

Talking with Texts: Hazlitt's Ephemeral Style

Since social life, like art, is a problem of appeal, the poetic metaphor would give us invaluable hints for describing modes of practical action which are too often measured by simple tests of utility and too seldom with reference to the communicative, sympathetic, propitiatory factors that are clearly present in the procedures of formal art and must be as truly present in those informal arts of living we do not happen to call arts. . . . Is not the relation between individual and group greatly illuminated by reference to the corresponding relation between writer and audience?

—Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*

Introduction: Mouthiness

WHEN HE WROTE THIS PASSAGE, in 1935, Kenneth Burke was—as ever—looking for ways to persuade readers not only to observe written texts themselves as forms of social action but also to observe social action through what he called “the poetic metaphor.” According to this view, social life is a kind of “composition”: it is guided by questions of address (the “*problem of appeal*”); its “assertions,” as he puts it, must be “socialized by revision.”¹ Though generally overlooked, the “communicative, sympathetic, *propitiatory* factors” foregrounded in art similarly bear the weight of social interaction (such “factors” belong, in the context of this special issue, to the indexical threadwork that allows “participation frameworks” to hang together). In the epigraph’s final line, Burke suggests that cultural-historical relations of a literary kind, as between “writer” and “audience,” reveal lines of separation imaginable between individual and group in a given social formation. Better remembered for arguing that literary forms bespeak and contest broader

ABSTRACT This article considers how the essayistic style of William Hazlitt’s printed texts produces, in its form, a critique of what it considers conservatism in speech and its uncritical reception. Situating Hazlitt in a longer history of thought that considers language a form of practical activity, I argue that the conversational character of Hazlitt’s writing is calculated not to *resemble* speech, but rather to take aim at speech’s false spontaneity. REPRESENTATIONS 137. Winter 2017 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 44–67. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.137.3.44>.

cultural convictions, here we are reminded that Burke also advocated thinking about social relations themselves through categories of verbal art.

In the work of British romantic essayist and political radical William Hazlitt (1778–1830), vivid accounts of the sociable worlds of everyday speech in early nineteenth-century London—in the tavern, parlor, pulpit, theater, or Parliament—are often likewise enmeshed in questions of literary form, in a comparable if unsystematic fusion of literary and social criticism. Burke’s comments (and the ethnopoetic and metapragmatic fields of research that Burke indirectly influenced) retrospectively help clarify that what enables Hazlitt so readily to assume continuities between literary writing and sociable ways of speaking is a version of the belief that language, whether literary or not, is active in and constitutive of the worlds around it. Moreover, the inseparability for Hazlitt of politics and style points to his intuitive grasp of the latter—in any of the discursive genres he analyzes, including his own writing—as practical activity.

In this he seems to have had an early sense of how, as V. N. Voloshinov emphatically put it, “*poetic work is a powerful condenser of unarticulated social evaluations,*” and reciprocally the way that “*these social evaluations . . . organize form.*”² If the Marxist-inflected idea of language as practical activity elaborated by the likes of Burke and the Bakhtin circle aided later influential theoreticians of sociolinguistic practice like Erving Goffman, Dell Hymes, and Michael Silverstein in bridging analytic domains by offering theories of social discourse imagined through categories borrowed from verbal art (for example, performance roles, genres, meter), the point of departure for this article is to open backward onto a longer history of thought that presumes the mutual involvement of linguistic styles and social fractions.³ For this account, the prehistory of a literary sociology like Burke’s materializes in an earlier view of language as constitutive social activity. Though their narratives conflict in some respects, critics seem to agree that, for various reasons, views of language as historical, “public,” and active take recognizable shape in the literary era we now call romantic; indeed, one head of the difficult hydra called “European romanticism” was a rapid shift in available theories of linguistic change and interaction.⁴ Under romanticism’s monstrous shadow, then, this article zeroes in on William Hazlitt as one idiosyncratic precursor for language-in-use.

There would be many ways of trying to illustrate this. I have chosen to approach Hazlitt through a closer look at his reputation for writing in a style that supposedly mimics conversation, focused on one particular essay (out of many others) that addresses the comparative effects of written and spoken language.⁵ In his essay “On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking,” Hazlitt tells us that in the House of Commons, another famous Burke—Edmund—was known as the “Dinner-Bell,” which is to say

that when he stood up and began to speak, his audience stood up and left for dinner:

He was emphatically called the Dinner-Bell. They went out by shoals when he began to speak. They coughed and shuffled him down. While he was uttering some of the finest observations (to speak in compass) that ever were delivered in that House, they walked out, not as the beasts came out of the ark, by twos and by threes, but in droves and companies of tens, of dozens, and scores! Oh! It is 'the heaviest stone which melancholy can throw at a man,' when you are in the middle of a delicate speculation to see 'a robusteous, periwig-pated fellow' deliberately take up his hat and walk out.⁶

As opposed as he was to Burke's conservative politics, the anecdote shows Hazlitt's distaste for a political habitat that he fills, like an idiot ark, with beasts whose "drowsy ears" are too stupid to understand or even hear Burke's style, for which he had a lifelong admiration.⁷ The reason he gives for their poor attention span is that Burke's style was too well *written*, as speech—hence too "fine" and "delicate" a dish—to be assimilated in a House full of listeners used to more easily digested fodder; as bestial collectives, in "shoals" and "droves," they leave in a body in search of the consumable. His talk and their ears were not attuned. These claims are in need of further explanation, but the first point is that for Hazlitt, a certain drowsiness of reception *and* delivery threatened the situation of the age's political speech, being perhaps even symptomatic of the culture's "speech situation" more broadly.⁸ The passage, like the essay from which it is taken, is in some ways simply a satire of the observed phenomenon that to *lock in* an audience, as it were, speech in demagogic political forms tolerates as few new ideas as possible. As Jon Cook puts it, Hazlitt's writing is engaged with the "question of how the English can or should write and talk to each other"; the basic position of this article is that Hazlitt conceived of the essayistic style he developed—his "familiar style"—as satirizing, resisting, or combatting bad habits of social interaction.⁹

Still, the shape this takes in "Writing and Speaking" is interesting, and the idea that Edmund Burke spoke as an author is, as we will see, just one of the ways Hazlitt's essay argues that speech can take on characteristics we more readily associate with writing. Coming from Hazlitt, this could seem at least a little surprising, given how persistently critics, casual readers, and Hazlitt himself have linked him with writing drawn toward speech, rather than speech drawn toward writing. In a consistently brilliant study of Hazlitt's style, poet and critic Tom Paulin has this to say of *The Plain Speaker* (1826), where "Writing and Speaking" was first collected: "What we're being offered is a printed text that aspires to the condition of rapid, direct, inspired speech," or to "the sociable condition of animated conversation."¹⁰

Hazlitt's contemporary reviewers expressed a similar opinion in less complimentary terms, routinely complaining of an inappropriate vehemence and abruptness in his writing or, more tellingly still, of his being "mouthy."¹¹ This gives the creeping sense that various other discursive personae were being adopted or recognized in his style's reputation for talkiness. Between Hazlitt and his readership, registers invoking (and breaching) lines of political affiliation and class were often the most evidently activated, which has sometimes obscured the philosophic bent of his form.

