London Review of Education
Vol. 9, No. 3, November 2011, 293–303

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Hazlitt's contrariness and familiar prose style: lessons on how to be critical

David Halpin*

Institute of Education, University of London, UK

Contrariness of the kind manifest in the literary output and general disposition of the nineteenth century English essayist and journalist, William Hazlitt, has much to teach contemporary intellectuals working in the academy about how better to be critical, offering important lessons on the necessity for self-consistency and independence of thought and the need more to write for publication in a familiar and accessible conversational style.

Keywords: intellectualism; Hazlitt; criticism; essays; contrariness

> The Dissenter... will not give up his principles because they are unfashionable... He speaks his mind, bluntly and honestly, therefore he is a secret disturber of the peace, a dark conspirator against the State. (William Hazlitt, *On court influence concluded,* cited in Wu 1998, 4: 222)

Intellectualism today

Public intellectuals are highly informed and convincingly articulate individuals who compulsively seek to speak the truth about the big issues of our times. Increasingly, if we believe the estimates of some commentators, such people today live lives of relative cultural invisibility. The British sociologist Frank Furedi, for example, argues that 'there do not appear to be very many prominent intellectual voices [about at the moment]; and [where they do exist] it is difficult to discern their collective impact on society'. Intellectuals, he concludes, are 'an endangered species. In place of individuals possessing genuine learning, breadth of vision and a concern for public issues, we now have only facile pundits, think tank apologists and spin doctors' (2004, 26).

This hostile assessment of Furedi's is both exaggerated and false. For while intellectualism as a universal function has never been a feature of any society, ancient or modern, it is simply untrue that intellectuals are about to become extinct in our own. To be sure, the pull of glitzy celebrity culture, at one extreme, and the lure of increasing academic specialisation, at the other, certainly makes the contribution of public intellectuals less obvious nowadays than maybe once was the case (Collini 2006). But the idea that they are dying out, or that there is no room for them, is surely wrong, though it must be conceded that there does prevail a degree of hostility, certainly in Britain, to the very idea of such people. Indeed, the label 'intellectual' frequently triggers sneers among some of its society's members, provoked by the suspicion that it points up individuals who are too clever by half poseurs or, worse still, persons who take condescending pleasure in claiming some kind of intelligent superiority over less informed mortals.

*Email: dhalpin33@btinternet.com

ISSN 1474-8460 print/ISSN 1474-8479 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2011.616322
http://www.tandfonline.com

When this does not happen, and when they are not snobbishly active, we find that the better kind of intellectual, despite commonplace assumption, is not confined to academia. A list of 100 prominent public intellectuals produced three years ago (in May 2008) by the influential periodical *Prospect* makes the point. While a high proportion of university-based academics feature in it (like Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, the late Tony Judt and Slavoj Zizek), also present are individuals from other walks of life – novelists and dramatists (like Umberto Eco, Amos Oz, Wole Soyinka and Orhan Pamuk), journalists (like Thomas Friedman, Alma Guillermoprieto and Martin Wolf), and also a musician (Daniel Barenboim), and even a former world chess champion (Gary Kasparov).

While acknowledging this diversity, this paper will speak specifically to the circumstances of university academics, which either explicitly, or in roundabout ways, self-define as, or wish to be, intellectuals; and it will entirely do so through the optic of the kind of contrariness personified in the radical attitude and declarations of the nineteenth century English essayist and journalist, William Hazlitt (1778–1830).[1]

Eschewing popularity, wealth and status, Hazlitt was an intellectual outlier who consistently dared to argue against the perspectives of and privileges enjoyed by Georgian England's Establishment, the members of which gave him back in retaliation a violent literary reaction. Duncan Wu (2008), Hazlitt's most recent biographer, says this about their dreadful, often highly personalised, broadsides:

> . . . this was a man who was attacked mercilessly throughout his life; indeed, Hazlitt-baiting became a recognized subgenre of literary journalism at which everyone was expected to excel. Between 1817 and 1830 there was not a single Tory journal that did not carry at least one article condemning him as an infidel, a Jacobin, and a whoremonger. . . This was nothing other than government-sponsored persecution, and must count as one of the most successful smear campaigns in literary history. (Wu 2008, xxv)

Against this background, I want to explicate how Hazlitt's robust and sometimes cast-iron approach to criticism, and his preferred familiar way of writing critically, have important implications for how university-based intellectuals should consider conducting themselves at the current juncture which is witnessing renewed attempts by government to redefine the education they seek to offer, entailing a likely diminishment of their vital role in speaking the truth to power.

