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HAZLITT, THE LIVING POETS, AND EPHEMERALITY

David Stewart

Thomas Campbell, said Hazlitt in his Surrey Institution lecture 'On the Living Poets' (1818), 'always seems to me to be thinking how his poetry will look when it comes to be hot-pressed on superfine wove paper, to have a disproportionate eye to points and commas, and dread of errors of the press' (v, 149).¹ Hazlitt's sharp identification of Campbell's nervous self-consciousness about the way his books will look in the shops sounds like a cut at a poet on whom Hazlitt could be tough. Books matter more to Campbell as objects than for the ideas they contain. It's the kind of comment that tends to place Hazlitt as an acidic antagonist of an ephemeral culture dominated by fashion rather than taste. Poets like Campbell, it seems, have lost their status as artists by pandering to a 'reading public' which desires only the latest shining thing. Works of art, Hazlitt worries, are ephemeral because they have become like lemon-coloured kid gloves: they are produced quickly on a semi-industrial scale for large numbers of consumers, look attractive, but are forgotten as soon as the gaze of fashion has moved on.

Elsewhere, though, Hazlitt's comments suggest he understands the pleasures to be found in superfine wove paper. In 'On Reading Old Books' (1821) and 'On Reading New Books' (1827), his preference seems to be for the established old as a counterweight to the ephemeral new, but with Hazlitt no perception remains unqualified. He describes 'the wet sheets of the last new novel from the Ballantyne press' (xii, 222) in the first essay, and in the second, offers this scene of reception, in which readers are

quite on the alert for the next new work, teeming hot from the press, which we shall be the first to read, criticise, and pass an opinion on. Oh, delightful! To cut open the leaves, to inhale the fragrance of the scarcely dry paper, to examine the type, to see who is the printer. (xvii, 200-1)

Hazlitt knows this delight from the inside, even if he is also troubled by its consequences. He was drawn throughout his career as a reviewer and an essayist not just to heroes like Milton and Raphael, but also to the productions of what

1 All quotations from Hazlitt are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1930-4). References are by volume and page.

seemed to many an ephemeral age in which new works teemed hot from the press, and readers consumed them before they cooled. For Hazlitt any pleasure to be found in the present day's culture is always qualified by his consciousness of its being new. The peculiarly thorough way in which he understands the relationship between culture and the moment of its creation and consumption allows Hazlitt to describe especially insightfully an age troubled by a sense of its own immediacy.

My quotations are all examples of Hazlitt's careful, if not precisely loving, attention to the quotidian details of his cultural world. Like the Cockney he describes in 'On Londoners and Country People', he has a keen eye for what is going on about him. One suspects that when he inhales 'the fragrance of the scarcely dry paper' he relishes that world's busy commerce and his and his readers' place within it. He need not explain the reference to the Ballantyne press in 'On Reading Old Books': the allusion to the author of *Waverley's* printers is deemed sufficiently clear for readers who, like him, are eager for the next novel. But unlike the Cockney who sees, as Hazlitt puts it, 'every thing near, superficial, little, in hasty succession', Hazlitt is not, we suspect, 'confined to one spot, and to the present moment' (xii, 67). He knows a lot about a popular culture that is tied to the moment of its creation, but he seems the more ready to value forms of culture which aspire to escape that atmosphere and descend to posterity. Where, for the Cockney 'nothing is contemplated sufficiently at a distance to excite curiosity or wonder' (xii, 67), attentive contemplation (registered most memorably in Hazlitt's accounts of his intensive, enraptured explorations of Titian's portraits) is often precisely what he presents as the mark of his own critical distinction. Similarly, his descriptions of superfine wove paper and scarcely dry ink are all contained in accounts of which the primary purpose is to condemn writing that ties itself in a cockneyfied manner to 'one spot, and to the present moment'.

