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### **On "Vulgar Exhibition": Hazlitt, "The Fight" and the Pornography of Popularity**

Modern literature [...] is a gay Coquette, fluttering, fickle, vain; [...] courted, she courts again; [...] pants for the breath of popularity [...] (Hazlitt, *Complete Works* 16.219)<sup>1</sup>

Despite the revival of literary critical interest in William Hazlitt in recent years, more attention to this writer from Cultural Studies perspectives seems warranted. Where such attention has surfaced, it has broached an interesting question for Cultural Studies historiography. On the cusp of the new historicist turn in Romantic studies, Jon Cook argues that, in Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Hazlitt should have replaced William Cobbett *contra* Edmund Burke on the horizon of the "culture and society" debate ("Criticism" 137). More recently, Tim Fulford remarks that "[f]or E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, Cobbett, rather than Hazlitt, was the journalist who best advanced the cause of liberty by finding a style that gave labourers a political discourse of their own. Hazlitt himself admired Cobbett's power and felt his own relative confinement to a polite language" (Fulford, "Paulin" ¶6). These comments suggest a historiographical question for Cultural Studies, and for the epistemology of culture. Other scholars have noted aspects of Hazlitt's work that, together, sketch a prototypical Cultural Studies critic: his interdisciplinary interests (in "painting, poetry, prose, plays, politics, parliamentary speakers, metaphysical lore, books, men, and things" [qtd. in Mulvihill, "Essayism" 28-9]); his analyses of everyday life, like "The Fight," which Tom Paulin calls a "study in what we now call 'popular culture'" ("Spirit" ¶36); and his alertness to tensions between political complicity and resistance in his own writing (Gilmartin 95).

This essay pursues Hazlitt as a case in Cultural Studies historiography by reading his 1822 essay "The Fight" as a contribution to the historical emergence of the discourse of "popular culture" as a class-inflected euphemism for pornography. This approach also addresses the popular cultural preoccupations of contemporary criticism on the essay, a literature that, as David Higgins notes, seems surprisingly scant (173). Paulin has done much to popularize a view of "The Fight" as a prototype for Cultural Studies, in the above-quoted *Guardian* article, and in giving the essay titular pride of place in his Penguin paperback Hazlitt selection.<sup>2</sup> Scott Juengel discusses how "The Fight" and other Regency boxing texts mediate masculinity and nationalism (¶3). Higgins develops a similar reading focused closely on "The Fight" itself; however, Higgins' and Juengel's

essays represent the only major readings since Stewart C. Wilcox's 1943 critical edition of its manuscript. Higgins reads "The Fight" as an assertion of Englishness subversively tempered by "effeminate" French sensibility, and so he discusses at length the essay's "removal" of references to Hazlitt's obsession with Sarah Walker (173), the daughter of his landlord in London. Hazlitt's major statement on that obsession, *Liber Amoris* (1823), has been widely dismissed as poor writing; ironically, it has also received much more scholarly treatment than "Hazlitt's best-known essay" (173). "The Fight" invites more analysis, for reasons of cultural context and of literary form: why doesn't Hazlitt entirely erase his references to Walker? And why does he devote so much of an essay about a prize fight to the way there and back, leaving barely a third of the essay to the fight scene, and only one paragraph (albeit "quite a monster" [qtd. in Wardle 305]) to its action?

I don't want to retrace the ground already well covered by Higgins, but to read Hazlitt's essay in its cultural-economic and intertextual contexts of production. An initial look at Regency boxing and literary commercialism frame my argument, that "The Fight" contributes to the formation of "popular culture" as a proto-pornographic supplement to the discourse of "culture." I then relate "The Fight" to Hazlitt's other writings in 1821-22, especially *Liber Amoris* (which is prototypical pornography, as writing about whores [McCutcheon 438]), and explicate the essay's form through its metonymies of race and gender, its constellation of polysemic keywords, and the "problem" of digression. I argue that Hazlitt's digression—especially concerning Walker—is not a stylistic flaw, as is generally understood, but a tactic for mediating decency and obscenity. Throughout, I refer to criticism of Hazlitt's work, and to theorists of pop and porn, in order to situate this literary moment (shadowed by the 1820 Caroline affair) in the history of popular culture theory. As a "proto-pornographic" (Mudge ¶11) image of popular culture, "The Fight" represents "Hazlitt's engagement with the question of what is to count as common in a divided society" (Cook, "Speech" 36)—in a way that exemplifies the *double entendre* of "commonness" as popularity and prostitution (McCutcheon 440), and enables the emergence of "popular culture" as a polite synonym for the voyeuristic, middle-class surveillance of vulgarities and barbarities—of that which is not culture.