By focusing on Hazlitt in this way my desire is sympathetically to heroise my subject, with the intention of encouraging others similarly disposed to 'try on' and replicate in their own intellectual lives aspects of his version of how to be a critic.[2] This is an unusual methodology, particularly during an age when learning from the past is neither fashionable nor even acceptable. I reject these attitudes, thinking rather that the legacy passed down to us by individuals like Hazlitt is one not only worth recalling, but also gainfully re-engaging with. Indeed, Hazlitt's attitude and oeuvre act as healthy reminders of ideals, values and beliefs which, currently, universities are in danger of ignoring and forgetting.

In this paper I will concentrate initially on Hazlitt's equivocal political attitude, before moving on to examine the manner in which he disseminated his ideas through the medium of the critical essay, arguing throughout that intellectuals in universities have much to learn from both.

Hazlitt's political equivocalness

Hazlitt possessed a non-signing-up kind of mind, a mode of critical intelligence to which we can gain insight from reading parts of his (1819) essay 'Lectures on the English comic

writers', where he approvingly says this about the sixteenth century French essayist Michel de Montaigne:

> The great merit of Montaigne... was that he may be said to have been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man... He was, in the truest sense, a man of original mind – that is, he had the power of looking at things for himself, or as they really were, instead of blindly trusting to, and fondly repeating what others told him that they were... In taking up his pen he did not set up for a philosopher, wit, orator, or moralist, but he became all of these by merely daring to tell us whatever passed through his mind, in its naked simplicity and force... He did not... undertake to say all that can be said upon a subject, but what, in his capacity as an inquirer after truth, he happened to know about. He was neither a pedant nor a bigot. He neither supposed that he was bound to know all things, nor that all things were bound to conform to what he had fancied or would have them to be. In treating of men and manners, he spoke of them as he found them, not according to preconceived notions and abstract dogmas; and he began by teaching us what he himself was... He was, in a word, the first author who was not a book-maker, and who wrote not to make converts of others... but to satisfy his own mind of the truth of things. (Wu 1998, 5: 85)

Hazlitt is writing here as much about himself as about Montaigne.[3] For, like his hero, Hazlitt had an 'original mind', refusing always to repeat 'what others told him', without first subjecting this to questioning. And, like Montaigne, Hazlitt wrote and spoke about things chiefly as 'he found them', rarely relying on 'preconceived notions and abstract dogmas', except that of justice and liberty, the nature of which he derived not from membership of any political party or movement – studiously avoiding such things, being independent of everything other than his own intellect – but, typically, from his appreciation of literature, and Shakespeare's plays in particular. Here (in his 'Characters of Shakespeare's plays', which appeared in 1815) Hazlitt writes about *Coriolanus*, a drama concerning an arrogant, obstinate autocrat who loathes the common people, who return his hate, and who, eventually, is stabbed to death:

> Shakespeare has in this play shewn himself well versed in history and state affairs. *Coriolanus* is a store-house of political common-places... The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher... (Wu 1998, 1: 125)

In hating the corruption and hypocrisy of the members of society's dominant class, in particular its religious and royal elites, Hazlitt is accordingly best recalled politically and intellectually as a secular republican who consistently raged in his writings against the way in which powerful minorities, and monarchs in particular, seek to subjugate majorities, limiting their freedom of expression and livelihood.