Yet the most Hazlittian element of the essay on Cockneys is, as Gregory Dart has argued, that by its end irritation has developed into a sympathetic, if partial, identification with the Cockney's way of seeing.² Scholars of the years following Waterloo have recently developed an increasingly sophisticated picture of an age marked and also troubled by spectacular phenomena, from metropolitan street spectacles, to fashions in clothes to, perhaps most pertinently for Hazlitt, bibliomania and the rise of a 'reading public'. The identification of the age as one dominated by such vivid and rapidly-changing attractions prompted excitement in some, but also anxiety in many, especially artists who worried about the fate of their own productions.³ The spectacular quality that many Romantics have been

2 See Dart's brilliant discussion of the essay's shifts of attitude in Chapter 2 of *Metropolitan Art and Literature 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

3 William H. Galperin's *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) offers a thoughtful early example of such criticism. On bibliomania in particular, see, for example, Philip Connell, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations* 70 (2000), 24-47 and Deirdre Lynch, "'Wedded to Books": Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists', *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (2004) <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/lynch/lynch.html>> (22 paras, accessed 17 January 2013). For two especially

drawn to also prompted, as Richard Cronin and others have shown, a newly intense concern about the potential longevity of art, in which Hazlitt clearly participated.⁴ His comments on the printed quality of poetry seem to suggest that he saw the age's literature as damagingly associated with a culture that would prove ephemeral by offering an enchanting, glimmering surface likely to attract consumers in a crowded marketplace, but which, for that reason, was unlikely to have any more permanent appeal. The reason his comments are so characteristic of him, however, and offer so telling an account of the culture they describe, is that they balance contempt or irritation with a sympathetic appreciation of ephemeral culture. Hazlitt offers an especially important reflection on his age's anxieties because he takes so seriously and investigates so thoroughly the pleasures, the problems, and the uncertainties of a period in which the relation between contemporary culture and its own contemporaneity seemed especially vexed.

This ability to see both sides simultaneously has long been recognized as Hazlitt's virtue. David Bromwich provides the fullest account, and recently Jon Mee has claimed that the fact that 'Hazlitt tends to interrogate the grounds of his own judgments, as if he remains in restless and conflicted conversation with himself' suggests the way in which he conceived of culture and taste as constructs which exist only in and through conversational exchange, not as immutable structures.⁵ On the other hand, Kevin Gilmartin has cautioned against a tendency to celebrate Hazlitt's contradictoriness too readily. In an account of his politics, Gilmartin claims that 'Hazlitt's contradictions are not his alone.' His combination of 'hope and despair' provides a powerful insight into 'the complex organization of British political culture in the early nineteenth century'.⁶ Hope mingled with despair might equally characterize Hazlitt's attitude to contemporary literary culture, and this allows him, I'd suggest, to become one of the most insightful critics of an unusually self-aware age. He accounts for a literary culture which desired to project itself towards posterity (looking forward to the status of being an 'old book'), yet was equally conscious of the difficulties and opportunities produced by being a part of the literary present tense.

Hazlitt's aside about Campbell's 'dread of errors of the press' appeared in his eighth of his *Lectures on the English Poets*, 'On the Living Poets.' It was a very common topic. In *Don Juan*, Byron describes a scene in a London drawing room: 'He saw ten thousand living authors pass, / That being about their average numeral; / Also the eighty "greatest living poets", / As every paltry magazine can show it's' (canto xi, stanza 54). One such magazine, rather anxious not to be thought paltry,

suggestive accounts of the period's culture and its conflicts see Richard Cronin, *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Dart, *Metropolitan Literature*.

4 Cronin, *Paper Pellets*, especially pp. 229–44.

5 See David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*, revised edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 23 and Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 278.

6 Kevin Gilmartin, 'Hazlitt's Visionary London' in *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, ed. Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40–62 (58).

was the *London Magazine*, and Hazlitt contributed an essay on Crabbe to its series on the living poets.⁷ But, as Byron suggests, the classification had become something of a cliché. The 'living poets' became in this period a kind of cultural category, something like a canon (it did not include all poets), but equally something much less settled, or capable of being settled.⁸ In the period following the end of the Napoleonic wars much poetry was published, but poetry's status as the highest form of cultural expression seemed in a new way questionable. The reason every 'paltry magazine' drew up lists was because poets and critics became especially conscious that the poets living now could not all 'live' in posterity.⁹ Identifying what might live is dependent on identifying the converse, the type of writing that will not. A poetics of posterity is mirrored by a poetics of ephemerality, and the list of living poets is not a secure canon but a prediction shadowed by the possibility of error. The period's hesitancy can be felt in Hazlitt's lecture: 'I cannot be absolutely certain that any body, twenty years hence, will think any thing about them; but we may be pretty sure that Milton and Shakespeare will be remembered twenty years hence' ('On the Living Poets'; v, 145).

