

Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 336. £99. ISBN 9780198709312.

As his ‘day-star of liberty’ continues to rise, Hazlitt revisionism has become a fun new sub-category in Romantic studies. Since David Bromwich’s thoroughgoing reevaluation in 1983 (*Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*), new Hazlitts have appeared with increasing frequency — but that need not stop us from having another, since, as Kevin Gilmartin reminds us in his noteworthy new *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*, Hazlitt’s was a ‘fluid and unresolved literary persona’ (34). Hazlitt has boldly been rebranded as the ‘first modern man’, as an idealist metaphysician, even — this from an online journal named after him — as ‘the original blogger’. His commitment to an unorthodox, uncompromising radical politics is a part of his myth, thanks to his canonical attacks on the late ‘apostasy’ of the Lake School poets; but his politics has sometimes been treated as an embarrassing footnote to his legacy as Romantic critic.

The Hazlitt Gilmartin introduces here is a writer whose politics cannot come second to his criticism, because the two are inseparable. Pitting himself ‘[a]gainst the view that partisan commitment compromises literary style’ (24), Gilmartin argues convincingly throughout the book 1) that Hazlitt’s political essays themselves are by and large as stylistically complex as the rest of his writing, and 2) that his better-known essays on culture and the arts share crucial patterns of rhetoric *with* that political writing, revealing how his stylistic investments resonate with political ones. The result effectively combats the tenacious view that ‘politics need be a reductive or distorting factor’ (35) devaluing Hazlitt’s literary style.

The book works, therefore, as a study of Hazlitt’s ‘distinctive political voice’ (25) that attends closely to its internal contradictions in order to demonstrate that ‘a fuller understanding of Hazlitt’s politics can deepen our appreciation’ of the buzz of other voices always present in his literary productions (35). Drawing on Jon Mee’s recent work on ‘conversable worlds’, Gilmartin is wonderfully sharp on the polyvocality of what he calls Hazlitt’s ‘combatively miscellaneous energy’ (25) (this becomes Gilmartin’s favorite metaphor for the essays’ abrupt switchbacks or second thoughts: ‘alternating currents’ [78, *et passim*]). From its opening, the book pursues this dialogic complexity through readings that irreducibly fuse politics and criticism with insights into the historical specificities of a periodical print media that allowed Hazlitt to assume multiple voices or viewpoints at once. Refreshingly, Gilmartin is *not* saying that politics ‘holds the key’ to giving Hazlitt an identity we can square with his love of paradox; rather, he reveals how, due to the complexity of his political views, we can see how ‘any interpretive sense of convergence [in Hazlitt’s oeuvre] should remain provisional’ (35).

The Introduction frames the book through a literature review ranging between those critics whose methods and aims are more distant from Gilmartin’s (M. H. Abrams, Uttara Natarajan), alongside and among those more proximate (Marilyn Butler, Seamus Deane). Five chapters and a conclusion address the style of Hazlitt’s politics through meticulous, sometimes overwhelming analyses of representative terms and concepts that appear repeatedly in the political essays — e.g., corruption, decay, and apocalypse; diagnoses of the contemporary “age” alongside evocations of the past (what Gilmartin calls ‘progressive retrospection’ [200]); the civic value of controversy and criticism; democratic organization and the unreliable ‘body politic’; and above all, the threat of ‘legitimate’ government. Essential to Gilmartin’s account is a fuller appreciation of the longer history of British political dissent reaching back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and of the contemporary radical wing of the press active around Hazlitt (including Cobbett, Woolard, Hone, Wade, and others). As Gilmartin repeatedly demonstrates,

such contexts crucially inform Hazlitt's self-orientation as a radical Dissenter in an era of post-Napoleonic political reaction. This confirms the sense, in reading the 'chameleon essayist' (54), that one needs to recognize these political environments in order to spot the colorful ironies of the aesthetic or less overtly political writings.

On its own terms, this book is tremendously effective, and represents a notable intervention in the rapidly transforming study of Hazlitt's Romanticism. It may well be of interest not only to Hazlitt enthusiasts and conscientious Romanticists, but to a broader readership interested in the ways aesthetics and politics are entangled in literary representation. Gilmartin carries on Bromwich's legacy in reasserting how many hats Hazlitt's writing wears simultaneously, only now to emphasize that style does not stop where politics begins. Against those who have (unknowingly or not) disclaimed Hazlitt's political writings as biased, aggressive, or obsolescent by design, Gilmartin underscores their 'rhetorical complexity and rich emotional range' (21). It is perhaps worth adding, that Gilmartin's attention to Hazlitt's mixed registers has its parallels in the works of less historicist critics (e.g., Anahid Nersessian, Jacques Khalip, Emily Rohrbach), whose rhetorically-motivated readings of Hazlitt also frequently reveal the political undertow of his style.

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