Hazlitt's political and contrary attitude makes him in many ways comparable to the contemporary social critic, the late Edward Said, who once defined the intellectual as a person 'set apart, someone who is able to speak the truth to power, a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task' (1994, 7) and, elsewhere, as 'an opponent of consensus and orthodoxy', acting as 'a kind of public memory; to recall what is forgotten or ignored; to connect and contextualise and to generalize from what appear to be the fixed truths' (Said 2001a, 502–3).

Hazlitt and Said share one other characteristic, which is a stubborn refusal to be categorised and captured by any particular factional interest. This aspect of their common identity

led both Hazlitt and Said to be outsiders, standing 'between loneliness and alignment' (Said 1994, 17). It also occasioned acrimonious conflict with some of their peers. The well known intemperate exchanges between Said and Ernest Gellner on the 'Orientalist Question', which featured in the letters pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* in February 1993, for example, have their less remembered historical parallel in those which contributed finally to a severance of relations between Hazlitt and Coleridge, with the former accusing the latter of being a political apostate for siding with the forces of reaction as these sought to curtail fundamental rights of free expression and assembly in England in the first 20 years of the nineteenth century.

The detail of all of this need not concern us here,[4] other than to remark that Hazlitt was appalled by what he interpreted as Coleridge's political mealy-mouthedness and obsequiousness generally. The hostility that Coleridge's behaviour provoked in Hazlitt was made all the more acute by the latter's previous deep admiration of his former friend's incisive genius and practical radicalism, each of which he considered to have been frittered away while he remained politically fixed.

Hazlitt's profound irritation with Coleridge was also motivated by the knowledge that, unlike himself, because of his high status as a public figure, the poet was in a very good position to attempt to exercise some progressive influence over the course of political events as they were being orchestrated by the government of the day, which included its suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1817. Instead, we learn that, behind the scenes, Coleridge was doing the exact opposite, toadying up to political power rather than challenging it. As Tony Grayling, another of Hazlitt's biographers, says:

> [Hazlitt] was incensed by hypocrisy and apostasy; he could not forgive a man [like Coleridge] who had [previously]... vocally sympathized with the plight of mankind, but [who] then turned away to feather his own nest by fawning on the powers that created that plight. (2000, 217)

None of this came easily to Hazlitt, who found the condition of radical self-consistency sometimes very hard going, particularly when he was forced to endure the ghastly responses it elicited from his opponents, acknowledging on more than one occasion the temptation and pull of majority thinking, which he successfully resisted because he dreaded much more the condition of running with the pack and being compromised politically as a result:

> It requires an effort of resolution, or at least obstinate prejudice, for a man to maintain his opinions at the expense of his interest. But it requires a much greater effort of resolution for a man to give up his interest to recover his independence... A man, in adhering to his principles in contradiction to the decisions of the world, has disadvantages. He has nothing to support him but the supposed sense of right; and any defect in the justice of his cause, or the force of his conviction, must prey on his mind, in proportion to the delicacy and sensitiveness of its texture; he is left alone in his opinions; and... grows nervous, melancholy, fantastical, and would be glad of *somebody* or anybody to sympathize with him... Nothing but the strongest and clearest conviction can support a man in a losing minority... (Wu 1998, 4: 129–30)

Hazlitt understood fully what being a radical public intellectual required of him, as did another recently deceased American critic, Susan Sontag. Remarking in similar vein to Hazlitt, she once wrote that:

> ... to fall out of step with one's tribe; to step beyond it into a world that is larger mentally but smaller numerically.... is a complex, difficult process... [for] it is easier to give one's allegiance to those we know, to those we see, to those with whom we are embedded. (Sontag 2008, 181f)

The implication of this message for today's higher education's public intellectuals is not difficult to spell out. At its highest level, it reminds them of the importance and difficulty of seeking always to behave politically in ways that are principled and steadfast, exercising their responsibilities without fear of personal effect. At a minimum, it requires them to review periodically the degree to which they are able to retain an appropriate critical distance from government and other forms of authority, avoiding pressures to become incorporated into their political and social agendas. Relatedly, it necessitates them to be cautiously judicious in striking up financial deals with individuals, groups and nations whose record of standing for truth, understanding and freedom is questionable. The most recent case of the LSE's ill-judged business links with the Gadaffi family springs quickly to my mind at this point (Kennedy and Hurst 2011).