The years following Waterloo were characterized, as Richard Cronin has argued, by those forms of writing (especially, for Cronin, Byron's *Don Juan*, Scott's Waverley novels, and the literary magazines) that were avowedly engaged with 'the current press'.¹⁰ Cronin's discussion points, in particular, to the combination of creativity and anxiety that this self-consciously 'current' status prompted, because being current tended to conflict with the aspiration to become permanent. The very appeal that the age's culture made to the 'reading public' seemed to figure that culture as ephemeral, because the forms of culture and the modes of consumption they encouraged seemed, in Gregory Dart's phrase, to be 'obsessed with [their] own surface novelty, luxuriating in [their] status as a commodity'.¹¹ Dart describes the increased rapidity of change in fashions in this period, and with it the emergence of 'an identifiably modern fashion industry'.¹² Fashions in clothes are, by their nature, a matter of surfaces, and Hazlitt was not alone in finding the culture of the age as a whole marked by an unsettlingly unstable superficial quality. Any age produces poetry that is subsequently forgotten, and all produce other forms of culture (newspapers, magazine essays, printed lectures, fashionable hats) that are forgotten. But this curious concern with the poised category of the 'living poets' is characteristic of a period which distinguished poetry as something emphatically

7 *London Magazine*, May 1821; the series was curtailed following the death of the editor, John Scott.

8 See William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 210–16, for an account of the growth of this category.

9 For the best account of this impulse, see Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Bennett provides a thoughtful account of Hazlitt's ambivalence about this culture which has influenced me here (see, especially, 60–4).

10 Cronin, *Paper Pellets*, 10–12.

11 Dart, *Metropolitan Art*, 69.

12 *Ibid.*, 121.

not, as Hazlitt put it in the first lecture in the series, a ‘trifling amusement of a few idle readers’ (‘On Poetry in General’; v, 1) but which also worried about poetry’s proximity to trifling amusements and idle readers. Studying the living poets was compelling because the very status of poetry seemed living, not concluded.

Hazlitt identifies a nervous, tentative quality in Campbell, but his lecture ‘On the Living Poets’ often participates in the same feelings. He worries that his selection of poets may be determined, not by the superior quality of Moore, Scott, Rogers, Campbell and others, but rather by their fashionableness. Fashion and merit seem mutually exclusive: ‘Fame is not popularity, the shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favour or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts of other men, undying and imperishable’ (v, 144). This is a common theme in Hazlitt’s work. In a late piece on ‘Poetry’ (1829), he claims that his subject is divided between two kinds,

one that is a description of objects to those who have never seen or but slightly studied them; the other is a description of objects addressed to those who have seen and are intimately acquainted with them, and expressing the feeling which is the result of such knowledge. It is needless to add that the first kind of poetry is comparatively superficial and commonplace; the last profound, lofty, nay often divine’ (xx, 209).

The way to deal with an over-crowded literary market is to divide it between categories. The deep survives, and the superficial is ephemeral.

It was a crucial debate in a period so anxiously aware of itself as over-stocked with forms of culture, and Hazlitt’s response to it seems clear enough. But he is so important a critic of this topic because he does not assume an absolute distinction between types of poetry, or types of culture. Claire Brock has claimed recently that Hazlitt, who as a periodical writer wrote very much for his age, was in fact opposed to the idea that art should seek posthumous fame.¹³ It is an attractive position. Hazlitt’s work for periodicals could often and self-consciously acknowledge its own unfitness for posterity’s reward, as indeed did many magazine writers in places like the *London Magazine* and *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Tom Paulin’s fine account of the way the ‘performative nature of Hazlitt’s criticism plunges us into living, moving, interpretative action as it happens here and now’ might well lead us to suspect he would reject as staid the notion of writing for an audience not ‘here and now’.¹⁴ But Brock is, I think, only half right, because Hazlitt’s account of posterity is not one-sided. As David Bromwich argues, in Hazlitt there are always two voices: ‘The first voice [...] seeks to restore values that were in danger of slipping into total eclipse, while the second, antithetical and observant, remains aware of all that qualifies

13 Claire Brock, *The Feminization of Fame, 1750–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 169–93.

14 Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt’s Radical Style* (London: Faber, 1998), 151.

the truth of those values.¹⁵ This perception has been explored in excellent recent work on Hazlitt's accounts of Regency popular culture. Gregory Dart's discussion of the way Hazlitt's writing registers its position in a Cockney periodical realm in between the 'polite' and the 'plebeian' has been extended by many others, including, most recently, James Mulvihill, John Whale, Mark McCutcheon and Richard Cronin.¹⁶ For them the most characteristic element of Hazlitt's response to an age which had commercialized literature is its ambivalence. His involvement in the periodical press, while it opened to him a sense of the opportunities inherent in writing to the moment, also enhanced his awareness of the alternative.