While a prostitution-inflected sense of "popularity" was common by the eighteenth century (Williams, *Keywords* 236), especially for figuring the professionalization of authorship (Gallagher 7), it is important at the outset to acknowledge that today's definitions of culture, popular culture, and pornography derive from later Victorian ontologies (Williams, *Culture* 111, 306; cf. Mudge ¶1). But those ontologies constitute a "nervous reaction" to Regency culture.<sup>3</sup> Like that of Burke or Cobbett, then, Hazlitt's writing thus shapes the "prehistory" of modern cultural discourse. If "popular culture is a self-conscious term created by the intelligentsia and now adopted by the general public to mark off class divisions in the generic types of culture and their intended audience" (Jenkins *et al* 28), then its self-consciousness develops by balancing propriety with prurience, distaste with fetish.

### **On Blackguard Scenes**

Prize fights were to Regency England what raves were to Thatcher's Britain: popular and prohibited. Both cultural sites engage what Alan Blum calls the "grammar" of *the scene* as a social problematic that points to the proto-pornographic quality of Hazlitt's

representation of popular culture: "If the scene is devoted in practice to sorting out the question of qualification, and if it engages this matter in a market place, then it practices in public something most private" (21). As a commoditized "locus of collectivization," the scene "is the site of a fundamental conflict in social life [...] between the excitement of engagement and the riveting seductiveness of community, between the encounter and the project" (33). Market relations and an agonistic ontology preoccupied with "purity and impurity" (29) distinguish scenes as social forms of privatization-in-public.

"Because of the threat to public order apparently posed by such large gatherings," Higgins writes, "fights were frequently prohibited by local magistrates and they took place deep in the countryside" (Higgins 174). As with raves, popularity and prohibition pressured "the Fancy" (as this "disreputable subculture" was collectively known [174]) to adopt underground tactics for staging events.

Fights of this kind were seldom advertised in advance; the news would go round by word of mouth that a certain time and place had been nominated (often out of London). Thousands of people would then set out on horseback, in coaches (like Hazlitt), gigs, carts, or on foot, converging on the venue. (Wu, "Notes" 224)

The fancy would sometimes play cat-and-mouse with the law; an 1818 match for William Neate had to re-schedule, since "a magistrate had fixed his paw on Neat, and no milling could be permitted in Buckinghamshire on that day" (Miles 106). The December 1821 match<sup>4</sup> that Hazlitt recounts, between Neate and Thomas "Gas-man" Hickman, took place without official interference. Boxing historian Henry Downes Miles remarks that, in an estimated audience of 25,000 spectators, "not the slightest accident occurred" (110)—and, pointedly, that the local commerce generated by the fancy "was a prime benefit to the town" (109).

Moralizing speculations about the fancy's financial speculations joined public safety concerns among the fancy's critics. Miles' blow-by-blow account of the Hickman-Neate match tracks the changing odds in each round, and opens by estimating that "upwards of £150,000, it is calculated, eventually changed owners on this battle" (111). Higgins notes that "prize-fighting attracted interest from all parts of society and individual fighters were given financial backing by rich patrons" (174). Cyrus Redding, Thomas Campbell's assistant at the *New Monthly Magazine* that published "The Fight" in February 1822, expresses typically "respectable" reservations in his 1847 reflections (in the same organ) on Hazlitt's topic, connecting the scene's venality to its brutality, in a passage that will resound across my reading:

The subject was so thoroughly blackguard, and it was giving currency to a disgraceful, demoralising species of vulgar exhibition that branded England as the bull-fight does Spain with disgrace in the sight of all civilized nations—an exhibition, too, that its advocates pretend kept up the national courage, while the real motive was the gain made of it, as of all similar shows, by blacklegs and thieves. (qtd. in Wilcox 7)

As Redding's "hesitation" over "the paper" gave way to Campbell's guarded appreciation as "too true a picture of existing manners [that] would, in the course of things, soon

become a mere record of our barbarities," they agreed to publish "the barbarism," ostensibly to appease Hazlitt and an expected audience for the piece (7).