Hazlitt and Sontag also alert would-be and already existing public intellectuals to the loneliness of critical self-consistency, and of the necessity therefore to act in difficult times in solidarity with others of similar bent, so as to maintain both one's own and their morale. Academics however are not always good at forging such alliances, even during the best of times, chiefly because their professional, even vain glorious, lives are geared so much to personal and individual success.

There is here an issue about self-consistency, which it needs to be said does not reflect well on Hazlitt, and from which I think public intellectuals in the academy should distance themselves. Hazlitt was very consistent. But one wonders if the obduracy that accompanied such steadfastness, which occasionally spilled over into highly personalised cynical derision and vulgar vituperation, may sometimes have compromised his capacity to appreciate matters from outlooks other than his own. His continuing unqualified admiration of Napoleon, despite the accumulation of evidence that condemned him as a tyrant, is arguably the worse best case of this tendency. Indeed Hazlitt's hostility to Coleridge's monologuing tendency – '[he] is the only person who can talk to all sorts of people, on all sorts of subjects, without caring a farthing for them understanding one word he says' (Wu 1998, 8: 31) – has parallels in his own sometimes hardened attitude towards the opinions of others, especially when they significantly differed from his own. I suspect, like Coleridge, he was a better talker than listener, and thus not very good at the 'give and take' evident in open appreciative discussion.

Public intellectuals need surely to move beyond the 'Either/Or' mode of thinking which Hazlitt too often favoured, to embrace a more nuanced 'And/Also' perspective in which seeming opposites are articulated and 'moved beyond' in the course of advocating a progressive vision. This is not about being perfidious. It is rather about seeking out and looking seriously at all the available evidence and, where appropriate, allowing it to count against one's own strongly-held positions and general attitudes. Hazlitt was sometimes incapable of this kind of reaching out, allowing his enthusiasm for and commitment to his own position to get in the way of viewing alternatives sympathetically. Public intellectuals, I am suggesting, need to avoid this weakness if their pronouncements are to be found compelling and taken seriously by people more sceptical than themselves about the issues under discussion.

Romantic criticism

Hazlitt's positions on the issues that concerned him were disseminated chiefly through his writings, by far the majority part of which were journalistic in nature. Although he wrote many very short and up-to-the-moment pieces for newspapers – notably book, art exhibition and theatre reviews – his more substantial and most remembered and most insightful works published in that medium had much more in common with the features that find their

way on to the 'Comment' pages found in today's broadsheet newspapers and the more extended essays published in outlets like *Prospect*, *The London Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Hazlitt wrote and published over one hundred such essays, developing in doing so a distinctive style of prose writing. While he did not invent the critical essay as a literary form, Hazlitt certainly redefined its nature, using it to wonderful effect to advance and propagate views on a host of disparate topics. In this and the next two sections I intend to discuss this particular aspect of Hazlitt's journalism, drawing out implications from his literary style of essay writing for how contemporary public intellectuals might go about better propagating their views and seeking support for them.

Although he was neither a poet nor a novelist, most outlines for university courses in 'English romantic literature' reserve a small place for Hazlitt's writings. In following such courses, students usually encounter the work of the literary historian, Marilyn Butler, in particular her seminal (1981) book *Romantics, rebels and reactionaries: English literature and its background 1760–1830*. In placing the British Romantics within their cultural setting, Butler observes that several of them – Coleridge and Hazlitt in particular – thought it was their vocation to be professional intellectuals or 'men of letters', commenting upon events, personalities and associated trends during a period when the clamour for social reform was intense. But, more than that, in becoming 'men of letters', such writers redefined what being a public intellectual was essentially about. As Butler says, 'the search for Romanticism may be not so much the quest for a certain literary product, as for a type of producer' (1981, 70). But there is a little more to this. For the kind of intellectual producer to which Butler draws attention, of which Hazlitt was a profound example, was also associated in the early nineteenth century in Britain with a very modern looking vibrant literary market in ideas, crucially aided by the proliferation of newly published high quality newspapers, journals and magazines (Higgens 2005).

