Hazards of Hazlitt

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2015)

In a crowded train a few days ago I was reading Hazlitt preparatory to writing an essay comparing his Shakespeare criticism with that of Dr Johnson (whom he detested). Which of them was the more acute, the more penetrating? And the essay which I happened to read on the train was *On the Ignorance of the Learned*, which ends with the famous words:

> If we wish to know the force of human genius we should read Shakespeare. If we wish to know the insignificance of human learning we may study his commentators.

As Hazlitt had by then written his book about Shakespeare's characters, he presumably knew whereof he spoke.

The essay both delighted and irritated me. Delighted irritation is, of course, a very pleasant state of mind, for it combines the enjoyments of moral outrage with those of aesthetic appreciation. In a matter of only a few pages I found myself veering, staggering perhaps, between joyous agreement and the deepest exasperation. This, perhaps, is not surprising because I am one of those strange but by no means uncommon creatures, an anti-intellectual intellectual—as, indeed, was Hazlitt.

When I read—or rather re-read, for I had read the essay more than once before—the affirmation that 'There is no dogma, however fierce or foolish, to which these persons [the learned] have not set their seals, and tried to impose on the understandings of their followers…' I nodded vigorously and enthusiastically, and let out an explosive little 'Ha!,' to the evident discomfort of those sitting next or opposite to me, who thought I might be mad. Or again: 'They see things not as they are, but as they find them in books, and "wink and shut their apprehensions up," in order that they may discover nothing to interfere with their prejudices or convince them of their absurdity.' One cannot help but think when reading this passage how apposite it is to all those intellectuals of the twentieth century who lined up to extol regimes such as Stalin's, Mao's or even (in fewer cases) Pol Pot's. One also thinks of Cicero's remark, nearly two millennia before, that there was nothing so absurd that some philosopher has not said it, and Orwell's nearly a century and a half later, that there are some things so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them. Nothing changes.

And yet this is all a little sweeping. It usually takes a philosopher to know that what a philosopher has said is absurd. Not every intellectual believes six impossible things before breakfast, and furthermore it often requires intellectuals to undo the harm that other intellectuals do. No one would deny Raymond Aron, for example, the name of intellectual merely because he failed to believe and opposed the lies and equivocations of Jean-Paul Sartre. From the fact that intellectuals have believed absurdities, it does not follow either that, *ex officio*, they believe only absurdities, or that only intellectuals believe absurdities. Orwell, the patron saint of everyone who wants to claim him as such, was not speaking the literal truth when he said that some things are so absurd that only intellectuals could believe them; rather he was trying to destroy blind faith in the superior wisdom of intellectuals (prevalent mainly among themselves). No one who surveys human history, however superficially, could possibly come to the conclusion that the common people were incapable of the utmost credulity, or that such credulity can be defeated once and for all and will never arise among them again. And there is a further complication since the time of Cicero, Hazlitt and Orwell: the class of person who considers himself an intellectual has expanded out of all recognition, making generalisation even more difficult and hazardous. Still, an anti-intellectual intellectual such as I cannot but question whether an increase in the number of persons who consider themselves intellectuals, or merely intellectual, is altogether a good thing.

Notwithstanding my statistical reservations, Hazlitt's words have contemporary resonance. When he says that there is no doctrine, however fierce or foolish, that the learned have not tried to impose on the understanding of their followers, who would not think (in our day) of Moslem intellectuals who promote their murderous absurdities? They are often, in their way, learned men; but it would have been far better for them to have known and thought nothing than to have known and thought what they have known and thought. One can, after all, be learned in the productions of astrologers or alchemists without knowing anything worth knowing. No doubt such productions are matters of interest to specialist historians of certain epochs, but they are no guides to modern life. Alas, we are now in the position of having to concern ourselves with a fierce and foolish doctrine, of no intrinsic intellectual interest whatever (much less than that of, say, Marxism), merely because some of the learned, in Hazlitt's derogatory sense, have tried, with some practical success, 'to impose it on the understandings of their followers.'

But Hazlitt goes too far—an occupational hazard of intellectuals who want to attract and keep an audience or readership. Moderation is rarely interesting, but there is no reason, as Bertrand Russell once said, why the truth when found should be interesting. So Hazlitt says

that if the learned are ignorant, the ignorant are learned. This is preposterous.

In the first place, Hazlitt loads his dialectical dice by equating learning with pedantry, the learned with the kind of people who can turn ancient Greek verse into Latin epigram without themselves ever having an original thought. He says that such people are often incapable of the simplest practical tasks and are narrow in their outlook and interests. They know nothing of art, music or science, but account themselves superior to all those who are not like them. They call ‘mechanical’ all accomplishments that do not relate to their own particular, tiny and useless skill.