This is merely to indicate how for Hazlitt's critics, such a style was about more than talking: it was about talking too much, out of turn, and above one's station. Locating and analyzing the power differentials that literary artifacts help us contextualize historically and situate emergently in past and present speech communities is easiest, of course, when they cross stark lines. When eighteenth-century West African abolitionist Olaudah Equiano recounts the moment a merchant told him he "talked too much English," we understand immediately that this fabricated linguistic infraction is an imminent threat to Equiano's physical liberty, perhaps his life.¹² By contrast, when in the midst of a justification of his "familiar style" Hazlitt tells us he has been "loudly accused of revelling in vulgarisms and broken English," a transgression is clearly felt, but its social consequences are less direct and more difficult to describe adequately.¹³ Yet it is evident he is self-consciously preoccupied with inventing a style that could push back at existing rules of use. The self-styled "familiarity" of his style—and likewise, the "plain-spokenness" of *The Plain Speaker*—accommodates the semantic sense of being, as it were, *too free*, *taking* liberties, *making* "familiar" with one's range of address. The "familiar style" Hazlitt composed might be understood in part as a linguistic offense against propriety, against the injunction to keep decorum or keep quiet.

Though Hazlitt was hardly alone in practicing this kind of critical style, as recent studies have made ever clearer, he has emerged as something of a special case.¹⁴ If his status as innovator of the romantic essay form has been more or less constant, Hazlitt has also lately undergone a degree of hagiographic rehabilitation: he has been resurrected as a premier English prose stylist and cultural critic of the early nineteenth century, restored as one of the era's foremost vulgate metaphysicians, and reconfirmed as fascinatingly heterodox firebrand and gadfly in the radical wing of early nineteenth-century reformist politics. Mitigated versions, at least, of these retrieved identities are unlikely to surprise readers who have read deeply in his work, and in one sense, my own reading may merely seem to reiterate, now appreciatively, the old bias that Hazlitt had a "mouthy" streak. Nevertheless, I undertake this account on a hunch that there is more to be gained from Hazlitt's talkiness, with a slight shift of theoretical emphasis. This involves

a methodological detour toward viewing Hazlitt's work through the context provided by the perspective of language-in-use. The idiom, of course, is very different; but in interesting ways, Hazlitt appears to be committed to a version of the view that developed, according to Raymond Williams, over a long romantic era, in which it becomes possible to see language as "a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process."¹⁵

My aim, then, is to see whether Hazlitt might be viewed as exploring an idiosyncratic picture of language, whether written or spoken, as active ("in use"). In a sense, this is easiest to glean in his odd notion that wherever language appears inert—as he claims Burke's oratory did in the House of Commons—it is the result not of the object or medium itself, but rather of bad writing or bad reading. The idea suggests that, as architect of the early nineteenth-century "occasional essay" (with affectionate nods to Michel de Montaigne, Richard Steele, and David Hume), Hazlitt is not trying to *approximate* speech, but is more accurately preoccupied with dramatizing written text's *relation* to speech, and with qualifying it as a kind of activity.¹⁶ As I've indicated, his style has generally been read as tending toward a loosened-up *spokenness*; attached to this tendency is the little-remarked shadow claim that assigns to speech various forms of gradiently fixed *writtenness*. In what follows, I give particular attention to this second and largely implicit view.

Not seeing Hazlitt's recognition of the writtenness of speech has blunted the complexity of his style's conversational quality, cheating readers of its stranger undertones by thinning to a banal truism the "familiar" essay's chatty voice, while leaving the categories of "speaking" and "writing" more or less distinct. As I mean to show, Hazlitt's supposed talkiness can also be understood as a way of combating the restrictions on the linguistic imagination implicit in the commonsense view that strictly associates (1) writing with permanence and (2) speaking with transience, rather than perceiving that such a distinction simply summarizes richly unspecifiable and overlapping practices of invoking existing scripts—whether by merely *realizing* previous texts, or by actively *reanalyzing* them. That Hazlitt's style appears to "defy fixity" presents an implicit argument that texts, like engaged conversations, are also active.¹⁷ In compressed form, this article argues that the restless activity of his style models a reformability contingent upon an intuition of linguistic form's constitutive ephemerality.

As a style, then, Hazlitt's writing indicates a view of language—by turns clear-eyed and muddled—as a medium for the improvisational performance and iterative transformation of culture, as a set of practices that both reenact and create social relationships. In itself, the fact that Hazlitt's titles consider writing in connection with speech—*The Round Table*, *Table-Talk*, *The Plain Speaker*, "The Conversation of Authors," and so on—may not tell us much. (The online publication that calls itself *Hazlitt* already said somewhat

more when it claimed him as “the original blogger.”¹⁸) Yet the convergence of a written and a spoken style in Hazlitt’s writing is meticulously authorized by a diffuse theory that redistributes qualities usually ascribed either to speaking (spontaneity) or writing (durability). Slanting “familiar” style as “ephemeral” style, what follows suggests that what his talkiness really does is to *push* language into use.

Between Writing and Speaking

Despite the ways we are used to distinguishing writing and speaking, Hazlitt shows how the two adopt each other’s traits, and how the apparent immediacy of speech disguises the mechanical or unreflective effects of oratory. Unofficially trained for language study by a conjunction of occupations and preoccupations (which included Dissenting radicalism; philosophical study, especially skeptical empiricism; work on the pedagogy of grammar; reviews and criticism on drama, visual art, literature, popular trends and ideas, and culture, high and low; and studies of political rhetoric), Hazlitt’s writing regularly describes verbal interactions while monitoring the attitudes these interactions take to the norms and scripts that govern them. His analyses of linguistic performance in the House of Commons might be read in the context (if not as the concentrated result) of two professional tasks early in his career: *The Eloquence of the British Senate* (1807), a critical anthology drawn from two hundred years of parliamentary speakers; and his first journalistic assignment, beginning in 1812, summarizing House proceedings for the liberal *Morning Chronicle*. The former evidently required him to spend time with speeches recorded as written text, while the latter forced him to take down speeches in real time himself. Small wonder then that Hazlitt tends to show how speech and writing swap qualities we are more likely to attribute to each: for a certain kind of attentive observer, the layering of utterance contexts in such assignments enforces the blurring of distinctions between spoken and written forms.

More than the *acts* of writing and speaking, “Writing and Speaking” differentiates between their *habits*. After a few general remarks, the essay outlines an array of examples of the latter, illustrating in various ways how the drama of declamation—whether face-to-face in the street, addressed to an assembly, or given from the stage—requires and enables spectacular immediacy of effect, which does not play in print. The central part of the essay is given over to an extended discussion of various speakers in the House of Commons, which asserts that their success or failure largely depends on their ability to save the audience from thought by making an immediate impression. Lord Chatham, for example, one of the House’s

consummate practitioners, performed “like a Voltaic battery,” touching off the popular “shock” that Hazlitt polemically also calls “sympathy” in the unthinking aggregate social body. Edmund Burke, as I have shown, has the opposite effect: even when he was a speaker, it seems he was too much the writer. The essay then offers accounts of a number of other public speakers, mostly members of Parliament: John Horne Tooke, Samuel Johnson, Charles James Fox, William Pitt, William Windham. The final pages are devoted, almost as an afterthought, to contrasting the habit of speaking with the habit of *writing*, which, when well done, is by contrast “fine” and “free.” Writing cultivates a reflective patience in its reading public by granting the author time; this emphasizes that free communication, like independent thought, *takes* time.

