knowledge. Together, the descriptive text and the evocative drawings of the body at work encouraged an act of imagination involving the kind of eighteenth-century sympathy described by Adam Smith and others. This strategy, Sennett goes on, supported the *Encyclopedia's* running contrast between the idleness of the privileged and the demonstrable usefulness of those who labor for a living.<sup>53</sup>

But he also points out that—quite apart from their praiseworthy industriousness—the *Encyclopedia's* artisans and craftspeople encouraged an imaginative reordering of the traditional hierarchy of knowledge. To bridge the cultural gap between the refined leisure of upper-class living and the seemingly dull, repetitive, mechanical tasks of lower-class work is to see beyond the usual relegation of craft or mechanical skill to a lower level of value. It reveals that the body's knowledge possesses an inarticulate authority unavailable through the processes of abstract reasoning alone. Through the instrumentality of feeling, through “grappling with the object,” Hazlitt's meditation on Cavanagh leads him to the creative dimension of mechanical processes and their power to illuminate new domains of experience. His essay on the revelatory nature of exercising the skill of painting leads him to see the best part of writing as residing in the skill *it* requires, which demands but also rewards focused attention. Painting released, as nothing else in Hazlitt's professional life did, an experience of the union of “the laborer and the thinker.” I have taken this phrase—“the laborer and the thinker”—from the introduction to Joanna Picciotto's *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*, where she writes that “[I]f the modern concept of intellectual labor promotes an unduly exclusive conception of intellectual life, its early modern ancestor did exactly the reverse. . . . Intellectual labor was first conceived not as the province of a restricted class of people but as an ideal encounter between the self and the world.” For Hazlitt, the act of painting sets up the conditions for such an encounter by presenting a realm of thought and action that opens into new and effortless experiences of learning.<sup>54</sup>

“The Indian Jugglers” was concerned with an ideal harmony of mind, body, and knowledge that individuals can experience, under the right circumstances. But *Table-Talk* also includes several essays on knowledge that are more ominous in tone. “On the Ignorance of the Learned” and “On Corporate Bodies” are stinging indictments of the corrupting effects of institutions on individuals and knowledge. These essays are the prelude to a work Hazlitt wrote a few years later that is the subject of the next chapter: his searching examination of the fate of knowledge in the social and political world of *The Spirit of the Age*.

<sup>1</sup> “To Thomas Hardy, No. 37,” *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, 131.

<sup>2</sup> “To Henry Crabb Robinson, No. 39,” *Letters of William Hazlitt*, 133–34. The ten topics were (1) Thomas Hobbes, “with a general view of philosophy since his time, shewing that succeeding writers have done little more than expand, illustrate, and apply the metaphysical principles distinctly laid down by him”; (2) John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, “shewing that all ideas necessarily imply a power for which sensation or simple perception does not account”; (3) Berkeley's principles of human knowledge and abstract ideas; (4) self-love and benevolence; (5) Helvétius's views on self-love and benevolence, as well as “Hartley's attempt to resolve all our affections and faculties into one association of ideas”; (6) Bishop Butler's theory of mind, “an account of the different original springs which move that various machine”; (7) the controversy between Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, “or on materialism and necessity”; (8) the same subject continued; (9) Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*, or “theory of language and nature”; (10) an argument on natural religion.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 184.

<sup>4</sup> “Charles Lamb to Thomas Manning, February 26, 1808,” *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 2:50–51.

<sup>5</sup> Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man*, 138–41.

<sup>6</sup> *Diaries, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, 1:244.

<sup>7</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:289–90.

<sup>8</sup> Herschel Baker (184–186) points out that Robinson’s description of the lectures in his diary includes a number of departures from the topics Hazlitt had announced ahead of time. He speculates that, having failed so spectacularly in reading the first lecture, Hazlitt may have decided to present the remaining ones extemporaneously or with the aid of notes, intending to organize them into written form at some future time. Thus, it is possible that there are no lost lectures; the five found by his son and published in 1836 may be the only ones Hazlitt ever put on paper.

<sup>9</sup> For a description of Hazlitt’s later success as a lecturer on literary subjects and the evolution of the London lecture scene “within the antithesis of spectacle and education,” see Peter J. Manning, “Manufacturing the Romantic Image,” in *Romantic Metropolis*, ed. Chandler and Gilmartin, 227–45.

<sup>10</sup> See Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*.

<sup>11</sup> Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:124.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:146.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:180n1; 2:134.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:144–45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:126.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:150–151, 126.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted as part of a discussion of Hobbes’s philosophy in Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 246.

<sup>20</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:196.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:124.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:150.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:151.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:207. In an article first published by his son in *Sketches and Essays* (1839), Hazlitt relates critical taste in art to his theory of abstract ideas: “I have, in a former essay [“Outlines of the Human Mind,” which describes the theory], ascertained one principle of taste or excellence in the arts of imitation, where it was shown that objects admit of endless analysis and the most subtle investigation. We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understandings and our hearts. To suppose that we see the whole of any object, merely by looking at it, is a vulgar error: we fancy that we do, because we are, of course, conscious of no more than we see in it, but this circle of our knowledge enlarges with further acquaintance and study, and we then perceive that what we perhaps barely distinguished in the gross, or regarded as a dull blank, is full of beauty, meaning, and curious details. . . . How, then, should everyone be a judge of pictures, when so few are of faces?” *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 20:388.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:208.

<sup>27</sup> See Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 138–39.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:150.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:155.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:165–66.

<sup>31</sup> Wellek, *Emmanuel Kant in England*, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Mandler, *A History of Modern Experimental Psychology*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:24–25n1.

<sup>38</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:38.

<sup>39</sup> Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Life and Letters of William Bewick (Artist)*, 140–42. In discussing “The Indian Jugglers,” Herschel Baker writes that Hazlitt once saw jugglers perform at an anatomy lecture at the Royal Academy, and cites Bewick’s account as the source for this statement. Bewick, however, says that the lecture on the night Hazlitt attended did not involve jugglers. It dealt with “the emotions and passions of the mind,” and Carlisle passed around first a human brain and then a human heart on a dinner plate (according to Bewick, Hazlitt was horrified). It is hard to imagine Hazlitt’s having written “The Indian Jugglers” without actually seeing a performance, however, and the likelihood is that he



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did, although probably not at the Royal Academy. According to P. P. Howe, a letter to the *Examiner* on December 17, 1815, notes that “The attention of the town is now clamorously called to the performance of a set of *jugglers* from India . . .” who performed at the Olympic New Theatre in London. *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:344.

<sup>41</sup> Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 403.

<sup>42</sup> Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 354.

<sup>44</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:77.

<sup>45</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:86–87.

<sup>46</sup> Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 7–10. David Autor, an MIT expert on labor markets, has argued that robots, despite their rapidly increasing sophistication, lack Polanyi’s tacit knowledge: “Following Polanyi’s observation [that ‘we know more than we can tell’] the tasks that have proved most vexing to automate are those demanding flexibility, judgment, and common sense—skills that we understand only tacitly.” He concludes that “Polanyi’s Paradox” means that intelligent machines will not displace human beings in the many tasks requiring these skills. “Why the Robots Might Not Take Our Jobs After All: They Lack Common Sense,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:31.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:33–35.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:188.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Innis, 24.

<sup>51</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:60, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, 298.

<sup>53</sup> Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 91–94.

<sup>54</sup> Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*, 2.

### Chapter Three: Cognitive Web: *The Spirit of the Age*

*They are not, then, so properly the works of an author by profession, as the thoughts of a metaphysician expressed by a painter. They are subtle and difficult problems translated into hieroglyphics.*

William Hazlitt, speaking of his later, post-*Essay* writings

*Imaginative projection is a principal means by which the body (i.e., physical experience and its structures) works its way up into the mind (i.e., mental operations).*

Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*

*[H]umanity might be defined as the only species on earth that combines individual with collective cognitive processes and in which the individual can identify with and become part of a group process. We can see this in our corporations and other institutions. The life of the human imagination oscillates between these two polar extremes, individual and corporate.*

Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare*

In *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits*, Hazlitt turns from the timeless universals of the *Essay* and the philosophical clashes of the *Lectures* to the everyday world of politics, literature, and the cultural wars of 1820s Britain. It is Hazlitt's attempt to describe the literary, political, and philosophical temper of the period, a collective intellectual biography of his generation. Published twenty years after the *Essay*, the portraits of twenty-four writers, politicians, philosophers, and other leaders of British society and culture are the work of his maturity, written at the height of his powers and at a moment when time had given him perspective on individuals and issues that had been the study of a lifetime.

The first challenge readers have faced in *The Spirit of the Age* is finding the thread that knits its two dozen essays together. Hazlitt gives us multiple variations on a definition of the spirit of his age; if the title is intended as a unifying concept, it is an elusive one. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli sums up a variety of attempts to discern an aesthetic structure in the work:

Considerable critical energy has been devoted to determining a univocal meaning of *The Spirit of the Age*, under the assumption that artists impose a distinctive and personal design on cultural history. But what is that design in Hazlitt? David Levin claims the term "the spirit of the age" is usually invoked to describe the most progressive aspects of an era, but Hazlitt juxtaposes liberals and Tories, reactionaries and revolutionaries. M. H. Abrams believes Hazlitt designed an exploration of the impact of the French Revolution. Roy Park says the text thematically demonstrates how the crushing force of the age suppressed the imaginative spirit. Patrick Story believes the series shows how the effeminacy of the arts lost out in the war between mechanistic logic and creative originality. Conversely, Ralph M. Wardle, René Wellek, and George Levine argue that Hazlitt failed to produce any coherent unification, either from laziness or inability.<sup>1</sup>

These critical difficulties have led to what could be called the aerial view of *The Spirit of the Age*—attempts to focus on the collective significance of the essays without devoting much analytical attention to specific ones. An opposite and perhaps more common strategy is to ignore the question of a “univocal meaning” altogether, and mine the individual essays for insights about their subjects. This is a productive approach, given Hazlitt’s intellectual acumen and keen eye for the telling detail, but one that tells us nothing about the overall structure and shape of the essays. And as Cafarelli also points out, Hazlitt cared about the design of his work: “More than any of his contemporaries, Hazlitt was concerned with how form constitutes meaning in collective narrative, and he came to use the iconic properties of discontinuous sequential narrative to frame epistemological questions.”

The apparent lack of a unifying theme in *The Spirit of the Age* points to an even more fundamental question. What kind of literary artifact is it? Ian Jack suggests that in *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt invented “a new kind of ‘character’ writing” derived from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sketches of types or classes of men, but one in which “the subject is neither the author as an individual nor his writings regarded in themselves, but the author as an author, in his works, and as a representative of the *Zeitgeist*.”<sup>2</sup> The most obvious forebear of *The Spirit of the Age*, however, is Samuel Johnson’s exercise in collective biography, *Lives of the Poets*. Brief biographies of literary and other figures became immensely popular in the Romantic period and beyond for both cultural and financial reasons, one of which has direct relevance to Hazlitt: many brief lives appeared first in newspapers or journals before they were organized into a collection and republished as a book.<sup>3</sup> About a half-dozen of the portraits in *The Spirit of the Age*, including the one on Jeremy Bentham that begins the series, were published first in periodicals. So the episodic character of *The Spirit of the Age* owes something to Hazlitt’s profession as a journalist and to the business models of early nineteenth-century publishing.

But the term “collective biography” fails to capture the feeling *The Spirit of the Age* engenders that Hazlitt wrote it with a larger intention in view. Herschel Baker describes it as “Hazlitt’s *Prelude*, for it shows the shaping of his mind.” Baker is referring to “the men, the values, and the books that had stirred his generation,” but there is another similarity between the two that he fails to mention.<sup>4</sup> Wordsworth was self-consciously writing a new kind of epic, one focused on the inner life of one poet rather than on the traditional epic themes of heroic physical struggle and the clash of armies and civilizations. In *The Prelude* we see everything from within Wordsworth’s consciousness and everything is related to his idiosyncratic intellectual development. Hazlitt does not put himself, as Wordsworth does, at the center of the drama, nor is it his aim to chronicle the growth of a single mind. He tells his story obliquely, through other minds. Nor does *The Spirit of the Age* reflect the same slow but assured sense of destination that marks Wordsworth’s poetic autobiography. The emotional tone of *The Spirit of the Age* is set by the present and the past; the future is absent, and hope for future improvement barely exists.

Hazlitt’s prose epic begins *in medias res*, takes an entire generation as its subject, and like *Paradise Lost* has at least one larger-than-life villain—arguably several. There is no single expression of a spirit of the age and no obvious progression in the portraits, only (as in *The Waste Land*, a much later but also highly ambitious work) a collection of fragments. As befits a modern epic, it has no towering protagonist. Its heroes are, at best, diminished versions of their earlier selves. But unlike T. S. Eliot, who hints at the end of *The Waste Land* about a path out of the spiritual vacancy that pervades the poem, Hazlitt sees no such release from the growing sense

of absence that accumulates in the reading of *The Spirit of the Age*. He refuses to bring his epic to a conclusion or to predict what future shapes society will take, but he is sure of his starting point, which is that the problems of his age are related to the fundamental problem of human cognition.

### **The *Essay*'s influence on *The Spirit of the Age***

Yet determining exactly how “form constitutes meaning in collective narrative” in *The Spirit of the Age*, as Cafarelli puts it, is like solving a puzzle: some assembly is required. One piece of the puzzle is the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, which makes an indirect appearance at the outset, on the title page: *The Spirit of the Age; or, Contemporary Portraits*.<sup>5</sup> Hazlitt had already used the image of the portrait gallery several times to represent a particular theory of mind: David Hartley's associationist philosophy, along with the Lockean empiricism that is one of its principal sources. The point of the analogy is the state of helpless intellectual passivity Hartley's theory implied, as if “ideas would exist in the mind, like tapestry figures or pictures in a gallery, without a spectator.”<sup>6</sup>

This cognitive model, so central to the argument of the *Essay*, is emblematic of the mental space we enter in *The Spirit of the Age*. The portrait gallery is marked, first of all, by an absence. Art is a visual medium that implies a spectator who can see (literally) and perceive (intellectually or symbolically) what the designs signify. The mind Hazlitt intends to explore is a collective one, with many ideas on display, but one apparently unequipped with a guide—someone who can translate the hieroglyphics on the wall, separately and in relation to each other. If we think of Hazlitt's society as analogous to a human brain, it is one whose faculties are unable to come together in an act of understanding.

The second clue Hazlitt gives, the epigraph he chose for the title page, leads back to the *Essay*'s focus on the nature of identity: “To know another well were to know one's self.” (P. P. Howe, the editor of Hazlitt's collected works, described it as the “motto” for *The Spirit of the Age*.) This slightly altered quotation from *Hamlet* introduces the idea that we come to know ourselves not by the time-honored practice of looking within but by looking outward, at other people and other minds.<sup>7</sup> We will encounter ourselves in what we are about to learn regarding the twenty-four subjects. Yet a reading of *The Spirit of the Age* does not suggest Hazlitt's point is that, at bottom, we are all alike. He takes great pains to demonstrate what is distinctive about each of his characters. And while the *Essay* did not hesitate to make sweeping statements about human nature and the human mind, Hazlitt insisted with equal vigor that we are all isolated within our own nervous systems, whose sensations, anxieties, pleasures, and anticipations are essentially closed to others.

In any case, how does knowledge of others yield self-knowledge? Jacques Khalip writes that in the *Essay* the two are related because the self “is theorized almost pragmatically as a structure through which one can provisionally organize data about oneself and others.”<sup>8</sup> *Data* is a term referring to “facts or statistics used for reference or analysis,” and is indeed consistent with the almost quantitative way the *Essay* discusses the self. “All individuals . . . are aggregates, and aggregates of different things,” Hazlitt says, and the “only true and absolute identity which can be affirmed of any being . . . is that combination of ideas which represents any individual person.”<sup>9</sup> The portrait gallery is itself a “structure through which one can provisionally organize

data about oneself and others.” We come to know ourselves by knowing others because, through the process of charting these other minds, we come to grasp the invisible cognitive web that society weaves around us all.

And like the self of the *Essay*, the world of *The Spirit of the Age* is locked out of the future; Hazlitt confines himself to the society of his day, a world frozen in time.<sup>10</sup> We again encounter the instability of consciousness, not in a literal but in a psychological sense, in Hazlitt’s depiction of the inner life of some of his characters. Knowledge—learning, education, and cognitive skills—is not something we possess but something that comes to inhabit us. Brougham, for example, despite his intellectual energy and industry, is nonetheless described as being “led away by the headstrong and overmastering activity of his own mind. He is borne along, almost involuntarily, and not impossibly against his better judgment, by the throng and restlessness of his ideas as by a crowd of people in motion.”<sup>11</sup> Coleridge’s compulsive intellectual wanderings are presented as a figurative fall from a great height, like the biblical fall of the angels—consciousness migrating, without any particular sense of direction, through a series of mental states. *The Spirit of the Age* reenacts the disruptive, essentially uncontrollable nature of consciousness.

In sum, the *Essay* is like an underground stream in *The Spirit of the Age*, invisible but formative. It supplied the theory of an unstable self, an impenetrable future, and an analysis of mental processes as foundational ideas for the later work. Hazlitt’s unspoken premise is that we are not identities who think but thinkers who express our wavering and uncertain selves through the cognitive structures of the mind. He reimagines his theory of the self as a theory of knowledge: in *The Spirit of the Age*, we are what we know. But he also adds elements from his evolving grasp of human psychology, the role of the body in knowing, and—in terms of the society of his day—what would probably now be called the sociology of knowledge. In *The Spirit of the Age*, knowledge can be individually empowering (in the case of Brougham), overwhelming (in the case of Coleridge) or destructive to society (in the case of Bentham). The knowledge we choose to embrace and endorse reflects something fundamental about us, and our society, that transcends our ever-shifting selves.

### **Spirits of the age**

The modular quality of *The Spirit of the Age*—the mental gaps between the essays—suggests that a unified point of view is not one of the possibilities available within the rules that govern the work. The individual portraits replicate the larger disorder of the collection. Some cross-references and comparisons crop up in the series; in the essay on William Godwin, for example, Godwin’s industry is contrasted with Coleridge’s indolence, and in the essay on Malthus Hazlitt points out that Malthus’s *Essay on Population* was stimulated by Godwin’s *Political Justice*, but by and large the essays stand on their own, each a separate creation in a closed space. There is a profound sense of process in the work—that people change, things change, perceptions change—but this sense is not so much elegiac as cognitive: it is the way the mind works. We begin anew with every portrait. Each requires a process of orientation, a map of the particular mental space we are in.

The molecular structure of *The Spirit of the Age* is one way in which Hazlitt suggests the fragmentation of individuals and of culture. Another is the multiple definitions of the spirit of the

age. Each definition is contextual; what applies in one essay may not apply in another. The spirit of the age is as provisional as the architecture of the self. The essay on Godwin, for example, begins with the statement that the spirit of the age is its “dastard submission to prejudice and to the fashion of the day.” The genius of William Wordsworth, on the other hand, with its refusal to bow to the poetic prejudices and fashions of the day, is “a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age”; indeed, “had he lived in any other period of world, he would never have been heard of.” The leading and oft-repeated characteristic of the period is the crushing power of Legitimacy (usually written with a capital L)—the forces of cultural reaction and governmental suppression massed against the liberating march of French revolutionary ideals. Against this Hazlitt opposes the courage of Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, whose talent in articulating its liberal editorial positions, “and . . . the tone of manly explicitness with which they are delivered . . . are eminently characteristic of the Spirit of the Age.”

At other times, Hazlitt suggests that the spirit of the age is the cultivation of chatter, not action, as in the famous passage opening the essay on Coleridge:

The present is an age of talkers, and not of doers; and the reason is, that the world is growing old. . . . The accumulation of knowledge has been so great, that we are lost in wonder at the height it has reached, instead of attempting to climb or add to it; while the variety of objects distracts and dazzles the looker-on. What *niche* remains unoccupied? What path untried? What is the use of doing anything, unless we could do better than all those who have gone before us?

Contrast this with a passage from the essay on Brougham:

[Brougham] is a striking instance of the versatility and strength of the human mind, and also in one sense of the length of human life, if we make a good use of our time. There is room enough to crowd almost every art and science into it. If we pass “no day without a line,” visit no place without the company of a book, we may with ease fill libraries or empty them of their contents. Those who complain of the shortness of life, let it slide by them without wishing to seize and make the most of its golden minutes. The more we do, the more we can do; the more busy we are, the more leisure we have. . . . It is not incapacity, but indolence, indecision, want of imagination, and a proneness to a sort of mental tautology, to repeat the same images and tread the same circle, that leaves us so poor, so dull, and inert as we are, so naked of acquirement, so barren of resources!

Coleridge, the endless procrastinator and wastrel of talent, fails to put his immense intellectual gifts to productive use and is at last buried under the weight of his own learning; his vast knowledge saps his ambition and his mental focus. “He would have done better if he had known less,” Hazlitt says in his scathing review of Coleridge’s *Lay Sermons*. Brougham, the representative of the Protestant ethic and entrepreneurial investor in his own much slighter abilities, creates through ambition and energy the kind of world in which such increase in cultural capital is possible. The two men are contrasting examples of how knowledge expands or diminishes the self, and while Hazlitt attributes the difference between them to how we choose to direct—or diffuse—our attention, he also points out that other cognitive shortcomings are

involved—“indecision, want of imagination, and a proneness to a sort of mental tautology, to repeat the same images and tread the same circle . . . .”

### **The coercive imagination**

When Hazlitt envisions the representative minds of *The Spirit of the Age*, he does so in a way entirely consistent with the *Essay*'s provisional vision of identity. At the outset of a typical portrait, Hazlitt identifies with the subject, sees the world as he sees it, full of expanding intellectual horizons and remarkable talents. At some point in the essay there is a reversal toward a more distant and distinctly more critical stance. A barrage of compliments at the beginning is later drastically offset by a long list of vividly described deficiencies—inflation followed closely by a correspondingly deep deflation. We tend not to notice the oddities and inconsistencies of his portraits in *The Spirit of the Age* because Hazlitt organizes our responses so well. The details of characterization are often memorable—the image of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham turning wooden utensils on a lathe, for example, the perfect image of the uninspired workman—and yet they do not quite jell into a final portrait. An important reason is Hazlitt's consistent use of superlatives in both praising and criticizing his subjects, which leaves no middle ground for assessing them; there is no ready way for the reader to integrate their positive and negative qualities, or to balance their achievements with their failures.