One of the most influential of these outlets was the liberally-minded *Edinburgh Review*, to which Hazlitt regularly contributed, and for which he was, for a time, a salaried reviewer. First published in 1802, this internationally read quarterly magazine quickly established itself as one of the most significant cultural voices in Britain in the nineteenth century, discussing everything worth knowing about in the fields of politics, society and the arts. Within 10 years, the *Edinburgh Review* was able to boast a circulation of well over 13,000 and an estimated readership of nearly four times that number. That is a lot of subscribers and readers for such a publication, even by today's standards. Its popularity among society's more bookish members, which was shared in significant part by other complementary periodicals, like *The Examiner* and *The Political Register*, encouraged, in turn, the arrival on the cultural scene of the modern journalist: 'not as a [mere] reporter... but as [an intellectual] critic, watchdog and self-appointed spokesman for the individual citizen' (Butler 1981, 70).

Critical essays

Already, we have a sense of what kind of intellectual critic Hazlitt was – obdurate, fearless and consistent. Now we need to attend to the manner in which he went about being a major intellectual watchdog of his times, which he achieved largely through communicating his ideas through the medium of the critical essay, rather than via learned books and articles.

If we examine etymologically the word 'essay', we quickly uncover 'experiment', and behind that the old French term *essai*, 'attempt' or 'weigh up'.[5] Accordingly, one way to think of the critical essay is to conceive of it as a form of mental evaluation. There is also an

unceremonious aspect at work here, for such essays frequently aim more to tantalise the intellect rather than to engage systematically with it. The poet, Tom Paulin, elaborating this insight, in the course of commenting on Hazlitt's writings, says that critical essays aspire 'to the condition of rapid, direct, inspired speech – a kind of improvised one-act play taking place in a writer's studio', suggesting a kind of experiment in dialogue (1998, 271f). In his 'On the periodical essayists' (1819), Hazlitt states this idea explicitly, writing that the essay is 'the best and most natural course of study. It is in morals and manner what the experimental is in natural philosophy, as opposed to the dogmatical world' (Wu 1998, 5: 84).

Essays are consequently a form of writing to the moment that seek to make things happen – action in prose form, in other words – aspiring to be 'practical and useful' (Ackroyd 2002, 318), which is why Hazlitt likened it similarly to extempore speaking and the painting of frescos, which 'imply a life of study and great preparation, but of which the execution is momentary and irrevocable' (Wu 1998, 8: 57). Said reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that his kind of essay-writing is akin to piano-playing: 'like the recital, [it] is occasional, re-creative, and personal' (2001b, 229).

Because critical essays, like most conversations, have a fragmentary quality, they are usually relatively shorter than the average academic journal article, being half as long. Their more lively prose style also entails a mixture of the personal, intimate, polemical and colloquial, including the use of anecdote, striking illustration and humor. Although they can be learned in the conventional sense, usually being highly informed and analysis rich, critical essays mostly eschew technical terms and direct academic referencing. So, it is uncommon for them to have footnotes or a bibliography. If ideas are sourced, the essential details are provided within the narrative itself, by and large in inferential ways, providing just enough information for readers to follow things up. This is largely unnecessary, for critical essayists make no pretence to add to knowledge in the way commonly defined within the academy. For, unlike the regular writer of academic articles, whose primary concern is either to contribute to a field of enquiry or to establish one, critical essayists are chiefly concerned quickly to put over a point of view, and to provoke discussion about it.