Several points may be teased out of this anecdote (which Redding repeated, with variations, in 1860 and 1866). First, Redding's perception that the "real motive" in "milling" is financial gain represents a useful index of the scene's economy. Higgins and Juengel both take note of the scene's informal economics; Juengel's argument about the pedagogical performativity of boxing—as "a melodrama of masculine decorum" (§3) to resist "the effeminized threat of foreign invasion" (§7)—revolves in part around whether the Hickman-Neate match was "*a cross*" (Hazlitt 72). Juengel finds evidence supporting the "insinuation of scandal" in accounts of Hickman's transactions after the event (§18), and he stresses Hazlitt's conviction that the fight was fair. But Hazlitt seems more ambivalent than insistent here: the manuscript version of his argument with the "barbarians" defends simply his "propensity to argue" (qtd. in Wilcox 51); and the published version includes an early scene in which "Tom Turtle", the fictionalized figure of John Thurtell—a "distinctly shady" trainer (Wu 227)—"swore he knew how the fight would go" (Hazlitt, "Fight" 65). I raise the question of the fight's fairness to detail how the "blackguard" disrepute of prize-fighting derived in part from the scene's speculations and capitalizations, among which we need to count Hazlitt's essay: "The Fight" is at once an advocacy of "the national courage" and Hazlitt's own "gain" of £10 (Hazlitt, *Letters* 211-12). P. G. Patmore evinced surprise that Hazlitt capitalized on the event: "I told him that I was going [to the fight]; and added (half in joke, half in earnest) that he could [...] make an 'article' about it for the New Monthly. I little thought he would take me at my word" (qtd. in Wu 224).

Hazlitt's bottom-line interest as a professional author puts him in the dubious company of others who would profit from the fight—Redding's "blacklegs and thieves"—and so (like his sexual and textual traffic with prostitution) lends contextual irony to his later reflection on form, about "the way in which I work out some of my conclusions *underground*, before throwing them up on the surface" (qtd. in Cook, "Criticism" 149, my emphasis). "The Fight" is "held to display something in public that should not be seen," as typical Tory responses held about Hazlitt's work in general (Cook, "Speech" 21). Because Hazlitt's digressions on the scene surrounding the fight interpolate the writing self as the text's narrator, that which is inappropriately displayed here includes the private self, as *Liber Amoris* exhibited *ad nauseum*, recycling excerpts cut from this essay. The "pornography of talking" that Joel Faflak identifies in Romanticism, as "exposure[s] of the self carefully administered for the sake of a public sphere that profits from this exposure" (82), thus takes exemplary shape in Hazlitt's commoditized confessionals, invested in London's informal sectors of prostitution and pugilism.

Hazlitt's self-exposure assumes not only gender-coded but also racialized dimensions (inadvertently reflected in Redding's references to blackguards and blacklegs). Hazlitt's references to Bill Richmond, a displaced black American boxer and trainer, as his "old master" ("Fight" 67) suggest that Hazlitt may have taken up boxing (Wu 227) but, more importantly, that he understands and represents the sport in racialized terms (O'Quinn, E-mail). Hazlitt's reference to the "veteran" Richmond as his master disrupts the associations of blacks and slavery, as does his characterization of the fancy as slaves to passion (68); as Fulford notes, master and slave imagery later dominates *Liber Amoris* (236). Each boxer in the Hickman-Neate match assumes a racialized figuration.

Reflecting Richmond's "sable honours" (67), Hickman sports "a panther's hide"; while panther imagery occurs usually without colour-coding in Hazlitt's oeuvre (including *Liber Amoris* [36]), "On the Spirit of Monarchy" (1823) specifies "its dark glossy pride" (349). Neate, for his part, represents Bristol, which had been Britain's major slave-trade port until abolition. Interestingly, Miles' account (which, unlike Hazlitt's, stresses the inter-city rivalry between Neate's Bristol and Hickman's London) quotes the suggestive imagery of light and dark in a news report of the fight's outcome: "Bristol illuminated, / London in darkness, / The Gas extinguished by a 'Neat hand'" (115).

Hazlitt deploys images of "blackness" to describe the violence of the fight itself: Hickman's "right eye was closed in dingy blackness" ("The Fight" 70), and the manuscript version describes "two men smashed to the ground, like black" (qtd. in Wilcox 45), a passage revised for publication as "two men smashed to the ground, smeared with gore" (Hazlitt 70). The essay thus becomes a relatively early modern confiscation of "the Black body [...] as physical prowess, sexual fantasy, moral transgression, violence" (Brand 36), a racialized figure for imagining popular cultural forms. Hazlitt's imagery of boxing also articulates racialized bodies and underground scenes—blackness and blackguardry—to amplify the essay's exotic sensuality (already inflected by "French-influenced sentiment" [Higgins 185]), as a prurient glimpse of class-transgressing "barbarism" for the *New Monthly's* middle-class readers.

