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Education, Criticism and the Creative Imagination: the legacy of William Hazlitt

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ABSTRACT William Hazlitt (1778–1830), one of the most important critics of the English Romantic Period, held and published highly developed views about the nature of the creative imagination, the function of criticism and what it means to be truly learned [1]. Although he never advanced an explicit theory of education, least of all one about the purposes of schooling, his principles of thought and action and his thesis about style and structure in writing are highly relevant to contemporary discussions of what counts as genuine learning and teaching and the intellectual vocation of members of the educational academy.

> Happy are they who live in the dream of their own existence and who see all things in the light of their own minds; who walk by faith and hope, not by knowledge; in whom the guiding star of their youth still shines from afar; and into whom the spirit of the world has not entered! The yoke of life is to them light and supportable . . . The world has no hold on them. They are in, not of it; and a dream and a glory is ever about them. (Hazlitt, in Howe, 1, p. 284)

> The Dissenter does not change his sentiments with the season; he does not suit his conscience to his convenience . . . He will not give up his principles because they are unfashionable . . . He speaks his mind, bluntly and honestly. (Hazlitt, in Howe, 7, p. 239)

> Passion . . . is the essence, the chief ingredient, in moral truth. (Hazlitt, in Howe, 12, p. 46)

Introduction

Despite struggling still to feature prominently in both many university undergraduate courses in English Literature and most Advanced Level exam syllabuses in the same subject [2], there surely exists today a sufficient critical mass of students of the history of prose writing in England that is at least broadly familiar with, and admiring of, some of the more significant writings of William Hazlitt (1778–1830).

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Students of education, however, I am absolutely certain, are very much less well acquainted with Hazlitt's considerable contributions to our understanding of philosophy, politics and the arts, chiefly because, in writing about these topics, he only drew indirect attention to the world of schools, despite having profound views about what counted as being an 'educated' and 'learned' person. Indeed, if we believe the conclusion reached by Anthony Grayling (2000, p. 115), a recent biographer of Hazlitt, he was not even convinced, unlike some of his radical friends, of the need in his lifetime for a national system of schooling [3].

For this reason alone, it is not surprising then to learn that the personality of Hazlitt has rarely, if at all, featured in academic discussion of ideas for and about education. This is a shame, for as Michael Foot, the leftist radical-intellectual and former Leader of the British Labour Party, has admiringly remarked, 'a whole curriculum of schooling for reformers can be compiled from [his] writings' (1980, p. 94)[4]. Taking a lead from this assessment, and from my own appreciation of Hazlitt's educational development and career, during which he celebrated continuously the value of reading, curiosity and openness to experience and new ideas, my intention in this article is to indicate how some of the themes he pursued in his voluminous writings are not only of historical interest to students of education, but also highly relevant to present day reformers anxious to encourage radical change within its basic institutions.

Hazlitt's Contribution

For those students of education possessing little or no knowledge of Hazlitt, it is necessary to provide at the outset some brief details of his contribution [5]. Grayling (2000) celebrates Hazlitt as 'the greatest exponent of the familiar essay' (p. ix), a literary vehicle he unwaveringly used throughout his working years to disseminate original and sometimes highly vehement, hard-hitting assessments of contemporary literary and celebrated political, chiefly Tory, personalities, as well as critical reviews of painting, literature and the theatre. In addition, Hazlitt published, early on in his career, an extended philosophical treatise on the nature of mind and moral action, the analyses of which help to explain his subsequent approach to aesthetic criticism and writing generally.

What ultimately holds together this *bricolage* of writings, however, is Hazlitt's dramatic and passionate intelligence and his unswerving commitment to individual and political liberty, each of which he leavens with a courageous opposition to established political and cultural power. The inscription on Hazlitt's recently restored gravestone in St Anne's, Soho, sums him up with these words of testament and appreciation: 'A despiser of the merely Rich and Great. A lover of the People, Poor or Oppressed. A hater of the Pride and Power of the Few, as opposed to the happiness of the many. A man of true moral courage . . . He lived and died the unconquered Champion of Truth, Liberty and Humanity.' Sharing this high estimate of Hazlitt's greatness, Ronald Blythe, the literary critic, goes further, describing him as 'the spokesman for the inarticulate, the exploited, the self-deceived and less brave inhabitants of George IV's England—the conscience of an era' (1970, p. 35).

Blythe is guilty here of excess, however, for Hazlitt was rarely a literal champion of the poor and down-trodden, being more rather (in the words of the Marxist historian, E.P. Thompson) a 'middle-class radical' who 'aimed his polemic, not towards the popular, but towards the polite culture of his time' (1968, pp. 820f) [6]. But such targeting, it must be stressed, was never snobbishly driven. On the contrary, in his critical engagement with particular members of the intellectual, political and aesthetic elite of Nineteenth Century England, of which he was himself an active participant, his concern more often than not was to expose their egoism, while never ever seeking to exemplify and brag about his own

abilities. As such, Hazlitt's politics, as Bromwich insightfully observes, were essentially anti-exclusionist rather than explicitly egalitarian, which explains why he 'shared few words with [contemporary] working-class revolutionaries' (1983, pp. 8 & 19), and why he does not therefore feature strongly among the founding-writers of intellectual socialism.