Aldous Huxley's enriches this brief account of mine of the meaning of the literary essay, suggesting that it is best appreciated within what he describes as a 'three-poled frame of reference':

> There is the pole of the *personal and the autobiographical*; there is the pole of the *objective, the factual, the concrete-particular*; and there is the pole of the *abstract-universal*. Most essayists are at home, and at their best, in the neighborhood of only one of the essay's three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. (Huxley 1961, 8)

Hazlitt's most satisfying essays are those that make the best of all the three worlds referred to by Huxley, though the personal/autobiographical pole is more often the one that sets his pen off and keeps it going. Indeed, as Grayling (2000) correctly observes, Hazlitt lived mostly a 'confessional' literary existence:

> . . . transposing his experience into literature, writing with stark honesty. . . His material was his own thought and feeling, his own dealings with life's intractabilities, and he used that material unsparingly. . . His work, for all its diversity and range, has [then] an intensely personal character, as if it constitutes a single long anecdote about a man responding to his world – to art, literature and drama, to politics and ideas. . . (Grayling 2000, 4–5)

Unlike today's authors of academic articles, Hazlitt did not therefore eschew keeping his personal life out of what he wrote. On the contrary, it was his direct engagement with and

reaction to the world, *as he experienced it*, that provoked him to conduct his literary experiments or *essais on* it, and which made him profoundly skeptical of all manner of theoretical abstractionism, chiefly because he thought it failed to take account of the 'heartiness' of human life. The very titles of some of his most well known essays indicate as much: 'On the pleasure of hating' (1826), 'On the fear of death' (1822), 'On the feeling of immortality in youth' (1827), 'On living to one's-self' (1821), and 'My first acquaintance with poets' (1823).

Even Hazlitt's most recalled volume, *The spirit of the age* (1825), fits this description, despite being a set of critical profiles of eminent contemporaries, including, but not exhausting, individuals like Bentham, Godwin, Scott, Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, Malthus, and Southey. From looking at its contents page, one might be easily forgiven for concluding *The spirit of the age* to be a set of objective–factual essays. Closer inspection however reveals it to be a compendium of highly contentious 'just-now' characterisations. As Paulin (1998) says, in these studies, Hazlitt:

> . . . portrays living, animated human beings, each in the present moment, not a series of posed, static figures. . . to make each profile resemble something that is happening now, like a scene in play. . . [even] stage comedy. [So] what we enjoy is the comic process of his prose, its flexible conversational mix of ease and smartness. (Hazlitt 1998, 235–6)

Hazlitt's familiar style

And it is these features of Hazlitt's essay-writing that constitute his particular kind of familiar prose style.[6] Crucial to understanding its nature however is an appreciation of its peculiar dialogic aspects. As its title anticipates, Hazlitt's *The plain speaker* (1826) signals these features directly. Hazlitt's intention in this volume, Paulin (1998) again tells us, is particularly to communicate the idea of immediacy in written communication – as a powerful physical sensation in which 'every word should be a blow, every hit should tell' (284). As a result, bold honesty and turbulent risk-taking reverberate through Hazlitt's discourse in *The plain speaker*, in which he realises a prose that 'positions itself confidently, glowing with chipper good health' (Paulin, 1998, 292). Here is an example of it, quoted from 'On the prose-style of poets' (1826), in which Hazlitt comments admiringly on the written output of the Parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, a person whose actual politics he despised:

> It has always appeared to me that the most perfect prose style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which went the nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over, was Burke's. . . Its style is airy, flighty, adventurous, but it never loses sight of the subject; nay, is always in contact with, and derives its increased or varying impulse from it. . . It differs from poetry, as I conceive, like the chamois from the eagle: it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, is picturesque, sublime – but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clambers up by abrupt and intricate ways, and browses on the roughest bark, or crops the tender flower. The principle that guides his pen is truth, not beauty – not pleasure, but power. (Wu 1998, 8: 7–8)

Hazlitt's urges us here to write, like Burke, in an 'airy, flighty, adventurous fashion', all the while seeking directly and fearlessly to communicate the truth as we find it. To achieve this objective in his own work, Hazlitt deploys various literary devices, including notably aphorism and paradox and word lists. And he frequently punctuates with deliberation: commas, semi-colons, and colons being placed to maximise effect. These techniques, of course, do not exhaust all that might be deployed in seeking to write essays in a conversational style; individual authors need to identify, develop and apply ones of their own. On the other hand, they do provide an indication of the relevant direction of travel.