The essay begins by declaring the “difference” of its title to be temporal, contrasting the “quickness” of speech with the “patience” of writing: “The great leading distinction between writing and speaking” he writes, “is, that more time is allowed for the one than the other” (245). This superficial distinction is quickly complicated: “The difference of *quicker* and *slower* however, is not all: that is merely a difference of comparison in doing the same thing. But the writer and speaker have to do things essentially different” (246). The supposedly essential difference, however, thereafter also blurs, turning into a question of the “different objects” consolidated by each through specific demands of medium, sphere of usage, and audience expectation. In its probing of different kinds of discursive solidity or stability, the essay recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of “speech genres”: “Each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of . . . utterances.”¹⁹ Despite its apparent durability, in its composition and circulation, Hazlitt represents writing as acting out a specialized kind of verbal exchange or decelerated conversation, becoming less “stable” as we look at it alongside talk. Speech, meanwhile, despite its apparent immediacy, is to the contrary stabilized by a number of situating factors, first among which are (1) the audience’s social attention (since “men in society judge not by their own convictions, but by sympathy with others” [249]); and (2) a given speaker’s tendency to reliance on received ideas. The “relatively stable types” of discourse Hazlitt haphazardly examines reveal talk’s structuring forms: it can be well or poorly composed, but is necessarily scripted by situated interaction and habitual usage.

Hazlitt often fixates on the stylistic and social effects of this inkling of the conservative tendencies of speech. In essay after essay, he diagnoses commonplace, cant, and affectation as the formal modes of prejudice, organizing his comments around the premise that public speech’s success is dependent on social currency, because it is at the mercy of the constraints of audience attention.²⁰ At the same time, in this particular essay, the making of *a* speech

in Parliament sometimes seems to stand in for the production of *speech in general*. (This kind of synecdoche is a standard weapon in Hazlitt's rhetorical armory—as when he makes a willful, crying infant represent the egotism or self-love of all of humankind: “I saw in its frantic screams and gestures that great baby, the world.”²¹) This in turn implies the complicity of conservatism in politically effective discourse (compared with the appetite for vulgar, easily digested theater) with conservatism in the “style” of everyday discourse. Reiterating received wisdom, repeating words and phrases, using a “common-place”—though they may be effective as oratorical practice—these techniques produce a kind of bad writing in speech. This is proved, for Hazlitt, whenever transcripts of the most rousing speeches are published, since according to him, their revelations are revealed as utterly banal: the most commanding orator looks bad on paper, becoming literally thin and flat—“an image of lead, with a few labels, nicknames, and party watch-words stuck in his mouth” (247).

Some of what Hazlitt does himself is to redeploy commonsense ideas. The flatness of oratory when printed, for instance, is partly the result of the absence of oratorical theatrics, the loss when reading is robbed of the “vehemence of gesture, the loudness of the voice, the speaking eye, the conscious attitude, the inexplicable dumb shew and noise” (247). In the midst of a romantic culture in which orality had acquired special kinds of value—but especially the authority of original authenticity—Hazlitt developed, according to Lucy Newlyn, a studied “ambivalence” about the conventional eighteenth-century distinction between “living voice” and “dead letter.”²² In this sense, he represents a contrary “mistrust of voice as the signifier of thoughts and feelings” (362), partly because of his closeness to the creation of new publics in the expanding readership of periodicals (as well as literacy more generally) and his commitment to the “modernity and progress associated with print culture” (370). Newlyn's account of Hazlitt's ambivalence between writing and speech is entirely persuasive; the implication that he prefers print for its durability is less so, since durability for its own sake appears to be exactly what his style resists. A reversal of the value scheme of writing and speaking would simply maintain the distinction, now elevating *dead letter* in place of *living voice*.

This brings us back to Edmund Burke in the House of Commons. On the House floor, Hazlitt says, Burke's Dinner-Bell language does become a kind of “dead” letter in its deaf reception, because of the kind of ears he is forced to flatter: its approach to “appeal” is reduced to a peal. (Hazlitt repurposes a popular misquotation of Hume's rueful phrase on his *Treatise's* failure at publication, that it “fell still-born from the press,” to describe Burke in the House, delivering a beautifully chosen quotation: dead letters indeed.) Trained as a writer, he is indifferent to the immediacy of his audience's

desires. If Burke's Dinner-Bell reputation anachronistically calls Pavlov's dog to mind—the sound alone sends the audience out for refreshments—Hazlitt's satire of political discourse in Parliament, and of those whom he imagines rising noisily and departing while Burke is speaking, recalls how much critical energy he spent attacking *forerunners* of behaviorism, like individualizing utilitarian and mechanistic accounts of ethics, mind, and language, in thrall to what he called “the selfish theory” of society.²³ To hear nothing but noise in Burke's dazzling speeches is an apt parody of the kind of heedless appetite touched off by crowd mentality in public genres of discourse. In fact, that Burke's bell speech fails clarifies the criticism of speech that works with the efficacy of a battery: Hazlitt indicts habituated listeners as much as the speaker who “electrifies.” That Burke drives his listeners out “in droves” rather than jolting them to attention in a body simply demonstrates again how an audience's habits of attention, when keyed to mere impulse, work instinctively, triggering reflex rather than reflection.

In step with Newlyn, then, the episode should make us suspicious of the easy assumption that Hazlitt's stylistic ideal is the seeming spontaneity of speech, since it is precisely Burke's immersion in the “habit of writing” that (for Hazlitt) makes his speech valuable. And yet, this value in a kind of writtenness is not the result of a durable continuity, but rather an energetic elasticity in Burke's written style. For Hazlitt, stable or repeatable form is the vice of bad speech rather than the virtue of good writing: repeatability is the mark of sham durability in the “ready-made goods” (257) of common-places necessary for immediately effective social speech. Burke becomes the essay's hinge, precisely because of the particular paradox he enables by disobeying the rules of the “House-of-Commons jargon” (253): namely, he militates at the level of linguistic form against his own political conservatism. His demanding style requires and promotes reflection in the listener, even as he advocates, in his championing of the authority of “tradition” over individual liberty, the antireformist value of what he himself called prejudice's “latent wisdom.”