The origins of Hazlitt's middle-class, inclusive political and cultural outlook and intellectual radicalism generally are not difficult to trace. As Martyn Butler explains in his exemplary study of the Romantic Period, Hazlitt 'came from the classic stock of the English Left—the Dissenters: his father was a Unitarian minister, and a vigorous defender of the Bible, the sects and individual conscience' (1981, p. 169). Hazlitt's upbringing, which included being educated at the celebrated Dissenting Academy at Hackney, was more than enough to socialize him successfully into a life of radicalism, even though, as I have remarked, this did not lead him to make any progressive reflections of substance *directly* about educational matters, despite holding very strong views about what it meant to be a 'learned' person.

The absence in Hazlitt's work of significant direct references to educational practice and institutions is paradoxical and strange, given that he took sufficient interest in school matters to publish in 1809 a pupils' 'grammar' text-book, and that he was 'first celebrated not only as a critic, but as a lecturer' (Bromwich, 1983, p. 6). At the Surrey Institution in London, where most of his public lectures were given (during the period 1817 to 1819), he attracted large audiences, chiefly made up of self-taught Dissenters and Quakers, whom newspaper reports of the time tell us found his contributions challenging [7]. Moreover, Hazlitt had himself benefited from a quite remarkable Dissenters education which, surprisingly, he did not express a wish to see extended, in some form or other, to the rest of the population. The Dissenters Academies were, as Grayling (2000) says, 'at the cutting edge of education in their day' (p. 5), offering teaching and an academic curriculum 'scarcely bettered by any other institution in the country' (p. 31). True, the New College at Hackney provided an elite education—'fitting youth for civil and commercial life as well as the learned professions' (op. cit., p. 32)—but its overarching aim to produce 'fair enquirers' is hardly particular to or relevant for just the relatively privileged middle-class intellectual community from which Hazlitt sprung, and of which he became such a leading member in his adult years.

Hazlitt's failure to write anything of direct consequence about the better practice of education and its institutional expression is all the more striking when one reflects on the fervent debate underway in England during his adult years about the need for and content of educational provision for the largely illiterate working classes of the time. Indeed, during the half century beginning in the 1780s, education was one of the main areas of conflict in a profoundly changing English society that had discovered the educational problems consequent upon major population growth, particularly in its new towns and cities which spread without planning, local government and schools. Although this period witnessed a growing confidence in the power of education—William Godwin, the radical social philosopher, at the time famously remarking that 'if [it] cannot do everything, it can do much' (quoted in Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 229)—ideas to educate the masses met with vigorous resistance, based on fear of what an informed and literate populace might do and a related suspicion of the motives of educators who were suspected of fermenting revolution. Even Sunday Schools, which spread rapidly throughout England in the 1780s, were considered by many of that society's more conservative commentators to be nurseries of fanaticism (op. cit., p. 235f).

It seems very odd that Hazlitt should have avoided written engagement with the arguments raging all around him about the need to educate the children of the poor, given that in many other major areas of public dispute he was rarely slow in coming forward. The

only *direct* mentions I can find about the practice of education in his collected writings are about the workings of the 'old' universities (Oxford and Cambridge), for which clearly he had little time, condemning them as 'cisterns to hold, not conduits to disperse knowledge' (Howe, 8, p. 268). Apart from brief observations on the character of a scholar ('he has an air of books about him'; 'he has a certain independence of opinion'; 'he is busy and self-involved'; 'he follows learning as its shadow' [Howe, 12, pp. 42f]), and more extended advice he offered to his son, William, on how best to live his life (Howe, 17, pp. 86–100), elements of which by implication are about 'being educated', Hazlitt is otherwise silent on the topic of education in terms of how it should be better provided via schools and other centres of public learning.

Despite Hazlitt's almost complete silence about education in these terms, aspects of his philosophical outlook, notably his metaphysics of mind and action, and the conception he had of himself as a writer about art in society and of what counts as being genuinely educated, remain capable of informing for the better our present-day appreciation of educational issues. To illustrate this claim I outline first Hazlitt's principles of thought and action, including his theory about the nature of the creative, sympathetic imagination, which I will use to reflect negatively on contemporary conceptions of teaching and learning in schools, including currently influential ideas about the sort of curriculum they should offer.

Thought, Action and the Creative Imagination

Hazlitt was intellectually and emotionally opposed to the abstract application of closed systems of thought, whether empirical or metaphysical, to those aspects of human experience where he believed they did not belong, which for him were the majority. Indeed, for Hazlitt, abstraction of almost any kind constituted the gravest threat to the quality of people's response to life, and to the quality of civilised living generally, which (he argued) can only be engaged with meaningfully via feeling, passion and sensibility. Feeling, and only feeling, in his view, is capable of capturing the evanescent complexity of nature, living and art: 'In art, in taste, in life . . . (he asserted) you decide from feeling, and not from reason' (Howe, 8, p. 31). Feelings thus always direct thought: 'I say what I think: I think what I feel' (Howe, 5, p. 175). As a result, Hazlitt was utterly opposed to the application of scientific and mechanistic attitudes and techniques (what we would label today as 'technicist' ones) to particular areas of public life—the arts and politics, especially—where he considered them irrelevant at best and, at worst, major threats to the country's imaginative and aesthetic culture. If he had been alive at the time, he would especially have bemoaned, for the very same reason, the introduction of forms of philosophical discussion that centre on conceptual analysis and the 'meanings' of words.