They also highlight a further distinguishing feature of Hazlitt's dialogic-rhetorical approach, which acknowledges as a given the frequently partisan, tendentious nature of communication, both written and spoken, and which justifies in turn his stress on the importance of using the medium of the essay to air counter-arguments. Ian Patel (2009) cleverly illustrates this point, quoting at length from another of *The plain speaker's* essays, 'On the conversation of authors' (Wu 1998, 8: 22–39), where we experience Hazlitt at his typical best, setting up one argument, then opposing it with another and, almost dialectically, finally landing us on new ground. Openness towards alternatives is crucial to this process, says Hazlitt, for 'nothing was ever learnt by either side in a dispute' (Wu 1998, 8: 30), or what we might today better describe as a 'dialogue of the deaf'.

Hazlitt, as I indicated earlier, did not always follow this principle in practice, being occasionally dogged in his views to the point of being intellectually obstinate. On the other hand, during better moments, of which there were many, the essay represented for him a form of writing that did not abandon the possibility of reasonable conversation. Indeed, there is, as Jon Cook (2004) argues, a sense in which Hazlitt's literary efforts, when looked at in their entirety, carry strong social and ethical implications. In particular, they assume the importance of developing public opinion along intelligent lines, affirming the value of contradiction to a democratic way of life – a life open to the endless variety of the common world. As Gardos (2010) reminds us, *public* reason mattered a lot to Hazlitt, who declared it to be the foundation of civilised social life: 'it is [he says] the medium of knowledge, and the polisher of manners, by creating common interests and ideas' (Wu 1998, 7: 92).

Conclusion

Which, of course, is why *public* intellectuals, during Hazlitt's time and ours, are so important. For they are the self-appointed mouthpieces for the individual citizen, arguing cases, often unpopular ones, on their behalf, and so tutoring people's judgements for the better as a result. But, to achieve success in this role, they need, I am suggesting, to consider ways of disseminating more their analyses via literary means akin to the critical essay, eschewing more than they do the scholarly book and journal paper, neither of which normally provide the body politic with sufficiently up to the minute comment on important unfolding events. Books take too long to write; and articles take too long to be accepted by journal editors for publication; which means that what they have to say is often either beside the point, or not in the right place, as events speedily overtake their authors' best first intentions. The critical essay gets round these limitations, facilitating the writing of relatively short, accessible, contentious, experimental commentaries on topical matters, to be read by intelligent interested generalists.[7]

Hazlitt, of course, was never constrained by the rules of academic scholarship, preferring always to write about things as he directly experienced and found them. Few public intellectuals in the academy currently have such license. Indeed, in the humanities, where many of them undertake their work, they increasingly no longer regard what they do as integral to the purposes of higher education, which these days are more economically related than educationally motivated. On the other hand, such intellectuals, despite their current hedged about state, may gain renewed confidence from how Hazlitt exploited his critical independence, which teaches that being consistently belligerent about pursuing the truth, and being urgent and uncompromising about its dissemination, are key aspects of any intellectual life worth living, whether in or outside of academia.

Notes

1. I made an earlier attempt at doing this in Halpin (2004), which discusses Hazlitt's theory of the imagination and its implications for education. In a subsequent paper (Halpin 2009), I discussed how Hazlitt's own education was premised on a particular conception of real learning. See also Nataragan (2007) for a very helpful survey of key sources about Hazlitt in general – both biographical and critical.
2. While the invocation of heroism at this point is controversial, I consider it both reasonable and justified, as I make clear in Halpin (2010).
3. See Bakewell (2010) for an excellent recently published introduction to Montaigne's life and oeuvre. Other very worthwhile sources about his *Essays* include Sayce (1972) and Frampton (2011).
4. See Wu (2006) and Wu (2008, 222–4) for a full account of what happened.
5. For a brief history of the critical essay, see Grayling (2000, 359–61). Paulin (1996) also has some interesting things to say about the genre (on pp. ix–xiv, 140 and 221). In addition, see Haefner (1987).
6. The characteristics of Hazlitt's familiar prose style has received excellent treatment in Bromwich (1999) and Paulin (1998), two sources that have heavily influenced the analysis that follow.
7. A superior example of what is being argued for here is the recent (2010) article by Stefan Collini (Professor of English Literature and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge) on the Browne proposals for the reform of higher education in England, which he published in *The London Review of Books*.