Hazlitt's essay anticipates responses like Redding's in its self-conscious references to vulgarity and barbarism (Higgins 181). The narrator's quotation of Spenser gets "translated into the vulgate" by his traveling companion (Hazlitt 62); the boxing ring is "unprofaned by vulgar tread" (68); and his pretensions to "insider" status with the fancy (having first confessed this as his "first fight" [61]) culminate in the narrator's ambivalent recoil from and engagement with "Goths and Vandals" (72) who interrupt his post-game supper plan and draw him into debating the fight's fairness. Hazlitt's overtures to his audience of "Ladies" also evince awareness of boxing's barbaric optics; he asks that "modesty and courage" not "look [...] askance on one another", and that his readers not "seem out of character" in devoting their attention "without shuddering" to his "tale" (61). Beyond the sexual pun about "shuddering" at a "tale" (or "tail"), the plea for a direct, not "askance" look *from* modesty *to* "the exploits of the brave" frames the ensuing "tale" with proto-pornographic voyeurism by adopting the phallic language of power that James Grantham Turner calls "the libertine sublime" (99). Hazlitt's double exposure—of a self for whom "the public ear is too great a temptation" (Hazlitt 65), and of a scene centred on "stripped" bodies engaged in physical and financial exchange (69)—begins to blur the line between sublimity and obscenity.

### On Public Organs

Blum's grammar of scenes is to Hazlitt's fight club what Suzanne Kappeler's "pornography of representation" is to his writing: a useful abstraction for tracing the gender-coded and commoditized ontological opposition between public and private. Criticized for reifying pornography, or for redefining it beyond analytic utility, Kappeler's theory makes an important point about how patriarchal, heterosexist norms overdetermine all Western forms of representation. Balanced in this study by Mudge's

concrete historicism, Kappeler's theory can shine a helpful blacklight on the bed sheets of popular culture, to illuminate its indelible pornographic stain.

The pornographic structure of representation [is] ... the systematic objectification of women in the interest if the exclusive subjectification of men. [...] Writer and reader bond in the exercise of usurping female subjectivity and experience, moving into the whole available space of writing and of reading which thus become activities predicated upon the male gender. (103)

So what text does *not* reproduce this structure of representation? What in Hazlitt's writing gives Kappeler's theory its purchase? Turning from representation in general to more specific, class-based modes of modern dissemination, Kappeler suggests that the "respectable" recoil from pornography derives not from its graphic content but from its gross distribution, its marketplace promiscuity: there is "something 'sexist', certainly faintly (softly) pornographic in the idea of mass circulation" (27). And this idea derives from a nineteenth-century context of literary commercialization:

Commercial viability becomes centrally important to the Victorian understanding of the evils of "pornography." Certain artifacts became objectionable only when they were disseminated into the larger market [...] The Victorians created a "pornography," [Lisa] Sigel claims, in which "Objects became indecent through the act of viewing or reading" (4). Textual obscenity thus became commensurate with and contingent upon the commercial expansion of the industry. (Mudge 11)

Similar to Mudge's theory about the historical emergence of literature, as that which is not pornography, is that of Andrew Ross, who notes how "in the nineteenth century, the private act of reading (especially popular literature), on the part of the new reading public, was infernally associated with masturbation" (230). Jacques Derrida's seminal *Of Grammatology* traces that association back to Rousseau (151)—one of Hazlitt's major influences, and an intertextual force in both "The Fight" and *Liber Amoris*.

Hazlitt's writing in 1821-22 responds, implicitly, to the "prostituted gallantry" of an age *genderpellated* (i.e. interpellated in gendered terms) by the trial of Queen Caroline (qtd. in Fulford, *Romanticism* 235). And his writing at this time also exploits Walker, explicitly. So "The Fight" and *Liber Amoris*, as well as the *Table Talk* essays that refer to Walker, serialize Hazlitt's transactions between popular culture and pornography in texts that imbricate these nascent discourses through key images and rhetorical strategies.