Hazlitt's assessment of the primacy of feeling and his attack on such abstractionism were first developed in the days when he was a young student at the Dissenting Academy in Hackney, at which time he first encountered and began to critique the so-called 'modern philosophers' of his time—in particular, John Locke and his theory of mind. The philosophical detail of Hazlitt's critique, which is set down formally in his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (published much later on in 1805 when he was 27 years old [see Howe, 1, pp.1–94]) is impressive by any of today's academic standards. It is also, as Grayling remarks (2000, p. 92), a hard and complex read, entirely devoid of the sort of literary flourishes and forms of plain speaking that became Hazlitt's trademark and eventual legacy.

In attempting to summarise his *Essay*, which is all I can do here, I am conscious therefore of simplifying and possibly even trivialising what Hazlitt considered to be his major contribution to thought—indeed one that interpenetrated and motivated all his subsequent

writings and by which he wished them therefore to be judged [8]. The central thesis of the *Essay* is that the human mind is simultaneously 'sympathetically disinterested' and 'autonomously creative'. It is 'sympathetically disinterested' in the controversial sense that people, according to Hazlitt, are not inherently selfishly motivated, but rather are as sympathetically interested in the welfare of others as in their own happiness; it is 'autonomously creative' in the sense that it is the imaginative master and not—as Locke would have us believe—the mechanistic slave of sense impressions. The first part of this couplet is the more difficult one to appreciate, for it flies in the face of those elements of common sense that suggest the fundamental motivation for people's actions is nearly always self-interest, and only very rarely the interests of others. Hazlitt's detailed defence of his contrary position is grounded in the idea that we can only rationally pursue and seek to construct the form and content of *future* states of affairs—the past and actually occurring present each being out of our influence and control. And because the future does not exist, there is in strict truth nothing to pursue selfishly in it. Indeed, for Hazlitt, even our own identities do not strictly exist at any one moment in time inasmuch as they have to be continuously recreated from almost literal scratch, despite impressions and habits of thought which suggest the opposite. As Bromwich (1983) says on Hazlitt's behalf: 'We cannot be affected by something we have never felt; we have never felt the effect of a future event; we cannot therefore act mechanically with respect to the future: we must [rather] act imaginatively [in the present]' (p. 52).

In acting in the present to reconstruct ourselves, we are, says Hazlitt, compelled anew to imagine disinterestedly what our prospective self and corporate identities might be. This reproductive process, Hazlitt insists, logically requires us to think about and take into account not just our self but other selves in general as well—to possess a form of *sympathy* that allows one to project, to enter into another reality, and to share its being, and thus to create the future freed significantly from the limitations of past and present feelings and practice—a mode of sensibility which may compel pedagogues, I am thinking, to underplay the background of pupils in judging their capacity to learn. It could also, as I will indicate later, provide an optimistic foundation for the very practise of teaching. As Hazlitt says: 'The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, 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 interest in it. I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others. Self-love, used in this sense, is in its fundamental principle the same as disinterested benevolence' (Howe, 1, pp.1–2).

The practical implications of this transcendental position are far-reaching, suggesting not only that we are all perfectly capable of living fully moral lives, but that, to do so, we must act creatively—imaginatively and immediately—on ourselves, other people and the world in order to fashion disinterestedly a credible future at both the individual and social level. On this understanding, to borrow Tom Paulin's words, the imagination, in Hazlitt's scheme, is always 'essentially and benignly social' (1998, p. 35). It is also dynamically formative to the extent that it allows us to articulate impressions, ideas or trains of association vastly different from one another. Moreover, because the individual and context are never, according to Hazlitt, the same for two moments together, this unifying capacity of the imagination acts as the primary means whereby we make sense of who we are in the world at any one moment, and of our actions within it.

The moral philosopher, Mary Warnock, concurs, concluding in her own (1976) study of the imagination that 'there would be no world to be understood without a prior imaginative construction [of it]' (p. 71). Although she does not once refer to Hazlitt in her analysis, Warnock's is similar to his in one other significant way—namely in the manner in which,

like him, she describes the imagination as a *power* in the human mind, impelled by *passionate fervour*, that (to use her words) 'enables us to see the world, whether present or absent as significant, and also to present this vision to others, for them to share and reject. And *this power . . . is not only intellectual. Its impetus comes from the emotions as much as from the reason, from the heart as much as from the head*' (Warnock, 1976, p. 196, my emphasis). Hazlitt could have easily himself have written these words for they convey completely his own view that the full and proper exercise of our rational capacities cannot ever be just a cold, dry, matter-of-fact process, but rather must be an equally imaginative one as well, kindled, crucially, by the warmth of passion.