The idea of writing for posterity often depends on imagining that the writer might simply escape his age and reach an untroubled scene of reception. This often expresses contempt for a contemporary audience and idealizes an audience that is not so much a future audience composed of living beings as an audience outside of time altogether. Hazlitt's view is much more complicated. In the essay, 'On Living to One's Self' in *Table-Talk* (1821), he denies the logic: 'Posterity is no better (not a bit more enlightened or more liberal), except that you are no longer in their power, and that the voice of common fame saves them the trouble of deciding on your claims. The public now are the posterity of Milton and Shakespear. Our posterity will be the living public of a future generation' (viii, 100). The word 'common' is often, as John Whale has argued, a tense one for Hazlitt, and here too it sits uneasily between the common good and a common whore.¹⁷ The living public is a fickle beast, and the 'common fame' which overrules common opinion is not a matter of universal suffrage, a principle which, as Hazlitt informs us in an earlier (1814) essay on the fine arts, he is happy to apply to government, but not to 'matters of taste' (xviii, 46). In 'Why the Arts are not Progressive' (1814), Milton is again the measure: 'Is Milton more popular now than when the *Paradise Lost* was first published? Or does he not rather owe his reputation to the judgment of a few persons in every successive period, accumulating in his favour, and overpowering by its weight the public indifference?' (iv, 164). Hazlitt does not abstract reception from history, but rather considers the importance of a cumulative opinion that builds up over several generations of critics all of whom were, at one point, living. Taste is formed through the long historical stretch of a writer's posthumous life in dynamic, if not wholly free, debate. When he says we 'may be pretty sure that Milton and Shakespear will be remembered twenty years hence' ('On the Living Poets'; v, 145), his uncertainty is genuine. It is an important idea for Hazlitt about which more might be said. But I want to focus here on a complementary

15 Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*, 145.

16 Dart, *Metropolitan Art*, 62. See also Gregory Dart, 'Romantic Cockneyism: Hazlitt and the Periodical Press', *Romanticism* 6.2 (2000), 143–62; James Mulvihill, 'Hazlitt's "Essayism"', *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 31.1 (2004), 28–52; John Whale, 'Liber Amoris: Unmanning the Man of Letters', *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 36.1 (2009), 55–76; Mark McCutcheon, 'On "Vulgar Exhibition": Hazlitt, "The Fight", and the Pornography of Popularity', *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 36.1 (2009), 77–100; Cronin, *Paper Pellets*, especially 137–8 and 242–3.

17 See Whale, 'Liber Amoris', 59 and Jon Cook, 'Hazlitt, Speech and Writing' in *Journalism, Literature and Modernity: From Hazlitt to Modernism*, ed. Kate Campbell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 15–37, 26–7.

perception: that judging writers who are still living depends on a different form of appreciation.

In the essay 'On Living to One's Self', Hazlitt tells an anecdote of a Scotsman who says 'that if the poet [Burns] were to come to life again, he would treat him just as he was treated in fact'. He would sooner give twenty pounds for a monument to the dead writer than twenty pounds to the living man. Hazlitt remarks 'What he said, the rest would do' (viii, 100). At this time (1821) Hazlitt had little affection for Scotsmen (the comment has a certain anti-*Blackwood's* ring), but the point is less judgmental than this might suggest. 'On Reading Old Books,' first published in the same year, suggests that he himself might do precisely the same: 'One candidate for literary fame, who happens to be of our acquaintance, writes finely, and like a man of genius; but unfortunately has a foolish face, which spoils a delicate passage' (xii, 220). Writing about living poets is difficult precisely because they are living:

All these contradictions and petty details interrupt the calm current of our reflections. If you want to know what any of the authors were who lived before our time, and are still objects of anxious inquiry, you have only to look into their works. But the dust and smoke and noise of modern literature have nothing in common with the pure, silent air of immortality. (xii, 220-1)