Consider the intimate intertextual relays between "The Fight," as "cultural commentary" (Higgins 180), and *Liber Amoris*, as "emotional pornography" (Paulin, *Day-Star* 45). Hazlitt leaves numerous "digressive" allusions to Walker in "The Fight": "felicity" in his Spenser quotation (62) evokes his nickname for Walker, as his "Infelice"; he complains of his "bitter" life (64); and he bemoans the fading of his "fairest hopes" (68-9). A manuscript passage, "not expunged" but not published either (Wilcox 63), also describes a "servant-girl" of the type Hazlitt fetishizes in Walker (qtd. in Wilcox 51). In contrast, the fight is totally absent from *Liber Amoris*. A passage in which the narrator "le[aves] the house [...] determined to proceed" (31) suggests a departure for a steam-boat voyage, whereas the source passage in "The Fight" narrates a departure for the

match. Both texts share a vocabulary of violence: "H" in *Liber Amoris* masochistically subjects himself to an emotional melodrama strafed by "blows" (59, 62), "punishment" (31, 35), and "violence" (58, 68).

Critics attentive to the transplant of references to Walker from "The Fight" to *Liber Amoris* generally approve of the consequent reshaping of the former text on both stylistic and ethical grounds (Wilcox 77; cf. Bromwich 437 n. 10), and dismiss the remaining Walker references, which for Higgins "are brief and isolated and do not disrupt the flow of the story" (178). Only Wilcox qualifies his taste-based defence of Hazlitt's revisions by acknowledging that thrift in writing, to the point of self-cannibalization, was integral to Hazlitt's method: "the inclusion in his *livre d'amour* of passages expunged from the essay is [...] in conformity with his habit of making use of nearly every word he wrote" (4). Hazlitt's erasure of the fight from *Liber Amoris* and the frequency with which he was already publishing inappropriate glimpses of "his landlord's daughter in italics" (*Monthly Literary Register* qtd. in Wu, "Hazlitt's" 207) suggest that efficiency was more important than ethical prudence to Hazlitt's high-output craft; ostensibly digressive references to Walker proliferate throughout Hazlitt's work at this time. Wu "count[s] no less than five separate references to Sarah Walker" (207) in the two volumes of *Table Talk*, published in the spring of 1821 and the summer of 1822, respectively. The repetition of these references and their circulation among middle-class audiences turn Walker into "common" literary property that becomes the next open secret of a writer already well known to have a penchant for prostitutes (McCutcheon 433-34). Especially noteworthy here are the references to Walker in the essay "On Great and Little Things," published in the same *New Monthly* issue as "The Fight" (Jones 318).

"On Great and Little Things" shows Hazlitt at his most contradictory and misogynistic. After opening an abstract reflection on how "we pamper little griefs into great ones" (§2), he unfolds an "emotional biography" (Wardle 303). Apostrophizing Walker as his "Infelice," Hazlitt then declares his preference for "humble beauties, servant-maids and shepherd-girls"—and then his corresponding "aversion to blue-stockings. I do not care a fig for any woman that knows even what an author means" (§6). Let us forget here neither the "Ladies" his "Fight" addresses in the same *New Monthly* issue, nor the many books given by "H" to "S" in *Liber Amoris* (61). The apparent digression from psychological generalization to details of his love life is anything but: the whole essay dresses as psychological treatise a rant about Hazlitt's frustrated inability to wed or bed Walker. "It is the being balked or thwarted in any thing that constitutes the grievance [...] The more contemptible the object or the obstructions in the way to it, the more we are provoked at being hindered by them. It looks like witchcraft" (§1-2). "Fancying" himself rejected from "the courts of Love [...] because I was [...] above the common standard" (§6), Hazlitt revels in his "repulse" thence, idolizes Walker (as a "statue" [§6]), and identifies women as the "little things" that so vex him: "Poets choose mistresses who have the fewest charms, that they may make something out of nothing [...] any of the fair sex will serve them to write about just as well as another" (§7).

This essay also draws on the "network of allusions and associations" (Higgins 174) common to "The Fight" and *Liber Amoris*. Here is the language of "indulg[ing] our violence" and examples of games and contests (§2-3); here is talk of "barbarism" (§11), and even an explicit reflection on writers' pursuit of "the crown of popularity" (§6). But the recurring word "fancy" itself resonates most clearly with the other two works.