Thomas McFarland explains this stylistic tendency to give strikingly different assessments of the same person in the span of a single essay, or in separate essays, as a product of Hazlitt's “coercive imagination”:

By the phrase “coercive imagination” is designated a tendency, restricted to Hazlitt alone, to express his sympathy or antipathy with the claims or merits of others in two different and discrete ways rather than in one universal way. . . . The coercive imagination, one surmises, is generated by the presence, on the one hand, of the extreme clarity of Hazlitt's vision allied to the immediate demands of the topics addressed by his journalistic commitment, and, on the other, by the presence of all the reservations, ambiguities, second thoughts, and recognitions of subsidiary or alternative possibilities that naturally occupy the attention of anyone as extraordinarily intelligent as Hazlitt.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Hazlitt perceived more about his subjects than he could coherently organize in a writing life beset by endless submission deadlines. But as McFarland himself points out, the coercive imagination appears in Hazlitt's writings alone, and so presumably not in those of other, equally harried journalists. James Chandler says that “For most of these figures, it is alleged that their strength lies in their weakness: Coleridge's procrastinating talkativeness, for example, is just the underside of his ability to see all sides of a question.”<sup>13</sup> Few of the portraits reflect so neat a formulation, however.

A different way of looking at Hazlitt's coercive imagination is to see it as a technique derived from his experience both as a theorist of the self (“All individuals . . . are aggregates, and aggregates of different things”) and as an artist. Sigmund Freud called the ability to access the thoughts and feelings of others through empathy, observation, imitation, and other kinds of insight a brain function all humans share as social animals. A field of cognitive science known as theory of mind explores how we attribute mental states to others and draw conclusions from

them. This skill is especially important to understanding artistic creations, which also require the ability to enter into the mental landscape of others and to infer inner states from external situations.<sup>14</sup>

The individual portraits follow this model—imaginative identification first, critical judgment afterward. This is the way in which Hazlitt is reading minds in *The Spirit of the Age*, by interpreting his subjects as if they were a painting or a poem—“subtle and difficult problems translated into hieroglyphics.” James Engell has written that Hazlitt regarded the imagination as an “*associating principle*,” and as a result “the object . . . becomes the center of a whole intellectual world.”<sup>15</sup> His tendency to give primacy to the object was fundamental to his entire philosophical approach.<sup>16</sup> Hazlitt presents his portraits as if each is an aesthetic object he holds in his hand, turning it round, surveying it carefully from all sides. The order in which we come to know each of the characters follows the order in which Hazlitt, as observer, perceives the facets of his personality—one by one, over time, as the process of noticing first one thing and then another unfolds. As we get to know the subject of each essay gradually, step by step, we must continually go back and integrate the new things we learn with what we already know. It could be argued that the process of reading descriptive prose requires us to do this, or something like it, all the time. The difference in Hazlitt is that the data we are given about a character as the essay progresses are not always so easily reconciled with versions of the same character earlier in the essay. What we know about them keeps changing, often radically. Hazlitt treats his characters as if they were a jumble of personal, intellectual, and ethical qualities held together by little more than a stance on political or literary or economic issues. His meticulously described subjects never emerge from their buzzing variety of personal and intellectual traits into a single, clear image.

But what does emerge is each subject’s idiosyncratic process of cognition, so that by the end of each portrait we know what is distinctive about how he constructs a mental picture of the world. Hazlitt had a visual, almost tactile feeling for individual minds. “Men’s opinions and reasonings,” he says in *Prospectus of a History of English Philosophy*, “depend more on the character and temper of their minds than we are apt to believe. Not only their prejudices and passions, and the light in which they have been accustomed to view things, influence them much more than the nature of things themselves; but a great deal depends on the very cast of their understandings, disposing them to imbibe certain prejudices, and confining them to a certain range of thought.”<sup>17</sup> An intellectual style, a tendency to think in a particular way, can be malleable like a heated metal (“the very cast”) but also porous; liable to be attracted to—drink in—specific intellectual biases; and constricted in the (mental) space it occupies. He once wrote that minds have “texture,” almost as if they were bodies and mental qualities, physical qualities. Minds, like bodies, have certain definable shapes and are subject to certain limitations that determine their capacities and the scope, wide or narrow, of their cognition. Two of the best examples from *The Spirit of the Age* are the portraits of Jeremy Bentham and Edward Irving.

### **Jeremy Bentham**

Hazlitt’s rebuttal of Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy, according to Roy Park, is to be found in four essays, one of which is the essay on Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age*.<sup>18</sup> “Hazlitt’s moral theory,” he adds, “found its most mature expression in his opposition to Bentham’s Utilitarianism.”<sup>19</sup> Hazlitt’s argument, however, is made not on moral but on intellectual grounds.



And it is a straightforward one: Bentham has chosen the wrong perspective on his subject. In examining the broad question of human morality and happiness through the narrow lens of utility, Hazlitt writes, Bentham has made a fatal cognitive error. Knowledge is like a map, and it leads us astray if it is not drawn in correct proportion to the terrain.

Thus, metaphors of space, distance, perspective, and direction dominate the Bentham essay. Hazlitt introduces the idea of perspective at the outset, when he refers to the ambitious scope of Bentham's philosophizing on human nature and institutions. "It is in moral as in physical magnitude. The little is best seen near: the great appears in its proper dimensions, only from a more commanding point of view, and gains strength with time, and elevation from distance!"

The essay begins by describing Bentham as a prophet without honor in his own country, but one whose influence beyond the confines of Britain is, quite literally, global. He is a philosopher "little known in England, better in Europe, best of all in the plains of Chili and the mines of Mexico," a correspondent with Russian royalty who is known to "the tawny Indian" and the citizens of "Paris or Pegu." His intellectual reach bridges time as well as space: "He has offered constitutions for the New World, and legislated for future times." This sounds, and is, hyperbolic, but Bentham himself had said as much. Anyone who understands the underlying principles of legislation, he observed, "might lay claim to the attributes of universality and eternity." Having lifted "his contemplation to that elevated point from which the whole map of human interests and situations lies expanded to his view" such a person understood principles which "will be so everywhere, and to the end of time." Hazlitt devotes the essay to proving how wrong Bentham's implicit self-advertisement is.

John Stuart Mill points out in *his* essay on Bentham that the "generalities" of his notion of utility as the foundation of morals were not original. Utility had a long philosophical pedigree going back to the Greeks. Bentham identified Helvétius as the immediate source of his theory, however.<sup>20</sup> The sensationalist philosopher, Hazlitt's old enemy in the *Essay*, is indeed the figure lurking behind the scenes in the Bentham portrait. Bentham credited Helvétius in particular as the inspiration for his own conviction that pain and pleasure are the ultimate arbiters not only of theories governing legislation but morals as well. "Systems which attempt to question it [the principle of utility], deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light," he writes in *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*. "But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved."<sup>21</sup> Bentham objected to metaphorical reasoning because it distracted from the search for general principles that could guide sound thinking. Rather, Bentham focused his energies, in Hazlitt's words, on the pursuit of "abstract and general truths," and the appeal of this project explains his remarkable international celebrity. It is Bentham's inflexibly systemizing mind that bothers Hazlitt, and his unrealistic projection of human potential for engagement with others far beyond its natural range.

Hazlitt's response to the calculus of Utilitarianism is to bury Bentham in metaphors, torrents of them, coming so fast one after another the effect is sometimes dizzying. Images of the body—in most cases, of Bentham's own body—as rigid, uncoordinated, frozen, or immobilized—reflect the peculiar inertness of his theories. Hazlitt variously describes him as an "able and extraordinary man . . . a beneficent spirit" who nonetheless "regards the people about

him no more than the flies of a summer.” He is a world-renowned philosopher devoted to “the pursuit of abstract and general truths” who has “legislated for future times” but who has also “reduced the theory and practice of human life to a *caput mortuum* of reason, and dull, plodding, technical calculation.”

But then Hazlitt immediately shifts our perspective to the physical and intellectual claustrophobia of Bentham’s personal life. Bentham at home presents a vivid contrast to the expansive geographical spread of his reputation. He has lived in the same Westminster house for four decades, “like an anchorite in his cell, reducing law to a system, and the mind of man to a machine.” He is, in other words, constantly reproducing his cramped physical space in his mental one, by shrinking—“reducing”—both law and philosophy to their smallest possible unit of meaning, information. He “listens to nothing but facts,” Hazlitt says, which he believes are the strong foundation of Utilitarianism. The very thought of his favorite topic energizes him:

When anyone calls upon him, he invites them to take a turn round his garden with him (Mr. Bentham is an economist of his time, and sets apart this portion of it to air and exercise)—and there you may see the lively old man, his mind still buoyant with thought and with the prospect of futurity, in eager conversation with some Opposition members, some expatriated patriot, or Transatlantic Adventurer, urging the extinction of Close Boroughs, or planning a code of laws for some “lone island in the watery waste,” his walk almost amounting to a run, his tongue keeping pace with it in shrill, cluttering accents, negligent of his person, his dress, and his manner, intent only on his grand theme of UTILITY—or pausing, perhaps for want of breath and with lack-lustre eye to point out to the stranger a stone in the wall at the end of his garden (overarched by two beautiful cotton-trees) *Inscribed to the Prince of Poets*, which marks the house where Milton formerly lived.

This paragraph illustrates Hazlitt’s technique of layering and cross-cutting perspectives. Bentham—“lively” and “buoyant”—is driven by his vision of a future perfected by utilitarian energies. His accelerating pace around the garden is the physical expression of his excitement about what he sees as the unstoppable force of his philosophy. But the people he is talking to do not have their hands on the levers of power. They are at the periphery rather than the center of society, members of the political minority, expatriates, or tourists from the New World to whom Bentham’s grand schemes are nothing more than an amusement or an opportunity for personal enrichment—they are, after all, “adventurers.” The laws he is so eager to fashion will not govern future civilizations but small knots of marooned humanity, stuck on a “lone island in the watery waste.” Bentham is going around in circles, Hazlitt implies, and his philosophy, for all its grand unifying concepts, isolates for two reasons: it is based on the same principle of individual self-interest as those espoused by Helvétius, and it fails to account for the fact that human perspective is not global but local:

Could our imagination take wing (with our speculative faculties) to the other side of the globe or to the ends of the universe, could our eyes behold whatever our reason teaches us to be possible . . . we might then busy ourselves to advantage with the Hottentots, or hold intimate converse with the inhabitants of the moon; but being as we are, our feelings evaporate in so large a space—we must draw the circle of our affections and duties

somewhat close—the heart hovers and fixes nearer home. . . . It is, indeed, the fault of this able and extraordinary man, that he has concentrated his faculties and feelings too entirely on one subject and pursuit, and has not ‘looked enough abroad into universality.’

Hazlitt draws the idea of perspective across time as well, signaled by the reference to Milton. Almost everything we associate with Milton—the grandeur of his moral vision and the architectural beauty of his epic poetry—is the reverse of what Bentham stands for. The gigantic presences that dominate *Paradise Lost* have no equivalent in Bentham’s experience, inflated though his ambitions are; Milton fashioned imaginary worlds, Bentham wooden utensils on a lathe. Bentham may live in Milton’s house, but he has no conception of the Miltonic universe that still lingers in this physical space:

To show how little the refinements of taste or fancy enter into our author’s system, he proposed at one time to cut down these beautiful trees, to convert the garden where he had breathed the air of Truth and Heaven for near half a century into a paltry *Chrestomathic School*, and to make Milton’s house (the cradle of *Paradise Lost*), a thoroughfare, like a three-stalled stable, for the idle rabble of Westminster to pass backwards and forwards to it with their cloven hoofs.

The irony of Bentham’s plans to turn the place where Milton wrote his Christian epic into a school for fledgling Utilitarians is yet another deflating perspective on the philosopher. This is the essay’s most symbolically charged moment, in which two things happen simultaneously. In making Milton’s home a stable for “idle rabble”—and not just rabble, but rabble with “cloven hoofs”—Bentham is transforming a sacred space into a contemporary underworld. This particular hell, however, is not a place of fallen angels and everlasting loss but of anonymous crowds with nothing much to do with their time. Their cloven hooves are obviously emblematic of the demonic, but they also suggest a transformation into creatures that are both less than human and banal—an image that encapsulates the consequences of Bentham’s philosophy in real life, which are to grind the meaning out of everyday experience and to project altruistic impulses far beyond their natural range.

The two bodies in this passage, the clumsy Bentham and the hybrid, vacant crowds of Westminster, are an inverse image of the seamless mind/body integration of Hazlitt’s athletes and jugglers. The whole strange complex of imagery—Milton’s house and garden, the trees (which of course evoke the tree of knowledge in *Paradise Lost*), Bentham’s disordered energy and uncoordinated movement, the devils, nineteenth-century London—creates an effect like a palimpsest, the emergence of the past into the present. Hazlitt has shifted our perspective from the spatial and visual to the temporal, and the whole point (as usual in this essay) is Bentham’s disconnection from the very realities his philosophy seeks to explain and control. The religious past that Bentham would like to bury is far from dead or inert; his rush to the future has been suddenly blocked by an eruption of energy from another century and another imaginative world. The passage has a disturbing, subterranean tone, the upshot of which is to establish the chasm between Milton the visionary and Bentham the unimaginative planner of prisons and philosophies.

And yet Hazlitt is not finished with Milton. Just when his drift seems clear, he suddenly remembers something Milton and Bentham have in common. Milton, like Bentham, was a schoolteacher: “Let us not, however, be getting on too fast—Milton himself taught school! There is something not altogether dissimilar between Mr. Bentham’s appearance, and the portraits of Milton, the same silvery tone, a few disheveled hairs, a peevish, yet puritanical expression, an irritable temperament corrected by habit and discipline.”<sup>22</sup> The ways in which the two men resemble one another continue to diminish Bentham in our eyes. He has gone from “lively” and “buoyant” and “eager” to “peevish,” “puritanical,” and “irritable.” Bentham the world-spanning philosopher and Bentham the energetic reformer have been reduced to Bentham the cranky old man. But so has Milton, for all his genius a man with the same kinds of temperamental knots as Bentham and the rest of us and, in his own seventeenth-century context, possessed by the same ambition to press a black-and-white morality on the world. After leading us to think that the gulf between the two is impassably huge, Hazlitt cuts Milton down to Bentham’s size. The boundaries between the past and the present have dissolved in this passage, and along with them our sense of dramatic contrast between the visionary poet and the dry social engineer.

What Hazlitt has done in this passage is to multiply the filters through which we see Bentham. The first demonstrates the dramatic contrast between Bentham and Milton, to Bentham’s disadvantage. The second reveals the hidden bond between them: the philosopher of pleasure and pain and the Puritan poet are not so different after all. Milton’s body, like Bentham’s, reveals a secret aspect of his character. Hazlitt is laying image on image, figuratively (in the literary “portrait” of Bentham we are in the midst of reading) and literally (by “reading”—interpreting—Milton through a real painting). In the process, their separate identities—their relative virtues and vices—begin to dissolve. The mutating Bentham/Milton comparison is a small paradigm of Hazlitt’s strategy throughout *The Spirit of the Age*, which is to force the reader to come to terms with the annihilation of identity, even when it comes at the cost of undermining his own argument. In the weaker essays, the ultimate effect is unsettlingly kaleidoscopic. In the stronger portraits, this strategy becomes an act of creative destruction.

The Bentham essay is a prime example. His identity as a thinker emerges just as his identity as a person recedes and eventually disappears into the welter of contradictory perspectives Hazlitt constructs around it. Once again, the imagery relies on the idea of misplaced perspective:

Mr. Bentham’s method of reasoning, though comprehensive and exact, labours under the defect of most systems—it is too *topical*. It includes everything; but it includes everything alike. It is rather like an inventory, than a valuation of different arguments. Every possible suggestion finds a place, so the mind is distracted as much as enlightened by this perplexing accuracy. The exceptions seem as important as the rule. By attending to the minute, we overlook the great; and in summing up an account, it will not do merely to insist on the number of items without considering their amount. Our author’s page presents a very nicely dove-tailed mosaic pavement of legal common-places. We slip and slide over its even surface without being arrested any where. Or his view of the human mind resembles a map, rather than a picture; the outline, the disposition, is correct, but it wants colouring and relief.

It is crucial to be standing in the right place to truly grasp what is out there, literally and figuratively. This seems to be an orienting remark—explaining to us how we should go about judging the significance of Bentham’s theory—but by the end of the essay it has a deeply ironic ring. Hazlitt uses perspective to create a series of reversals in our point of view about the philosopher that ultimately demolishes our flattering first impression. Is Bentham a philosophical genius or a plodding cataloguer of facts? It all depends on where you stand. In fact the Bentham portrait consists of a series of overlapping perspectives, close-up, mid-range, and distant, that does not add up to a coherent point of view. These perspectives are, in effect, smaller closed worlds within the larger closed worlds of the essay and the collection. Bentham’s philosophy takes only one point of view, the “pursuit of abstract and general truths.” His tunnel vision at the end of the portrait, for example, is strikingly at odds with the wide horizons suggested at the beginning. His thought has neither depth nor contrast, and that is why—contrary to his reputation for having made morality clear and simple by applying the yardstick of pleasure and pain—his mental universe is empty. Anyone who tries to explore it will discover, as Hazlitt has tried to show us, that it is impossible to traverse. This mega-perspective is complemented by our mini-view of Bentham as a person. His physical body, in its rigidity and gracelessness, is a metaphor for his philosophy. We experience it as a body in motion because of the demonic energy of Bentham’s ideas, which summon up Miltonic monsters even as they flatten and deaden contemporary life. Bentham stays home, but his inflated notions about human perfectibility and the possibility of controlling human passions through abstract reason do not. They travel to the farthest reaches of the world like a virus, infecting other minds. In the case of influential individuals—thinkers like Malthus and creative writers like Sir Walter Scott—the written or spoken word releases knowledge from the confines of a single brain to become part of the cultural cognitive web. It is this passage, scarred with the distortions and transformations imposed by the limits of both individual and collective minds, that Hazlitt charts in this and other portraits.

Behind Hazlitt’s attempt at a detached analysis of Bentham and his philosophy lies a deep and visceral dislike. In an essay titled “The New School of Reform,” Hazlitt describes Benthamite Utilitarianism as marked by “a sinister bias of mind.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the shower of praise that opens the portrait, and the efforts to present Bentham as a pleasant enough fellow, Hazlitt ultimately makes it clear that he is a species of monster. He has no idea of the small human body, only the gigantic body politic; yet his preference for thinking on a grand scale gives him no insight into the full range and complexity of human experience. This is a long way from the fluid, integrated exercise of mind and body exemplified by the performance of the Indian jugglers, and in fact Hazlitt draws an explicit parallel. In the earlier essay, he had observed that the jugglers’ mind and body worked in such close conjunction that “the mere intention of the will acts mathematically, like touching the spring of a machine, and you come with Lockesley in *Ivanhoe*, in shooting at a mark, ‘to allow for the wind.’” This tacit understanding is exactly what Bentham lacks in his thinking about human life, according to Hazlitt: “He has carried . . . [his] single view of his subject too far, and not made sufficient allowance for the varieties of human nature, and the caprices and irregularities of the human will. ‘He has not allowed for the *wind*.’”

### **The Reverend Mr. Irving**

The body in Hazlitt is both an instrument and a medium of knowledge, a relationship strikingly illustrated in the contrast between Jeremy Bentham and the Reverend Edward Irving.

In different ways, both are studies in the bizarre. The essay on Bentham tacked back and forth between rebutting Bentham's intellectual system and striving to give a balanced view of him as a basically good man, while also steadily shrinking his intellectual stature through analogies that center on bodily rigidities and awkwardness. There is no such motive in the essay on Irving, but the body is, if anything, even more central in conveying identity than it is in the Bentham portrait.

The backdrop of the Irving essay is rhetoric, prized in Dissenting circles and beyond as an indispensable skill for an educated person. The passionate Parliamentary debates of the late eighteenth century, sparked by the political crises of the revolutionary period, stimulated a greater emphasis on educating young people in the art of public speaking.<sup>24</sup> It was also a skill with moral and philosophical underpinnings. In the mid- to late eighteenth century, views on rhetoric were evolving toward a more natural speaking style that argued the primary importance of the body—facial expressions, gestures, and voice—over reliance on classical rules and stylized language. Persuasive speaking flows from enacting ideas and emotions, not simply articulating them. “By insisting that the universality of language lay less in the features of language than in the features of delivery and countenance,” writes Jay Fliegelman, “the body of the speaker and its attitudes, not the body and attitudes of the text, become the site and text of meaning.”<sup>25</sup> In his 1777 treatise based on his lecture notes as a teacher at several Dissenting academies, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, Joseph Priestley says much the same thing. But he also points out that figurative language is the natural vehicle of expression for heightened emotional states:

Figurative speech, therefore, is indicative of a person's real feelings and state of mind, not by means of the words it consists of, considered as *signs of separate ideas*, and interpreted according to their common acceptation; but as *circumstances* naturally attending those feelings which compose any state of mind. Those figurative expressions, therefore, are scarce considered and attended to as *words*, but are viewed in the same light as *attitudes, gestures, and looks*, which are infinitely more expressive of *sentiments and feelings* than words can possibly be.<sup>26</sup>

Words can stand for the body by functioning as its medium. Priestley consistently describes rhetorical devices in bodily terms: the content and method of a speech equal the bones, muscles, and nerves of a composition; the style is the equivalent of “the covering of this body, to describe the external lineaments, the colour, the complexion, and graceful attitude of it.”<sup>27</sup> But Priestley had another purpose as well, which was to demonstrate the connection between those principles and David Hartley's theory on the association of ideas. Understanding this theory, he says, introduces the student to “the striking effect of Excellencies in composition, upon the genuine principles of human nature.”