This seems to value the 'pure, silent air' above the 'dust and smoke', but Hazlitt's point is that judging a living writer is a different category of activity altogether. The essay was published in the February number of the *London Magazine*, and the 'Lion's Head' leader column in that issue remarks: 'these are days of exertion, – of patronage, – of popularity, – of liberality, – and every fine quality besides! The LONDON MAGAZINE, therefore, must play its part, as occupying a distinguished place amongst the noise and bustle.'¹⁸ The noise and bustle, dust and smoke, had its metropolitan pleasures, but the point for both Hazlitt and his editor is that criticism in such an atmosphere must change its tenor. It's this perception which causes Hazlitt to stop his *Spirit of the Age* piece on Byron because Byron has died, or why he thinks Godwin has achieved a 'sort of posthumous fame' because 'Mr Godwin's person is not known, he is not pointed out in the street' (xi, 16). It's also the reason why he would rather not meet Shakespeare ('On the Living Poets'; v, 146): what if the Bard had a foolish face?

Old books make possible the perception that art is an abstraction. This is from the essay 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth' (1827):

It is one of the beauties and advantages of literature, that it is the means of abstracting the mind from the narrowness of local and personal prejudices, and of enabling us to judge of truth and excellence by their inherent merits alone. Woe be to the pen that would undo this fine illusion (the only reality), and teach us to regulate our notions of genius and virtue by the circumstances in which they are placed! (xvii, 193)

18 'Lion's Head', *London Magazine* 3 (February 1821), 124.

This sounds fine, but the problem is that so often it is Hazlitt's pen that undoes the illusion by placing writing in contact with the circumstances of its production. He tells awkward anecdotes about Wordsworth and Coleridge, or happier ones about Lamb and Hunt by the fireside; he sees Lord Eldon 'plodding along with an umbrella under his arm' (*The Spirit of the Age*; xi, 145). Duncan Wu has defended very ably Hazlitt's use of personal details in his critical accounts of his contemporaries, but it was for Hazlitt an unavoidable aspect of writing about a living poet that we do not only encounter them as books.¹⁹ As James Mulvihill puts it, Hazlitt offers 'a necessarily provisional and hybrid form of inquiry into the circumstances constituting social existence.'²⁰ The circumstantial nature of reality is always undoing the fine illusions we weave. But for Hazlitt this has its benefits.

When Hazlitt writes about culture which engages directly with the dust and smoke and noise of the age he worries about its ephemerality while also sensing its opportunities. The *Table-Talk* essay 'The Indian Jugglers', for instance, begins with a celebration of physicality, moves to a grander celebration of high art, but ends with Hazlitt's wonderful account of John Cavanagh, the fives player, that is most characteristic for being, as he describes it himself, 'between jest and earnest' (viii, 86). For Cavanagh 'the noisy shout of the ring happily stood him in stead of the unheard voice of posterity!' (viii, 89). This is only partly a joke: for Hazlitt achieving a more immediate acclaim has its pleasures. In another essay in this collection, he begins by critiquing coffee-house politicians for the 'suddenness and fugitiveness of the interest' ('On Coffee-House Politicians'; viii, 190) they take in the topics of the day. But his meditations acquire a typically ambivalent note: 'It sometimes gives one a melancholy but mixed sensation to see one of the better sort of this class of politicians, not without talents or learning, absorbed for fifty years together in the all-engrossing topic of the day' (viii, 191). Much of what Hazlitt has to say about his age is 'melancholy but mixed'. It will be forgotten, and yet this type of activity gathers its energy from its insistent immediacy. The essay 'On the Aristocracy of Letters' combines condemnation of superficial or fashionable literature with appreciation of the opportunities that fashion permits: 'The best wits, like the handsomest faces *upon the town*, lead a harassing, precarious life – are taken up as the bud and promise of talent, which they no sooner fulfil than they are thrown aside like an old fashion' (viii, 211). The harassing, precarious nature of their existence suggests that their status as poets is, like the Cockney, tied to the present moment.

The perception is cultural but it has its roots in Hazlitt's metaphysics. In his *Letter to William Gifford* (1819), Hazlitt restates his early metaphysical discovery. The point is partly about time. 'The present moment stands on the brink of nothing' because our conception of futurity is merely an idea: 'The next year, the next hour, the next moment, is but a creation of the mind' (ix, 58). By the same token, as he puts it in another essay, 'There is no such thing as Antiquity [...]

19 Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200–1, 237–8.