Reform by Misquotation

This paradox is pinpointed when Hazlitt cites Burke against himself (unattributed, but doubtless recognizable to many readers). Burke's reactionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had famously defended unthinking prejudice as a moral guide: “Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind . . . and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit.”²⁴ Treating this reactionary

position to a creative paraphrase, Hazlitt substitutes for Burke's word "prejudice" the pointedly capitalized "COMMON-PLACE": "A COMMON-PLACE does not leave the mind 'sceptical, puzzled, and undecided in the moment of action:'—'it gives a body to opinion, and a permanence to fugitive belief'" (248). With a casual blow, Hazlitt signals that prejudice and commonplace are alike in solidifying entrenched modes of thought. Hazlitt's swipe turns Burke's famous appeal to the necessity of continuity for the health of the state into an irony about the restless energy that makes Burke's own style sing—since Burke is temperamentally incapable of uttering a commonplace. The artful insertion of "COMMON-PLACE" both subjects his style icon to reform by misquotation and condemns "prejudice" more broadly by aligning it with the bad communicative habit of reliance on thoughtless iteration.

The value of unthinking communicative immediacy in Parliament is brought to the surface with related irony in another slight misquotation of Burke, this time the infamous phrase he used to refer to a revolutionary rabble, the "swinish multitude." Explicitly invoking Burke's usage, Hazlitt makes sure it will quietly circulate alongside the extensive pattern of figures throughout the essay with which, as we have seen already, he caustically assigns parliamentarians their own herd mentality by figuring them as bestial collectives (there is an added poetic justice in the context of parliamentary meetings, in that "shoals" and "droves" are also, of course, known as "nouns of *assembly*"). Referring to the "mob of lords and gentlemen," he erupts, "Talk of mobs! Is there any body of people that has this character in a more consummate degree than the House of Commons? . . . That is moved more en masse, in its aggregate capacity, as brute force and physical number?" (253). Thoughtlessness is obviously a problem for thought, but it is also a problem for its evaluation, for, as he writes elsewhere, "They alone understand the value of a thought who have gone through the trouble of thinking."²⁵

Pointedly foregrounding questions not of content but of habit, function, and style, Hazlitt makes the question of discourse's temporality into a question of its politics: for in political speech, what works instantaneously colludes with what is most resistant to change and most easily comprehensible. He distinguishes communicative habits not by reifying their media, but by measuring linguistic effects and operations: the writer by habit disregards what "produce[s] an effect" (260), while the habitual speaker's reliable common-place "operates mechanically, and opens an instantaneous and infallible communication between the hearer and speaker. . . . It is enshrined in its own unquestioned evidence, and constitutes its own immortal basis. Nature, it has been said, abhors a *vacuum*; and the House of Commons, it might be said, hates every thing but a common-place!" (248). Having undermined Burke's moral appeal to "prejudice" by nominating the fixed "common-place" as its linguistic form, Hazlitt's figures now suggest yet more ways

that the social functioning of address to a crowd operates most efficaciously through mindless influence: as an emblematic language-unit, the commonplace is first ritualized as religious idol (“enshrined” and “immortal”), then naturalized as a law of physics (in that, by analogy to nature, the House is as it were determined to hear nothing else). It demands to be easily understandable. The vacuity nature abhors, the House’s linguistic subculture *requires*, now as the emptiness of unassailable communicability. For Hazlitt, what in language “opens an instantaneous and infallible communication” is not to be trusted, for that very reason. To be “skeptical, puzzled, and undecided” is precisely the state of mind Hazlitt would advocate: like the essay form itself, the engaged citizen does not conclude unquestioningly, but inhabits the question. Theodor Adorno would write that the essay form stands “in opposition to the cliché of comprehensibility,” that “it serves as a corrective to the stubborn primitiveness that always accompanies the prevailing form of reason”; he might have been describing Hazlitt’s pointed resistance to the commonplace.²⁶

Celebrating Burke’s non-House, un-Commons style, Hazlitt tramples the stuff of its conservative message: it is never his matter, but only his manner that counts, whether for or against him, whether he understands it as speech elevated by its sinuous, energetic style, or (as Burke’s fellow MPs supposedly do) as the ringing of the bell of boredom. Burke’s style arouses Hazlitt’s admiration, because it refuses to rely on repetitious formulas or “calculable periods” for the sake of his audience, steering clear of “received doctrines and notions.” In isolating the components of speech that cater to an audience, Hazlitt suggests how dependent speaking is for its immediate effect on making an impact, which it can only do by repeating the familiar. It is the predictable structure of such discourse that is its most striking (and regrettable) feature. In Parliament, “you are . . . in a regularly constructed machine of pretexts and precedents” (253). When Hazlitt reports on this “set of cant-phrases, arranged in sounding sentences,” we glimpse the idea that most speech, on or off the House floor, is also writing—just *bad* writing, literal “pretexts” composed out of predigested parts, like set type. For Hazlitt, Burke was, by contrast, a *good* writer in speech who did not adhere to the rules of parliamentary sloganeering.

Organizing the essay, then, is the common-sense notion that the situating constraints of our company or audience *prescribe* what can be said, while composition in isolation from these constraints focuses our attention more exactly on the mere act of the (written) utterance:

The habit of speaking is the habit of being heard, and of wanting to be heard; the habit of writing is the habit of thinking aloud, but without the help of an echo. The orator sees his subject in the eager looks of his auditors; and feels doubly conscious, doubly impressed with it in the glow of their sympathy; the author can only look for encouragement in a blank piece of paper. (255)

Having been “an author before he was a Member of Parliament” (250), Burke is an accidental proponent of stylistic reform: as a writer by constitution, he resembles the communicant whose society consists partly of that “blank piece of paper.”

In true contrarian spirit, Hazlitt intimates here that writing has a strange, slow kind of spontaneity that habitual speech lacks thanks to its audience constraints; the project of each confronts different problems of appeal, different modes of “sympathy.” A speaker like Burke lives from the habit of writing, which prevents him from merely reiterating what people want to hear. The more spontaneity an effective speaker *appears* to give voice to, the more reliant that speaker will turn out to be on pat “periods,” rehearsed responses, clichéd catchphrases. Meanwhile, the paradoxical spontaneity or freedom of writing is the result of being liberated from the social necessity of tailoring opinion to the least common denominator, and this shows itself in the writer’s cultivated patience in waiting—and waiting—for the right expression (even in social discourse: “a person in habits of composition often hesitates in conversation for a particular word” [258]). The paradox of writing’s slowed spontaneity, as it were, or composition’s liberating deliberation, severs the notion of spontaneity from real-time exchange; it suggests that written text, like a slow conversation, occurs in a time as *real* as any talk. The relation of author and reader unfolds in time, even as the very idea of supposedly spontaneous or unscripted speech—what Erving Goffman memorably called “fresh talk”—is everywhere undermined, revealed as an illusory upper limit against which we mistakenly imagine we can measure every kind of discursive freedom.²⁷ Speech is only free, for Hazlitt, when we recognize the time it takes, secluded from “popular applause or social indulgence”; this truth emerges clearly in the laborious process of “literary exertion,” whose satisfactions lie not in “immediate *éclat*,” but in the “progressive nature” of composition (258–59).

In analyzing the “habits” of writing and speaking, Hazlitt is also analyzing how those habits structure the receptive attitudes we consolidate in the roles of listener, audience, and reader. It is not only that discursive habits shape an individual’s utterances across media—Burke, for example, is supposed to have “conversed as he spoke in public, and as he wrote” (256)—but that the seemingly separable acts of utterance and apprehension seem to merge as their interactive settings are dramatized. For instance, being itself the “echo of popular clamour,” the oratorical style that pounds its point home through common-place and repetition “finds, in the increased action of the minds of numbers, the weight and force of an instinct” (258). The commonplace is habituated into expectant modes of reception.