This is the context in which Hazlitt presents Irving as an example of the perversion of rhetoric. A tall, handsome, and charismatic speaker, Irving was a Calvinist preacher who captivated fashionable London with his thunderous sermons about the corruptions of urban life. Thomas De Quincey considered him “unquestionably, by many, many degrees, the greatest orator of our times.”<sup>28</sup> Yet Hazlitt depicts him, with a mixture of fascination and loathing, as a fraud of biblical proportions. Everything about him is oversize. Hazlitt returns constantly to

Irving's physical attributes, in particular his height, as the secret of his appeal. His "talents and acquirements [are] beyond the ordinary run of every-day preachers," Hazlitt says, but by themselves they "would never have launched him into the ocean-stream of popularity, in which he 'lies floating many a rood.'" The reference to the newly fallen Satan from *Paradise Lost* suggests, as it did in the Bentham piece, a man who casts a long and perhaps ominous shadow. Hazlitt used biblical analogies to convey Irving's reputation and prowess in other contexts as well. In an obituary he wrote of Joseph Priestley, by reputation a solid thinker but not a showy orator, he imagines the pleasure of watching a debate between Priestley and Irving, "the great Goliath of modern Calvinism."<sup>29</sup>

The ostensible theme of the Irving portrait is the emptiness of celebrity and how a charlatan, through skillful rhetorical manipulation, can mesmerize an audience into thinking he actually has something to say. Hazlitt's ambivalence about both spoken and written language—more precisely, the uses to which they are put—is a recurring thread in *The Spirit of the Age*. He writes about each in a distinctly different tone of voice.

One is as the detached expert on rhetorical technique and former chronicler of parliamentary oratory, who can analyze why speakers fail to communicate and admire the force of well-constructed arguments shored up with artful phrases. He points to Francis Jeffrey, for example, as someone who combines the best of both styles—the fluidity and informality of spoken communication and the precision and thoughtful organization of print.

The other Hazlitt writes as the critic of the specious ends that eloquence often serves, especially in its spoken form. "Mr. Canning's success as an orator," he says in the essay on the politician George Canning, "and the space he occupies in the public mind, are strong indications of the Genius of the Age, in which words have attained a mastery over things, 'and to call evil good and good evil' is thought the mark of a superior and happy spirit." Here he is clearly speaking of language as no longer just an expressive but a performative act: by its very nature, it makes things happen. As Angela Esterhammer writes in her study of philosophies of language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "[A] Romantic speech-act theory considers utterance as an event that before all else shapes the subject's consciousness, determines the subject's relationship to the world and the hearer, and changes the environment that surrounds, and includes, the one who speaks."<sup>30</sup> Once again, Hazlitt envisions thought as occupying space. The proportion of "the public mind" colonized by Canning's persuasive words is so large that it leaves no room for contrary views. Language is a potent force driving the "collective cognitive processes" that impose limits on what can be thought and said.

Hazlitt seems to be heading toward the idea that spoken language has a special power that makes it more dangerous than the printed word. Irving's influence is not as insidious as Canning's because, as Hazlitt recognizes, he is a passing phenomenon, a shooting star that will soon fall below the horizon. Had Irving's sermons appeared only in print, Hazlitt says, without the patina of his self-confident, aggressive, and attractive persona, he would never have become a public sensation. In this respect, Irving is a kind of reverse image of Bentham. Bentham is an influential man of ideas whose disconnection from his body mirrors the narrowness and inflexibility of his thought. Irving is a man with nothing to offer but a performance. Hazlitt presents Bentham as a man possessed by his ideas, as much their victim as their perpetrator. He

sees Irving as the exemplar of an oddly magnetic identity of body and thought: “He himself is the only *idea* with which he has yet enriched the public mind!”

Hazlitt’s discussion of language in the Irving and Canning portraits centers on the dangerous potential of eloquence, united with an imposing physical presence, to arouse and channel collective emotion. He implies that this danger springs at least in part from the nature of language itself in his period; it is the “Genius of the Age” that “words have attained mastery over things.” But in the portrait of Sir Francis Burdett, he seems to see the printed word differently. Liberty is “a modern invention,” he writes, created by “the growth of books and printing”—a tribute to the liberating societal role of technology. He does not extend this Enlightenment perspective to authors like Bentham, however, who spread his doctrines not as an orator but as a writer of books. Even the language Bentham uses, Hazlitt says in a phrase he will repeat in other contexts, “*darkens knowledge*.” Spoken or printed, words have a hidden power to mutate into action.

### **Metaphorical Hazlitt**

If we take the *Essay* as marking Hazlitt’s first venture into intellectual life, the puzzle that is *The Spirit of the Age* has at least an entry point. Associationism, the philosophy he both opposed and half-embraced, was a body-based and reductionist view of human cognition, a forerunner of behaviorism. Hazlitt recognized the large role the association of ideas and sensations plays in mental life, but he also struggled to escape from the reductionist implications of Hartley’s theory (just as he sought to escape from Bentham’s moral reductionism). During the twenty years separating the *Essay* and *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt’s thinking about knowledge shifts its center of gravity from efforts to combat a strictly sensationalist—and thus physiological—epistemology to exploring knowledge as a process and as a relationship between the act of knowing and the knower. In doing so, he developed a more complex perspective on the role of the body in cognition that departs from the schematic and fragmented view of the *Essay*. It had framed the body as a collection of physical faculties under the control of a changing and unstable consciousness. In “The Indian Jugglers,” as I have argued, Hazlitt begins by asserting the superiority of mental over physical skill but ends by blurring the bright line he had drawn between the two at the outset of the essay. It is a step toward the idea that bodily experience and creative mental experience have something in common that is more fundamental than their differences. Among these commonalities is attention: intellectual insight depends on the knower’s bringing to bear a certain kind of attention whose most accurate analogue is knowledge acquired by the body.

The body is the link between Hazlitt and some of the neurologically based research and theorizing about cognition in our own day. Antonio Damasio, Francisco Varela and his colleagues Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have all contributed insights regarding the process of imaginative projection of bodily and environmental experience into cognitive structures. “[M]any of our most fundamental concepts, including those lying at the heart of ethics, politics, and philosophy, have their roots in movement and other bodily experiences at a pre-reflective level,” Johnson writes in *The Meaning of the Body*. “[W]e do not have two kinds of logic, one for spatial-bodily concepts and a wholly different one for abstract concepts. . . . Instead, we recruit body-based, image-schematic logic to perform abstract reasoning.”<sup>31</sup> Within this body-to-mind perspective, metaphors—“understanding and



experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”—are neither ornamental nor incidental linguistic attributes, but a fundamental characteristic of human cognition.<sup>32</sup> “The most sweeping claim of conceptual metaphor theory,” according to Johnson, “is that what we call abstract concepts are defined by systematic mappings from body-based, sensorimotor source domains onto abstract target domains.”<sup>33</sup>

This analysis gives a new dimension to Hazlitt’s use of metaphor, particularly in *The Spirit of the Age*. René Wellek described him as “an artist who attempts the task of translating a work of art into a completely different set of metaphors. At times the result seems only a superfluous duplication . . . at other times Hazlitt actually succeeds . . . [in creating] metaphorical analogies which it would be wrong to dismiss as *mere* analogies.”<sup>34</sup> Hazlitt’s somewhat cryptic description of his writings as “subtle and difficult problems translated into hieroglyphics” echoes Wellek’s view of him as a translator, but with an important distinction. Wellek sees him as a mediator between author and reader who employs metaphors and analogies to reproduce, with uneven success, what has already been written. Hazlitt’s self-description suggests he is up to something more than skillful paraphrase. Figurative language, the verbal form of images, is a technique that permits him to articulate a new and different level of perception regarding inner experience. The Bentham and Irving portraits, each in a different way, are examples.

In fact metaphor is the most important technique Hazlitt uses as a way of representing cognitive functioning generally. The mind operates, we learn, by a process of unending transmutation. Everything we think we have learned about his subjects is likely to be reversed, only to be reversed again. Nothing is simply what it is. Ideas congregate like crowds and carry off minds, faulty analysis becomes a featureless pavement that causes the thinker to slip, corporeal bodies become abstract concepts, Milton’s London house shifts its location to a suburb of hell. Cognitive issues are translated into the hieroglyphics of metaphor—visual images expressed through words—and then need to be translated yet again in the reader’s mind in an act of interpretation. At the same time, Hazlitt’s metaphors manipulate us by scattering our attention all over the cognitive landscape of his characters’ brains, and that becomes part of the challenge of interpretation.

Yet they also give *The Spirit of the Age* some of the structure it otherwise lacks. To read it is to experience the loop-like process of constant metaphorical translation—“understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another”—that runs like a through-line in every portrait. His coactively imaginative style is part of a strategy of disturbing our usual expectations about biographers as responsible for presenting a complete and coherent account of the mind and character of their subjects. *The Spirit of the Age* requires a more than usual act of imaginative participation on the part of the reader to decide how these fractured portraits come together, individually and as parts of a whole.

In this highly centrifugal work, nothing seems to converge toward a center. The multiple minds of *The Spirit of the Age* are aggregates of different things, nodes in a larger cultural consciousness of which, as individuals, they are largely unaware. Neuroscientist Merlin Donald sees the tensions between individual brains and what he calls “collective cognitive processes” as a force for human progress: “Now the [individual] mind leads with gestures and words to push one way, and now the culture pushes back in another direction, perhaps one that no one would

have predicted.”<sup>35</sup> But in *The Spirit of the Age*, group processes are dominated by the politically, socially, or economically powerful, and the influence of the intellectually powerful is generally malign. Hazlitt was more likely to see the relationship between individual and culture in his period as oppositional rather than reciprocal.

An idea common to most interpretations is that Hazlitt’s principal goal was chronicling the inability of the age to address its collective problems, variously defined—coming to terms with the political reality of the French Revolution, preserving the vigor of the arts in a mechanistic age, defending the possibility of altruism against Malthusian economic determinism. At the heart of *The Spirit of the Age*, however, is a larger, causal failure that underlies the others: a failure of mind. Hazlitt’s critique of Utilitarianism’s exclusive focus on instrumental knowledge is only the most extended example. There is also Coleridge, for whom an excess of learning was an obstacle to intellectual achievement, and Mackintosh, “one of the ablest and most accomplished men of the age,” for whom it was a barrier to direct experience. He “might like to read an account of India; but India itself with its burning, shining face would be a mere blank.” These and other portraits dramatize British society of the 1820s in terms of the knowledge it values, the knowledge it denies, and the liberating or corrupting effects of knowledge on individuals and institutions. Hazlitt recognized the growing importance of knowledge to society and on more than one occasion castigated Oxford and Cambridge for their resistance to any branch of study less than several centuries old. But he also believed that knowledge was not an unalloyed good. It can be a force for liberation but also for division and oppression, at both the individual level and the level of culture. *The Spirit of the Age* is an extended meditation on this disturbing proposition, so different from our optimistic faith in unlimited human progress through learning. The absence that haunts the portrait gallery and this last great work is the uncertain gulf between the potential and the reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets*, 133.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Jack, *English Literature, 1815–1832* (Oxford, 1963), 269. Quoted in Uphaus, *William Hazlitt*, 94.

<sup>3</sup> Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets*, 33

<sup>4</sup> Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 434.

<sup>5</sup> Hazlitt mentions the *Essay* directly on two occasions, first in the essay on the lawyer and judge James Mackintosh, where he relates how Mackintosh, stationed in India and lonely for home, welcomed the chance to read the *Essay*, described by Hazlitt as “that dry, tough, metaphysical *choke-pear*.” In the portrait of William Gifford, the vitriolic editor of the conservative *Quarterly Review*, Hazlitt tells how he once countered Gifford’s criticism of his “flowery style” by referring the *Quarterly* editor to the *Essay*’s spare prose and extended philosophical argument. Gifford’s response: “It is amusing to see this person, sitting like one of Brouwer’s Dutch boors over his gin and tobacco-pipes, and fancying himself a Leibnitz!”

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England*, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Hazlitt changed the quotation in the second edition of *The Spirit of the Age* to conform to the text of the play: “To know a man well, were to know himself.” In the context of the play, Osric has just said that Hamlet is acquainted with Laertes’s great skill as a duelist. Hamlet replies that he cannot admit knowing that, because then he would be claiming equal skill for himself, since only excellence can understand excellence. Yet, he adds, it is also true that “To know a man well, were to know himself,” meaning that we only truly understand others by knowing ourselves—i.e., self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge. I am indebted for this interpretation to Stephen Orgel, J. Reynolds Professor in Humanities, Stanford University.

<sup>8</sup> Khalip, *Anonymous Life*, 40. Khalip is speaking of “the epistemological emptiness of identity as such” in Hazlitt, and goes on to say (p. 40) that because “the self is already thought of as a necessary fiction, Hazlitt posits disinterest as the expression of a subjectivity that is always temporally unfastened—what Derrida calls the ‘non-

*contemporaneity with itself of the living present,*' and which presumes that the 'question' of justice for oneself and others depends upon interrogating the alterity of the self."

<sup>9</sup> *Essay*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 1:33–34.

<sup>10</sup> There are two exceptions: Sir Walter Scott and Jeremy Bentham. In the first case, however, the point is simply to define where Scott's literary imagination works best (the past) and in the second it is to illustrate Bentham's tendency to intellectual overreach.

<sup>11</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 11:137.

<sup>12</sup> McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Chandler, *England in 1819*, 181–82.

<sup>14</sup> Kandel, *The Age of Insight*, 406–9.

<sup>15</sup> Engell, *The Creative Imagination*, 201.

<sup>16</sup> "Strange as it may seem, to learn what any object is, the true philosopher looks at the object itself, instead of turning to others to know what they think or say or have heard of it, or instead of consulting the dictates of his vanity, petulance, and ingenuity, to see what can be said against their opinion." "On Paradox and Common-Place," *Table-Talk*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:147.

<sup>17</sup> *Prospectus of a History of English Philosophy*, in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 2:113.

<sup>18</sup> The other three are "On Reason and Imagination," "The New School of Reform," and "On People of Sense," all from *The Plain Speaker*.

<sup>19</sup> Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Mill, "Bentham," in *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society*, 252.

<sup>21</sup> Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Hazlitt's views on portraiture reflected a shift during the Romantic period from an emphasis on an accurate likeness of the sitter to an expressiveness that conveyed "the fullest representation of individual nature." Thus his comment on Robert Lefèvre's portrait of Napoleon: "It has . . . the appearance of being what is understood by a faithful likeness, and only wants that full development of the workings of the mind, which every portrait ought to have, and which, in a portrait like the present, would be invaluable" *Complete Works*, 18:89. See Tscherny, "Likeness in Early Romantic Portraiture," 193–99.

<sup>23</sup> "The New School of Reform," in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:179.

<sup>24</sup> Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, 77. Priestley includes some excellent practical advice for speechwriters as well: do not attach too much importance to first drafts; minor lapses are less evident in speaking than in writing. And he reminds writers that they have a useful device unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans—the footnote, which allows them to incorporate incidental matter outside the main text.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Morrison, *English Opium-Eater*, 226.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 26, 181.

<sup>32</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 177.

<sup>34</sup> Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950*, vol. 2, *The Romantic Age*, 197–98.

<sup>35</sup> Donald, *A Mind So Rare*, 285.

## Chapter Four: Romantic Knowledge

*In the course of acquiring all this so-called knowledge, I've lost something. I've lost contact with something that I had. I wonder about myself now. I haven't shouted "Hallelujah!" for a long time, you know? Can I do it once more? I would like to believe that.*

Athol Fugard, interview, March 27, 2014

It should be no surprise that knowledge was a problem for Romantic writers because knowledge was a problem for their age. The literature of the period is rife with clashing visions of knowledge as power and knowledge as overwhelming, enervating, and potentially impoverishing. Wordsworth warned that "We murder to dissect" in the *Lyrical Ballads* and aspired to "knowledge not purchased with the loss of power" in *The Prelude*; Shelley asserted that his era had no dearth of knowledge but "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know."<sup>1</sup> Coleridge (along with many others) worried about the future of the British state absent a clerisy of learned men to restrain the excesses of an undereducated electorate vulnerable to political radicalism.<sup>2</sup> The founding of the Dissenting University of London in the 1820s, dedicated to making education serve useful ends, challenged the intellectual traditions of Oxford and Cambridge even as it heralded a new day for those Britons long excluded from English universities. Education reformers of all kinds were immersed in improvement schemes for schooling the lower classes. If the motive behind many of these efforts was a desire to ensure an appropriate reverence for the ruling classes and the established church, it was a sign of social progress, as Hazlitt observed, that in 1820s England "the meanest mechanic can read and write."

For individuals and institutions, the multiplication of new paths to knowledge bred a disorienting blend of optimism and anxiety. Education inevitably became a major battleground for these issues. "The characters of men are determined in all their most essential circumstances by education," William Godwin wrote in his influential *Political Justice* (1793).<sup>3</sup> The question of schooling and advanced learning flowed into the larger debate sparked by the French Revolution over what societal progress means and what forms of education advance it. James Chandler sees Wordsworth's critique of contemporary pedagogical practices in *The Prelude*, for example, as centered on the overly abstract and child-controlling theories of Rousseau and French Ideologues such as Destutt de Tracy, and thus as much concerned with politics as with education.<sup>4</sup> Alan Richardson's 1994 study of schooling in the Romantic period, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*, demonstrates how much of the school reform effort in England was entwined with ensuring social control, and the central role literary works, from poetry to political broadsides to novels, played in reflecting and shaping British education from 1790 through the mid-nineteenth century.

More recent scholarship has extended Richardson's exploration of literature and education in a different direction: higher education and the era's multiplying venues for intellectual work in the arts and sciences. Robin Valenza's account of how poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge argued for poetry's special place in the economy of knowledge in *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain* elucidates how literary works became part of a "larger, culture-wide debate about the connections among

disciplinarity, language, class, and audience.”<sup>5</sup> Jon Klancher’s *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* takes this developing account into the realm of the arts and sciences institutions of the early 1800s, and shows how the debate over knowledge was spurred by these organizations—among them the Russell Institution, where Hazlitt delivered his lectures on English philosophy.

At the heart of Romantic ambivalence over knowledge was a sense that perhaps the age had too much of a good thing. Changes in copyright laws and improvements in production techniques in the eighteenth century had increased the availability and stimulated the promotion of literary works of all kinds. The circle of readers steadily expanded in a trend that was marked by two groundswells, the first in the 1730s and 1740s with the proliferation of popular magazines and novels, and the second in the 1780s and 1790s with a flood of inexpensive political pamphlets and religious tracts aimed at combatting radicals like Thomas Paine.<sup>6</sup> The invention of the steam press in 1810 caused another upsurge in print production. Thomas De Quincey found the deluge of new books “the presses of Europe are still disemboguing [pouring] into the ocean of literature” a cause for despair—because of the impossibility of reading even a fraction of them—and was convinced this phenomenon had contributed to the spread of a profound cognitive peril: the disproportionate attention given to the study of foreign languages, encouraged by the easy availability of elementary grammar textbooks.<sup>7</sup> He compared the pernicious effects of language study to “dry rot” of the mind and, in a reversal of Kant’s famous dictum “Dare to know,” exhorted the young to “Dare to be ignorant of many things your mind craves” because many of those things “are not favourable to the ultimate ends of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> The invisible hand might guide the economy of material wealth to merge the pursuit of personal interest with the common good, but what forces would control the distribution and uses of knowledge in the economy of intellect?

Literary writers of the period were largely opposed to utilitarian and mercantilist theories of knowledge as a commodity like any other, and uncertain about the societal and political implications of educational reform movements aimed at spreading new knowledge to the masses. Enthusiasm for the discoveries of experimental science was tempered by an awareness that the new scientific disciplines represented a potential encroachment on poetry’s—and by extension, literature’s—claim to be a privileged form of knowledge. The prevailing cognitive theories of associationism and phrenology raised intriguing but sometimes unsettling questions about how best to stimulate the brain and thus intellectual growth. The restructuring of philosophical knowledge in the Romantic period, to which Hazlitt’s unread *Essay* and *Lectures on English Philosophy* were silent testimony, was accompanied by an equally intense interest in reconceptualizing other forms as well, motivated by the drive to organize knowledge and thus find a vantage point from which its various manifestations could be understood and controlled.

The Romantic period was not unique in its alarms and hesitations about what the exponential growth of knowledge would mean for values, social organization, and literature. But the authors I discuss in this chapter are instructive examples of its struggle to articulate the psychological disequilibrium created by a new and unstable intellectual landscape. Thomas Love Peacock’s satirical history of the arts and sciences sets one of the terms of the Romantic debate over knowledge in its utter rejection of poetry as in any way central to the future of intellect. De Quincey’s intensely personal and quasi-paranoid vision of books and education differs strikingly from Shelley’s ecstatic sense of the unity of all knowledge, but has something in common with

Hazlitt's struggles over the dangers of reading and the pain of a life spent dealing in words. All of these authors reflect the Romantic attempt to embrace an optimistic and expansive view of knowledge. For De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Shelley, however, this attempt was held in check by the desire to assert the intellectual and experiential value of literature, as well as to protect emotion and feeling from the potentially corrosive effects of certain forms of education and learning.

### **Knowledge, literature, and language**

Valenza points out that Diderot's *Encyclopedia* included a diagram, based on Bacon's *Advancement of Knowledge*, that shrank "the realm of the imagination, which takes in poetry and its sister arts, to a conspicuously small compass—barely a sixth of the space allotted to the 'reasoning' disciplines of theology, ethics, mathematics," and the sciences.<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Bentham's 1817 *Chrestomathia*—the title is derived from two Greek words meaning "conducive to useful learning"—includes a "Synoptic Table" that organizes the disciplines according to their utility in securing human happiness. From Bacon onward, the urge to classify the various branches of human knowledge in visual form rested on the conviction that it could be captured and made more visible—"seen" in a new and more coherent way. Most used the mental faculties exercised by the disciplines as the organizing principle (it was the Scottish moral philosopher Dugald Stewart who pointed out that this approach was "altogether unsatisfactory" to devising a convincingly coherent explanation of the relations among the arts and sciences, and likely to remain so).<sup>10</sup> Bentham's quantitatively pleasure-centered worldview upended traditional ideas of a hierarchy of knowledge crowned with theology and philosophy. In his Synoptic Table, literary studies are represented by grammar (classified as one of the "intellectual-faculty-regarding" disciplines) and rhetoric (designated as one of the "passion-exciting") and are grouped under the general heading of Nooscopic Pneumatology ("intellectual-faculty-regarding"), while aesthetics appears as one of the "mere-sensation-regarding" disciplines under Pathoscopic Pneumatology ("sensitive-faculty-regarding"). This Utilitarian table, intended primarily as a supporting framework for his proposal to establish schools with a curriculum designed to meet the practical needs of the middle classes, is generally considered as unsatisfactory as its predecessors. (Despite its shortcomings, however, Klancher argues that Bentham's views of the arts and sciences were less schematic and more nuanced than his table suggests. He believed, for example, that clear distinctions between the two eventually become more difficult to make ("over time, art *becomes* science, science *reveals* its internal art."<sup>11</sup>)

The interest in new visual maps of knowledge, including Bentham's, was inspired in part by the emergence of new disciplines. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of grouping works on virtually any subject under the broad rubric of "literature" gradually yielded to the triumph of intellectual specialization (whose utility was celebrated, appropriately enough, by Adam Smith). As Valenza notes, the progress of scientific knowledge meant that by roughly the 1820s the use of "literature" as an umbrella term for writings devoted to general learning of all kinds was breaking down.