It is true that learning and pedantry sometimes go together, but by no means are all the learned pedantic (the most learned people I have known personally have been accomplished in several different fields, including practical ones unrelated to their own), while the unlearned are not always immune from pedantry. When reviewing a book about a subject of which I know little or nothing, for example, I delight to come across an error which I can recognise. There is more rejoicing in the heart of a pedant over one mistake than over ninety-nine facts he didn’t know. I have quite a number of old books in which a previous reader has marked with an underlining or by an exclamation mark in the margin the only typographical error in the whole volume. It is as if that reader had been reading only in the hope of finding such an error, so that, being a frustrated intellectual himself, he could feel superior to the author of the book he was reading.

But the identification of learning with pedantry is not Hazlitt’s only mistake. He is a populist in the worst sense. He says, for example, the ‘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 university.’ Times may have changed, but I took a little time off from reading to listen to the three men from Liverpool next to me who were talking among themselves. What were the good things they said? They had but two subjects: the price of various kinds of beer in various kinds of bars, and the selection of the Liverpool football team (the former manager of which once said that football was not a matter of life and death—it was much more important than that). I suspect that I could have spent a twelvemonth in the company of these men and heard of little but beer and football. This does not mean that they were bad men, but it would rather cast doubt on their superior wit.

But it is not only superior wit with which the common, unlearned people are endowed in Hazlitt’s opinion, but superior wisdom. This is what he says:

> Above all the mass of society have common sense, which the learned in all ages want. The vulgar are in the right when they judge for themselves; they are wrong when they trust to their blind guides.

Now it is true that there are some absurd doctrines propounded by the learned which the ‘mass of society’ does not come to believe, but is it common sense that protects them, or their lack of understanding or interest? After all, they are perfectly capable of believing many absurdities. And if they are endowed with common sense *ex officio*, how comes it that ‘they trust to their blind guides’?

Hazlitt goes on to say:

> The celebrated nonconformist divine, Baxter, was almost stoned to death by the good women of Kidderminster for asserting from the pulpit that “hell was paved with infants’ skulls”; but, by force of argument, and of learned quotations from the Fathers, the reverend preacher at length prevailed over the scruples of his congregation, and over reason and humanity.

Now this passage has a special personal interest for me because, when I am in England, I live next door but four to a house on whose frontage are inscribed the words, *In this house lived the learned and eloquent Richard Baxter 1640-41*, which for some reason I read for a number of years as ‘learned and elegant,’ perhaps because I prefer elegance to eloquence, the latter being possible in the service of a very bad cause.

But let us return to Hazlitt. Is nearly stoning a preacher to death a sign of the female congregation’s common sense that he extols? Common sense, surely, would laugh at the doctrine Baxter propounded (if, that is, Hazlitt’s representation of it is correct). And if the common sense of the populace were so powerful a shield against Baxter’s ‘fierce and foolish doctrine,’ how came it that he was able to prove, by quotation from supposed authorities, that the road to hell really was paved with babies’ skulls? It is difficult not to conclude that the proper defence against Baxter’s horrible proposition was common sense allied with learning and eloquence. In other words, common sense is necessary but not sufficient.

Hazlitt pays tribute to women, but not of a kind to please modern feminists. Women, he says, ‘have often more of what is called good sense than men… They cannot reason wrong; for they do not reason at all.’ Quite apart from displeasing modern women, this is a dangerous form of irrationalism; for if it is true that mankind cannot live by reason alone, it is also true

that it cannot live without it. And when Hazlitt goes on to say that 'uneducated people have the most exuberance of invention and the greatest freedom from prejudice,' he displays only his lack of acquaintance with humanity. This is proved by his further assertion that Shakespeare was such an uneducated person. Shakespeare was uneducated (at worst) only in *le tout Paris* sense of the world, a deeply snobbish sense.

But why should Hazlitt have been so eager to claim virtues for the common people when what he says demonstrates a rather limited or selective acquaintance with them? I think he is thereby trying to prove his political virtue, a very modern thing to try to do. *Vox populi, vox dei.* Harm, including bad taste, therefore comes only from the learned, from the rich, from the educated, from the higher reaches of society, from the authorities, but for whom life would be much better than it is. There is no essential flaw or contradiction in human nature; and so it is not possible to think that both the learned and the unlearned can be ignorant, wicked or foolish, each in their own way, because the attractions of error and evil are always present and often great. The common people must be intrinsically good if life is to be perfectible. The ignorance of the learned is Hazlitt's answer to the problem of evil.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is here.