Hazlitt makes this last point in a brilliantly telling way in his critique of weak orators: 'Modesty, impartiality and candour (he writes) are not the virtues of a public speaker. He must be confident, inflexible, uncontrollable, overcoming all oppositions by his ardour and impetuosity . . . Calm inquiry, sober truth, and speculative indifference, will never carry any point' (Howe, 7, p. 300). Of course, Hazlitt here is typically over-stepping the mark. Indeed his account could easily be a description of a fascist orator! Even so, it is a reminder, if handled with care, of the importance of recognising a positive role for the emotions in rational deliberation, which arguably is sometimes understood too passively and exercised too undemonstratively. There is also a reminder here about the nature of the creative impulse and of its psychological consequences, which Mahoney (1981) describes dramatically in these terms: 'Strong passion triggers the imagination to seek and struggle for a mode of embodying the sometimes wild and indistinct cravings of the mind and will. The basic concern of the imagination is not with things as they are, but rather with things as they are touched by the *peculiar electricity of our psychic lives*. At times, only the imagination, with its wondrous powers, can begin to match the infinitely varied responses evoked by the power of human passion; only the imagination can reveal a thing as it is felt to exist and as a human is compelled to think of it' (p. 106, my emphasis).

Pedagogy, Butterflies and Bullets

Hazlitt unhesitatingly and unequivocally pins his life's work and his vision for humankind on the power of the creative imagination, which he sees as the means through which people can forge meaningful and credible personal identities and by which they can translate thought, feeling and sensation into laudable moral actions. Indeed, in tracing the structure of social consciousness, his moral psychology fuses idealism (about the workings of the human mind) and empiricism (about human emotionality) to create the sympathetic object of voluntary action.

Hazlitt also believed that the people's will should be directed toward the public interest by wise and virtuous leadership, which explains why he was so critical of the public image of certain prominent politicians and members of the literary establishment of his day (Bentham, Walter Scott, Wilberforce, Byron, Cobbett, Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Fox [9]) In writing his critical pen-portraits of these personalities, Hazlitt's primary concern was to establish precisely the manner in which they had utilised and, in most cases, abused their original mental endowment. How, he wants to know, has such and such a person exploited the talents that were obviously latent in their youth? Why, on the other hand, did this or that man (and they were all *men*) choose to dissipate his nervous energies in unworthy causes? In every case, Hazlitt subjects the person about whom he is writing to severe scrutiny, examining the integrity and consistency of their reasoning powers. Above all, he is particularly impatient of those persons whose actions would inhibit the creative imagination, and therefore lead to abstractionism rather than sympathetic completeness.

Thus, while one could imagine Hazlitt welcoming education's current preoccupation with finding new ways to promote 'creativity' in school classrooms, he would, I am sure, have found horrifying the context in which this is expected to be achieved—a context in which teaching is increasingly subjected to performance forms of management, and learning to the achievement of cut and dried attainment targets. Such abstractionism would be regarded by Hazlitt, if he were alive today to comment on it, as the antithesis of being educated and learned. Genuine learning, Hazlitt tells us, comes instead from a *lively combination of reading and observation of life*, neither being complete without the other, and both being the responsibility of each of us, life-long. It certainly does not derive from a school curriculum grounded in the learning of certain pre-defined and de-contextualised 'basic skills', least of all in teaching centrally prescribed subject matters that are not comprehensively linked with the life-worlds of the students who are expected to be initiated into them. Such forms of disassociated book learning, according to Hazlitt, always lead to ignorant and never educated states of mind. He cynically makes this point in a series of ironic observations about an individual who clearly reads a lot, but whose judgement has been hardly tutored for the better as a result: 'Such a one may be said to carry his understanding about with him in his pocket, or to leave it at home on his library shelves. He is afraid of venturing on any train of reasoning, or of striking out any observation that is not mechanically suggested to him by passing his eyes over certain legible characters . . . He has no ideas of his own, and must live off other people . . . He knows as much of what he talks about as a blind man does of colours . . . He is expert in all the dead and in most of the living languages; but he can neither speak his own fluently, nor write it correctly' (Howe, 8, p. 70) [10].

Indeed, Hazlitt is persuaded that such 'expertise' (what today we might define as abstract intellectualism) is better replaced by a form of 'common sense' that is uninfluenced by 'schooling', or any kind of formal education for that matter; an attitude that may provide the reason for his apparent lack of interest directly in educational issues to do with provision and access, suggesting also that he was a 'de-schooler' long before this movement came into being. 'Uneducated people (he writes) have most exuberance of invention and the greatest freedom from prejudice . . . They argue from what they see and know, instead of spinning cobweb distinctions of what things ought to be . . . You will hear more good things on the outside of a stage-coach from London to Oxford than if you were to pass a twelvemonth with the undergraduates, or heads of colleges, of that famous university; and more *home* truths are to be learnt from listening to a noisy debate in an alehouse than from attending to a formal one in the House of Commons' (Howe, 8, p. 75). As in his remarks about good oratory, to which I referred earlier, Hazlitt overreaches himself on this related topic. Even so, his vivid sending-up of the educated classes in *Table Talk* and elsewhere has a strong ring of truth to it, which sometimes it is helpful to be reminded of as we busily go about creating imaginative design solutions to the problem of how best to inject creativity and feeling into a pre-determined curriculum that frustrates their achievement. Not surprisingly, for Hazlitt, the seat of knowledge and understanding is found neither in book-learning as an end in-itself nor in prescribed curricula, but instead 'in the head', by which he means 'the imagination'. Wisdom, similarly, is located 'in the heart. We are sure to judge wrong, if we do not feel right', he concludes (Howe, 9, p. 222).