A parallel development was the invention of specialized vocabularies as intellectual disciplines evolved into smaller and smaller units of focus. These developing vocabularies, especially in the newer disciplines like chemistry and physics, had an influence beyond the sciences themselves. Hume had aspired, without notable success, to write about complex philosophical questions in language any educated person could comprehend. By 1823, De

Quincey was endorsing philosophy's use of technical terms as a way of introducing more precision into imperfectly realized ideas, and invoking the analogy of the physical sciences to do it. "The terminology of Kant then is not a rebaptism of ideas already existing in the universal consciousness: it is, in part, an enlargement of the understanding by new territory. . . . It is on this principle that the nomenclature of chemistry is constructed: substances, that were before known by arbitrary and non-significant names, are now known by systematic names."<sup>12</sup> De Quincey's defense of specialized language and its potential analytical power was a recognition that there were ways in which science could be a model for humanistic disciplines. (According to Valenza, Wordsworth and Coleridge responded, in essence, by arguing that while poetry does not employ a specialized vocabulary, it uses language in a specialized way.<sup>13</sup>)

The growing use of technical terms was only one of the ways in which language figured in the cultural discussion of knowledge and education. From early schooling through university, students were immersed in classical languages through the study of Greek and Latin. Reservations about the value of this practice had a pedigree in eighteenth-century critiques of education. Adam Ferguson, a major figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, expressed a version of this sentiment in his 1767 work, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. "The parade of words, and general reasonings, which sometimes carry an appearance of so much learning and knowledge, are of little avail in the conduct of life. The talents from which they proceed, terminate in mere ostentation, and are seldom connected with that superior discernment which the active apply in times of perplexity; . . . Men are to be estimated, not from what they know, but from what they are able to perform."<sup>14</sup> The rule-books of culture, transmitted to the educated classes through intense focus on immersion in ancient languages, had compromised the ability to exercise initiative and take decisive action.

Several decades earlier, David Hume had made a distinction between the learned and the "conversable" worlds that echoes something of Ferguson's call to praxis. In Hume's view, conversation is a form of practice for living, training in self-expression disciplined by exposure to a wide range of ideas and refined by attending to the conversation of others. It is not traditional forms of education that sustain culture but the kind of social experience that puts learning in touch with life. "The Separation of the Learned from the conversable World," Hume lamented in 1742, "seems to have been the great Defect of the last Age. . . . By that Means, every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation. . . . And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation?"<sup>15</sup> A common corollary in the period was that too much application to study isolated and rendered young men physically passive and disinclined to action, whereas the education of a gentleman should encourage an energetic stance toward his responsibilities and a sophisticated sense of how to present himself in society.

Criticism of cloistered learning was reinforced from another direction—Utilitarians and Dissenters. Priestley described the typical university liberal-arts curriculum as sadly out of date in the 1760s, given the rapid globalization of trade. He recommended adding the systematic study of laws, government, manufacture, and commerce for gentlemen "in active life" to meet the threat to English interests from growing international competition.<sup>16</sup> In 1808, an anonymous

author in the *Edinburgh Review* fumed about the classical curricula taught by English dons and force-fed to English students:

A learned man!—A scholar!—a man of erudition! Upon whom are these epithets of approbation bestowed? Are they given to men acquainted with the science of government? Thoroughly masters of the geographical and commercial relations of Europe? To men who know the properties of bodies, and their action upon each other? No: this is not learning; it is chemistry or political economy—not learning. . . . The picture which a young Englishman, addicted to the pursuit of knowledge, draws—his *beau ideal* of human nature—his top and consummation of man’s powers—is a knowledge of the Greek language. His object is not to reason, to imagine, or to invent; but to conjugate, decline and derive.<sup>17</sup>

Although De Quincey would have made learning Greek an exception because of the unrivalled power of its literature, he saw educational emphasis on foreign languages in the same negative light. Language study has an invertebrate intellectual structure; it “yields no reason why it should be this way rather than that, obeying no theory or law . . . its lifeless forms kill and mortify the action of the intellect.”<sup>18</sup> Learning a science, on the other hand, requires the exercise of the intellectual faculties of “comparing, combining, distinguishing, generalizing, subdividing, acts of abstraction and evolution, of synthesis and analysis, until the most torpid minds are ventilated, and healthily excited by this introversion of the faculties upon themselves.” Unlike the *Edinburgh Review* author, De Quincey’s complaint does not rest on utilitarian objections—what is all this erudition *for?*—but on cognitive grounds. Adam Smith had noted “the beauty of a systematical arrangement of different observations connected by a few common principles.”<sup>19</sup> Language study offers no such principles, De Quincey maintains, and virtually no organization; everything about it is arbitrary. Science and similar disciplines are superior because “Wherever there is a law and system, wherever there is relation and correspondence of parts, the intellect will make its way.”<sup>20</sup>

Besides its contribution to individual cognitive development, science seemed to offer practical lessons in organizing a wider discourse of knowledge. Barriers between the learned and the less educated were coming down, aided by experimental science. By the time Joseph Priestley was performing his historic experiments in chemistry and electricity in the 1760s and beyond, theory and practice were beginning to cross-germinate. Educated men and practitioners—farmers and manufacturers, weavers, potters, and other craftspeople—were having scientifically and economically productive conversations with each other. The eighteenth century saw a more than tenfold increase in invention, including the innovations of such craftspeople as weavers and instrument-makers.<sup>21</sup> The percentage of lower-class men who succeeded in becoming scientists rose as well.<sup>22</sup> Priestley found time between fundamental scientific contributions to serve as a consultant to the china manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood and to discover the carbonation process, an advance that was later successfully (and profitably) applied by a Swiss entrepreneur named Johann Jacob Schweppe. “The politeness of the times,” Priestley wrote, “has brought the learned and the unlearned into more familiar intercourse than they had before.”<sup>23</sup>



Science's ability to create a spontaneous community of talent in pursuit of a common goal, even across class lines, was a much harder task within literary culture. Hazlitt considered its "feuds and jealousies" impediments to progress toward liberty and equality, and "no class of persons so little calculated to act in *corps* as literary men."<sup>24</sup> De Quincey wrote that literature reflected few of any nation's intellectual concerns and that "literary people are, in a large proportion, as little intellectual people as any one meets with."<sup>25</sup> The great journals of the early nineteenth century, like the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, attracted large middle-class audiences for writers and raised the compensation of journalists to new highs.<sup>26</sup> But the competitive demands of the market also worked against cooperation. Although, as Mary Poovey writes, poets like Wordsworth attracted willing acolytes and publicists like De Quincey, presenting a unified front was difficult to accomplish among authors and critics:

Literary writers were not able to establish enforceable boundaries around their work. Their work never really constituted a "discipline" during the nineteenth century, much less a "profession," partly because the definitions they were adopting to distinguish Literary merit made them either ambiguously positioned helpmates, as De Quincey was to Wordsworth, or rivals with each other, as reviewers were to writers, instead of consistent allies embarked on a common task.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, the confidence of scientists in the unlimited promise of their disciplines was spilling over into broader questions. Jon Klancher relates how Humphry Davy's 1802 inaugural lecture at the Royal Institution not only inspired his listeners with the potential of experimental science but excited them with an even more ambitious prospect: the eventual binding together of "*the great whole of society . . . by means of knowledge and the useful arts.*" This new and knowledge-born unity was to include humanists and poets, as long as they were willing to employ a "'language representing simple facts,' the better to 'destroy the influence of terms connected only with feeling.'"<sup>28</sup> This statement was an implicit denial of literature's claim to a universal window on the human condition and therefore its claim to a privileged place in culture. Where did this leave poetry, the emblematic imaginative art, among the emerging order of the disciplines?

### **Left behind**

Thomas Love Peacock, a poet and novelist himself, had an answer in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). His breezy satire is remembered chiefly for two things: its attack upon the Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge) and the whirlwind it provoked, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, written in 1821. But Peacock's diatribe also sheds a searching light on the tensions surrounding the debate over knowledge and poetry and their relation to progress. He combines a playful wit with moments of scornful indignation as he skewers the dissension of the literary world, the struggle among the disciplines, and the threats to literature's standing posed by science and Utilitarian and Dissenting advocates of instrumental education.

The framework he uses—the theory that history proceeds in cycles—dates back to classical times. But he grafts onto it aspects of eighteenth-century Scottish philosophical histories, such as those of Hume and Ferguson, which depict "an inexorable historical process, often periodized in the four great stages that culminate in commercial society."<sup>29</sup> Peacock employs this dual perspective to mock Romantic notions of poetry as an exalted form of

knowledge by placing them firmly in a Utilitarian and mercantilist scale of values, beginning at the preliterate dawn of human society:

The successful warrior becomes a chief; the successful chief becomes a king: his next want is an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements and the extent of his possessions; and this organ he finds in a bard, who is always ready to celebrate the strength of his arm, being first duly inspired by that of his liquor. This is the origin of poetry, which, like all other trades, takes its rise in the demand for the commodity, and flourishes in proportion to the extent of the market.<sup>30</sup>

At this first stage—the age of iron—poets “are as yet the only historians and chroniclers of their time, and the sole depositories of all the knowledge of their age.” In the succeeding age of organized institutions and civil societies, poetry still reigns supreme: “The whole field of intellect is its own. . . . Poetry has now attained its perfection: it has attained the point which it cannot pass: genius therefore seeks new forms for the treatment of the same subjects.” This—the age of Homer—is when its decline begins. “Pure reason and dispassionate truth” demand more rigorous and objective forms of articulation—a sentiment that recalls Davy’s 1802 inaugural address. First history emancipates itself from the chains of poetic myth and legend, followed by philosophy and the early glimmerings of science. As these disciplines mature with the emerging dominance of reason, poetry “leaves them to advance alone. Thus the empire of thought is withdrawn from poetry, as the empire of facts had been before.”

Peacock finishes with an abbreviated history of the four ages of *modern* poetry (thus extending his account to eight ages of poetry, despite his title) that ends with the Romantic period, an uninspiring age of brass. He has fun with Romantic self-absorption and worship of nature, in one instance, by imagining the Lake Poets reasoning with themselves as follows: “Society is artificial, therefore we will live out of society. The mountains are natural, therefore we will live in the mountains. There we shall be shining models of purity and virtue, passing the whole day in the innocent and amiable occupation of going up and down hill, receiving poetical impressions, and communicating them in immortal verse to admiring generations.”<sup>31</sup> But his account is remarkable principally for the Romantic poets’ inexhaustible infatuation with themselves and their embrace of a ridiculous—because unscientific—return to nature.

Writing at a time when the Republic of Letters was devolving into a collection of smaller, intellectually autonomous states, Peacock made his (perhaps not entirely) tongue-in-cheek dissection of poetry’s pretensions a history of the intellectual disciplines. His theory of the development of these disciplines starts from the assumption that poetry’s role was always—and only—to serve as a primeval Gaia of intellect, a huge formless mass from which continents of knowledge detached themselves over time. The march of specialization, as the disciplines one by one asserted their independence from—indeed their superiority to—their mother continent, has reduced poets themselves to “semi-barbarian[s] in a civilized community” and poetry to “the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment. . . . It can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life an useful or rational man.”<sup>32</sup>

Peacock’s deterministic account ultimately merges with a different and non-cyclical kind of history, the endless upward climb of knowledge and progress envisioned in Enlightenment

dreams of perfectibility. As “the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit,” modernity shakes off poetry into the cyclical world of classical history and medieval superstition where it belongs. His argument turns to this point in one final, Herculean, massively subordinated sentence:

Now when we consider that it is not the thinking and studious, and scientific and philosophical part of the community, not to those whose minds are bent on the pursuit and promotion of permanently useful ends and aims, that poets must address their minstrelsy, but to that much larger portion of the reading public, whose minds are not awakened to the desire of valuable knowledge . . . when we consider that the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge, will continue to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and condusive studies: that therefore the poetical audience will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the comparison of intellectual acquirement: when we consider that the poet must still please his audience, and must therefore continue to sink to their level, while the rest of the community is rising above it: we may easily conceive that the day is not distant, when the degraded state of every species of poetry will be . . . generally recognized . . .

Throughout *The Four Ages*, the standard for poetry is the size and composition of its audience; poetry falls because rising disciplines become increasingly efficient in annexing its educated patrons and ultimately the more talented of its practitioners. Poetry’s quality must therefore inexorably continue to erode as more and more of the readers it attracts either do not care about, or are incapable of understanding, the superior value of more serious pursuits. In contrast to Wordsworth, who argued that truly original poets must create the taste by which they are to be appreciated, Peacock sees no such elevated place or power for future poets; they will be forced to write down to the lowest taste of their times:

. . . intellectual power and intellectual acquisition have turned themselves into other and better channels, and have abandoned the cultivation and the fate of poetry to the degenerate fry of modern rhymesters, and their Olympic judges, the magazine critics, who continue to debate and promulgate oracles about poetry, as if it were still what it was in the Homeric age, the all-in-all of intellectual progression, and as if there were no such things in existence as mathematicians, astronomers, chemists, moralists, metaphysicians, historians, politicians, and political economists, who have built into the upper air of intelligence a pyramid, from the summit of which they see the modern Parnassus far beneath them, and, knowing how small a place it occupies in the comprehensiveness of their prospect, smile at the little ambition and the circumscribed perceptions with which the drivellers and mountebanks upon it are contending for the poetical palm and the critical chair.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, poetry’s final and most devastating loss will be the best minds of future generations. He leaves imaginative literature isolated in a noisy Parnassus of ill-educated readers and squabbling critics, far below the carefully constructed “pyramid” that science and other

contemporary pursuits have built “into the upper air of intelligence” through the steady and collective accumulation of useful knowledge.

With this concluding thunderbolt, Peacock makes a prediction about poetry’s future. Its marginalization derives not just from the shattering of its early monopoly on knowledge. It is also the result of the growing number and sophistication of the audience for truly useful and “conducive” knowledge. *The Four Ages* is the verbal equivalent of Diderot’s tree of knowledge: poetry hangs at the precarious edge of the outermost branch of the tree of knowledge, while more solid and productive disciplines are safely anchored to the trunk.

### Shelley strikes back

*A Defence of Poetry*, completed in 1821 but not published until 1843, long after Shelley’s death, is not so much a blow-by-blow refutation of Peacock’s arguments as an evocation of *The Four Ages* that rarely comes into direct contact with it. Shelley admitted as much: “[A]though devoid of the formality of a polemical reply; if the view [these pages] contain be just they will be found to involve a refutation of the doctrines of the Four Ages of Poetry.”<sup>34</sup> Its 1843 editor removed most of the scattered references to Peacock in Shelley’s draft. So for many modern readers it can seem to spring out of nowhere, its origins no longer a part of its meaning.

My interest in Shelley’s retaliatory polemic is limited and specific: Shelley’s strategies for defending poetry’s ascendancy in the context of the *Four Ages*’s hierarchy of the disciplines.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Peacock’s straight line of argument, the *Defence* takes its time, circling its topic in a way that disarms too-logical criticism. Its loosely organized construction serves Shelley’s purpose, which is to create a parallel imaginative history in which the threats to poetry articulated in *The Four Ages* are nullified, dismissed, or submerged from view. Its striking instances of near-ecstasy are completely foreign to the brisk energy of the other work. But one quality it shares with *The Four Ages* is a tone of bold confidence that matches Peacock’s.

*The Four Ages* used the historical crystallization of the disciplines and professions to explain poetry’s devolution and predict its permanent eclipse. Among other things, Utilitarian visions of newer and possibly more dynamic disciplines displacing those devoted to imaginative experience challenged Romantic conceptions of the unity of knowledge and the unity of human experience. Shelley’s strategy, to adopt and adapt Plato’s definition of *poiein* as the “general name” for “the exercise of every inventive art,” allows him to absorb the other disciplines (and professions like architecture and law) into poetry, and then to subject them to its generalizing power.<sup>36</sup> He achieves this by capitalizing on what, as Valenza points out, made poetry different from other intellectual fields: it seemed to have no content. For that very reason, it can function in Shelley’s account as the universal solvent, dissolving the differences among the disciplines and conferring order upon them.

*A Defence of Poetry* presents poetry as an intellectual force powerful enough to reconstruct knowledge as a single entity, unified by poetic skill and subordinated to the discipline of human nature in its most general sense. (Wordsworth had done something similar when he described poetry as “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge” and “the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science,” but Shelley elaborates the same idea on a much larger canvas.) Only poets hear the rhythms deep in experience and bring an answering

harmony themselves, Shelley says early on, which is why poetry functions as “the center and circumference of knowledge . . . the root and blossom of all other systems of thought.”

At the same time, the *Defence* posits history as Platonic, self-creating, and hidden, something that must be unveiled (as the frequent references to veils suggests)—though “unveiled” does not imply anything like a transparent and complete understanding. The words of poets “unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth,” but these poetic unveilings are only intermittently glimpsed, suggesting the fundamental resistance of history—and of poetic knowledge—to being understood. Shelley’s recasting of Peacock’s cycles of power and decline into a history marked by an “indestructible order” of beauty that poets “imagine and express” safely removes poets from the time-bound judgments of reading publics and the quantitative standard of popular esteem that dominate *The Four Ages*. The threat of the disaffected audience is nullified.

Bruce Haley suggests that in the *Defence* Shelley was engaged in writing a new kind of history, “not critical and analytic, but poetic or intuitive, inviting a special kind of reading.”<sup>37</sup> Shelley had read *The Statesman’s Manual* and might have been influenced by Coleridge’s contrast between conventional historical writing, with its retrospective investigation of chains of causation, and Biblical history, which enfolds “the Reason in Images of the Sense.” Shelley’s cycles of society rising, falling, and rising again are a counterpoint to the relentlessly upward progression of history—in many ways our view of history—that Peacock espouses at the end of *The Four Ages*. While history may appear linear, it looks very different, as M. H. Abrams explains, from a Coleridgean perspective, which conceives past, present, and future as part of one great circular journey of the “One back to the One by way of the many.”<sup>38</sup> Shelley’s cyclical version of time recalls Coleridge’s image of the ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail, which Coleridge saw as emblematic of the imagination:

The common end of all *narrative*, nay of *all*, Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion—the snake with it’s Tail in it’s Mouth.<sup>39</sup>

Poets are important creators of this unity, Shelley is saying, but—as critics have pointed out—their primary characteristic is not their agency but their uncomprehending subordination within a closed and self-perpetuating historical circle.<sup>40</sup> Whether shapers of institutions—which Jon Klancher sees as central to Shelley’s concept—or as movers of events, poets are the instruments of invisible forces. Shelley’s tendency in his poetry to identify with irresistibly powerful forces that overwhelm the sense of self strikes a similar note. The best-known is the symbolic storm, the “Destroyer and Preserver,” of his *Ode to the West Wind*. Like that poem, the *Defence*, and especially its soaring conclusion, derives its rhetorical impact from the same building sense of union with mysterious powers, barely glimpsed, that animate human life and death. This is consistent with the mystical tone Shelley adopts in discussing the role of poetry which, he says, “compels us to . . . imagine that which we know. . . [and] creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.”

In her classic study of ecstasy, Marghanita Laski cites Shelley’s use of ruins in his poetry, in which images of transience invoke by contrast the feeling of underlying permanence that is frequent in ecstatic states.<sup>41</sup> Among the inventory of triggers that produce ecstasy, she includes

the inner sense of discovering knowledge. Such “knowledge-contact ecstasies” are “characteristic of inspirations . . . that the new idea or purpose feels as if it had arrived independently of the creator’s volition and often as if it were communicated by someone or something else.”<sup>42</sup> This description suggests Shelley’s poets, and also why the *Defence*, despite its sometimes confusing leaps and vague prose, achieves such an exciting cumulative impact at its climax. Shelley’s most effective answer to *The Four Ages* is not his complex argument or his sometimes elusive logic, but his powerful rendering of a transcendent discovery: the ecstatic experience of knowledge. It makes a rhetorically convincing case that poetic knowledge is self-validating, the wellspring not merely of secular progress but also of a profound inner experience of unity with the world.

Woven into Peacock’s and Shelley’s competing arguments are three unifying versions of history—the cyclic, the linear history of progress, and the Coleridgean circular journey. Bentham also had a unifying theory about yet another kind of history, that of the course of an individual life. He conceives it as a linear account, but one grounded in “expectations,” which looks to a future shaped by the economy of material success:

It is by means of [expectations] that the successive moments which form the duration of life are not like insulated and independent parts but become parts of a continuous whole. Expectation is a chain which unites our present and our future existence and passes beyond us to the generations which follow.<sup>43</sup>

Bentham’s version fits within conventional history’s chain of causation, except that it is not a retrospective but a *prospective* set of linkages from the present to the future. It includes no room for a past that is important to Shelley’s evidence-based case for poetry and its unifying role. Yet it almost seems, like Shelley’s *Defence*, to be envisioning history as a work of art that incorporates balance and order. “Expectations” take the place of the ecstatic contact with knowledge in the present and the poetic creation of futurity. They are the counterpart, for the individual, of Peacock’s hopeful projection of the disciplines into a future of steady, reliable accomplishment, with a productive denouement we can be confident will occur. We gain the sense that our individual lives have meaning, that they are a “continuous whole,” by contemplating the security promised by our projected accumulations. Expectations, in this sense, are not the expression of fragile hope in the face of an unpredictable world. Their function is to tame surprise by reassuring us about the strong bonds between us and our future well-being.

Thus Peacock’s claim—his expectation—that the progress of the disciplines means the best minds will no longer gravitate toward poetry or imaginative literature. He receives some support from an unexpected source: Thomas De Quincey’s *Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected*, written just a few years after *The Four Ages* and *A Defence of Poetry*.