The perspective of such comments is sociological to the extent that it opposes the tendency of the era to understand discourse, rights, and morals

first in terms of contained individuality and “self-interest” (which Hazlitt calls “an idol of our own making”) and only secondarily in terms of sympathy or *social* interest. Maintaining that “social affections” are “regulated by the feelings of others,” Hazlitt believed that the ego’s formation is artificial (which is to say, learned culturally), and that a society governed by the principle of self-love might be untaught or even overturned through the elevation of social interest, through “diffus[ing] the soul of morality through all the relations and sentiments of our social being.”²⁸ This would be very different from allowing one’s speech to take shape in response to “social indulgence” (258); rather, it would mean allowing it to form in response to social aspiration, like the writer confronted with the blank page. That *blank* stands not for the absence of society (for writers are “never less alone than when alone” [259]), but for a language not yet in use, for the possibility of its reformed conditions, for social forms still to come.

As the pointed rewording of phrases from Burke’s *Reflections* indicates, Hazlitt’s citations are to a greater or lesser extent counterintuitively calculated to serve as an alternative to the thoughtless parroting of the commonplace. In that sense they are active interventions. To expand on the idea of reform by misquotation, look once again at the passage where Hazlitt paints the magnificent Burke abandoned by his peers, in “shoals” and “droves” like half-dumb creatures. One hears clearly in this passage Hazlitt’s celebrated critical voice: its movement is aggressive yet playful, quick yet roaming, passionate yet ironic in its intonations and its barrage of allusions and informal citations misquoted by memory. Two of these citations are explicit but unattributed, as usual, and thus “occasional” in the sense that they simply seem to have occurred to him as the occasion suited, borrowed serendipitously off a shelf from the library of his experience. They are “pre-texts,” yet their meaning is not prescribed. One is from Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* (or *Urne-Burial*), the other from *Hamlet*. There is a curiously deliberate contingency to their emergence at just the right moment, acting out a kind of staged free association, the “drama” of which is creative re-appropriation.

Consider first, briefly, Hazlitt’s line “Oh! It is ‘the heaviest stone which melancholy can throw at a man.’” In the course of his treatise on funereal rites, Browne devoted a chapter to expressions of belief in the afterlife; the chapter’s final paragraph begins, “It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature, or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seemes progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine.”²⁹ The reader cannot—and need not—know the relevance, for Hazlitt’s purposes, of all active threads leading off into the slight misquotation’s invocations of theology or materialist philosophy, which might prove telling on the topic of how the living state of the self (“his nature”) may or

may not go on (be “progressionall”) after death. Nevertheless, the reference to a morbid, poetically expressed disquisition on impermanent bodies, and whether and how immaterial ideas and identities survive, is pointed. The passage arrives, in Hazlitt’s essay, shortly after the “common-place” has given “a body to opinion, and a permanence to fugitive belief.” Under what circumstances do the receptive agencies of interaction permit “fugitive” ideas, opinions, or expressions to perdure in effective or quasi-material form? Or as Hazlitt writes, with something between humor and poignancy, “What effect could Burke’s finest observations be expected to have on the House of Commons in their corporate capacity?” (249). If they do not make contact with an embodied audience—if they are imperceptible or ignored—ideas don’t live on (even as survival is travestied by the common-place’s crude uptake through instinctive prejudice). There are equal parts pathos and bathos in Hazlitt’s cartoon of a rapidly emptying auditorium, as Burke launches into a beautifully crafted soliloquy; the melodramatic “Oh!” introducing Browne’s appearance at this moment is more than enough to clarify that, yes, this is theater.

Now consider the “robusteous, periwig-pated fellow” who walks out on Burke’s speech. This representative vulgarian is conjured from the scene in which Hamlet is directing the players on the subtlety of their performance, urging them to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action,” beginning with the instruction not to overdo it:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. . . . O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise.³⁰

This is one of the essay’s handful of allusions to the same scene in *Hamlet*: recall that “inexplicable dumb-shew and noise” has already been used to describe the orator’s bag of tricks. In fact, the precise fit of Hamlet’s speech to the essay, when it sinks in, makes the reader wonder whether Hazlitt’s dramatistic picture of language may not actually be adapted loosely but directly from this Shakespearean metadrama. Hazlitt’s adopted “robusteous, periwig-pated fellow” is of course not only a figure—a performer, a speaker—who shamelessly overplays his lines but also one whose delivery is dictated by pandering to the audience, in an exaggerated version of what sociolinguists have called “recipient design.”³¹ Hazlitt’s alignment of delivery and reception, of the habit-forming social tendency toward unreflecting comprehension, is already licensed by the alignment, in the scene in the House of Commons, of exaggerated players and short-attention groundlings, their comprehension “capable” of only so much. Borrowing this alignment but fusing its components, the pivotal change wrought by Hazlitt’s citation this

time is the transformation of this “robusteous, periwig-pated fellow” from *performer* into *audience*. Repurposing Shakespeare’s ridiculous “fellow” by flip-flopping his role from the stage to the seats, Hazlitt informs us that the bad actor (now the citizen too much in the “habit of speaking”) will be an equally bad listener, that is, equally obedient to the desire for the communicative equivalent of instant gratification.

Such brief, rapid-fire, unattributed citations are absolutely typical of Hazlitt’s essay style. One could say a great deal more about the use of citation as a key element of his formal strategy: as Paulin writes, with typical vividness, “Rather like Cellini throwing blocks of copper, bronze scraps, and lumps of pewter into a furnace, memory feeds quotations from a wide range of authors into his imagination where they’re melted down before emerging as, literally, a finished article” (142). In the present context, even the subtle shifts wrought by memory’s creative recombinations—even the distorting “mis-” of misquotation—contributes to language as a kind of common property that must undergo reformation, or rather whose reformability must somehow pointedly be acknowledged. Hazlitt sheers away from the bad habit of indulging in communicative iterability by repurposing the idea of the commonplace in his exploitation of the casually inspired exemplary quotation put to new use. In other words, he uses the idea of spontaneity in his writing (though representing another’s words, a quotation is spontaneous when it “occurs” to him) while shifting its meaning beyond impulsive “freshness” to a sort of active resignification of recycling material scraps for new and ongoing projects. He wrote, and wrote gleefully, during what Deidre Lynch has described as the historical era “when language was reconceptualized as appropriable property” (238), indeed when the typographic conventions for discriminating an individual’s speech from collective thought in narration were in the process of fixation.³²