The idea that effective teaching can be reduced to, and measured by, competence and outcome-based strategies is, then, totally at odds with Hazlitt's conception of the educated person and of the nature of thought and action generally. Such a person, in his scheme, is someone who is true to his/her convictions; someone who does not hark continuously back to the past and follow convention for the sake of it; and someone who consequently is never dogmatic—someone (to refer to the words of Hazlitt that open this paper) 'who lives in the

dream of their own experience and who sees all things in the light of their own minds'. His attack on Coleridge, in particular, resonates here. Coleridge, Hazlitt says, while possessing great 'intellectual wealth', has 'a mind [simply] reflecting ages past: his voice is like the echo of the congregated roar of the dark rearward and abyss of thought' (Howe, 11, p. 29). Poor Mr Gifford's mind, meanwhile, 'is an utter want of independence and magnanimity in all that he attempts. He cannot go alone; he must have crutches, a go-cart and trammels . . . He cannot conceive of anything different from how he finds it, and hates those who pretend to a greater reach of intellect or boldness of spirit than himself. He inclines . . . to the traditional in laws and government, to the orthodox in religion, to the safe in opinion, to the trite in imagination, to the technical in style, to whatever implies a surrender of individual judgement into the hands of authority, and a subjection of individual freedom to mechanistic rules' (Howe, 11, p. 117).

Effective teaching, one could imagine Hazlitt writing, is centrally about the disinterested pursuit of opportunities that enable learners to construct for themselves meaningful personal identities, including responses to, and reinterpretations of, their experience—of other people, of events, and of circumstance generally. For sure, Hazlitt's insistence that this takes place anew during each waking moment through the exercise of the creative imagination is an idealisation of what empirically is a more constrained process. For Hazlitt's theory of action must be wrong at this point, to the degree that none of us, not just teachers, are ever able entirely to escape the influence of past events and experience, or the limiting aspects of the present context. On the other hand, teachers can work hard to seek ways to avoid their compromising effects, rather than assume their negative self-fulfilling impacts. They can also embrace the idea that teaching—lesson by lesson—offers them a series of quasi-unique opportunities, experiments almost, to 'start all over again', as if each time from scratch, thus fostering a form of optimism about their ability to teach, despite the shockingly bad circumstances in which they are sometimes compelled to work.

It is fair to say also that Hazlitt would have hated the abstractionism, or 'second-orderliness', of those philosophers of education which have sought in times past to 'define' teaching analytically. I suspect he would have shuddered, as I do now, for example, at reading this sort of thing: 'Teaching is the label for those activities of a person A, the intention of which is to bring about in another person, B, the intentional learning of X'. These are the words of the eminent educational philosopher, Paul Hirst (1973, p. 172), published at the peak of influence of the so-called 'Bedford Way School of Philosophy of Education', of which he was such a prominent member in the 1970s. While these words offer a logically coherent definition of teaching, what they say about its actual nature is unrecognisable to this former classroom teacher. To suggest, as one of my critics has, that Hirst is here 'bringing language back to its ordinary, everyday use' and thus 'exposing the emptiness of what is said by [some] ideologues and theoreticians' [11], is to ignore how prescriptively charged this form of conceptual analysis of teaching can become if it is not grounded in a sensitive appreciation of the realities of classroom life. Indeed it represents the form of 'spinning cobweb distinctions of what things ought to be' (Howe, 8, p. 75) that Hazlitt fought against for much of his adult life: a manner of writing and speaking that appears to define something, but which in fact says hardly anything about it. What such spinning illustrates rather are the preferences of the writer—that is, it tells us what Hirst would like teaching to be like, rather than what it involves in practice lesson by lesson. Like this teacher, Hazlitt, I guess, would prefer, and find far more illuminating, sociological, ethnographic, *descriptions* of what goes in school classrooms, such as the ones expressed in the following three, empirically-derived extracts:

> Teachers practise an art. Moments of choice of what to do, how to do it, with whom and at what pace, arise hundreds of time a school day, and arise differently every day and with every group of students. No command or instruction can be so formulated as to control that kind of artistic judgement and behaviour. (Schwab, 1983, p. 245)

> Teaching is an opportunistic process. That is to say, neither the teachers nor his students can predict with any certainty exactly what will happen next. Plans are forever going awry and unexpected opportunities for the attainment of educational goals are constantly emerging. The seasoned teacher seizes upon these opportunities and uses them to his and his students' advantage . . . Although most teachers make plans in advance, they are aware as they make them of the likelihood of change . . . They know, or come to know, that the path of educational progress more closely resembles the flight of a butterfly than the flight of a bullet (Jackson, 1968, pp.166–167).