### **De Quincey: Knowledge and terror**

De Quincey’s remarks about technical vocabularies are from the *Letters*, a work known almost exclusively for the distinction, which De Quincey credits to “many years’ conversations with Mr. Wordsworth,” between what he calls the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. De Quincey’s famous division of literature into two parts evinces his awareness that,

even if the sciences could at times hold lessons for other kinds of intellectual work, there was also a disciplinary competition at stake:

All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge. Now, if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I, in my turn, would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness—as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them. I say, when these inert and sleeping forms *are* organized, when these possibilities, *are* actualized, is this conscious and living possession of mine *power*, or what is it? <sup>44</sup>

The utility of these two categories, he says, lies in the way they help clear up the confusion engendered by the older definition of *literature* as anything published in a particular language. He reserves the literature of power to the narrower category of *belles lettres*, or, as he writes later in the *Letters*, “a body of creative art.” The literature of knowledge, on the other hand, “is either science or erudition”—examples of the latter include antiquities, geography, philology, philosophy, and theology. Everything that falls under this category can be translated from one language to another without “one atom of loss”—in other words, a denotative body of knowledge uncomplicated by tone, feeling, or intricately fine and therefore untranslatable connotation.

As Mary Poovey notes, this partition of literature into two opposing camps seeks to assign a superior place to imaginative over “all forms of informational writing,” including scientific writings.<sup>45</sup> As I have argued, Shelley uses a similar strategy to assert poetry’s dominance over other forms of intellectual activity in his *Defence of Poetry*. De Quincey makes his case for the primacy of imaginative literature by a significant parallel: “science or erudition”—the literature of knowledge—may help organize the mind, but poetry organizes the emotions, the “modes of feeling” that would otherwise lie deep and unrecognized in the psyche. The “inert and sleeping forms” it awakens possess possibilities that are *actualized*, feelings that are brought to life, by the very process of being organized. In other words, the literature of power deserves its name because it causes things to happen within the mind that can be stimulated in no other way. These cognitive changes occur through the vivifying force of language when it is used with the skill only poets possess. (De Quincey is using the term *poet* to stand in for a broader class of literary practitioners.) And in a way that also recalls Shelley, he is claiming that when poets exercise their art, the conventional separation between thought and action begins to dissolve (organizing = actualizing). The literature of power, figuratively speaking, explodes off the charts when it comes to agency.

So it is significant that in the *Letters* De Quincey advises the young man of the title to embrace the literature of knowledge, not the literature of power, in building a strong educational foundation. In part this is because he wants to lead him to the study of philosophy and to an appreciation of the extraordinary originality of Kant. Nonetheless, De Quincey’s glorification of the literature of power in this passage—literature as *belles lettres*—is remarkably at odds with his assessment of its value elsewhere in the *Letters*.

This shift occurs when De Quincey turns from literature in the abstract to literature's effect on the brain. The advantages of the literature of power become disadvantages in the realm of mental training. Pure literature inspires enthusiasm and excitement, but presents a serious challenge to the student because—unlike the sciences and mathematics—it does not proceed in a logical sequence of equally demanding steps:

[T]he difficulties and resistances to our progress in these investigations are not susceptible of minute and equable partition (as in mathematics), but are either of necessity tumultuary and *per saltum* [by leaps], or none at all. . . . The dilemma, therefore, to which a student of pure literature is constantly reduced . . . is this: . . . his understanding must find a daily want of some masculine exercise to call it out and give it play . . . [I]f (as too often it happens) he has not cultivated those studies (mathematics, *e.g.*) which present such difficulties as will bend to a resolute effort of the mind, and which have the additional recommendation that they are apt to stimulate and irritate the mind to make that effort, he is often thrown by the very cravings of an unsatisfied intellect, and not by passion or inclination, upon some vulgar excitement of business or pleasure, which becomes constantly more necessary to him.<sup>46</sup>

What the literature of power lacks is the innate logical order that makes consistent application to study congenial and creates an encouraging sense of progress. In fact it is so dangerous to intellectual agency—the ability to think in an orderly and purposive way—that it must be regularly offset with the study of disciplines from the literature of knowledge. Otherwise, the study of imaginative literature invites dilettantism and addiction.

There is a potent example, De Quincey tells us, of the consequences of failing to balance pure literary studies with bracing masculine disciplines. It is “an eminent living Englishman, with talents of the first order” who followed no organized plan of study, did not understand that “mathesis must furnish the master key,”<sup>47</sup> and therefore never experienced the “perpetual influx of pleasure, from the constant sense of success and difficulty overcome.”<sup>48</sup> As a result, he ended up chronically dissatisfied with himself and his contemporaries. This eminent Englishman is, of course, Coleridge, who was doomed to appear in print as his generation's favorite cautionary tale about how not to live life. He haunts the *Letters* as its negative role model (in contrast to De Quincey himself), turning up several other times in De Quincey's account as a poor metaphysician and a worse explicator of Kant, even though (De Quincey says) he had a better grasp of Kant's system than other contemporary commentators. According to Jonathan Bate, the organization of the *Letters* mimics that of the *Biographia*, and the primary question at stake is “where De Quincey stands in relation to Coleridge's literary life and opinions,”<sup>49</sup> especially Kant's philosophy and its reception in England. Even the device of imaginary correspondence echoes Coleridge's in its thirteenth chapter.<sup>50</sup> (Another Coleridgean touch, it might be added, is De Quincey's promise to write seven letters while only delivering five.)

Yet the *Letters*'s most compelling moments are those that reveal how, for De Quincey, the acquisition of knowledge is laced with the threat of losing control to some intense craving. The dangers of devotion to foreign languages, for example, can be dealt with only by strictly limiting such studies to the level necessary to grapple with a worthy foreign literature or philosophy, such as the German. The most formidable—because unavoidable—threat that



knowledge poses, however, is presented by books themselves. Although De Quincey states early on in the *Letters* that the best possible plan of study is the possession of a good library, his later discussion of the allure of books is one of the great monuments to the terrors of bibliomania.

The rise in readership during the early nineteenth century coincided with a wave of popular fears about the obsession for collecting books, both antiquary and modern. In more extreme cases, bibliomania was considered a medical disease.<sup>51</sup> De Quincey was a prime example of this compulsion.<sup>52</sup> In the *Letters*, the otherworldly fecundity of books becomes entangled with his warnings about languages, because he sees them as related addictions. He begins by calculating the number of books it is possible to read in one lifetime and concludes that even with intense application it would take thirty years to read ten thousand. If someone were unfortunate enough to live to be eighty, he could raise that figure to twenty thousand, he goes on—but estimates that this is barely five percent of the mass of books Europe alone would produce during those same thirty years. (It is ironic that De Quincey uses the mentally stimulating tool of mathematics to elucidate exactly how wretched a love of books can make you.) “All this arithmetical statement you must not conceive to relate to any fanciful case of misery. No; I protest to you that I speak of as real a case of suffering as ever can have existed.”<sup>53</sup> This suffering might be bearable to a man who lives in a small town, where books are few; but it becomes unendurable if you take the same man to London, with its “wagon-loads of unused stores which he is at liberty to work up.” No longer the master of books, “he is degraded into their slave.”<sup>54</sup>

From here, De Quincey extrapolates from his insatiable lust for books to a bottomless craving for art, music, and finally people, who after all can be read like books if you have the skill. But then he recalls that if books are available in the hundreds of thousands, people exist in the millions. Even the living will not suffice. What good would it do him to meet the great thinkers of the seventeenth century, he wonders, if he cannot meet the giants of the twentieth century as well? He envisions himself trapped on a narrow “isthmus” between past and future, isolated from both.

He explains away this plunge into a “midsummer madness” as a warning to the young about the dangers of intellectual life, which can be avoided only by consistent self-control and adherence to a strict plan of mental hygiene. There is an extraordinary disproportion, however, between the prescription and the disease. If there is one thing this cautionary tale has made clear, it is that books are the agents of a terrible addiction—much like the opium habit De Quincey battled unsuccessfully throughout his life. The “plan of study,” which largely involves logic, the arts of memory (not much discussed), and minimal contact with languages—i.e., words—is pathetically unequal to the threat intrinsic in the act of reading. It is impossible to know when to stop because it is impossible ever to know enough. The *Letters* begin as a pedagogical treatise on needful knowledge and morph into a nightmare of drowning in it.

De Quincey tells us that his leading claim to instruct the young about learning rests on his lifelong success in mastering solitude, which he believed was indispensable to intellectual development: “If there has ever lived a man who might claim the privilege of speaking with emphasis and authority on this great question,—By what means shall a man best support the activity of his own mind in solitude?—I probably am that man; and upon this ground, that I have passed more of my life in absolute and unmitigated solitude, voluntarily, and for intellectual

purposes, than any person of my age whom I have either met with, heard of, or read of.”<sup>55</sup> This qualification is nonetheless undermined by his urge to reveal his own sense of frantic helplessness in the face of the perils of reading. The eager young student, whom we are to imagine reading these advice-laden missives, exists only in De Quincey’s mind. We are left with his inner monologue about an impossible dilemma: education can only be achieved through study, yet study awakens dangerous hungers, which solitude and loneliness can only reinforce. In the world of the *Letters*, solitude is the last thing to recommend for a mind confronted with the irresistible temptations of reading.

The epistolary structure of the *Letters* as a primer for inducting the younger generation into the secrets of learning allows De Quincey a distancing framework for articulating his approach-avoidance attitude toward Coleridge, his sometime mentor and friend. His criticisms of a brilliant but underachieving Coleridge perform another function besides score-settling, however, which weaves them into his case for the pathology of reading: the futility of self-assertion and self-control. Coleridge is the model of a mind that has not been well-armed for its encounter with books, which function as metonymy for the exponentially expanding universe of knowledge. De Quincey opposes the mind’s healthful pleasure in scientific and mathematical “difficulties overcome” to the lure and menace of language and other intellectual domains of power. Which will the virtuous student choose? For all De Quincey’s self-reassuring pedagogical counsel, the *Letters* suggest that it is useless to resist.

### **Hazlitt: The consequences of reading and writing**

While De Quincey’s ambivalence about books is embodied in nightmarish fantasies, Hazlitt’s is analytic and discursive. There is, for example, his contrast between the role of reading as a force for general human progress and its role in the lives of individuals. James Chandler shows us one side of this dichotomy when he quotes Hazlitt’s oft-stated argument that the spread of reading and writing at the end of the feudal period was indispensable to the spread of liberty: “Books alone teach us to judge of truth and good in the abstract. . . . Our impressions . . . united in public opinion, and expressed by the public voice, are like the congregated roar of many waters, and quail the hearts of princes.”<sup>56</sup> This process ultimately creates a common awareness and sense of what constitutes justice and impartiality, Chandler writes, and concludes that books, because they teach us to be “fully human,” are Hazlitt’s “paradigm for education and culture.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet the same Hazlitt quotes approvingly Hobbes’s statement that, had he read as much as other men, he would be as ignorant as they. Hazlitt goes even further:

It is better neither to be able to read nor write than to be able to do nothing else. Such a one . . . is afraid of venturing on any train of reasoning, or of striking out an observation that is not mechanically suggested to him by parsing his eyes over certain legible characters; shrinks from the fatigue of thought, which, for want of practice, becomes insupportable to him; and sits down contented with an endless, wearisome succession of words and half-formed images, which fill the void of the mind, and continually efface one another.”<sup>58</sup>

Here he associates reading with Ferguson's complaints about the passivity-inducing quality of much that goes by the name of education, as well as with the kind of mental disarray De Quincey sees inflicted by the study of literature undisciplined by mathematical or scientific disciplines. In this essay, "On the Ignorance of the Learned," Hazlitt is referring to the trained incapacity of scholars, whose learning has hobbled the springs of action and self-motivation. They have failed to master the cognitive skills that bring order and movement into "the void of the mind" (Hazlitt often speaks of cognition as movement through space). Classical education's emphasis on language and memorization bred the mental laziness of the conventionally learned: nothing they had been taught involved an active or thought-organizing process or the acquisition of intellectual skill.

We would expect books, because they enable the free flow of knowledge from mind to mind, to enrich the intellectual capacity of individuals, just as we would expect the literature of power's arousal of unconscious senses to stimulate more complex and nuanced thinking than the literature of knowledge alone could afford. In neither instance is this the case. Hazlitt could imagine illiteracy as a better fate than intellectual lassitude for the same reason De Quincey could envision catastrophic consequences flowing from an unsound plan of study—because the prevailing psychology encouraged an image of the brain as a system of faculties vulnerable to damaging over- or underdevelopment. This psychology encouraged the idea that a carefully balanced cultivation of mental dispositions and abilities was essential to right thinking and right living. The *Letters* use this set of cognitive assumptions first to establish, but then to undermine, the superiority of creative literature over other forms of knowledge. Like a selective virus, the literature of power is disempowering to all intellectual life outside its own domain. The *Letters* testify to the period's cultural unease about what happens when an inexperienced student is allowed unregulated access to learning.

But there is, in addition, a more directly psychological—as opposed to cognitive—dimension to both De Quincey's and Hazlitt's ambivalence about knowledge. Rae Terada, in writing about De Quincey's shocked reaction to his sister's death, his emotional state "after one declares hope dead," quotes Freud:

One of Freud's main ways of discussing trauma is to remark that excitations brought on by catastrophe are "unbound" (he does not say they are uncomprehended). Freud's notion of "binding" is notoriously abstract and metaphoric. But if "binding" organizes energy to shape and limit it, psychological pathologies reflect "unbound" energies by the fact that one has not been able to catch the energy before it has seeped through and through, so to speak. To put it another way, unbound energy metastasizes, and so structures the self by affecting each part of it.<sup>59</sup>

Behind De Quincey's and Hazlitt's portrayal of books and reading is a sense of trauma—of the impossibility of managing their transformative cognitive and psychological effects. For Hazlitt, and for the De Quincey of the *Letters*, knowledge is a form of "unbound" energy that can escape control by the self. Hazlitt's unsympathetic description of the scholar who is too frightened to risk an original thought, too exhausted to grasp an argument, whose anxiety is relieved only by "a wearisome succession of words and half-formed images, which fill the void of the mind and continually efface one another" represents a mind that has been traumatized. Or one that has

regressed almost to the mental state of an infant at birth, as Locke saw it: “void of all characters, without any ideas.”

Hazlitt’s analysis of books and educations that impose a paralyzing dominance over the brain, in the process disabling its critical and synthesizing faculties, takes the Dissenting critique of conventional classical education a long step further, into a darker and more pessimistic emotional register. Miseducation forces open the gates of the mind to more information, learning, or knowledge than it can take in, organize, and, use, an experience that resembles an unwilling and violent nullification of the self.

### **The treachery of audiences**

Hazlitt sometimes expresses a revulsion towards words that seems odd for a professional writer, as if a mathematician were to take a deep dislike to numbers. He does not relish the life of an essayist, he says; re-reading something he has written for the sake of ensuring cogency or reassuring the printer dulls the sense of achievement, of problems resolved. The only way to enjoy something you have written is to have forgotten that you ever wrote it. And this is not so hard to do, thanks to the evanescent nature of words. “After I have once written on a subject,” Hazlitt tells us, “it goes out of my mind: my feelings about it have been melted down into words, and *them* I forget. I have, as it were, discharged my memory of its old habitual reckoning, and rubbed out the score of real sentiment. In future, it exists only for others.”

Putting pen to paper involves a strange alchemy of loss. Feelings are melted down into words, like gold into bullion, only the wealth thus created is not available to the one who writes but only to the one who reads. All that remains to the writer is a psychic debt discharged, a memory scoured clean, and a persistent sense of anhedonia. The act of writing is a gift to the future that involves no pleasure or sense of sharing in the present; what is real—i.e., directly felt and experienced—accrues to the reader because it is now unreal to the person who felt it. Reading, so vital to public life, has predatory overtones when it becomes a transaction between author and reader.

Mark Schoenfield connects the working conditions of nineteenth-century journalism to Hazlitt’s sense of self-alienation, and specifically to his theory of a continually shifting self. “The repetitions of periodical production constitute Hazlitt’s identity,” he writes, “rendering him unfit for everything else, yet also estranging him from himself.” The constant demands to feed the journals and the press “entailed the production and reproduction of one’s names—until, as Hazlitt points out, the writer’s identity becomes an extension of his textual productions.” As a result:

Once, Hazlitt argues in the *Examiner*, this situation directed the writer toward posterity and future fame, one could imagine becoming coextensive with one’s works and living through them. But, he argues, the periodical industry—in which his own writing thrived, and in opposition to which he produced much successful work—has co-opted the function of the future: ‘The spirit of universal criticism has superseded the anticipation of posthumous fame, and instead of waiting for the reward of distant ages, the poet and prose-writer receives his final doom from the next number of the ‘Edinburgh’ or ‘Quarterly Review.’<sup>60</sup>

In a way that also suggests Hazlitt's theory of an identity strictly bounded by the past and the present, Schoenfield refers to the reiterative character of periodical culture as representing "a continual present, in which history and futurity are lost."<sup>61</sup>

Hazlitt's bifurcated view of the public power of reading and writing and the private pain they inflict is a mirror image of his sometimes hopeful, sometimes bleak view of the audiences for whom he wrote. In the last year of his life, he published a review of Godwin's recently published novel, *Cloudesley*, in the *Edinburgh Review*. He did not like the novel very much, but it leads him to ponder the plight of the professional author. The writer in the early nineteenth century, he says, faces an impossible task: to produce constantly at a high level of quality. Only one contemporary author—unnamed, but almost certainly Walter Scott—had achieved this extraordinary combination. The average writer is forgotten by the public if he falters in his publication rate and ridiculed if he fails by attempting to write beyond what his talent allows.

Godwin, Hazlitt writes, is a particularly apt example of this untenable position. He represents one of two categories of genius: the author who writes primarily out of his own inner experience. (The other category includes writers like Walter Scott, who draw the materials of their art from nature and the external world.) An introvert author like Godwin, simply as a result of his "constitution of mind and operation of [his] faculties," cannot create original works indefinitely because, in effect, he cannot go on reproducing himself indefinitely. Godwin's great achievement, given the kind of thinker he was, consisted of writing two strikingly different but equally remarkable works, the treatise *Political Justice* and the novel *Caleb Williams*. It is unfair for such an author to be evaluated in light of his latest work, Hazlitt argues; he deserves to be judged by his best. This, however, is exactly what the public will not do. "Had Mr. Godwin been bred a monk, and lived in the good old times, he would assuredly either have been burnt as a free-thinker, or have been rewarded with a mitre, for a tenth part of the learning and talent he has displayed. He might have reposed on a rich benefice, and the reputation he had earned." But Godwin and every other author writing for the market lives in a harsher reality. "[T]hough condemned to daily drudgery for a precarious subsistence, [he] is expected to produce none but works of first-rate genius. No; learning unconsecrated, unincorporated, unendowed, is no match for the importunate demands and thoughtless ingratitude of the reading public."<sup>62</sup> (Writing sixteen years later, De Quincey was equally negative, declaring that the reading public had grown in size but not in "intellect and manners and taste."<sup>63</sup>)

The surprise in this passage is that the terms *consecrated*, *corporate*, and *endowed* all carry deeply negative overtones for Hazlitt in that they describe the kind of clerical and upper-class monopolies on knowledge that the invention of printing did so much to shatter. The Hazlitt optimistic about social progress can observe that "The reading public—laugh at it as we will, abuse it as we will—is, after all (depend upon it), a very rational animal, compared with a feudal lord and his horde of vassals."<sup>64</sup> Hazlitt the practicing writer reverses the image: in the Godwin review, learning *unconsecrated*, *unincorporated*, *unendowed* is at the mercy of its contemporary audience, stripped of its protection from the heedless ignorance of the modern reading public.

Hazlitt's inner conflict over writing and audiences, De Quincey's existential fears about books, connect with their culture's attempt to absorb the new and sometimes threatening possibilities of the upsurge in reading, writing, and literary production in light of its assumptions about how the mind works. Clifford Siskin compares this phenomenon to the task of adjusting to

a novel technology. In *The Work of Writing*, he employs the term *writing* as “shorthand for the entire configuration of writing, print, and silent reading . . . not only something people do, more or less often and more or less well; by calling it a *technology* I am acknowledging it as something other, something to which people must adapt, something that can, in a sense, be done to them.”<sup>65</sup> In De Quincey and Hazlitt, we see this process close up.

### The organization of knowledge

Hazlitt was well aware of the issues of “disciplinarity, language, class, and audience” looming in the British discourse about knowledge. The narrow Benthamite influence in this environment is one—but only one—of the reasons he took a generally skeptical stance toward the period’s unproductive enthusiasm, as he saw it, for organizing and systematizing knowledge.

He claims, for example, that a fault of German writers is their mania for intellectual systems. “They are universal undertakers, and complete encyclopedists, in all moral and critical science. No question can come before them but they have a large apparatus of logical and metaphysical principles ready to play off upon it; and the less they know of the subject, the more formidable is the use they make of their apparatus. . . . Truth, in their view of it, is never what *is*, but what, according to their system, *ought to be*. Though they have dug deeply in the mine of knowledge, they have too often confounded the dross and the ore, and counted their gains rather by their weight than their quality.”<sup>66</sup>

Unlike the creators of grand generalized systems, poets must organize the knowledge they offer on the basis of “the aggregate of well-founded particulars; to embody an abstract theory, as if it were an actual part of nature, is an impertinence and indecorum.”<sup>67</sup> Poetry, in contrast, represents “nature moralizing and *idealizing* for us; inasmuch as, by shewing us things as they are, it implicitly teaches us what they ought to be; and the grosser feelings, by passing through the strainers of the imaginary, wide-extended experience, acquire an involuntary tendency to higher objects.”<sup>68</sup> The ideal emerges from the real through the apprehension of beauty; it is only when we allow the aesthetic perception of things to fill our minds that we can begin to grasp the ideal potential of objects, experiences, or ideas. It is not the content of poetry, the literal or metaphorical significance of what it says, that matters, but the cognitive strategy poetry employs. Poetry is not prescriptive and, like the other fine arts, “does not undertake to unfold mysteries and inculcate dogma.” This seemingly passive process effects an inner and empowering shift in perception marked by three stages: first perception, then understanding, and finally conceptualization of an implicit ideal form. We do not teach nature by imposing our deductive intellectual systems or moral theories on reality. Nature teaches us through the example of poetic induction.

But—and this is the second thrust of his attack on system-building—coiled in his argument is a direct question about motive. It is systematizing German philosophers and so-called people of sense who “darken knowledge,” he says, by “setting up their own blindness and frailty as the measure of abstract truth, and the standard of universal propriety.” The portrait of Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age* is directed at just this kind of error. Hazlitt criticized Bentham’s reformist drive to inventory intellectual and moral ideas, like so many pieces of furniture in a warehouse, as the sign of a weak reasoning power, most clearly revealed in the peculiar opacity of his style: “He writes a language of his own, that *darkens knowledge*” (emphasis in original).<sup>69</sup>

Bentham's determined pursuit of an ideal result—of what “ought to be”—endowed his speculations with a premature and artificial coherence.