20 Mulvihill, 'Hazlitt's "Essayism"', 49.

Whatever is or has been, while it is passing, must be modern' ('On Antiquity', *The Plain Speaker*; xii, 252). The restless and ever-shifting consciousness of the present moment is important to Hazlitt because it is only in that moment that the art work (or anything else) can be perceived.

Hazlitt's account of personal identity mirrors his account of cultural works. In his lecture 'On the Living Poets', he makes the link in describing Thomas Moore:

his pen, as it is rapid and fanciful, wants momentum and passion. It requires the same principle to make us thoroughly like poetry, that makes us like ourselves so well, the feeling of continued identity. The impressions of Mr Moore's poetry are detached, desultory, and physical. (v, 151)

The modernity that Hazlitt identifies in Moore is not so much an anticipation of metropolitan fragmentariness as a disorientating evocation of ever-shifting presentism. Moore's poetry exists only now, and its 'physical' quality (sensual, but also garishly typographical) suggests that 'it is passing.' These comments, and others like them, are not compliments, but they possess a keen sympathy for writing that ties itself so thoroughly to the present moment. Hazlitt found in the culture of his age an acknowledgment of the same difficulties that, in the essay 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth', causes a young man to find 'something revolting and incredible' (xvii, 193) in the notion that he and all of his age exist only 'in such a point of time, and in such a corner of space', 'in a moment to be nothing' (xvii, 192-3).

Although it is far from ideal, Hazlitt clearly finds value in a certain type of ephemeral productivity, partly because he finds in Cavanagh and the Southampton's coffee-house wits a mirror for it. So many of the *Table-Talk* essays published in the *London Magazine* contain observations on the essays' own potential ephemerality and invite reflections on the essays' relationship with their subject matter. They comment on ephemeral topics like the conversation of authors or parliamentary eloquence, or reflect on the claims of the likes of Wordsworth who believed, Hazlitt tells us in his first 'Table Talk' in the *London*, that 'no poet, who deserved the name of one, was ever popular in his life-time, or scarcely after death' ('On the Qualifications Necessary to Success in Life'; xii, 201). At the end of 'On Reading Old Books' he remarks 'Whether these observations will survive me, I neither know nor do I much care' (xii, 229), but given the essay's subject, it is clearly on his mind. The magazine essay is like the performance of a juggler in that it seems to invite the perception that it cannot be extricated from the present moment of its creation. Like Campbell's typographical poetry, the essays are concerned intimately with their effect on an immediate audience. But, like Beau Brummell, whose witticisms are 'so attenuated' 'they hover on the very brink of vacancy, and are in their shadowy composition next of kin to nonentities' ('Brummelliana' [1828]; xx, 152), poets, politicians, sportsmen, and periodical writers must engage in 'the art of making something out of nothing' (xx, 153). These are forms which bear the conscious burden of being 'like a bubble, at one minute reflecting the universe, and

the next, shook to air!' ('On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth'; xvii, 192). They are all engaged in a poetics of ephemerality that is vividly immediate but that is troubled by its proximity to nothing too.

Such a manner of productivity, which depends upon 'the noisy shout of the ring' of contemporary spectators, engages culture with popular or fashionable acclaim. Hazlitt does not often seem keen on fashion. Fashion, he brilliantly says, 'constantly begins and ends in the two things it abhors most, singularity and vulgarity' ('On Fashion', [1818]; xvii, 52). Fashion is both despotic (it must always change because if it is common then it is outmoded), and also servile (because what is fashionable depends on the perceived approbation of a select group). Because it must always change it is also the most ephemeral of cultural modes. Predictably, then, Hazlitt does not like it. So it is all the more surprising to come across the same phrasing in an essay concerned to define art by its superiority to fashion. Hazlitt's late essay 'Originality' (1830) considers the paradox that a work of art must be both true (an accurate account of nature) and new (not a slavish imitation). He concludes: 'Enough has been said to vindicate both conditions of originality, which distinguish it from singularity on the one hand and from vulgarity on the other; or to show how a thing may at the same time be both true and new' (xx, 298-9). Originality in works of art is precisely like fashion in that it is engaged in a continual balancing between two contradictory states.