> Teaching is an art in the sense that the teacher's activity is not dominated by prescriptions or routines, but is influenced by qualities and contingencies that are unpredicted . . . Teaching is an art in the sense that the ends it achieves are often created in the process. (Eisner, 1979, p. 154)

Unlike Hirst's prescriptive definition of teaching, these descriptions of teaching get to the heart of what teaching *as a form of life* is like. In particular, they draw attention to the way in which it involves the performance of complex, diverse skills in real time and in contexts that are unpredictable and constantly evolving. They implicitly draw attention also to what other students of teaching have stressed about its nature—the fact (despite what Hirst says about it, which is empirically wrong) that *teachers do not always know, when they are teaching, what they are doing precisely.* Rather, they often function intuitively, utilising in the process skills of imaginative foresight and improvisatory engagement (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000; Humphreys & Hyland, 2002), which makes the identification of their intentions often unclear, both to themselves and to others watching them, including their pupils. This does not render their activity as non-teaching, however, which is what Hirst seems to be suggesting. Rather, it indicates that such activity is always multifarious, inevitably occasionally extemporised, and frequently makeshift.

Knowing this to be the case, I want to argue, provides a firm basis for developing ways and means of enabling pre- and post-experience teachers to improve their classroom practice, chiefly though bringing into critical consciousness the ideas they think and act with implicitly in the course of their work—a basis far more reliable and consequential than that provided by the 'cobweb distinctions' spun by some analytic philosophers of education. I'd go further and assert too that such a philosophical approach to understanding teaching makes a fundamental error—of assuming that, in getting the terms of the discussion seemingly in good logical order, one is helping to move things in the right direction. Hazlitt, of course, didn't ever say anything like this. But I can imagine that he would easily be provoked to do so if he was a member of today's education academy witnessing the work of some of its philosophers, as was Fred Inglis, one of its more forthright former participants, in his (1975) fulmination in which he accuses Hirst, and others like him, of 'leaving out of account questions as to whether things should be as they are, and further questions about how things came to be that way' (p. 56). True, Hirst's definition of teaching embodies a prescription of what teaching ought to be like; but this is cloaked by and concealed within a form of conceptual analysis, the surface neutrality of which is not what

it seems. On the contrary, analysis of this sort may constitute a form of 'unpolitics'—a politics that squeezes out of consideration alternatives because it appears to be without ideology, when clearly it possesses a great deal of it.

One Essay Writer to Another: Mr Hazlitt meets Mr Said

Hazlitt's theory of thought and action has implications also for the conduct of criticism, including how the role of the intellectual in society should be conceived. By implication, it has consequences too for the form and content of critical writing in and about education; and it is to these related topics, by way of conclusion, that I want briefly to direct attention.

Writing about the function of educational professionals today, Ron Barnett, states: [they] 'have not a right, but a duty to speak out. In speaking out, they will exhibit critical thought, in the sense of critical thinking, of analysing and commenting on public controversies [in their field]' (1997, p. 136). While these remarks say nothing about how this commenting might find public expression, they mirror Hazlitt's conception of his public and political role as social and cultural critic. They also connect well with the representations of the intellectual developed by one of today's major social and cultural critics, Edward Said, who, before his untimely death last year, was Hazlitt's equal in being a master of the essay form; and who, like Hazlitt again, regarded it as an effective, crucial even, means of delivering criticism to a wide public. Strange then to report that, in writing about the importance of essay-writing, Said never once referred to Hazlitt's literary efforts using the same genre, an absence I will seek to correct in the next few paragraphs, chiefly by making links between their respective personalities, with the aim of making better sense of the latter's and, by inference, the education critic's also.

While Hazlitt did not ever self-consciously state how he thought of himself as a critic and intellectual, Said has written extensively about this aspect of his political and academic profile. His conception of the public intellectual is well known, its chief expression being found in the published version of his 1993 BBC Reith Lectures (Said, 1994). There Said writes of the intellectual as being a person who is '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' (p. 7) [12]. This could equally be Hazlitt writing about himself. Indeed, for both Hazlitt and Said, the result of this attitude was the same: a reluctance to be categorized, and an associated determination not to be captured by any particular factional interest or political grouping. The intellectual, thus defined, is always—like Hazlitt was once, and Said was until recently—an outsider, standing 'between loneliness and alignment' (Said, 1994, p. 17). Hazlitt knew this very well at a personal level, for his fearlessly expressed literary insights often made him more enemies than friends. While I am not suggesting for a moment in writing in this approving way that education academics should be similarly pugnacious in the way they conduct themselves in education policy-making arenas, there remains still a case for them to review periodically the degree to which they are able to retain an appropriate intellectual, and thus critical, distance, notably from governments, rather than be totally or largely incorporated into their political and social agendas. Education academics, on this understanding, might choose to be a 'critical friend' of government, but never at the expense of independent judgement, which at times might position them in a state of opposition to the priorities of particular Education Secretaries, and thus unpopular with them. That is the risk and the responsibility of criticism.