In a move that at first seems odd, Hazlitt includes Shelley among systemizing writers like Bentham. Citing Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* as an example, Hazlitt says that he “is not a poet, but a sophist, a theorist, a controversial writer in verse. . . . [who] gives us, for representations of things, rhapsodies of words. He does not lend the colours of imagination and the ornaments of style to the objects of nature, but paints gaudy, flimsy, allegorical pictures on gauze, on the cobwebs of his own brain. . . . He assumes certain doubtful speculative notions, and proceeds to prove their truth by describing them in detail as matters of fact.”<sup>70</sup> Although Hazlitt would not have read Shelley's *Defence*, he recognizes the affinity between Utilitarian abstraction and Shelley's idealizing intellect.<sup>71</sup>

Hazlitt uses the phrase *to darken knowledge* in several different contexts.<sup>72</sup> Its appearance in “On People of Sense” is relevant to a whole school of thinking, of which Bentham is just one representative. P. P. Howe suggests<sup>73</sup> that it is a variation on the lines from the Book of Job:

Who is this who darkens counsel  
By words without knowledge?  
Now prepare yourself like a man;  
I will question you, and you shall answer Me.  
Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (Job 38:2–7)

God's response to Job's questioning of his wisdom is to point out how small Job is in relation to the enormous reality he confronts. Hazlitt's substitution of *darkens knowledge* for *darkens counsel* retains this implication, but also underscores the message of the last two lines: the mistaken arrogation of authority by people who presume to make grand and experientially unfounded pronouncements. As a result, they deprive knowledge of the light of truth and empty words of meaning by subordinating both to the pursuit of self-aggrandizement or political gain. This is Hazlitt's point in “On People of Sense”: some of humanity's most retrograde fallacies and errors, from the Divine Right of Kings to the dogmatic quarrels of religious sects, have sprung from the self-regarding instincts of the powerful and the theorizing brains of the learned.

The third dimension of Hazlitt's skepticism about intellectual systems helps explain his sense of the “burden” of knowledge. The long accumulation of knowledge from the past to the present, in Hazlitt's view, can overwhelm perspective and sap the vigor of the intellectual faculties. This is, for him, an inescapable part of its burden. Our knowledge of the past involves a balance of rewards and penalties:

History, as well as religion, has contributed to enlarge the bounds of imagination: and both together, by showing past and future objects at an interminable distance, have accustomed the mind to contemplate and take an interest in the obscure and shadowy. The ancients were more circumscribed within ‘the ignorant present time’—spoke only their own language—were conversant only with their own customs,—were acquainted only with the events of their own history. The mere lapse of time, then, aided by the art of printing, has served to accumulate for us an endless mass of mixed and contradictory

materials; and, by extending our knowledge to a greater number of things, has made our particular ideas less perfect and distinct.

The paradox is that our historically expanded imaginations, while giving the mind a greater refinement and aptitude for generalization, also undermine our ability to organize knowledge into some coherent order. This historical process, in which the invention of printing plays a role, has rendered “our particular ideas less perfect and distinct.” It is not only the sheer mass of knowledge in the aggregate that inhibits ambition. We are less able integrate it, a specifically cognitive loss inflicted by the immense distance between ourselves and all past knowledge:

The constant reference to a former state of manners and literature, is a marked feature in modern poetry. We are always talking of the Greeks and Romans—*they* never said anything of us. This circumstance has tended to give a certain abstract elevation, and ethereal refinement to the mind, without strengthening it. We are lost in wonder at what has been done, and dare not think of emulating it.<sup>74</sup>

This psychic gulf between us and knowledge enervates the mental faculties, and it is this cognitive depletion that creates our hesitations about daring to scale the mountain of knowledge or compete with the giants of the past. The Greeks and Romans were fortunate in knowing nothing of us. Their smaller world was one in which intellectual mastery was still possible, unencumbered by “a mass of mixed and contradictory materials.” Living in the modern world imposes mental disabilities that argue for a keen sense of our limits and the vanity of building elaborately formal yet empty intellectual structures.

But are these structures really empty? Hazlitt’s argument on behalf of poetic induction and against deductive theorizing is consistent with his conception of knowledge as largely tacit, personal, and dependent on skillfully applied intuition. It is not a particularly convincing case against organizing knowledge or disciplines around a set of principles, however. Poetic induction could conceivably generate its own version of unifying ideas and taxonomies of knowledge, although this process does not seem to be easily transferable to the construction of grand intellectual visions. Poetic induction, being dependent on individual aesthetic experience, risks yielding a system that might not be meaningful to anyone except the person who produced it. Poetic thinking, in his account of it, substitutes for abstract intellectual ordering because it offers a way of metabolizing knowledge within the individual, not projecting it outward into generalized paradigms.

In a culture divided by conflicting views on knowledge, Hazlitt played the familiar role of critic and lover of contradictions. His coarctive imagination—the tendency to express diametrically opposing views in different essays or even in the same essay—is never so much in evidence as when he talks about knowledge, reading, and books. Peacock’s extraverted optimism about intellectual progress and Shelley’s conversion of knowledge into ecstasy set them apart from Hazlitt and De Quincey alike. In one sense, at least, Peacock’s argument has prevailed. “Pure” literature is no longer as central in our intellectual world as it was in theirs. This sense of impending displacement is evident in some of the writings discussed here. One reaction, I have suggested, was a constellation of fears, anxieties, hopes, and ambitions centered on finding a rationale for knowledge that gave due weight to literature’s place and contributions. By the



1880s, the discourse about the arts and sciences had narrowed to the all too familiar clash of the humanities versus the sciences. Matthew Arnold, responding in his 1882 Rede Lecture at Cambridge University to Thomas Huxley's critique of humanistic education, was still defending the unique educational power of the Greek language. The earlier Romantic discourse about the arts and sciences was broader than its successors, which include the twentieth-century example of C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*. And it still holds valuable perspectives for us, especially in considering the role of what Clark Kerr called the modern "cities of intellect," American research universities. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 68–69.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Jeffrey wrote in 1819 that "We take the most alarming signs of the times to be, that separation of the upper and middle classes of the community from the lower, which is now daily and visibly increasing. The conduct of all parties, and of every branch of society, has contributed more or less to produce this unhappy estrangement between the two grand divisions of which the population consists." Jeffrey, "State of the Country," *Edinburgh Review* 32 (1819): 294, quoted in Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, 93–119, 216–34. Although both Rousseau and Wordsworth claim to champion an education premised on an appeal to "nature," Chandler argues, Wordsworth's definition of the term is "closer to Burke's sense of (second) nature" (p. 119), i.e., use, custom, and habit.

<sup>5</sup> Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise*, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, 55–56.

<sup>7</sup> De Quincey, "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected," in *Letters to a Young Man and Other Papers*, 43–44. In addition to the proliferation of foreign-language grammar books, De Quincey attributes the enthusiasm for foreign-language study to four other causes (pp. 40–46). First, vanity—"commonplace minds" are impressed by skill in speaking a foreign language; second, national fashion, as evidenced in the popularity of French, even though France was England's "eternal enemy" (he also notes that at the outset of the 1808–9 Peninsular War "the provinces teemed with editions of Spanish books, dictionaries, and grammars"); third, levity—the "liability to casual impulses" resulting from the failure to have a sound purpose or plan of study; and fourth, the close relationship between addiction to books and addiction to foreign languages—"Many of those who give themselves up to the study of languages do so under the same disease [i.e., bibliomania] which I have described."

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 166, 168.

<sup>12</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 88–89. Coleridge defined *pedantry* as "the use of words unsuitable to the time, place, and company," meaning that specialized language is appropriate in some contexts but not in others: "The mere man of the world, who insists that no other terms but such as occur in common conversation should be employed in a scientific disquisition, and with no great precision, is as truly a *pedant* as the man of letters, who either overrating the acquirements of his auditors, or misled by his own familiarity with technical or scholastic terms, converses at the wine-table with his mind fixed on his museum or laboratory . . ." *Biographia Literaria*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> "The real language of men' enacts the very process Wordsworth describes: it selects from the English lexicon but configures these choices in such a way that they take on a new signification, apart from conversational or representational uses of language. Thus, what Wordsworth describes is not a separate language, but it is a specialized use of language." Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise*, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 31–33.

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, "Of Essay-Writing," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, 534–35.

<sup>16</sup> Priestley, *Lectures on History*, 1:3–5, 10.

<sup>17</sup> "Review of *Essays on Professional Education*, by R. L. Edgeworth, esq.," *Edinburgh Review* 15, no. 29 (October 1809): 46.

<sup>18</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 434.

<sup>20</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 34.

- <sup>21</sup> Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century*, 12–13.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. Dissenting scientists like Priestley were also active in promoting adult education in the second half of the eighteenth century (p. 59).
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, 57.
- <sup>24</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 7:146.
- <sup>25</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 75.
- <sup>26</sup> Coser, *Men of Ideas*, 78.
- <sup>27</sup> Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*, 293.
- <sup>28</sup> Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 82.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.
- <sup>30</sup> Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, 4.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>32</sup> Walter Scott expressed a somewhat similar sentiment in his letters: “A taste for poetry . . . is apt if too much indulged, to engender, a fastidious contempt for the ordinary business of the world, and gradually to unfit us for the exercise of the useful and domestic virtues. . . . Cultivate, then, sir, your taste for poetry and the belles lettres, as an elegant and most interesting amusement, but combine it with studies of a more serious and studious cast.” *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 2, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (London: Constable, 1932), 278. Quoted in Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, 36.
- <sup>33</sup> Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, 19–21.
- <sup>34</sup> Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 77–78. Shelley planned on a second part that would complement his discussion of poetry’s elements and principles with a discussion of “an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of Poetry, and a defence of the attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners and opinions, and compel them into a subordination to the imaginative and creative faculty.” The second part was never written, however.
- <sup>35</sup> For some scholarly views on Shelley, see Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking*; Paul De Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*; Keach, *Shelley’s Style*; Hogle, *Shelley’s Process*; Haley, “Shelley, Peacock, and the Reading of History”; Hall, “The Divine and the Dispassionate Selves.”
- <sup>36</sup> Shelley’s translation as quoted in Ingpen, *Plato’s Banquet*, 80.
- <sup>37</sup> Haley, “Shelley, Peacock, and the Reading of History,” 457.
- <sup>38</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 271–72.
- <sup>39</sup> “To Joseph Cottle. 7 Mar. 1815,” *Collected Letters*, 4:545. Quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 271.
- <sup>40</sup> Recent Shelley critics have argued for a different interpretation: that the *Defence* (as well as some of Shelley’s poetry) embraces a view of history that is not a series of self-enclosed cycles but one that opens into an unpredictable, creative futurity. Examples include Kaufman, “Legislators of the Post-Everything World”; Khalip, *Anonymous Life*; and Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignties*.
- <sup>41</sup> Laski, *Ecstasy*, 237.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.
- <sup>43</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, vol. 1. Quoted in Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy*, 63.
- <sup>44</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 55–56.
- <sup>45</sup> Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*, 321.
- <sup>46</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 15–16.
- <sup>47</sup> *Mathesis* is a Latinized version of a somewhat vague Greek expression that implies two different meanings: (1) learning/knowledge/science, with mathematical overtones—hence *universal science*; and (2) *universal mathematical science*, a narrower definition that, despite the implications of the term “universal,” refers to the discipline of mathematics. Bechtle, “How to Apply Modern Concepts,” 129–30. The fifteenth-century philosopher Marsilio Ficino believed “that the perfect divine order of the universe gets mirrored in the human mind due to mind’s mathematical insights; thus mathematics proves capable of the role of an universal key to . . . knowledge; hence the denomination mathesis universalis.” Quoted in Marciszewski, “The Principle of Comprehension,” 525–26. De Quincey appears to have aspects of both meanings in mind in the *Letters*: mathematics as a key entry-point to knowledge and the study of mathematics as a stimulus to rigorous analytical thought.
- <sup>48</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 18.
- <sup>49</sup> Bate, “The Literature of Power,” 139.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>51</sup> Josephine McDonagh, “De Quincey and the Secret Life of Books,” in Morrison and Roberts, eds., *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, 125–29.

<sup>52</sup> McDonagh writes that De Quincey’s preoccupation with the image of books multiplying uncontrollably began early. In *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), De Quincey relates a story about ordering a history of navigation when he was seven years old and being told by a teasing bookseller that the work might run to four or five hundred volumes. He was too young to understand the joke, which brought on a guilt-fueled fantasy of (among other disturbing images) a huge mountain of books being deposited in front of his family’s home (McDonagh, quoted in Morrison and Roberts, *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, 123–24. De Quincey’s compulsive book-buying was lifelong and contributed to his chronic indebtedness.

<sup>53</sup> De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15. De Quincey biographer Robert Morrison writes that De Quincey “liked to portray himself as a solitary” and that during his time as an Oxford student he tended to exaggerate the extent of his isolation. Morrison, *English Opium Eater*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature*, 146.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>58</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:70.

<sup>59</sup> Terada, “Living a Ruined Life.”

<sup>60</sup> Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity*, 119, 122–23.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>62</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 16:395–96.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Morrison, *English Opium Eater*, 348.

<sup>64</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 17:326.

<sup>65</sup> Siskin, *The Work of Writing*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 16:58.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:246.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:245.

<sup>69</sup> Tim Milnes challenges Hazlitt’s criticism that Bentham’s language “darkens knowledge” by arguing that Bentham’s efforts to create a “new ‘phraseology’—based on the sound ontology of a hedonic register that would translate abstract statements into the lexicon of pleasure and pain” signaled “a critical shift in Western thought towards prioritizing the ‘conceptual’ over the ‘doctrinal’ in philosophy and recasting the ‘problem’ of truth as a sub-category of the question of meaning” [in contrast to Hazlitt’s realist position that truth requires a correspondence between what exists in the mind and in the world]. Tim Milnes, “Darkening Knowledge: Hazlitt and Bentham on the Limits of Empiricism” in *Metaphysical Hazlitt: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Natarajan, Paulin, and Wu, 131–32.

<sup>70</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:246.

<sup>71</sup> Philip Connell cites several connections between Shelley and Bentham as political reformers, pointing out Shelley’s praise of Bentham’s philosophy in *A Philosophical View of Reform* for offering “an important corrective to economic inequality and the spirit of commerce.” *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of ‘Culture,’* 219. More generally, Connell argues that in terms of the political context of early nineteenth-century Britain, both the philosophical chasm between Bentham and the Hunt circle and the opposition between poetry and science in the period have been overstated. He sees Shelley’s anti-Utilitarian stance in the *Defence* as a shift away from an earlier, more sympathetic view of Bentham, and notes (pp. 231–32) that Hunt “responded coolly to Hazlitt’s attack on the ‘eminent and venerable’ Bentham, and persevered in his belief that the apparent estrangement of ‘literature’ and ‘science’ was a temporary by-product of the ongoing reform crisis.”

<sup>72</sup> One of those contexts is the status of knowledge and learning in institutions, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>73</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 12:414.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:66.

## Chapter Five: Autonomous Knowledge

*Let us make the most of the spirit of our times. We may direct, but we cannot arrest the progress of knowledge.*

William Hazlitt, 1828

The interplay of mind and books discussed in the last chapter reflected the struggles of individuals to come to terms with the cumulative weight of reading and writing in mental life. The theories, models, and paradigms of knowledge that Bentham and others created (and a critical Hazlitt opposed) were directed to a different end, an abstract and collective reorganization of knowledge to align it with the period's intellectual advances and the goals of reform—political, social, and educational.

These struggles and speculations took place outside the confines of Oxford and Cambridge universities. London was the heart of English intellectual activity. In any case, academic quality and enrollment had been in decline at the two universities since the early eighteenth century; neither encouraged faculty engagement with new scholarly discoveries or with science.<sup>1</sup> Oxford and Cambridge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were out of date, out of touch with contemporary scholarly and scientific trends, and eclipsed by the brilliant Scottish universities to the north. Wordsworth is the most famous of a cohort of unhappy undergraduates in the Romantic era, thanks to his account of his Cambridge education in *The Prelude*, but he was by no means unique. Most of the future Romantic poets and writers who matriculated at Oxford and Cambridge were unimpressed by the quality of the faculty and the lax moral and academic tenor of the two universities, especially the neglect of teaching. Coleridge lamented that “The Education, which Dissenters receive among Dissenters, generates Conscientiousness & a scrupulous Turn/will this be gained at the Wine Parties in Cambridge?”<sup>2</sup> Southey was informed by his Oxford tutor that “he had little or nothing to teach him,” and later wrote that “all he learned at Oxford was how to row and swim.”<sup>3</sup> Shelley's fellow-student and future biographer, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, acknowledged his disappointment but tactfully limited himself to observing that Oxford gave students “the same opportunity of *solitary* study as in other places.”<sup>4</sup> Although Wordsworth shouldered some of the responsibility for his unsatisfactory undergraduate education (“I was not for that hour/Nor for that place”<sup>5</sup>) his experience of teachers who did not teach and a curriculum mired in the past was typical.<sup>6</sup> In 1808 and 1809 the *Edinburgh Review* devoted several articles to blaming the two universities for a variety of national woes, among them the superiority of Continental to English mathematicians, even though mathematics had been taught at Cambridge since Newton's time.<sup>7</sup>

### The university as an idea

Oxford and Cambridge were part of a discourse about the failure of English institutions that, as Mark L. Barr writes, dates to the 1790s and its sedition and treason trials in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Coleridge's last prose work, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1829), was devoted to the proposition that Britain could be rescued from the turbulence of politics by reimagining the relationship among the nation's major institutions—the state, the

church, and the classes of British society. Barr's analysis concentrates on *Church and State's* contribution to the debate over "the capacity and incapacity of legal institutions to produce justice."<sup>8</sup> But Coleridge also introduced a concept that has had an enduring influence on thinking about higher education: the notion that institutions should embody an idea. This assertion was implicit in Edmund Burke's political writings, expressed most famously in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); Coleridge's articulation gave it currency and inspired Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University* and many other writings about higher education as well. *Church and State* is thus a useful starting point for considering universities as an idea, as corporate bodies, and as a ground for theorizing about institutions and knowledge in today's global economy.

Coleridge's discussion of institutions turns on a central distinction, the difference between a conception and an idea. He illustrates with the example of Rousseau's social contract theory as the foundation of government legitimacy. Considered as a conception—a historical fact or a generalization derived from agreements between individuals and treaties between nation-states—the notion of a social contract entered into at some specific time in history strains credulity. But to consider the social contract as an idea—a mental construct consisting of "the knowledge of *its ultimate aim*"—is to attain an entirely different level of insight, one created not by the understanding but by the higher faculty of reason. In this Coleridgean sense, the dubiously empirical conception of a social contract becomes "an ever-originating social contract . . . , so certain and so indispensable, that it constitutes the whole ground of the difference between subject and serf, between a commonwealth and a slave-plantation."<sup>9</sup> In a footnote he underscores its potency: "[T]he constitution itself is an IDEA," he says, not to be confused with a mere "fancy," but "the most real of all realities, and of all operative powers the most *actual* [emphasis in original]."<sup>10</sup> The thread of Coleridge's reasoning can sometimes appear tangled, but Sheldon Rothblatt provides the following summary guide:

We gather the purpose of an institution from its antecedent idea, we know its antecedent idea from its ultimate aim, we deduce its ultimate aim from a great many pieces of historical information, but the method requires us to maintain at all times a careful distinction between an idea, sometimes called a principle, and a conception. Ideas may be embedded in certain institutions—liberty in the social contract—but the latter is false, only the former is true.

Foreign as this logic may appear to us today, he adds, it resembles in spirit such modern disciplinary practices as looking for patterns or principles beneath recurring phenomena in the social sciences; creating artificial laboratory environments to study the natural world in physics; or—most interesting in light of the Kantian and Hegelian foundation of Coleridge's thinking—"economic forecasting that also incorporates a teleological aspect and invariably evaluates the present according to an ultimate aim."<sup>11</sup>

John Stuart Mill read *Church and State* from the perspective of Coleridge's German-influenced philosophical stance, a rebellion against Locke and various eighteenth-century Continental philosophers whose extreme influence had contributed to the sweeping destruction of long-established institutions. The Germano-Coleridgean school, he says, was the first to identify, and to clothe in a philosophy of history, the three characteristics of successful nations: a

system of lifelong education that, “whatever else it might include, one main and incessant ingredient was *restraining discipline* (emphasis in original); a feeling of loyalty to the state, which requires “*something* which is settled, something permanent, not to be called in question,” whether this sense of permanence is entwined around a symbolic person or enshrined in political principles such as liberty and equality; and a bond of community and common interest among those who share the nation with each other. Great Britain possesses these characteristics, Mill holds, but with changing circumstances, the passage of time, and the growth of knowledge come the need for institutional reform. The political and intellectual tumult of the eighteenth century yielded only two alternatives—either the destruction of ancient institutions and creeds, or the reassertion of those aspects of old institutions that retain their living essence: Bentham or Coleridge.<sup>12</sup> Mill considered *Church and State* a primer on how to revitalize existing institutions so they could mediate change.

Particularly noteworthy was its insight into the importance of national education to any society, a source of both its permanence (to the extent that “education operated as a system of restraining discipline”) and its openness to change (“by the degree to which it called forth and invigorated the active faculties”).<sup>13</sup> Coleridge’s reasons for an education designed around the idea of restraint needed no elaboration. Political stability and social harmony required that hierarchies of rank and privilege be maintained against the upward ambitions and revolutionary ideas that unrestrained education would kindle in the hearts and minds of the poor. Mill singled out for special praise Coleridge’s idea of a national church whose mission is to advance knowledge, and of the clerisy, whose mission is to act as a far-flung community of the learned, drawn from throughout the arts and sciences, to diffuse throughout every parish in England the kind and quantity of knowledge necessary for the cohesion of society.