Recurring six times here, seven times in *Liber Amoris*, and nine times in "The Fight," *fancy* does a lot of work for Hazlitt's familiar vocabulary. It represents a psychic faculty, something like thought or imagination: "We fancy there is a spell upon us" ("On Great" ¶2). It mediates the social production of the subject: "You sit and fancy things out of your own head, and then lay them to my charge" (*Liber* 16). And it is slang (which Hazlitt deems categorically "vulgar" ["On Vulgarly" ¶3]) for the Regency prize-fight scene.

### On Staging Flights of Fancy

"The Fight" exploits the polysemy of "fancy" and other recurring keywords. In an early passage whose prunings go to *Liber Amoris*, Hazlitt "heard the clattering of a Brentford stage, and the fight rushed full upon my fancy" (62). Ironically, it is Hazlitt's fancy, including his fixation on Walker, that maintains his critical distance from the scene, as "a lover of the FANCY" (62, my emphasis), not a member of the fancy—who "are not men of imagination" (68). This description of Joe Toms, as a "lover" of the fancy, Hazlitt later applies to himself, in rhetorically asking whether "a love for the FANCY is incompatible with the cultivation of sentiment?" (72). As a lover of the fancy with only pretensions to full membership, Hazlitt eroticizes the outside-insider status then reproduced in the "Ladies," his readers whose fancy he would seduce through the pleasures of the text.

Other recurring words resonate with polysemy, and suggest that the formal coherence of the whole essay is not compromised but organized by the "liberty to digress" (62). The "Brentford stage," whose "box" Hazlitt mounts, contributes to how he "tropes the entire spectacle as theatre" (Juengel ¶19), adapting theatre vocabulary not just to the fight but to the systems of modern communication (meaning both transportation and dissemination) that make the fancy "common to many" (Williams, *Keywords* 72). Mounting the "box" with the driver of the "stage" inverts the class and value of the "stage-boxes" Hazlitt ridicules in *Table Talk* as seats where "great puppets [...] see nothing from the proper point of view, but peep and pry into what is going on" ("Whether Actors" ¶10). Whereas the theatre boxes pervert the view—"the stage is not a mistress that we are sworn to undress" (¶10)—the stagecoach boxes fuel Hazlitt's "force of imagination" ("Fight" 63). Hazlitt's dramatization of coach travel also everts the imperial image of the Royal Mail as "the sublimest object" (as he describes mail-coaches in "The Letter-Bell," anticipating De Quincey [207]). When Hazlitt gets "inside at Reading," the interior of Britain's emissary vehicle is occupied by the corrupt trainer Turtle and an "invalid" (63). This vulgar reterritorialization of imperial space is consistent with Hazlitt's revaluation of vulgarity itself, in a *Table Talk* essay on that subject that defends his fondness for Whitechapel's prostitutes, and redefines vulgarity as the gentility produced by slavish affectation: "It may be defined to be a prostitution of the mind or body to ape the more or less obvious defects of others" ("On Vulgarly" ¶3).

More than a "pilgrimage to a shrine of manly English virtue" (Higgins 178) or an affirmation of the "rigors of conversation" (Juengel ¶14), the essay's seemingly disproportionate account of the trips to and from the fight celebrate precisely the modern networks of communication that produce middle-class anxiety about the promiscuous indiscretions of "mass circulation," networks in which each node produces its own distinctive forms of discourse: the *flânerie* that gleans word-of-mouth intelligence from a source first spotted "through the glass-door of the *Hole in the Wall*" (61); the "ideal



perfection of mechanical conveyance" in stage- and mail-coaches (63) that cultivate "lively discourse" (64) and even historiography (73); an acquaintance's ironic failure to catch the mail-coaches for "staying to write a note" (65); the "public-houses" where Hazlitt capitalizes on a Cobbett-esque "English yeoman" for *Political Register* material (66); the fight scene as a theatre of cruelty, supplemented by Pigott's pocket "New Eloise" (72); even the "carrier-pigeons" that "flew with the news of her husband's victory to the bosom of Mrs Neate" (71)—a flight of fancy, indeed.