Such opposition ought, moreover, to find ways of expressing itself more through the medium of the *essay*—a highly accessible and personal way of writing that has the effect of

liberating the worldliness of the people who make use of it and of encouraging big and positive impacts on their readers as a result [13]. Education academics do not much use this literary form to communicate their ideas, short newspaper articles excepted. Only rarely, for example, do they utilise significant outlets for the publication of extended essays—*London Review of Books* and *Prospect* being notable British examples—to disseminate their critical analyses. Typically, like this education academic, on this occasion, they make use rather of journals for this purpose. This is sad, chiefly because the measured and specialised prose of academic journal writing makes much of what they choose to say via that channel inaccessible to other, non-education, members of the intellectual community with and from whom, presumably, they want to make contact and gain sympathy.

The essay circumvents this limitation, chiefly through its more immediate literary register, which encourages it users, in Said's words, 'to become thoroughly implicated in their revulsions' (2001c, p. 30). Elsewhere, he compares essay-writing with piano-playing: 'The essay, like the recital, is occasional, re-creative, and personal' (2001b, p. 229). In similar vein, Paulin (1998) conceives of the essay as one means 'to combine the advantages of the literary and the conversational styles'; as something that is 'random, chancy, sparky'; a printed text 'that aspires to the condition of rapid, direct, inspired speech'; a kind of 'improvised one-act play taking place in a writer's studio' (pp. 271ff). To that extent, after William Burroughs (1985), it is a form of writing that aspires 'to make things happen' (p. 61)—action in prose form, in other words.

Hazlitt's liking of essay-writing, it should be stressed quickly, inter-locks completely with his general attitude about the nature of thought and action, which is why my discussion of it here should not be considered as an interesting afterthought or appealing addendum. Making this point, Paulin observes that the critical act for Hazlitt, 'expressed in a vigorous, flexible, fast-moving prose style' is, in the final analysis, 'analogous to the creative process by which [he and] every mind knows and understands' (1998, pp. 24–25). And what of Hazlitt's 'style'? Paulin, arguably, has done more than anyone in recent times to commend it to a twenty-first century readership. His own masterpiece in this connection is his 1998 book *The Day-Star of Liberty*. A work of art in its own right, it is interspersed throughout with illustrated commentary on Hazlitt's inspirational rhetoric that, for Paulin, constitutes a form of prose akin to kinetic performance. Hazlitt's is a muscular, sinewy, active, gymnastic, declamatory writing style—a confident, heroic and direct way of communicating that (in Paulin's words) 'sings in its reach and stretch' (1998, p. 22). Quickfire, intense, often pictorial, Hazlitt's writings embody (Paulin further tells us) 'buzz, activity, gusto, as against fixed concepts' (p. 33). Relatedly, in his final collection of essays, *The Plain Speaker*, Hazlitt likens his preferred writing style to extempore speaking and the painting of frescos, 'which (he says) imply a life of study and great previous preparation, but of which the execution is momentary and irrevocable' (Howe, 12, p. 62).

The Plain Speaker, in fact, signals directly the presence of the spoken word in Hazlitt's writing. As Paulin (1998) remarks, his intention in this volume 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' (p. 284). Bold honesty, boisterous, unbuttoned plain speaking, turbulent risk-taking, free rational enquiry, communication, liberty, democracy—these themes reverberate through Hazlitt's discourse in *The Plain Speaker*, in which he realises a prose that (in Paulin's words) 'positions itself confidently, glowing with chipper good health' (p. 292). Here is an example of it, taken from one of the most well known of the essays in *The Plain Speaker*—'On the Prose-Style of Poets'—in which Hazlitt comments admiringly on the writing style of one of his heroes, the Parliamentarian, Edmund Burke:

> 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. (Howe, 12, p. 10)

I don't want to be misunderstood at this point, for it is not my intention to commend directly to education academics and critics the form of prose writing developed and advocated by Hazlitt, least of all the kind I have just illustrated [14]. On the other hand, I am suggesting that the boisterous, risk-taking qualities of written prose that he sought to exemplify in his published output might be ones that they sometimes should consider drawing upon in developing their visions for the future of school education. And why? Because such qualities are more likely than the dry-as-dust stuff they too often write and publish to encourage, even to incite, readers and fellow professionals to think differently and imaginatively about the possibility of school reform and of the role they might play in bringing it about, which may explain why I was pleased recently to learn that the University of London's Imperial College is to develop a new brand identity that will encourage its academic staff to become 'plain speakers, not mystifyers'. Maybe more of us should think of doing the same, drawing on Hazlitt for inspiration.