Notes on contributor

David Halpin is Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London and Visiting Professor of Education at Bath Spa University.

References

Ackroyd, P. 2002. *The origins of the English imagination*. London: Chatto and Windus.
Bakewell, S. 2010. *How to live: A life of Montaigne*. London: Chatto and Windus.
Bromwich, D. 1999. *Hazlitt: The mind of a critic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Butler, M. 1981. *Romantics, rebels and reactionaries: English literature and its background 1760–1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Collini, S. 2006. *Absent minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Collini, S. 2010. Browne's gamble. *London Review of Books* 32, no. 21: 23–5.
Cook, J. 2004. Hazlitt, speech and writing. In *Journalism, literature and modernity: From Hazlitt to modernism*, ed. K. Campbell, 15–37. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Curtis, P. 2008. Commerce in schools put under the spotlight. *Guardian*, May 19, p. 4.
Frampton, S. 2011. *When I am playing with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me? Montaigne and being in touch with life*. London: Faber and Faber.
Furedi, F. 2004. *Where have all the intellectuals gone?* London: Continuum.
Gardos, B. 2010. Hazlitt and the common pursuit. *The Hazlitt Review* 3: 55–73.
Grayling, A.C. 2000. *The quarrel of the age: The life and times of William Hazlitt*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson.
Haefner, J. 1987. Incondite things: Experimentation and the Romantic essay. *Prose Studies* 10, no. 2: 196–206.
Halpin, D. 2004. Education, criticism and the creative imagination: The legacy of William Hazlitt. *London Review of Education* 2, no. 1: 17–33.
Halpin, D. 2009. Hazlitt's learning: A real and negative education. *The Hazlitt Review* 2: 49–66.
Halpin, D. 2010. Heroism and pedagogy. *Pedagogies* 5, no. 4: 265–74.
Higgens, D.M. 2005. *Romantic genius and the literary magazine*. London: Routledge.
Huxley, A. 1961. *Selected essays*. London: Chatto and Windus.
Kennedy, D., and G. Hurst. 2011. LSE struck £1m deal to train Libya's ruling elite. *The Times*, March 3, pp. 1, 15.
Natarajan, U. 2007. Critical approaches to William Hazlitt: A brief survey. http://www.hwa.to/hazlitt/UNBibliohtm.
Patel, I. 2009. Hazlitt's rhetorical style. *The Hazlitt Review* 2: 33–8.
Paulin, T. 1996. *Writing to the moment: Selected critical essays 1980–1996*. London: Faber and Faber.

Paulin, T. 1998. *The day-star of liberty: William Hazlitt's radical style*. London: Faber and Faber.
Said, E. 1994. *Representations of the intellectual*. London: Vintage Books.
Said, E. 2001a. On defiance and taking positions. In *Reflections on exile and other literary and cultural essays*, ed. E. Said, 500–6. London: Granta Books.
Said, E. 2001b. Remembrance of things played: Presence and memory in the pianist's art. In *Reflections on exile and other literary and cultural essays*, ed. E. Said, 216–29. London: Granta Books.
Sayce, R.A. 1972. *The essays of Montaigne: A critical exploration*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
Sontag, S. 2008. *At the same time*. London: Penguin.
Wu, D. 1998. *The selected writings of William Hazlitt* (9 volumes). London: Pickering & Chatto.
Wu, D. 2006. Hazlitt versus Coleridge. Second Annual Hazlitt Society Lecture, Conway Hall, September 9, in London.
Wu, D. 2008. *William Hazlitt: The first modern man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.