The imagery of communication networks relates to that of the climactic fight scene through figures of flight and consumption, according to Hazlitt's emergent modern sensibility of the rapid and diversifying commoditization of cultural forms. Once secured on the Bath mail, it "cut through the air like an arrow" (63), and inside, "the invalid in the Bath mail soared a pitch above the trainer" in conversational skill (64). In the fight, Hickman "flew at his adversary" with blows that "played with the rapidity of electricity" (69). Hazlitt's visceral style articulates these flights of fancy to gestures of ingestion: the mails drive "as if they would devour the ground before them" (63); once at ringside, the narrator describes being "swallowed up in the immediate interest of the scene" (68); and descriptions of Hickman's diet (64) and the narrator's supper (72) concretize this imagery. As "a critic but also a consumer of culture" (Mulvihill 39), Hazlitt develops a "conception of culture [...] grounded," as James Mulvihill argues, in an awareness of its mediatization, "an awareness of the workings of mediation, the process by which experience—'*handed down through the greatest number of intermediate stages*'—defines us and our world" ("Poetics" 541). Similarly, Cook calls Hazlitt a "proto-McLuhanite," for whom "communications technology is figured as extending human senses and capacities" (16). McLuhan's industrial folklore of "sex, technology, and death" (*Mechanical* 101) is on early display in "The Fight," and it is sustained, not diluted, by Hazlitt's digressions.

The essay's miscellaneous accounts of communications—the comings, goings, and connections among its characters—thematize Hazlitt's alertness to middle-class anxieties over mass circulation, and provide illustrative counterparts to his rhetorical digressions, several of which are digressions about his tendency to digress. Of his dialogue with Pigott, he values its digressiveness (62; cf. 71). His "lively discourse" in the mail-coach is dampened by the trainer's "confine[ment] in his topics," but reinvigorated when talk turns to boxers' training. Following this, he quotes Richmond to reflect on the "edifying" value "to see a variety"—then rejoins the scene, with a re-orienting "Where was I?" (64). Indiscreetly spilling secrets of public moment and private minutiae into "the public ear," Hazlitt's "liberty to digress" is an integral element of his "familiar" style, and here it becomes a way to articulate a modern perception of abundance and complexity in forms of communication and consociation to transgressions of race, gender, and class. Hazlitt's transgressive digressions—conjuring his "old master," alluding to Walker, or enjoying the adjacency of sentimental literature to bare-knuckle boxing—lend the essay its coherence as a self-consciously inappropriate diversion.

Like the rapid reappearance of the essay's excised passages on Walker in *Liber Amoris*, the ubiquity of digression in "The Fight" suggests not that certain digressions were simply left in but that digression itself, an improper formlessness, is the principle of the work's form. Presuming a relative unfamiliarity with the fancy on the part of his feminized audience, Hazlitt uses digressions to provide signposts for exposing readers to

the scene: literary quotations; character drama; and the narrator's love interest, elliptically phrased for openness to interpretation and identification. Digressions also produce vicarious, sublime thrills: missed travel connections, dodgy scene-makers, and a graphic ringside view of the brutal spectacle. The *intratextual* repetition of allusions to Walker reflects their *intertextual* serialization in Hazlitt's other works at this time, and here cement the imaginative premise of identification between writer and reader in proximity to, and critical difference from, the scene itself. As a lover (of the fancy), Hazlitt teases the romantic and solicits the respectable sensibilities of his middle-class audience.

Hazlitt's digressions about Walker also develop the identification of writer and reader by exploiting the optics of direct and "askance" viewing. Hazlitt neither cuts all references to Walker from "The Fight," nor leaves them to stand unremarked: crucially, he retains them *and* problematizes his decision to do so. "Is not this life more sweet than mine? *I was going to say*" (64, my emphasis). He *does* say what he *was going to say*; that is, he *says* what he *would not have said*. By leaving in these digressions and commenting on their supplementary presence, Hazlitt makes visible the process of making invisible. Obscenely, he demonstrates panoptic discipline of recognizing and turning from the obscene, of taking the obscene off-stage, leaving his text and desire open just enough for an audience "peep and pry into what is going on" (§10), simultaneously dressing and undressing the mistress of his stage.

Lastly, the digressive structure of the essay modulates what we might term its "pornographic cadences" (Brown 382).

in the rhythmic pulses of [...] sentences in which a single point is incessantly reiterated, reworked, driven, and thrust at its audience; [...] in the literalism and force of [...] abstract claims [...] which simultaneously structure the scene and permit any (man) his own imaginative entry into the scene; [...] in the direct and personalized form of address [...] In short, in its rehearsal of a powerful underground (pornographic) code of gender and sexuality [...] whose] putative radicalism simultaneously sustains the pleasure of the familiar [...] (381-2)

Wendy Brown's apt, ironic descriptor for the rhetoric of anti-pornography feminism lists textual forms that we also find in the "insistent and pounding quality" of Hazlitt's prose.