Conclusion

I started this article stating a wish to commend Hazlitt and his works and ideas to increased attention among students of education. Only those who have reached this point in my analysis of his contribution and achievement, and who have taken the trouble to read what has gone before, can judge if I have been successful in this objective. What I have tried to convey through my appreciative reading of Hazlitt are three things in particular: that his transcendental rendering of the creative imagination entails an important critique of views of learning and teaching, including curriculum formation, that overly stress content to be learnt and performance targets to be achieved at the expense of students' creative engagement with ideas and life itself; that, while arguing with ardour, eloquence and personal conviction is never either a sufficient or necessary condition for establishing the truth of something, being passionate about pursuing the truth and urgent and uncompromising about its dissemination are important aspects of the intellectual life; and that in making oneself heard and understood as an intellectual it may be necessary from time to time to use forms of prose writing that eschew academic abstractionism in favour of a more declamatory style of communication.

Ultimately, of course, there is no substitute for reading Hazlitt rather than my or anybody else's commentary on him. And that is quite an experience, whatever one thinks of what he is writing about. Indeed, as one of his admirers remarks, 'no one can read him without responding to the vigour of his thought and style, for he wrote with a steady, throbbing power that seems to generate a torrent of ideas' (Baker, 1962, pp. 469–470). This is true, and the reason for this is provided by Hazlitt himself via his description of the art of an

anonymous critic, in that most famous of his essays, from which I also quoted a moment ago, 'On the Prose-Style of Poets':

> The principle which guides his pen is truth, not beauty—not pleasure, but power. He has no choice, no selection of subject to flatter the reader's idle taste, or assist his own fancy: he must take what comes, and make the most of it. He works the most striking effects out of the most uncompromising materials, by the mere activity of his mind . . . In prose, the professed object is to impart conviction, and nothing can be admitted by way of ornament or relief, that does not add new force to clearness to the original conception . . . There must be a weight, a precision, a conformity from association in the tropes and figures of animated prose to fit them to their place in the argument, and make them tell. (Howe, 12, p. 10)

Hazlitt's conception here of criticism as an act of persuasive eloquence maybe one that is difficult to emulate fully in today's education academy, constrained as it is by performance targets and a desire to 'make up' to authority. On the other hand, it may act to remind many of those who work in it of their vocation as public intellectuals, and all that that entails.

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Notes

[1] Hazlitt's writings are collected together in two editions—P.P. Howe's (1928–32) *Complete Works* (21 volumes) and D. Wu's (1998) *Selected Writings* (9 volumes). Whenever I quote from Hazlitt in this paper I use Howe's edition, referencing its editor's name and the relevant volume and page number (e.g., Howe, 8, p. 63). Less library-based editions of some of Hazlitt's writings are available in Hazlitt (1944, 1969, 1970, 1991, 1998 & 2000).

[2] Advanced Levels are academic examinations taken by 16+ year-olds in English secondary schools.

[3] In one of his *Round Table* essays ('On Common-Place Critics', in Howe, 5, pp. 136–139), Hazlitt writes disparagingly about people who uncritically follow fashions for the sake of it. Among the fads he cites on this occasion is 'the new Schools for All' movement.

[4] Mervyn Jones states that Foot was converted to socialism after reading Hazlitt (1994, p. 38). He also tells us (p. 529) that Foot planned to write a book-length study of Hazlitt. This project however was never realised, Foot preferring to write a series of essays about Hazlitt's contribution, the chief of which is included in his book *Debts of Honour* (1980).

[5] See Baker (1962), Jones (1989) and Maclean (1943) for other significant accounts of Hazlitt's life and times.

[6] Probably the best exception to this judgement is Hazlitt's vigorous rebuttal of Thomas Malthus's views on population growth and control, the latter of which embody a very unsympathetic assessment of the behaviour, sexual in particular, of the English working classes. See Hazlitt's 'A Reply to Malthus' in Howe, 1, pp. 177–366.

[7] 'His last Surrey Institution lecture on the English poets was a success and ended with resounding applause . . . for his audience knew that a deep and original and a fearless thinker stood before them' (*Examiner*, 8 March, 1818, quoted in Houck, 1977, p.119).

[8] My understanding of Hazlitt's *Essay* is significantly influenced by discussions of it found in Park (1971), Albrecht (1965), Mahoney (1981), Bromwich (1983) and Grayling (2000).

[9] Initially published separately as a series of articles contributed to periodicals, these critical portraits were finally brought together in 1825 under the title *The Spirit of the Age* (see Hazlitt, 1969 and Howe, 11, pp. 1–184)

[10] Similar sentiments are expressed by Hazlitt in his advice to his young son, William, on the occasion of his first attending boarding school: 'You will bring with you from your books and solitary reveries a wrong measure of men and things, unless you correct it by careful experience and mixed observation' (Howe, 17, p. 94).

[11] Private correspondence.

[12] Elsewhere, Said regards the intellectual 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' (2001a, p. 502f).

[13] The essay differs from an academic article in its lack of pretension to be a systematic and complete exposition. In being addressed to a general intellectual audience, rather than a specialized one, it discusses its subject in non-technical ways and often with a liberal use of such devices as anecdote, striking illustration and humour to augment its appeal. See Appendix 2 of Grayling (2000) for further analysis of this literary genre.

[14] In any event, it is not easy to write like Hazlitt, as he himself once admitted: 'It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar style for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may say so, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of' (Howe, 8, p. 242).

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