Barr sees a close resemblance between Coleridge’s clerisy, the legal notion of trusteeship, and the historical role of British judges, which was to draw on precedent and tradition “as a member of an institutionalized community that does not innovate so much as gradually perfect the expression of a supposedly complete and stable ground of justice.”<sup>14</sup> Without attempting to convey the detail and subtlety of Jon Klancher’s analysis of the clerisy, I want to note that he connects it first to Coleridge’s thinking about poetry as a text that is “organized from within” and then to his interest in organization as a scientific concept in the vitalist/materialist debates over living organisms that took place around 1816. Both led him to consider social organization in the same inner-directed way.<sup>15</sup> The clerisy would be central to this inner organizing process in at least two respects. First, by serving in local communities as authoritative guides to a mode of interpretive reading that, while open to criticism from within, reflects common values important to the orderly functioning of society. Second, by embodying in themselves a deep and collective sense of the Idea of the British constitution, not as a conception of the understanding but as a creation of the higher faculty of reason.<sup>16</sup> The Idea cannot be conveyed in words and is, in effect, ineffable.

There are ways in which the clerisy seems to resemble a distributed network, like a human brain, with active and presumably intercommunicating faculties unified by the organizing power of what Hazlitt (but not Coleridge) would have called the understanding. But as individuals who protect and cultivate the arts and sciences, guarding their integrity and encouraging them to grow, the clerisy can also be seen as a living paradigm of the unity of the knowledge itself, which Coleridge had described in 1816 as having “the manifest tendencies . . .

at present, from the most purely intellectual even to the labours of the common mechanic, to lose their formerly insulated character, and organize themselves into one harmonious body of knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> It is a short step from here to theorizing universities as institutions that evolve organically around the arts and sciences, consecrated to free intellectual exchange and academic freedom, overseen by a dedicated, clerisy-like guild.

### **The university as corporate body**

The university that Wordsworth and Coleridge knew was seen as a corporate body, defined in the 1785 edition of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary as “A body politick authorized by the king’s charter to have a common seal, one head officer or more, and members, able, by their common consent, to grant or receive, in law, any thing within the compass of their charter: even as one man may do by law all things, that by law he is not forbidden, and bindeth the successors, as a single man binds his executor or heir.” Adam Smith describes universities as “corporate bodies” in a section of *The Wealth of Nations* devoted to higher education. One of the few Scots to attend Oxford in the 1740s, Smith thought the dismal education the university offered its undergraduates was the reason many English parents opted to send their sons on the grand tour instead. “In the university of Oxford, the great part of the public professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching,” he wrote.<sup>18</sup> How could such a dereliction of duty go unpunished, even unremarked? Viewed from the perspective of the free market, English universities were academic monopolies, organized to serve the needs of faculty rather than those of students. That students find it difficult to obtain an education in the sciences is scandalous, he says, because “it is the business of those incorporated bodies to teach.”<sup>19</sup>

Teaching at Oxford, he was convinced, had been ruined by endowments, which made professors far too comfortable and insulated. Endowments freed the faculty from competitive pressures, ensured their control of the work environment, and left any standards of teaching unenforced.<sup>20</sup> Smith’s proposal was to shift faculty support largely to student fees, a step that would align the faculty with market forces and give them a much more powerful incentive to attend to their pedagogical duties. “In every profession . . . where competition is free, the rivalry of competitors, who are all endeavouring to jostle one another out of employment, obliges every man to endeavor to execute his work with a certain degree of exactness.” This did not happen in the corporate environment in which Oxford and Cambridge dons operated. If one person refused to take teaching seriously, he might be censured. But if everyone agreed “to be all very indulgent to one another, and every man to consent that his neighbor may neglect his duty, provided he himself is allowed to neglect his own,” there is no penalty. Thus Smith contributed one of the first economic models of university management and shed light on a certain dynamic in the behavior of corporate bodies.

Whether by accident or design, Hazlitt employed the same dynamic almost fifty years later in an essay written for the 1825 Paris edition of *Table-Talk*. The occasion of “On Corporate Bodies” was George Canning’s famous speech of March 1820. The Peterloo massacre had occurred in August 1819; Canning had been reelected to Parliament in November 1819, after a campaign that leaned heavily on the need for a crackdown on public assemblies. He devoted his remarks in March of 1820 to praising Parliament’s action in outlawing large public demonstrations which, he says, had raised the spectre of lawless mobs roaming the streets and destroying property (“Do I exaggerate when I say, that there was not a man [in November 1819]

who did not tremble for his possessions? That there was not a man of retired and peaceable habits, who did not tremble for the tranquility and security of his home?”). Canning argues that mass demonstrations are, by their very nature, a threat to the peace and order of the local community. Organized by strangers and operating outside the formal hierarchy of local authority, they have neither standing nor interest in the communities they incite to riotous behavior.

In contrast, the “spirit of the law,” he says, is “eminently a spirit of corporation,” by which he means that public meetings should be organized and run only by local residents and overseen by local officials. Those who know each other share “that mutual respect which makes the eye of a neighbor a security for each man’s good conduct.” The leaders of mass meetings—in the context of Canning’s speech, the equivalent of outside agitators—are motivated by the same goals that led to the calamity of the French Revolution: “the first work of the Reformers was to loosen every established political relation, every legal holding of man to man, to destroy every corporation, to dissolve every subsisting class of society, and to reduce the nation into individuals, in order, afterwards, to congregate them into mobs.”<sup>21</sup>

Canning’s speech, reprinted as a pamphlet and widely read, was perfectly calculated to elicit a counter-blast from Hazlitt. “On Corporate Bodies” is a virtuoso performance in using Canning’s logic to dismantle his argument. Sailing over Canning’s opposition of conservative versus reform values, the right to protection of property versus and the right to free public speech, Hazlitt uses the legal concept of corporate bodies to make a scathing critique of three civic and cultural institutions: municipal government, universities, and fine-arts societies.

The concentrated fury of “On Corporate Bodies” is directed to the corruption of the individual by what Hazlitt calls the *esprit de corps* created by corporate membership. Smith’s use of the term *corporate body* had been simply descriptive. Hazlitt uses it to play off the idea of bodies, corporeal and incorporeal, to demonstrate what happens to the moral sense when individuals come together as a group. With only one exception, the answer is: it disappears.

The epigraph at the head of the essay, “Corporations have no soul,” refers to a seventeenth-century legal opinion that corporations could not be subpoenaed because “they were invisible, immortal, and that they had no soule; and therefore no Subpoena lieth against them, because they have no Conscience nor soule.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently they could not be held accountable—called to testify “sub poena,” or under threat of pain by legal authority—for their actions. So corporations—like miniature versions of Hobbes’s Leviathan—are composed of other, smaller bodies that, through the process of induction into the corporate body, are hidden from view as well. The key word about corporations and their members is *invisible*. Corporations cannot be seen, not just in a legal sense but also in terms of their moral influence and responsibility for their actions. Their exemption from legal and regulatory constraints gives them significant power over their individual members, who in turn are protected from ending up “sub poena” because as parts of the corporate body, they are invisible too.

Corporate bodies, Hazlitt says, exploit the difference between individual and group behavior. Once a member of the corporate body, the individual becomes “a cypher . . . a mere numerical unit” that must subject itself to the discipline of the whole. This is why corporate bodies are more prone to wrongdoing than are individuals: “they have more power to do mischief, and are less amenable to disgrace or punishment,” he writes. “The principle of private



or natural conscience is extinguished in each individual . . . and nothing is considered but how the united efforts of the whole (released from idle scruples) may be best directed to the obtaining of political advantages and privileges to be shared as common spoil. Each member reaps the benefits, and lays the blame, if there is any, upon the rest.”<sup>23</sup>

Corporate discipline is enforced by ostracizing anyone who deviates from the fundamental code of corporate life—that any act taken by the body, or on its behalf, must serve its collective self-interest. In a process similar to the faculty behavior described by Smith, individual resistance melts under peer pressure and even reluctant individuals ultimately join in corrupting everyone else. Municipal government, Oxbridge, and the Royal Academy radiate outwards in concentric circles of self-dealing and malfeasance. All corporate bodies do: “Circle within circle is formed, an *imperium in imperio*: and the business is to exclude from the first circle all the notions, opinions, ideas, interests, and pretensions, of the second. . . . it becomes a habit . . . in those who are ‘dressed in a little brief authority,’ to thwart, annoy, insult, and harass others on all occasions where the least opportunity or pretext for it occurs. . . .the *official* takes the place of the *moral* sense.”

His case against Oxford and Cambridge is that they have failed to adapt to change and to rival providers of knowledge that have emerged in the previous two centuries, whom they cannot acknowledge without losing their own sense of authority and control:

All that has been invented or thought in the last two hundred years they take no cognizance of . . . . Yet in that period how much has been done in literature, arts, and science, of which (with the exception of mathematical knowledge, the hardest to gainsay or subject to the trammels of prejudice and barbarous *ipse dixits*) scarce any trace is to be found in the authentic modes of study, and legitimate inquiry, which prevail at either of our universities! The unavoidable aim of all corporate bodies of learning is not to grow wise, or teach others wisdom, but to prevent any one else from being or seeming wiser than themselves; in other words, their infallible tendency is in the end to suppress inquiry and darken knowledge, by setting limits to the mind of man, and saying to his proud spirit, *Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther!*<sup>24</sup>

The *restraining discipline* that Mill had identified as essential to *Church and State*’s educational program is imposed here to stifle talent, ward off change, and pervert learning. Canning claimed that the “spirit of corporation” embedded in English law protects the public from the menace of mob rule. Hazlitt reverses this logic when he declares that mobs, which operate outside corporate discipline, are more honest than corporate bodies. Passers-by on a street who witness another citizen being robbed, for example, may spontaneously join in pursuing the thief, perhaps inflicting some pain when they catch him. This re-formation turns the corporate dynamic upside down because (1) the members of the mob do not know each other; and (2) this fact guarantees that they are drawn together not by self-interest or self-dealing but by a spontaneous goal of stopping a crime. If the justice of the mob is rough and rendered outside the institutional structures of the law, it also springs from the kind of sincere and spontaneous cooperation that marks Godwinian anarchism.

Mobs, unlike corporations, are actually motivated by a living sense of the public good: “They have no other clew to guide them to their object but either the dictates of the heart, or the

universally understood sentiments of society, neither of which are likely to be in the wrong. The flame, which bursts out and blazes from popular sympathy . . . is not kindled by sparks of wit or sophistry, nor damped by the cold calculations of self-interest.”<sup>25</sup> Using a logic that is, he says, as loose as Canning’s, he makes the case that while mobs carry ominous connotations and corporations do not, the negative charge should in fact be reversed. It is municipal officials, university faculty, and cultural leaders who are driven by “the cold calculations of self-interest.” The only class of people that cannot be charged with such motives is “that body of individuals which usually goes by the name of the *People!*” The two bodies—the Corporation and the People—are in a state of perpetual enmity.

Hazlitt unwinds the bonds of the corporate body into a looser and more natural form of organization. Once liberated from the crushing discipline of self-interest, individuals are free to rediscover their own innate sympathy with others. Their collective action is therefore entirely different from the lockstep of corporate behavior. Yet the mob also represents a contained explosion of revolutionary anger, symbolized by the swift justice it deals out to those who violate human norms of ethical behavior. In celebrating the mob’s instinctive morality, Hazlitt is dismissing any idea that the institutions of his time can be reformed. All are monopolies, whether of wealth, authority, knowledge, or power. Instead he turns to “the People” as the engine of progress, although he does not assume they will do anything about institutions.<sup>26</sup> The People and their institutions are on separate tracks that never meet. There is no sense in this essay of a future that could be better, only an urgent sense that it *must* be better.

Hazlitt returns to Canning’s Liverpool speech in another *Table-Talk* essay titled “On Paradox and Common-Place.”<sup>27</sup> Here he takes it on in the context of the theory of history that underlies his refusal to propose a future shaped by reformed institutions. Canning had condemned reform because, he claimed, he would not endanger the British state by sacrificing “the fruit of centuries of experience . . . for visionary schemes of ideal perfectibility, for doubtful experiments even of possible improvement.” Hazlitt denies that calls for reform are driven by any prospect of future good or Godwinian visions. They draw their impetus from the visceral knowledge of past oppression: “It is the knowledge of the past, the actual infliction of the present, that has produced all changes, all innovations, and all improvements—not (as is pretended) the chimerical anticipation of possible advantages, but the intolerable pressure of long-established, notorious, aggravated, and growing abuses.” Political action, therefore, is always a reaction.

This hydraulic conception of the history of social improvement imagines that the pent-up pressures of the past leave no room for visions of the future. Institutions are the embodiment of these malign pressures and become their flashpoint when revolutionary rage is strong enough to counteract the obstructive phalanx that is the corporate body. “I do not see how institutions can for ever exist at war with opinions; and no one will, I should think, maintain that existing institutions are the growth of existing opinions. Our present opinions and the prevailing tone of society are the result of light and conviction, of the free communication of mind with mind; our institutions (as bottomed on the old, ‘time-hallowed foundations’) are the result of darkness and force, of systematic wrong and individual aggrandizement.”<sup>28</sup> The difference between Hazlitt and Coleridge is that Hazlitt sees no redemptive possibility in English institutions. The only socially creative act possible for him is to destroy them in a defiant rupturing of bonds, a release of tension rather than an imposition of discipline. This strategy unleashes the desire to seek the

good and make the experience of others our own. It is a logic straight out of *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* and its faith in the natural disinterestedness of the human mind.

Divergent as they are, both *Church and State* and “On Corporate Bodies” address the question of the disordered relationship between British institutions and the British people. Where Coleridge wants to bind the nation together through a system of clerical teachers who model the skill of enlightened reading for civic and religious life, Hazlitt wants to liberate individuals from all institutional control. Against Oxbridge’s corporate grip on knowledge, Hazlitt opposes the concept of a public and collective intelligence that advances human progress in the face of “Legitimacy,” his term for the socially, politically, and culturally dominant. As Jon Klancher points out, Hazlitt celebrates the sweeping victories of the “popular intellect,” however obstructed by the power of Legitimacy:

All discoveries and all improvements in arts, in science, in legislation, in civilization, in every thing dear and valuable to the heart of man, have been made by this intellect—all the triumphs of human genius over the rudest barbarism, the darkest ignorance, the grossest and most inhuman superstition, the most unmitigated and remorseless tyranny, have been gained for themselves by the people.<sup>29</sup>

Klancher sees this 1819 essay—“What Is the People?”—as “an intense, indeed a well-nigh sublime moment of *educated* radical rhetoric in these heated years of political debate.” But he also calls attention to what Hazlitt’s rhetoric was directed against, “the increasingly straitened collective intellect taking shape in the 1820s.” This emerging public consensus was defined, in its thinking about progress, by the growing dominance of Benthamite efficiency and pragmatism.<sup>30</sup> If a strategy could have been devised to counteract this dominance, Hazlitt never believed it would come from institutions.

### **Theorizing the university**

By the time Hazlitt was denouncing Oxford and Cambridge in the 1820s, they had already embarked on reform. The academic experience of undergraduates, unremarked and essentially invisible in the eighteenth century, began to change when the shock of the French Revolution settled in and demonstrated the force of ideas in shaping the young.<sup>31</sup> In an ironic reversal, Dissenting academies, once described by Priestley as “*rivers* . . . [which] fertilize a whole country,” were beginning a decline of their own.<sup>32</sup>

Those excluded from Oxford and Cambridge found an alternative in the University of London, established by Dissenters and chartered in 1836 for “the promotion of useful knowledge, to . . . all classes and denominations.”<sup>33</sup> Although Bentham himself played no part in its sponsorship or creation, he was one of its inspirations, and his mummified body found its final resting place there (his head now rests in the university’s safe).<sup>34</sup> Two of its early advocates were the poet Thomas Campbell, who had been impressed by the success of the metropolitan Bonn University in Germany, and the reformer Henry Brougham (Hazlitt wrote portraits of both in *The Spirit of the Age*). It was deliberately intended as a university for the sons of the rapidly expanding middle class, and was an alternative, not a competitor, to Oxford and Cambridge.

The University of London was new to English higher education because it was built on the Scottish model. Scottish universities, leaders in higher education since the mid-eighteenth century, were forward-looking, committed to teaching and teaching reform, and utilitarian in spirit. They welcomed new scientific and philosophical knowledge and recognized its implications for teaching; the demonstration lecture was introduced by Scottish medical school faculty and a broad range of scientific subjects were integrated into the curriculum. Scottish university faculty were active in applied scientific work aimed at furthering the nation's industry and economic competitiveness.<sup>35</sup>

In England, such a model was bound to be controversial. It was nonsectarian, urban, decentralized, oriented to professional education, and intended for middle-class students, primarily from Dissenting backgrounds—all things Oxbridge was not. The most shocking aspects of the new university were that it had no particular religious affiliation and required no religious observance, it offered the possibility of degrees on the basis of examination, and it was located in a city. (Hazlitt had satirized the popular idea that physical locations evoked a stream of associations to past traditions and personages that made certain spots specially fitted to the education of the young.<sup>36</sup> An 1823 essay about a visit to Oxford begins as a rapturous tribute to the beauty of the university. It concludes with a warning that Oxford's associative magic lasts only as long as the visitor avoids actually talking to the inhabitants, "for if he does, the palace of enchantment will melt from his embrace into thin air!"<sup>37</sup>)

An 1826 *Edinburgh Review* author defended the new institution's forerunner, University College London, from charges of irreligion and dismissed the idea that London offered temptations that young male students would be unable to resist—or that a city environment was inherently un conducive to study. He praised its expansion of access to education as affording social and political protection. "If ever the diffusion of knowledge can be attended with the danger of which we hear so much, it is in England at the present moment," he wrote. "And this danger can be obviated in two ways only. Unteach the poor,—or teach those who may, by comparison, be called the rich. The former it is plainly impossible to do: And therefore, if those whom we are addressing be consistent, they will exert themselves to do the latter; and, by increasing the knowledge, increase also the power of an extensive and important class."<sup>38</sup> And like Adam Smith, the anonymous writer believes the two established universities would be improved in curricular offerings and performance by a challenge to their monopoly position: "Like manufacturers who enjoy a monopoly, they work at such an advantage, that they can venture to work ill."

Newman, whose Oxford education had taught him to value liberal, not instrumental, knowledge, found the educational ethos of the University of London so repellent that he was moved to protest:

[I]f I had to choose between a so-called University which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years . . . if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind . . . , I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University

which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, as Rothblatt notes, it was the University of London—the first such institution to be born in the nineteenth century—that set Newman on the path to writing his defense of traditional English education, *The Idea of a University*.<sup>40</sup>

The University of London is rarely mentioned in the pedigree of the American research university, which is usually described as a hybrid of English undergraduate education and German graduate-level research. But the Scottish model on which it was built has been a significant strand in American higher education. It entered first of all through the influence of Scottish Enlightenment figures who came to the colonies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and served as college faculty and presidents.<sup>41</sup> In a larger sense, the Scottish university tradition, much more hospitable than the English to instrumental knowledge and public service, played a role in establishing universities as partners and participants in society's problems and prospects. When the Morrill Land-Grant College Act was signed by President Lincoln in 1862, it entered history as the quintessential "idea" of the American public research university. The ineffable Germano-Coleridgean Idea did not take root in the pragmatic American context, although it persisted as a reminder that institutions should be more than mere organizational frameworks. What did flourish was a university committed to the liberal arts and sciences and to forms of knowledge that served societal ends. It was an idea that owed a great deal to Scottish conceptions of education.

Still, the research university remains an "under-theorized institution" in the words of Simon Marginson. It has found few convincingly large perspectives that attempt to see it whole. We would have to go back fifty years, to the work of University of California president Clark Kerr, for a fully realized view of the research university. His 1963 Godkin Lectures, published as *The Uses of the University*, introduced the concept of the multiversity as the representative institution of postwar American higher education. Kerr helpfully, and with characteristic conciseness, explains the multiversity by contrasting it with the visions of two major theorists who preceded him, Cardinal Newman and Abraham Flexner:

The "Idea of a University" was a village with its priests. The "Idea of a Modern University" was a town—a one-industry town—with its intellectual oligarchy. "The Idea of a Multiversity" is a city of infinite variety. Some get lost in the city; some rise to the top within it; most fashion their lives in one of its many subcultures. There is less sense of community than in the village but also less sense of confinement. There is less sense of purpose than within the town but there are more ways to excel. . . . As against the village and the town, the "city" is more like the totality of civilization as it has evolved and more an integral part of it; and movement to and from the surrounding society has been greatly accelerated.<sup>42</sup>

The premise of the lectures was that American higher education was in the midst of a great expansion (with what came to be called the Baby Boomer generation) and a great transformation. This transformation was caused by the "knowledge industry," which was beginning to influence government, business, and beyond, and would produce, for the first time,

“a truly American university” that would serve as a model for the world. “What the railroads did for the second half of the last century and the automobile for the first half of this century may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry: that is, to serve as the focal point for national growth. And the university is at the center of the knowledge process.”<sup>43</sup>

Kerr had Harvard in mind when developing his concept of the multiversity, and later wrote he was misunderstood by those who thought he was referring to multicampus systems.<sup>44</sup> Yet the term he uses to describe modern research universities—“cities of intellect”—suggests scale, extension, and ambition: something like his own institution, the University of California, the nation’s first university to be organized as a public multicampus system with multiple campuses and thousands of faculty and students. Certainly the student protestors of the 1960s understood the multiversity that way, as a large and impersonal institution. After all, in the Godkin Lectures, delivered the year before the Free Speech Movement, Kerr had described it as a lonely experience for many students, a place where “The walking wounded are many.”