The idea of casual citation, born of deep affinity with the source text, that wants to shift its angle of vision slightly but significantly in one direction or another, exemplifies a form of the idea of language as practical activity. I believe we see far more in Hazlitt’s writing if we suppose it is working through an inkling of the linguistic point of view the present special issue shares with earlier work in the field of linguistic anthropology. That “the social values of particular speech forms . . . change over time” means that interactions “instantiate different ratified values of those speech forms.”³³ What can we hear in each “factor” of a text, or of a given citation (its wording, but also its register, its speech style, its sociohistorical affinities, its shifting cultural values)? Is it merely “reinvoked or recuperated,” or is it “treated as a ‘target’ of the current act”?³⁴ How is some stretch or feature of text “linked to prior renderings”?³⁵ As with Hazlitt’s cartoons of communicative immediacy and stability—the Dinner-Bells or Voltaic batteries of

discourse—for the perspective of language-in-use, “inertial continuity,” in which “a scheme of prior valorization is simply reproduced,” need not be the norm if we can view it as an undesirable “special case.”³⁶ That language is essentially active or ephemeral implies an “irreducibly agentic character” of “role alignment” in semiotic encounters, so that (relatively speaking) “the products of prior events of valorization are transformed, yielding novel formations.”³⁷ Some words, as Bakhtin wrote, may “stubbornly resist” assimilation: “It is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker.”³⁸ Yet even this feeling of internal resistance may become another in the list of kinds of redeployment in interactive events, through which old texts can be “referred to, cited, evaluated, reported, looked back upon, replayed, and otherwise transformed in the production and reproduction of social life.”³⁹

Hazlitt’s staged rivalry between the badness of the common-place versus the possibilities of casual (mis)quotation indicates by extension that interactive communication, whether in speech or in writing, is always a process of composition. While he apparently accommodates the reader through the chatty genres of conversation, this article’s experiment is to think of Hazlitt’s linguistic imagination additionally as a self-consciously dramatic enactment of language’s persistence and change through use. The word “ephemerality” is applied here not to conjure up conversational prose approximating “fresh talk,” with its authentic spark of spontaneity (nor of course do I refer solely to the ephemerality of journalistic writing). Rather, the idea is to show that Hazlitt values forms of discourse that foreground, in their self-presentation, the active capacity to shift the rules of their own uptake, reflecting an unsung version of the romantic desire for linguistic reform. Surely, given his own political convictions, we may assume that Hazlitt identifies with Hamlet’s response, in the scene he cites earlier, to one actor’s reassurances that the troupe has more or less “reformed” the habit of bad theatrics: “O, *reform it altogether*” (3.2.40).

Familiarity, Ephemerality, Self-Contradiction

“There is then a certain range of thought and expression beyond the regular rhetorical routine, on which the author, to vindicate his title, must trench somewhat freely”: in departing from linguistic “routine,” the author pushes “freely” into new territory. (For the “author” to “vindicate his title” seems to draw heroism from the etymological sense of author as “extender, increaser”: *author* is the reflex of Latin *auctor*, from *augere*, whence “augment.”) Whereas for the speaker a “set of oratorical flourishes”

can be used up, “the writer has time to seek out, to embody, and to fit into shape and use” an endless range of resources (*Writing and Speaking*, 257). Such counterintuitive claims help us place Hazlitt’s work within the broader shift in language ideologies that is part of the canonical story line of romanticism. In an exemplary account, Raymond Williams argues that it was thanks to Enlightenment and romantic reconceptualizations of chronological origins of culture, and the human-made dimension of cultural history, that views of language as “active” and “constitutive” began to acquire currency by the late eighteenth century.⁴⁰ If pictures of language newly historicized by the speculative anthropologies of the eighteenth century were questioned by romanticism and its aftermath, it was in part because language was increasingly apprehended as (what Marx would call) an “ordinary,” practical, always-active aspect of social life. This redescribed language as a strange substance both internal and external, intimate and impersonal, private and public. Language slowly became something that was always happening, “naturally”—but William Wordsworth’s naturalizing efforts to make poetry “speak a plainer and more emphatic language,” as he put it in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), the collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge considered epochal for British romanticism, is only one instance of this many-sided trend. We might say that Hazlitt’s idiosyncratic “familiar style” by contrast reflected a self-aware interpretation of what, rather than being natural, was fleetingly “common” about speech. Yet rather than claiming a common permanence of nature, as the Lake Poets have been understood to do, he tested the common ephemerality of talk in writing: trivialities, self-contradiction, self-interruption, digression, gossip, slang, bluntness, voluminous illustration, casual misquotation. In what does the restless “realism” of this style consist? How does its real talk stand beside the romantic poets’ better-known “real language of men”?

Perhaps, as one critic suggests, Hazlitt’s talky realism was looking for “what is common in the gaps and tensions . . . of society.”⁴¹ In a review of *The Plain Speaker*, the *Monthly Magazine* derided this realism in class terms, scoffing that Hazlitt “presses his cockney illustrations into the service of philosophy.”⁴² His friend and fellow essayist (and fellow “Cockney”) Charles Lamb wrote that he was a philosopher who “talks to you in broad daylight”: “[He] is continually translating his thoughts out of their original metaphysical obscurity into the language of the senses and of common observation.”⁴³ With strikingly similar phrasing, Marx and Engels would write in *The German Ideology* that “the philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world.”⁴⁴ This latter formulation helps us see, perhaps, that for Hazlitt, “translating his thoughts” did not entail turning writing “back” into speaking: rather, speech and writing are shifty entities that

trade qualities depending when and how we imagine and perform them, or how we orient ourselves within those performances. It seems the *Monthly Magazine* reviewer sensed, in those “cockney illustrations,” a kind of practical activity threatening to do its work.

In “On Familiar Style,” Hazlitt declares that one thing bad stylists lack is a proper knowledge of “the hidden structure both of words and things”; and these structures, like those of just government, must paradoxically be guided by the principle of their own reformability. This carries over into his notion of the style of selfhood modeled by his writing, as well: an uncompromising proponent of reform, Hazlitt held a radically anticipatory view of personal identity. The self persists, according to him, not by being self-*identical*, but by ceaselessly and anxiously renewing itself in an ongoing present, according to the hidebound habits of egotism, as well as by exercising the contrary capacity for “elasticity,” or the ability to creatively reassemble one’s attentiveness. As Jacques Khalip writes, an “estrangement at the core of the self” is oddly enough what for Hazlitt makes “sociality . . . at all possible,” another indication that he saw social life in dramatistic terms (in part since this view extends Hume’s description of personal identity as “fictitious,” produced in the “theater” of the mind).⁴⁵ And as Jon Cook explains, Hazlitt’s passion for the theater colored “his capacity to treat writing as the occasion for theatrical forms of self-presentation” (18).

My hope is that this revisiting of Hazlitt’s style—and its dramatistic view of self in society—might help to reread his and other texts of the romantic era with and against Voloshinov’s claim that a “radical restructuring” of ideologies of language was taking place in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth century (83). More specifically, Voloshinov suggested that new dimensions of language practices were in the process of being recognized, described, and validated. In Hazlitt’s case, the enactment of language’s restless mobility, joined to a loosely semiotic understanding of the “fictional” persistence of identity in society, begins to align language change with an early paradigm resembling discursive subject formation. In Hazlitt’s thinking, “the individual and the collective . . . necessarily inform one another.”⁴⁶ The adoption of multiple contradictory views in a single essay is to the point: just as our persistence as intellectual personae is built of contradictions, and the psyche’s conscious aims are recognizably corroded by its motives and consequences, so the essays themselves assume a discursive shape, or a rough outline, thanks to the contrary forces of unruly dispute. Formulated quite directly as a challenge to the Benthamite utilitarian ideology that had among its agendas an effort to neutralize language by discounting the dissimulating force of its “emotive” appeal, Hazlitt’s notion of language is as charged with ethical awareness as was his stylistic practice.