Hazlitt's answer to the originality paradox is to confound surface and depth: 'We do not look beyond the surface; or rather we do not see into the surface, which contains a labyrinth of difficulties and distinctions' (xx, 297). This is why, he says, quoting a favourite phrase from a hero, 'Titian wrote on his pictures, *faciebat* – as much as to say that he was about them, but that it was an endless task' (xx, 298). The work of art is endless because it is multiple: it requires in viewers an intensive, restless, investigative activity such as Hazlitt describes in the *Table-Talk* essay 'On the Pleasure of Painting', one that delves into surface perceptions. Art is not translated to a pure or perfected realm. Instead, for artist and viewer, appreciation depends upon a continual effort of reconstruction. Hazlitt does not conceive naively of art abstracted from history, but such a vivid account seems nonetheless to distinguish art from commerce and fashion. Yet the echo of the phrasing of the essay 'On Fashion' suggests the subterranean connection between art and fashion in Hazlitt's thinking. There is a restless quality to both, just as there is in coffee-house politics or aristocratic poetry. In both the surface need not be superficial. Titian's *Young Man with a Glove* in the Louvre, just as much as an actual young man with a glove in Piccadilly, '[hovers] on the very brink of vacancy' ('Brummelliana'; xx, 152). But this quality gives them, for Hazlitt, their power to attract a sympathetic gaze.

This is why, in the two essays on reading that seem to value canonical old books over fashionable new books, Hazlitt is also able to describe so vividly the pleasures of the new. In part this is because all books are, in a way, like Titian's paintings, new, because a reader has not explored them fully. But it also emerges from his recognition that judging 'living poets' depends on a much less fixed mode of appreciation. The 'wet sheets of the last new novel from the Ballantyne press' are

such a pleasure because their reputation is not dry: we do not know quite what to make of them. He ends his *Round Table* essay on Wordsworth's *Excursion*, a poem that places at its heart the idea that poetry should aspire to permanence, by commenting modestly 'it would be presumptuous in us to determine' (iv, 125) its ultimate merit. 'Presumptuous' is chosen with care: for Hazlitt the merit of a poem is not ultimate but consists precisely in what is made of it by a range of readers over time.²¹ It is not just hard to consider its permanent status, but a kind of category mistake. No one, as he puts it elsewhere, 'can anticipate the suffrages of posterity' ('Whether Genius is Conscious of its Powers?', *The Plain Speaker*; xii, 117). When judging our contemporaries we judge them as contemporaries, 'at once spectators and a part of the moving scene' ('On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth'; xvii, 192).

When Hazlitt discusses the living poets, he often seems disappointed. Walter Scott has achieved merely 'drawing room success' (v, 155); Samuel Rogers is 'elegant, but feeble' (v, 148); in Thomas Moore's poetry 'every thing lives, moves, and sparkles', but then again this 'exhibition of fireworks' 'surprises for the moment, and leaves no trace of light or warmth behind' (v, 151). He ends his lecture 'On the Living Poets' by remarking: 'I have felt my subject gradually sinking from under me as I advanced, and have been afraid of ending in nothing' (v, 168). The living poets may be as ephemeral as a coffee-house spouter or a juggler. Contemporary culture seems like an airy nothing, an ephemeral bubble, not worthy of serious attention. But this lack of fixity also occasions Hazlitt's appreciation. Duncan Wu praises Hazlitt's 'generosity of spirit' that allowed him to give even those who had fallen out with him their due, and the same might be said of his attitude to an ephemeral age.²² Hazlitt clearly values posthumous fame and the claims of high art, but this does not prevent him taking enjoyment in forms of culture which have not yet, and might not ever, achieve that status.

The same mixture of sympathy and uncertainty drives *The Spirit of the Age*. The age's spirit is for Hazlitt defined, as James Chandler points out, by a multiplicity that refuses clear definition, and Hazlitt's book is so wholly implicated in the age it describes precisely in its mobility.²³ As Tom Paulin writes of the essays, 'The expression [...] is always taken "en passant"', and this is appropriate in one for whom criticism 'must aim never to be fixed or finished'.²⁴ This lack of fixity can be observed especially in the way he describes the link between culture and commerce and the effect this might have on those cultural objects' ability to become fixed, or canonical. Poetry by the likes of Moore and Scott seems to Hazlitt, to use one

21 It is intriguing that this phrase occurs only in the revised version of the review (printed in *The Round Table* in 1817) and not the original three-part review in *The Examiner* (1814), especially given that the original review is, generally, more generous. See Duncan Wu's discussion in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), II, 321–4.