### **On Crimes Against Taste**

"Popularity," Hazlitt writes in "The Indian Jugglers," "is neither fame nor greatness" (122). If, as Paulin and others have claimed, "The Fight" is "about" prose style, this holds true for what happens outside as well as inside the ring; the essay is also necessarily "about" changes in modes of communication. The transformations in public culture and class structure between the Regency and Victorian periods, formalized in Hazlitt's networked productions and familiar style, balance this oppositional critic between residual, individual-based forms of eighteenth-century radicalism and the nineteenth century's emergent mobilizations of "mass insurgency" (Cook, "Hazlitt: Criticism" 152). Writing less for an emerging working-class audience than for an emerging middle-class audience, Hazlitt in "The Fight" and other essays from this period provides an exemplary and increasingly marketable bourgeois image of working-class "barbarities"—a polite

image of the popular, at a decisive moment of its formation, that reveals the gender-coding at work in modes of representation and dissemination, and thus in the modern idea of "popular culture" itself. By extension, this image also becomes prototypical for the volatile mixture of celebration, surveillance, and capitalization of "illegitimate" cultural fields and forms that has come to characterize (or stigmatize) Cultural Studies.

Articulated to his exploitation of the underground economies of sex and sport, Hazlitt's anonymous, serialized exposures of inappropriate subjects assume an exemplarity in historicizing the pornography of popularity—and the historiography of Cultural Studies.

Pressing questions have been asked about Cultural Studies' relation to illegitimate, transgressive, or otherwise "low" objects of inquiry, by (among others) Bill Readings, Imre Szeman, and Paul Gilroy, who asks "what pressures bear down upon the critics who broker and cheerlead for rebel cultures [...] What factors shape the way these intellectuals construct the political attributes of the lowly cultures they illuminate and pronounce upon?" (179-80). Like Gilroy, Readings suggests that the scholarly brokering of "lowly" cultures amounts to little more than marketing. And Szeman takes up Readings' critique of culture's "dereferentialized" availability to global capital (117), to call for "a new conception of culture" as such (106).

Concerned not with the canon-compromising "crimes against taste"<sup>5</sup> of which T. S. Eliot accused Hazlitt (qtd. in Bromwich, "Shoe" ¶1) than with the function and future of Humanities scholarship, questions like these can be brought into productive dialogue with feminist critiques of the increasing ubiquity and legitimacy of pornography, some of which trope this ubiquity and legitimacy as a saturation point or critical mass. A recent, persuasive invective against porn's popular ascendancy (written in a popular not scholarly mode) is Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), which critiques the contemporary colonization of female subjectivity by heterosexist porn aesthetics—and the corresponding erasure of feminism. In a scholarly vein, Rosi Braidotti writes, "postmodernity is marked by a widespread impact and a qualitative shift of pornography in every sphere of cultural activity [...] the becoming-culture of pornography means that any cultural activity or product can become a commodity and through that process express inequalities, patterns of exclusion, fantasies of domination, desire for power and control" (526-7). Mudge, too, despite his rigorous historicism, detects a recent shift: "pornography has been transformed from a debased and marginalized other into the quintessence of modern, popular culture" (34).

This reading of Hazlitt seeks to approach the "dereferentialization" (or reterritorialization) of culture from an oblique historiographic angle that counters the perceived novelty of pop culture's permeation by porn. That permeation is not a new symptom of postmodern cultural pathology; it is a historical outcome of the constitutive interpolation of those principles in the historical emergence of the category of popular culture, which, in the end, is no better than it ought to be. The question we might ask next is how to redefine popular culture against the grain of its prescribed, pornographic heteronormativity.

## Notes

1. I am indebted to Charles Mahoney's article "Periodical Indigestion: Hazlitt's Unpalatable Politics" for drawing my attention to this quotation.

2. Richard Hoggart sees Penguin and Pelican texts as popular, class-crossing distributors of canonical literature (253).
3. See Joel Faflak and Julia Wright's essay collection *Nervous Reactions: Victorian Recollections of Romanticism* for a reassessment of Romantic-Victorian periodization.
4. Paulin (qtd. In *The Fight* 571) and Wu (224) date the fight as taking place on 11 Dec. 1821, but Henry Downes Miles' account suggests it took place on 12 Dec.
5. I wish to thank Charles Robinson for helping me to source Eliot's quotation.

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