To put it once more in Kenneth Burke's terms, since the analytic metrics of "Writing and Speaking" track the ways written and spoken forms are received and felt, Hazlitt brushes up against the "communicative, sympathetic, *propitiatory* factors" of social interaction that allow a text to unfold as an event. Hazlitt magnifies the ways people in public enact roles or personae, following the scripts demanded by situated interactions, and implies that, when observed as a kind of discursive interaction, even written text is reanalyzed as practical activity capable of remodeling social relations. Hazlitt's ephemeral, talky realism was a plan, a practice, and an imperative to feel the reformability of language through its use, while recognizing different kinds of writtenness embedded in the texts, tones, and voicing structures that enable communicative interaction. If talk is quickened text, socially activated but in some ways the more beholden to its contextual constraints, some kinds of texts can slow this conversation. Even his observation that "the light of books is diffused very much abroad in the world in conversation and at second-hand," meant primarily to discourage surprise at discovering wise thoughts in low places, doubles as a comment on how text artifacts not only *are*, but *happen* across social strata.⁴⁷ In a sense, his own citation practices act out the mix of accident and purpose in the second-handedness of linguistic experience.

Hazlitt's philosophical project worked to deflate the swollen interiors of the self, while at the same time insisting on its complicated "folds," and this aim entailed a dual requirement: to both demystify *and* amplify the voice. I close by letting Hazlitt himself clarify how his own written voice takes shape out of its active tensions. Watch the effects of relative fixity conferred to the writer's mind in the two following contrary applications of a typesetting metaphor, in which the mind becomes text either rigidly composed of chunked "stereotypes," or loosely composed of still-moveable, individual "sorts" or pieces of type. The first suggests how the habit of writing could harden, rather than make flexible, the mind. Surprisingly, his emphasis on receptiveness sometimes led to the thought that the habit of writing could solidify the mind by filling it with stereotypes. Like *cliché*, the term "stereotype" was coined to refer to an efficient printing technique pioneered around 1800 (that is, just half a decade before Hazlitt's first publication), whereby a whole page of type could be cast as a single plate (thus avoiding the necessity of keeping a page's worth of individual type pieces tied up). The *OED* cites the earliest metaphorical usage of this technical term to 1850, but Hazlitt (no doubt among others) had translated this symptom of modernity in various ways earlier on. He wrote as early as 1822, for example, that the minds of authors "are a sort of Herculaneum, full of old, petrified images;—are set in stereotype, and little fitted to the ordinary occasions of life."⁴⁸ The comment is written in a mood quite different from that of "Writing and

Speaking”: this time, he laments that “authors . . . feel nothing spontaneously,” that “realities are not good enough for them,” and that “they do not drift with the stream of company or of passing occurrences,” or at least that *when* all of this is true, their thoughts close down, in danger themselves of becoming stereotyped into common-places.⁴⁹

This uncharacteristically critical account of the mental effects of writing however seems, upon inspection, to be among other things an ironic effort to persuade the son to whom it was addressed not to follow Hazlitt’s footsteps by becoming a writer. As we have seen, he is more likely to suggest that the habit of writing frees up or loosens the mind from the anticipated verbal forms required immediately to satisfy the hearer in oratory. In “Writing and Speaking,” in the midst of claiming that Edmund Burke was little appreciated as an orator, Hazlitt admires his writing style as a typesetter’s nightmare: Burke’s *Letter to a Noble Lord* “was returned [by Burke] to the printing-office with so many alterations . . . that the compositors . . . took the whole matter in pieces, and re-set the copy. . . . Burke’s mind being . . . that of an author, never became set. . . . It was not tied down to the printer’s form. It could still project itself” (256–57). Despite the fact that the mind is still made of print technology’s raw materials, here, to be an author—to be in the habit of writing—means to flourish in the endless revisability of one’s raw materials.

This flip-flopping is perfectly characteristic: it actually demonstrates neatly how the stubbornly un-pin-down-able Hazlitt was fond of adopting conversational poses in his writing that mimic the process of changing one’s mind. The “familiar style” is ephemeral, not in dispersing like a wake into the past, but in vibrating with an eagerness to “project” itself forward into a constantly reforming future.⁵⁰ Recognizing how tones of public discourse ring and carry in the mind, composed of received wisdom, Hazlitt reveals a sensitivity for how—as Bakhtin put it—“the word in language is half someone else’s,” yet equally how one might take possession of it in “moment[s] of appropriation.”⁵¹ In a sense his style mitigates this appropriation by redefining the individual’s contribution: he performs the emblematic agency of ironic (mis)quotation, as one technique of a formal method that mixes “the advantages of these two styles, the *literary* and the *conversational*.”⁵² The meandering method of the essay suggests that in its conversation with itself the writer’s mind meets a public composed of or played by a succession of its own potential forms, even as it is taken up by a mixed company of readers. Against the superordinate value placed on the “temporally invariant,” the essay “rebels against the doctrine . . . that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy.”⁵³ In Hazlitt’s ephemeral style emerges the self-conscious desire of a writer to model linguistic practical activity by representing language use in literary real time (which, as he helps us see, is

bound to be acted out across different scales of transmission). Its process follows Diogenes's footsteps in preferring action to words—Hazlitt opens “Writing and Speaking” by declaring that “the philosopher of old was not unwise, who defined motion by getting up and walking” (245)—only here, words themselves are where the action is.

Notes

1. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley, 1954), 265. My epigraph is also from this work, 264–65.
2. V. N. Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art (Concerning Sociological Poetics),” in *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I. R. Titunik (New York, 2012), 178. Italics in the original text.
3. This term holds several others together, implying how speech communities and speech genres scale up and down with the concepts of “class fractions” (Pierre Bourdieu) and “role fractions” (Erving Goffman, Asif Agha).
4. There are too many versions of this story to account for here, but a representative sample of those that have significantly shaped the background I work from (sometimes, as in the case of Voloshinov, with as little as a few brief lines) follows: V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA, 1973); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); Ian Hacking, “How, Why, When, and Where Did Language Go Public?,” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 121–39; Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago, 1998); Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2003); Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). Initial steps toward establishing a sense of the relation of shifts in linguistic theory and ideology to the literary activity of European romanticism are indicated in the valuable, still unsynthesized historical accounts these and other critics have offered.
5. My thinking here is partly shaped by Jon Mee’s fascinating recent contribution to accounts of the discursive space staked out by “conversation” in the mid- to late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford, 2011). As Kevin Gilmartin suggests, “conversability” comes in many forms: “Hazlitt was alert to the way contemporary radical journalism developed print approximations of oral expression that opened out upon a popular political culture of speeches, debates, public meetings, and convivial dining and drinking”; Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Cambridge, 2015), 28–29. See also Jon Cook, “Hazlitt, Speech and Writing,” in *Journalism, Literature and Modernity: From Hazlitt to Modernism*, ed. Kate Campbell (Edinburgh, 2000), 15–37 (who argues in a different but related vein of Hazlitt’s style that its “ideal of common conversation . . . has a tactical role in his fight against the Tory press” [32]); and Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford, 2000).