In later years, Kerr was puzzled by the way his account of the multiversity was read—as a celebration of its triumphs, when in fact what he intended was a sober assessment of its disturbing proclivities as well as its strengths. But if his aim was to detach and observe, his style said otherwise. His criticism is consistently mixed with sympathy and often slides into admiration. In the opening paragraph of the first lecture, for example, he writes that the multiversity, unlike earlier institutions of learning, is a “great transformation [that] is regretted by some, accepted by many, gloried in, as yet, by few.”<sup>45</sup> The “as yet” implied that greater familiarity might bring approval, and Kerr’s language throughout *The Uses of the University* is animated by the excitement of revealing a remarkable new institution in the world:

“The Idea of a Multiversity” has no bard to sing its praises; no prophet to proclaim its vision; no guardian to protect its sanctity. It has its critics, its detractors, its transgressors. It also has its barkers selling its wares to all who will listen—and many do. But it also has its reality rooted in the logic of history. It is an imperative rather than a reasoned choice among elegant alternatives.<sup>46</sup>

Kerr wondered what gave this historical imperative its internal coherence. It did not resemble an organism because parts of it could be added or eliminated with little discernible effect. Although he described the multiversity as “a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board, and related purposes,” his ultimate conclusion was that it has no central idea and no single organizing principle except knowledge:

What is the justification of the modern American multiversity? History is one answer. Consistency with the surrounding society is another. Beyond that, it has few peers in the preservation and dissemination and examination of eternal truth; no living peers in the search for new knowledge; and no peers in all history among institutions of higher learning in serving so many of the segments of an advancing civilization. Inconsistent internally as an institution, it is consistently productive. Torn by change, it has the stability of freedom. Though it has not a single soul to call its own, its members pay their devotions to truth.<sup>47</sup>

In his last lecture, Kerr turned to the challenges of the future. The cities of intellect, he said, can be imagined not just as universities but as the collective intellectual wealth of society, and even as “the force of intellect as the central force of a society—its soul. . . .” It is a soul possessed by the constant need to add to knowledge. “The organized intellect is a great machine that has gained extraordinary momentum since the Greeks got it going 2500 years ago. It turns out its countless new pieces of knowledge but with little thought for their consequences.” Its gigantic productivity “cannot be stopped. The results cannot be foreseen. It remains to adapt.”<sup>48</sup>

Where Coleridge’s idea of the university looks inward to its ultimate aims, the Idea he claims is both actual and powerful, Kerr’s looks outward to the demands the university must fulfill. Coleridge’s Idea was never realized, but it is doubtful he would consider that a telling objection to its truth or its value; Kerr is still read for the lucid accuracy with which he describes a new kind of institution. Both are theories of the university, both recognize its social context, but the obvious difference is that Kerr’s theory must meet a different standard—does it describe a university as it actually functions today? Nevertheless—and although Kerr does not mention Coleridge but his disciple, Cardinal Newman—*The Uses of the University* in its various editions is, in spirit, a Romantic document in several respects. First of all (like Newman’s famous work) it owes its organizing framework—the university as an idea—to a distant echo of *Church and State*. Kerr’s concerns about knowledge’s growing significance and unintended consequences repeat, in a contemporary context, the motivating unease behind Coleridge’s work: the need to channel expanding knowledge in a way that protects the interests of society. It is hard to tell whether enthusiasm or resignation predominates in his brief allusion to knowledge that cannot be stopped and the human imperative to adapt.

Over time, as new editions of *The Uses of the University* were published, Kerr added scrupulously honest postscripts on how well his theory of the multiversity had fared in light of events. His reservations about the future of the cities of intellect grew. In the 1963 lectures, the multiversity’s negative aspects were described largely as potential threats or challenges, virtually all coming from the changing external environment, but in 2001 he characterizes them as “pathologies” reflecting the modern university’s “inherent diseases”—its reliance on federal contracts and grants, for example, despite their influence on the research agenda; the imbalance between the sciences on the one hand and the humanities and social sciences on the other, between the “‘rich’ and the ‘not so rich’ participants” in the academic enterprise; the declining attention to undergraduates and increasing attention to research and service; the migration of faculty loyalty from the university as an institution to academic disciplines and outside activities of various kinds.

Ultimately, he saw the research university was becoming more and more a captive of the politics of scarcity. The multiversity was sustained by a social contract between the state and higher education in which the university served a public good by cultivating the talents of the state’s citizens. Thus, it was assumed that the state should bear about a third of the costs of educating students, public universities a third, and parents and families the remaining third. Over the past three or four decades, however, education has increasingly come to be perceived as a private rather than a public good. As many scholars of higher education have noted, the social contract has become a thing of the past; contemporary society regards education as essentially a private good (as record levels of student debt testify).

Kerr summed up the consequences for higher education by suggesting that university presidents can be divided into two categories—hedgehogs and foxes. Hedgehogs, according to the Greek fable, know one thing well; foxes know many things. His point was that contemporary presidents and chancellors must scurry, fox-like, around the landscape finding resources to keep the academic enterprise afloat; he and other fortunate presidents like him in the 1960s, on the other hand, had the public understanding and financial support to indulge in visions of what a university should be—and to act on those visions. Kerr’s public research university was open to talent, meritocratic, perhaps even able to offer students a small-college, village-like experience here and there in the midst of the cities of intellect. Yet his allegory could just as easily be read not only as a description of presidents but also as a portrayal of the multiversity’s changing environment in which public resources were dwindling and “movement to and from the surrounding society has been greatly accelerated.”<sup>49</sup>

The multiversity was a creative adaptation to the character of knowledge as Kerr saw it. It sacrificed internal coherence to comprehensiveness, unity to openness to new ideas, activities, and possibilities. Like Hazlitt’s mob, its very lack of a tight organizational credo was intended to allow for “the free communication of mind with mind”—although Kerr never expected this would be accompanied by a blossoming of disinterested behavior. Writing in 1997, Sheldon Rothblatt explains the multiversity as “the university of the Benthamites. Its utility is established on the basis of the calculus of pleasure, its capacity to satisfy the greatest number, to provide the greatest number of positional goods for the greatest number of people.”<sup>50</sup>

## **Innovation**

Since Kerr wrote *The Uses of the University*, two forces have combined to shape the idea of the contemporary university: the knowledge economy and the technologically globalized world. The concept of knowledge as a commodity has been around since the time of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Thomas Love Peacock. But a theory of what kind of commodity it is, and how knowledge actually works in the economy, is relatively recent.

In a 1990 paper called “Endogenous Technological Change,” economist Paul Romer asks why productivity in the United States has grown over the past century when traditional economic assumptions would have predicted a decline. His answer, in simplest terms, is the role of knowledge in the evolution of technology:

The raw materials that we use have not changed, but as a result of trial and error, experimentation, refinement, and scientific investigation, the instructions that we follow for combining raw materials have become vastly more sophisticated. One hundred years ago, all we could do to get visual stimulation from iron oxide was to use it to make a pigment. Now we put it on plastic tape and use it to make videocassette recordings.<sup>51</sup>

The constant improvement in these instructions for putting raw materials together constitutes technological change and “lies at the heart of economic growth.” It occurs mostly through the actions of people who, Romer says, are responding to the market. Even in the case of faculty conducting basic research at universities, with no idea of profit in mind, market incentives play a role when private companies translate their findings into marketable goods. Thus, while economic thinkers from Adam Smith onward had considered knowledge



“exogenous,” or outside the economic system’s traditional trinity of land, labor, and capital as factors of production, Romer argues that it is really “endogenous,” or integral to it.

But knowledge is “inherently different from other economic goods.” Once the initial investment of time or energy or materials has been made, knowledge can be thought of as a set of instructions that are endlessly repeatable at no additional cost, whether in the form of a videocassette tape, directions for assembling a chair, a poem, an idea, or a mathematical equation. All are “nonrival goods” because their benefits do not accrue to one person alone—a single user who can exclude everybody else. Nonrivalrous knowledge can be shared and used widely by many people at the same time.

Romer concludes that nations with a larger proportion of human capital—people and ideas—and thus a greater potential for producing knowledge-based improvements, will experience greater economic growth than states without those advantages. (In 1995, the President’s Council of Economic Advisers concluded that some fifty percent of American economic growth since World War II was the result of advances in knowledge.) And since new knowledge can be created indefinitely, this growth is no longer hedged in by the limits of land, labor, and capital (some economists have added entrepreneurship to the factors of production).

His explanation of the role of knowledge in stimulating economic growth—which emerged from a subfield of economics known as New Growth Theory—gave a theoretical basis to Kerr’s 1963 observations on the spreading influence of the “knowledge industry,” whose ultimate effect was to bring the marketplace into the university. It also reinforced Kerr’s statement about the unstoppable character of knowledge. Within thirty or forty years of the Godkin lectures, we were no longer living with the knowledge industry but inside the knowledge economy.

One of the many consequences is that technological advances in media and communications have sent knowledge around the world and in the process engendered new theorizing about the role of universities. Marginson, who studies the effects of globalization on higher education, believes that we now live in a “global knowledge economy” that is also “social and cultural, taking the form of a one-world community mediated by the web.”<sup>52</sup> It is marked by burgeoning relationships among knowledge institutions around the world, the rise of new universities, especially in China and east Asia, and the proliferation of new technologies of learning. The global dimension of education connects national systems of higher education but is a separate domain from them:

Any theorisation of this global higher education domain must account for two elements. One is cross-border *flows*: flows of people (students, administrators, academic faculty); flows of media and messages, information and knowledge; flows of norms, ideas and policies; flows of technologies, finance capital and economic resources. . . . Global flows constitute relatively visible lines of effect. The other less explicit element is the worldwide patterns of *differences* that channel and limit global flows: lateral diversity in language, pedagogies and scholarship, and in organisational systems and cultures; vertical diversity including competitive differentiation, hierarchy, inclusion, exclusion, and unequal capacity. Global higher education is not a level playing field.<sup>53</sup>

This new world, he says, is more like a field of power relationships than the traditional marketplace of economics (or of ideas), and he nominates Bourdieu as its theoretician. Universities, each with its own particular habitus and within the structural limits of the field, seek to increase their relative position. In the global dimension, U.S. universities prevail in virtually every competitive category: resources, size and quality of the research enterprise, proportion of citations in the top scholarly and scientific journals, English as the language of science and (increasingly) scholarship, attractiveness to foreign students (who often choose to stay in the U.S. when they finish their studies). American hegemony in global higher education does not consist in a military-style, top-down model of domination, however. Along lines suggested by aspects of theorizing in Foucault and Gramsci, it rests on “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, American leadership is sustained primarily by the concentration of intellectual talent from throughout the world in its universities, and by the export of American knowledge, “a gift no one can refuse.” Elite U.S. research universities—principally the Ivy League, but also top public institutions like Michigan and Berkeley—ultimately function as the high-end exemplar to which other nations aspire: the global Idea of a university.

But Marginson sees cracks in American dominance that are not accounted for in Bourdieuan terms. These are due not only to the fundamental changes wrought by globalization since the 1960s but also to Bourdieu’s view of “agency freedom, self-determining identity, as bound *a priori* by the stratification of class power lodged in the unconscious.” As Gramsci understood, Marginson says, there are other conditions that affect agency freedom, among them the “*creative imagination* of governments, universities, disciplines, groups and individuals.” As a result, the global field offers opportunities for imagining and constructing identity that can enable escape from the existing American monopoly of knowledge. The global dimension, currently organized by hierarchical rankings, is in a state of continual flux that makes it unpredictable. Given the proliferating possibilities it offers, rankings can be reordered and hegemony can be subverted or simply worn out, because it must be continually renewed. In the global field, “any structural dynamic must be considered partial, relativised by the other parts of the field, provisional, and in continual transformation.”

In its pessimistic/optimistic way, Marginson’s global field theory validates a point that emerges from both Kerr and Romer: the transformation of knowledge into an artifact of the economy means that it cannot be subordinated to any regimen of control unconnected with the pursuit of knowledge itself. Or, as Jon Klancher writes in speaking of the transfiguration of the arts and sciences during the Romantic period, we have embraced a conception of knowledge “that appears unencumbered by the conditions that produced it. Our modern word for that condition is *autonomy* . . . [emphasis in original].”<sup>55</sup> While technology has been a condition of its creation, the belief in the inevitability of knowledge as progress has taken on a life of its own, quite apart from how we feel about the technology that enables it. Knowledge today is everywhere, constantly moving across physical and intellectual borders in “quicksilver flows,” as Marginson puts it. Its ubiquity has contributed to its growing independence from human intentions. Knowledge to which we must adapt, knowledge that is fundamental to a global economy through the incessant generation of new ideas, is essentially autonomous. It cannot be subjected to any values that do not support the conditions of its endless expansion.

This idea is not inconsistent with theories of knowledge as a path to status or a tool for domination. But it suggests that knowledge itself is the starting point, not the uses to which it can or may be put. New Growth theory, for example, is a hopeful paradigm of a world in which knowledge is a potentially inexhaustible resource for poor and rich countries alike. The knowledge economy has brought indispensable benefits. At the same time, it has also brought us a world marked by a continual rupture of established institutions, a fact that seems to be not just accepted but welcomed. As Lee Felsenstein, an early innovator in computing during the 1960s, put it: “We wanted there to be personal computers so that we could free ourselves from the constraints of institutions, whether government or corporate.”<sup>56</sup> The current enthusiasm for “disruptive innovation” is an indicator of the anti-organization spirit of our time. Described by Harvard business school professor Clayton Christensen in his 1997 book, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, disruptive innovation refers to the business phenomenon by which smaller, more entrepreneurial companies take down established giants. Industry leaders tumble because they have been insufficiently entrepreneurial themselves, insufficiently alert to enemies from below. (Christensen has since written about its application to universities.) According to historian Jill Lepore, disruptive innovation, in which annihilation strikes by stealth and without warning, is a “competitive strategy for an age seized by terror,” and its rhetoric “a language of panic, fear, asymmetry, and disorder.”<sup>57</sup> She is criticizing what she calls “the gospel of innovation,” which she considers to be really a theory of change: “the idea of progress stripped of the aspirations of the Enlightenment, scrubbed clean of the horrors of the twentieth century.”

Disruptive innovation theory is the product of a fascination with markets as the foundation for thinking about organizations. The apparent triumph of capitalism, symbolized by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, has encouraged this trend.<sup>58</sup> In the past thirty years or so, analyses of the university, in the form of administrative models and practices, have come increasingly from business professional schools rather than from political science, sociology, philosophy, or other traditional academic disciplines. These analyses center on management and, increasingly, on local control. As the withdrawal of public support forces administrators to search for new sources of revenue, recent theorizing about university organization in large public multicampus systems has tended to recommend increasing degrees of campus independence, on the assumption that universities need to become more responsive to the market in order to survive. In a recent paper on the development of U.S. university systems, Berkeley Chancellor Emeritus Robert Berdahl summarizes the growing view of higher education as a private good, the increasing need for public universities to engage in private fund raising, the constraints of centralized governing structures, and states’ perception of public research universities as engines of economic growth. In light of these shifts, he sees the future of the research university lying in the direction of the “entrepreneurial university” which, “to be truly entrepreneurial . . . needed to be liberated from state and system controls.”<sup>59</sup>

Universities are already in the midst of another great transformation: adaptation to the knowledge economy. One of the accomplishments of New Growth theory, Joel Mokyr tells us in his history of the knowledge economy, was its rediscovery of the importance of institutions for the diffusion of knowledge—a rediscovery because the social and economic utility of spreading knowledge through academies, societies, informal networks of scientists, and learning institutions like those of early nineteenth-century London was a project of the Enlightenment. The knowledge economy is about instrumental knowledge, and, as Mokyr observes, its growth,

“like the growth of living forms, has . . . a great deal of autonomy to it.”<sup>60</sup> It is raising new questions about forms of organizing knowledge, including intellectual property, education, and societal policy. Commenting on the implications of Romer’s version of New Growth theory, David Warsh observes:

[T]he special ‘copying’ property of knowledge—that it could be used by the same person over and over again, or by any number of persons at the same time—was not [from an economic perspective] an inconvenient fact that could be assumed away simply by assigning property rights. . . . [W]ho could say with any certainty what should be regarded as appropriable and what should not? Who would advocate giving Newton or Leibniz a patent on the calculus? Or Einstein a copyright on the formula  $E=mc^2$ ? . . . How broad should such protections be? How long should such state-sanctioned monopolies last? What alternative institutions might be set in motion, educating the workforce, producing new knowledge, and diffusing it? These were among the most important policy questions of the new economics of knowledge. But there were no pat answers to them. They required a policy, just as central banking required a monetary policy, or stabilization required a fiscal policy.<sup>61</sup>

Michael Peters and Tina Besley, who see creative opportunities for the humanities and arts in the global field, believe that answers will emerge as part the unfolding of the new globalized knowledge economy itself:

[T]he creative (and knowledge) economy is unquestionably also an ethical economy: it involves the *cultivation of norms* as part of its own underlying social infrastructure. . . . This question should turn analysis away from the focus on the firm towards a better understanding of knowledge institutions, particularly universities, but also research institutes, libraries, museums and galleries, as the primary ideas institutions.<sup>62</sup>

The idea of a university in the new world of knowledge is still a work in progress. It seems destined to encompass closer integration with society, and more disaggregation internally, than even Kerr would have expected. It will adapt to new competitors, new forms of instruction, and new kinds of organization. But first the university must survive austerity. Beyond that, as Kerr saw, the inequalities between the poorer and the richer disciplines remain to be bridged if it hopes to continue representing the unity of knowledge in all its incarnations. Perhaps the nascent knowledge economy will evolve into a new stage for the unfolding of the creative imagination throughout the arts and sciences, even though “the relative importance of knowledge for its own sake has declined relative to knowledge that may be mapped into better techniques.”<sup>63</sup> It is too soon to tell.

As Mark Kipperman has written, a debate about empirical knowledge in the Romantic period was never just about its truth or its source, but about “the social *ends* of such knowledge and from where the real *power* to guide and change an emerging technical-industrial era would come.”<sup>64</sup> In an era of autonomous knowledge, the question is whether this is any longer a realistic possibility. Hazlitt thought the progress of knowledge could not be stopped but it could be directed. Let us hope that, for once in his life, he was not being too optimistic.

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<sup>1</sup> Garland, *Cambridge before Darwin*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Curry, *Southey*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:45.

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, 3:81–82.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of Wordsworth's experience at Cambridge, see Schneider, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education*. Schneider concludes (p. 189) that "Perhaps his most important debt to Cambridge . . . was the opportunity it offered him, which it forced upon him, to compare country life with city life, primitive life with civilized life, the small world with the great world. By means of this contrast he was able to question the culture of his age at the very roots, and create a new culture of his own."

<sup>7</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 11, no. 22 (January 1808); vol. 14, no. 28 (July 1809); vol. 15, no. 29 (October 1809).

<sup>8</sup> Barr, "The Common Law Illusion," 120.

<sup>9</sup> Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Rothblatt, *The Modern University and Its Discontents*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge*, 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–32.

<sup>14</sup> Barr, "The Common Law Illusion," 129.

<sup>15</sup> Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Prospectus to the Encyclopedia Metropolitana," 1817; quoted in Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 164.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 427.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>20</sup> Coleridge, on the other hand, supported endowments because he felt they gave professors the leisure they needed to devote themselves to learning.

<sup>21</sup> "Speech of the Rt. Honourable George Canning, Delivered at the Liverpool Dinner, given in Celebration of his Re-election, March, 18, 1820." 2nd ed. London: Printed by Cox and Baylis, and Published at the Guardian Office, 1820, 12–15.

<sup>22</sup> The opinion of Manwood, chief Baron (c. 1580) in *Bulstrode Reports*, 2: 233. A similar statement is attributed to Lord Chancellor Edward Thurlow around 1775: "Corporations have neither bodies to be punished nor souls to be damned."

<sup>23</sup> *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 8:264.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:268.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:272.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:146–56.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:325.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:153.

<sup>30</sup> Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 218–19.

<sup>31</sup> Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents*, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Harte, *The University of London*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–67.

<sup>35</sup> Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal*, 23–25.

<sup>36</sup> Associationism "proved to have a peculiar affinity with the notion of the genius of a place, principally in support of the tendency to impart to locations a special virtue or quality which could then be transferred to the beholder." Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt*, 225–26.

<sup>38</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, "Thoughts on the Advancement of Academic Education in England," February 1826.

<sup>39</sup> John Henry Newman, *On the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1850), 137–38. Quoted in Harte, *The University of London*, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> According to Douglas Sloan, four important achievements of early American higher education were the coalescence of an academic scientific community, the role of the college as a forum for debate on Enlightenment perspectives versus traditionally religious perspectives, the beginnings of a specifically American theory of the role of its colleges and universities, and the emergence of a relevant college curriculum. “In all four areas,” he writes, “Americans concerned with education found themselves frequently guided and informed by Scottish ideas and examples.” Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal*, 225.

<sup>42</sup> Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 31. Abraham Flexner, reformer of U.S. medical education and founder of the Center for Advanced Study at Princeton, argued in the early decades of the twentieth century that American universities had taken on too many functions (teacher training, for example) and in the process lost their identity. He called for concentration on “the pursuit of knowledge, the solution of problems, the critical appreciation of achievement, and the training of men at a really high level.” Kerr believed that this ideal of a tightly knit and highly focused university “was as nearly dead in 1930 when Flexner wrote about it as the old Oxford was in 1852 when Newman idealized it.” Quoted in Cole, *The Great American Research University*, 36, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 66. In his two-volume personal memoir, *The Gold and the Blue* (2:153), Kerr wrote that the “knowledge industry” meant “the newspaper press, television, book publishers, schools, and universities.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 103: “What I wanted to do [with the concept of the multiversity] was to mark the contrast with a more nearly single-purpose institution having a more monistic spirit, a more monolithic leadership, and a single clientele—whether the older Oxford concentrating on teaching, run by the faculty, and serving would-be gentlemen or the older Berlin concentrating on research, run by the chair professors, and serving new knowledge.”

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 92–93.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Sociologist Neil Smelser argues that a combination of trends since the 1970s has brought far-reaching changes in the relative status of university disciplines. Among these trends are the stagnation and then decline of state support in public research universities, the increasingly tight job market for graduates in many fields, and the disciplinary “instability and inequities” introduced by the flow of external research funds predominantly into scientific, economic, and technologically oriented fields. “Put simply,” he concludes, “the favored areas of the sciences and engineering have been glutted, the social sciences fed, and the humanities starved. These developments, along with increased student vocationalism, have been major forces in the heralded ‘crisis of the humanities’ . . . and the threat to the ‘idea of the university,’ namely to cover all fields of relevant and worthy knowledge.” Smelser, *Getting Sociology Right*, 310–11.

<sup>50</sup> Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Romer, “Endogenous Technological Change,” S72.

<sup>52</sup> Marginson, “The Knowledge Economy and Higher Education,” 39–53.

<sup>53</sup> Marginson, “Global Field and Global Imagining,” 303–15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 308. The quotation is from A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971), 12.

<sup>55</sup> Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Isaacson, *The Innovators*, 266.

<sup>57</sup> Lepore, “The Disruption Machine,” 30–37.

<sup>58</sup> March, “The Study of Organizations and Organizing since 1945,” 15.

<sup>59</sup> Berdahl, “Thoughts on the History of University Systems in the US.”

<sup>60</sup> Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*, 293.

<sup>61</sup> Warsh, *Knowledge and the Wealth of Nations*, 295.

<sup>62</sup> Peters and Besley, “Academic Entrepreneurship and the Creative Economy,” in Peters, Marginson, and Murphy, *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy*, 83.

<sup>63</sup> Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*, 287.

<sup>64</sup> Kipperman, “Coleridge, Shelley, Davy, and Science’s Millennium,” 409–36.

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