22 Wu, *William Hazlitt*, 201.

23 James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181.

24 Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty*, 256, 291.

of his favourite words, 'meretricious': a glittering, but ultimately empty, physical object for sale. In *The Spirit of the Age*, Scott (xi, 59), Byron (xi, 70), Canning (xi, 150) and Moore (xi, 170) are all associated with the quality, though Wordsworth, tellingly, is deemed to shun it (xi, 87). In 'My First Acquaintance with Poets,' Hazlitt remembers Coleridge exclaiming 'That is true fame!' on seeing a tattered copy of Thomson's *Seasons* in a window seat. Wordsworth replies that Thomson was 'a good poet, rather than a great one; his style was as meretricious as his thoughts were natural' (xvii, 120). That the word, so frequently used to slight fashionable writing, calls to mind prostitution suggests that femininity as much as commerce may be an aspect of Hazlitt's ambivalent suspicion of his age's print culture, a point discussed very eloquently by Richard de Ritter.²⁵ But the very obsession with the concept in *The Spirit of the Age* suggests for him meretriciousness was central to the age's spirit while also marking his fascination with the opportunities that such a quality permits.

The essays in *The Spirit of the Age* share with many of Hazlitt's accounts of his age's culture a habit of shuttling between delight and aversion. This habit is perhaps most remarkable for its mirroring of the rapidly shifting cultural scene he at times critiques. Gregory Dart, describing the essay 'On Londoners and Country People,' claims that 'the meaning of the essay is to be found less in its final resting place than in the sum of the various positions it has seen fit to adopt.'²⁶ It is, likewise, a failure to rest that prompts both Hazlitt's uncertainty and his interest in the age's miscellaneous spirit. The fluidity of this perception positions Hazlitt as an unusually acute critic of a period in which the potential for writers to '[fill] permanently a station...in the Literature of our Country,' as Wordsworth put it in 1819, was debated the more urgently because the possibility seemed in doubt.²⁷ The age demands some decision about whether it deserves or is likely to achieve a permanent station, but Hazlitt also sees that the age makes its most striking appeal to contemporaries by suggesting a lack of fixity that makes any such decision uncertain.

Hazlitt's brilliant description of Thomas Campbell as one with an eye in his poetry on its appearance, 'hot-pressed on superfine wove paper, [with] a disproportionate eye to points and commas, and dread of errors of the press' (v, 149), is typical because the relish he takes in describing such a culture of writing suggests his sympathy with it. Campbell's poetry's insistently typographical quality attaches it to the printer's shop, and in doing so to a culture in the act of becoming, one in which errors of the press may be made, and subsequently corrected. Taste is circumstantial, subject to change: the pages are still wet. In 'On Reading New Books' Hazlitt points to a 'natural or habitual sympathy between us and the literature of the day' (xvii, 208) because it exists as we do 'on the brink of nothing.' Hazlitt's sympathy with Campbell's typographical anxieties might have been prompted by

25 Richard de Ritter, "'In Their Newest Gloss": Hazlitt on Reading, Gender, and the Problems of Print Culture,' *Hazlitt Review* 3 (2010), 25–37. See also Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, 275, Whale, 'Liber Amoris' and Cook, 'Hazlitt, Speech and Writing,' 33–4.

26 Dart, *Metropolitan Art*, 77.

27 'Preface' to *Peter Bell*, ed. John E. Jordan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 41.

the fact that, as Duncan Wu tells us, before he gave the last lecture in the series he was already correcting proofs of the book version.²⁸ But such sympathy was constitutional. The very seriousness with which Hazlitt understands the way in which writing might reach audiences in posterity encourages him to take more seriously the way in which writing reaches us now. 'On Reading Old Books' draws to a conclusion by considering all the potential pleasures that await him in the literature of the past. But it ends with a final exclamation: 'I should also like to read the last new novel (if I could be sure it was so) by the author of *Waverley*: – no one would be more glad than I to find it the best!' (xii, 229). But of course he does not yet know if it will be his best, and the possibility is part of the pleasure. In the wet sheets from Mr Ballantyne, the clenched fist of John Cavanagh, the attenuated wit of Beau Brummell, the jostling spirits at the Southampton Tavern, the novels of the ever-productive Scott, or the poetry of Moore, Rogers, Hunt or Campbell, Hazlitt takes pleasure in and develops a sense of mixed wonder for a world poised, restlessly, on the brink of nothing.

NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

28 Wu, *William Hazlitt*, 240.