6. William Hazlitt, "On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking" (hereafter, "Writing and Speaking"), in *The Plain Speaker*, vol. 8 of *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London, 1998), 249.
7. Hazlitt reports how, as a young man meeting Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he impressed the poet by saying that "the speaking of [Burke] with contempt might be made the test of a vulgar democratical mind" (inasmuch as for the dogmatic radical Burke's conservative politics would presumably obscure his worth as a stylist). The tone of "Writing and Speaking" sharpens audibly when we perceive that the discussion of Burke here—as throughout Hazlitt's writings—carries a recollection of that interaction; explicit contempt in this passage is reserved for Burke's listeners, yet its figures serve to communicate how Burke's high-flown delivery was at war with its conservative content. See William Hazlitt, "My First Acquaintance With Poets," in *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. Robert Woof (Grasmere, UK, 2007), 70.
8. In his evaluation of the bad communicative habits, there is at least the hint of a technophobic critique of modernity, since bad habits of communication are expressed using mechanical figures (see references to the Voltaic battery and the printer's stereotype). For the idea of a "speech situation," see Hans Blumenberg, "Sprachsituation und Immanente Poetik," in *Immanente Ästhetik, Ästhetische Reflexion: Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne* (Munich, 1966), 145–55.
9. Cook, "Hazlitt, Speech and Writing," 24.
10. Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London, 1998), 272.
11. A reviewer in the *Star Chamber* declared that Hazlitt was "one of the most mouthy, verbose, and obscure scribblers that we ever had the misfortune of meeting with"; Duncan Wu, "Introductory Note," to Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker*, xiv.
12. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York, 1995), 94.
13. See William Hazlitt, "On Familiar Style," in *Table Talk*, vol. 6 of *Selected Writings*, 217–21.
14. That Hazlitt's style was developed in the midst of seismic shifts in literacy, British periodical publication, and anxieties about new reading cultures and audiences has been demonstrated in different ways in a number of studies. Mee, in *Conversable Worlds*, for instance, shows how the work of entire sectors of literary production began to be conceived as stylistically motivated by redirecting discursive energies toward the recognition of the local, the marginal, the active. For useful background on the radical periodical culture surrounding Hazlitt, see also Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*; Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison, WI, 1987); and Marc Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: The "Literary Lower Empire"* (New York, 2009).
15. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 31.
16. See Hazlitt's chapter "On the Periodical Essayists" in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, in *Selected Writings*, 5:84–96. Jon Cook similarly formulates Hazlitt's interest in the "relation" between writing and speech.
17. The apt phrase is from Uttara Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and the Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford, 1998), 9. For most Hazlitt readers the claim that his style is "ephemeral" will hardly stop the press, since it would be easy to understand "ephemeral" in terms of the illustration-rich, journalistic ease of his writing. (Indeed, *journalistic* and *ephemeral* are superficially aligned by etymological reference to impermanence—"daily" or "lasting only a day.")

- However, whereas the impermanence of the productions of a periodical press at a key phase in its formation is understood most readily through obsolescence, I am arguing that the essayistic ephemerality advanced by Hazlitt emphasizes language's activity or reformability.
18. The description has since been removed from their website (perhaps the editors in the meantime have discovered an even more original blogger).
 19. M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1986), 60.
 20. When we consider the biographical anecdotes reporting that he could be as shy in speech as he was bold in print, it is small wonder that audience attention should have absorbed him. However, John Mee's recent study of the cultures of conversation that informed Hazlitt's intellectual labor raises questions about Coleridge's picture of Hazlitt as tongue-tied or "shoe contemplative." See Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, 239–40.
 21. See "On Depth and Superficiality," in Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker*, 323.
 22. Newlyn, *Reading*, 362.
 23. Hazlitt had a horror of the utilitarian tendency to translate an empiricist attachment to surfaces into ethical, scientific, and political policy. Related targets in his writings include justifications for slavery, the uses of phrenology, and Malthusian economics.
 24. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1993), 87.
 25. See William Hazlitt, "On the Conversation of Lords," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930–34), 17:167.
 26. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York, 1991), 1:15.
 27. Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia, 1981), 146.
 28. The first quotations, from 1807, are from William Hazlitt, "Preface to an Abridgment of the 'Light of Nature Pursued,'" in *Complete Works*, 1:134. It reads in full: "The springs that give birth to our social affections are, by means of the understanding, as much regulated by the feelings of others, as if they had a real communication and sympathy with them, and are swayed by an impulse that is altogether foreign to self-love." The final quotation is from William Hazlitt, *Letter to William Gifford, Esq.*, in *Selected Writings*, 5:382–83.
 29. Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia*, in *Selected Writings* (Chicago, 1968), 147.
 30. The first lines of act 3, scene 2, William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Cyrus Hoy (New York, 1992), 48.
 31. The term was coined in the field of conversation analysis by Harvey Sacks and refers to the "processes of adapting forms of expression to interpreter roles," so that "utterances are designed specifically for an intended audience"; Jef Verschueren, *Understanding Pragmatics* (London, 1999), 86.
 32. The classic treatment of this problem is Voloshinov, *Marxism*, 107–59.
 33. Asif Agha, "Semiosis across Encounters," in "Discourse across Speech Events: Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in Social Life," special issue, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (June 2005): 2.
 34. *Ibid.*, 3.
 35. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 75.
 36. Asif Agha, "The Social Life of Cultural Value," *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 270.

37. Ibid.
38. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), 294.
39. Bauman and Briggs, "Poetics and Performance," 80.
40. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 21–44.
41. Cook, "Hazlitt, Speech and Writing," 36.
42. Wu, "Introductory Note," xv.
43. Charles Lamb, *Selected Prose*, ed. Adam Phillips (London, 1985), 226.
44. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York, 1970), 118.
45. Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Stanford, 2009), 26.
46. Ibid., 37.
47. See "On the Conduct of Life," in William Hazlitt, *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1930), 183.
48. Ibid., 192.
49. Ibid., 191.
50. Here, with "projection," there is some indication of Hazlitt's ambivalence toward "progress" in his technological metaphors; see Paulin's discussion of "projection" and proto-cinematic technology (Paulin, *Day-Star*, 17–18), as well as Cook's measured judgment that he took stock of both "the costs and gains of modernity" ("Hazlitt, Speech and Writing," 32). For broader recent reevaluations of the role of mechanicity in romanticism, see John Tresch, *The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleon* (Chicago, 2012); and James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin, eds., *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 2005).
51. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 293.
52. From Hazlitt's preface to the 1825 Paris edition of *Table Talk*; see the editor's introduction to Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker*, vii.
53. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 10.