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The argument of Tim Milnes's latest book hinges on a paradigm shift within the tradition of the genre in question: neoclassical essayists such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Samuel Johnson, and David Hume started out from an apodictic, or value- and truth-affirming, agenda, whereas their Romantic successors, most notably William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, sought to actively 'produce' such 'social and epistemological norms through the exercise of imaginative power' (viii). Hence the book's title, borrowed from Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785): it implies the interplay between the subjective testimony of an individual's sensory perception and her or his trust in the intersubjective testimony of another person (ix). But the title also, with an air of gentle polemic, evokes Uttara Natarajan's *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense* (1998), which broke new ground in the elaboration of Hazlitt's metaphysics as underpinning precisely his 'exercise of imaginative power'.

Hume the philosopher, essayist, and philosopher of the essay emerges as the trailblazer of this paradigm shift, as he deliberately abandoned 'philosophy's apodictic status [...] in favour of a conception of reflective thought as the negotiation of adjustments in rhetoric and consensus-building' (109). Hume hence functions not so much as the starting point but guiding presence throughout the book. Milnes's introduction accordingly concentrates on Hume's project to bridge philosophy and conversation in the familiar essay. It argues that knowledge and subjectivity are not 'punctual' but 'relational' in Hume, and that interpersonal 'trust' hence represents a 'social a priori', or 'a form of natural transcendentalism' located within the community (12–14).

Chapter 1 contextualizes this intersubjectivity with respect to the works of Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Adam Smith, and in contradistinction to the 'psychologism' of John Locke and its continuation in Joseph Priestley and David Hartley (59). 'For Smith,' Milnes observes, 'conscience is ineluctably bound up with relationships in which we are actively involved as spectators and agents' (40). Reid's empiricism, by contrast, moves towards a more 'active interpretation' of the mind 'by grounding experience in a social intuition that is treated as philosophically foundational' (45, 47). Crucial in Stewart is that his 'epistemology rests upon an anthropological account of truth in which even the most basic and self-evident elements of reason derive their legitimacy from needs that are social and biological as well as logical' (56). These facets of a shared 'social a priori' elucidate Hume's emphasis on style, for his 'socialized empiricism uncovers a moral and aesthetic dimension to knowledge, raising in turn the epistemological profiles of virtue and taste' (28).
Chapter 2 then focuses on the notion of intersubjective trust as ‘the most fundamental of the social-transcendental conditions of knowledge’ (73). Trust, Milnes argues with Hume and against Rousseau, ‘presupposes a fundamental indeterminacy and unpredictability in human thought and behaviour’ (77); is ‘prone to performative misfire in ways that threaten the intersubjective economy of knowledge’ (77); and is ‘epistemologically basic’ since we trust the testimony of others for the acquisition of knowledge and ascertainment of truth (82). A ‘finely balanced truth-economy of trust’ hence becomes the aim of Hume’s characteristic ‘tact, irony, and essayistic diplomacy’ (78), Milnes argues, before he examines, in Chapter 3, the role of language in mainly the aforementioned thinkers, but also in Monboddo, Berkeley, Condillac, Horne Tooke, and Bentham. Amidst all of them, Milnes finds that ‘[f]or Hume, the phenomenal contents of our experience are insufficient for validating the referential contents of our words and sentences’, and that, because of this ‘absence of an empirical foundation’, the ‘conventions of human language’ regulate meaning (109–10). ‘For Hume, Reid, and Bentham’, Milnes concludes, ‘the performance of certain virtues, instead of merely honouring the values of a rational, civilized society, becomes the condition of possibility for such a society’ (133).

This elaboration of performativity paves the way for Chapter 4 and its comparison of Hume and Johnson. Milnes observes that for Hume, ‘the moderation of public discourse involves the essayist policing polite culture via performances that reinforce and consolidate the conventions that ultimately underpin all norms’, whereas for Johnson, ‘moral norms themselves fundamentally determine the legitimacy of human performances’ (149). In other words, these two essayists seek primacy in social convention and moral-religious duty, respectively (172–3). Yet both agreed that ‘abstract philosophy wounded precisely where it healed’ – that it created a ‘breach’ between ‘enlightened, scientific knowledge’ and ‘quotidian thought’ – and that therefore ‘the resulting scars could not simply be removed by the application of more reasoning’ (165). Johnson resolved this through ‘the grand style’ of his ‘periodical sentence, which [...] effects the very act of intellectual containment that its logic cannot’, thus surpassing Addison and Steele in the recognition that style itself is ‘epistemologically constitutive’ (168).

The fifth and final chapter, entitled ‘Romantic Essayism’, then extends this thread to Hazlitt. Milnes here argues that Hazlitt elevated the diplomatic ‘liminality’ of the Humean essayist (situated between ‘rhetoric and seriousness’) ‘into an aesthetics of the sublime’ which is itself hybrid in the imaginative transcendence of the empiricist terminology that it continues to apply (193–4). Lamb, comparably, achieves his own characteristic kind of imaginative-empiricist liminality ‘through a sophisticated form of literary enchantment’ (195). Both Romantic essayists, Milnes explains, were driven by the increasing diversification of knowledge, concomitant proliferation of print, a fragmentation of the public sphere that occasioned a loss of interpersonal trust, and a shared opposition to mechanistic utilitarianism (198-9). Crucially, however, Lamb and Hazlitt also shared a scepticism towards the reading public that led them to aspire to a disinterested, or aestheticized, ‘form of social empiricism’ beyond the ‘general consensus’ of Hume (201, 240).
Approached from a different angle, one thing connecting Hazlitt with Hume is that the former accepts the latter’s ‘conclusion that the exhaustive determination of belief by sense-experience (the perfect correspondence of idea and world) was not a viable model for knowledge’ (204). Hazlitt resolves this ‘by inflating the cognitive function of consciousness still further’, expounding the ‘projection of concepts or ideas upon the world by a powerful mind’ (204). Milnes rejects a significant agreement with Kant behind this notion of power as proposed by Roy Park and Natarajan (as well as myself), and puts forward a view closer to those of David Bromwich, René Wellek, and Elizabeth Schneider (202 and n.42; 206–7 and n.64). The Humean role of the passions in relation to the imagination in Hazlitt is key to this verdict (231). Hazlitt, Milnes concludes, remains rooted in ‘a British tradition of thinking about the problems of knowledge and experience in psychological terms’, as ‘he paints a picture of human experience that pits one form of power (abstraction) against another (imagination)’ (208). Milnes calls this a ‘supersensory faculty of “common sense”’ (224). It originates in Hazlitt’s elaboration of disinterestedness as the mind’s power to transcend identities in his Essay on the Principles of Human Action (1805) – a power which, Milnes now agrees with Natarajan, also sustains the Hazlittean conceptualization of the imagination as aesthetic creator (212–13).

While Hazlitt thus continues to invest in philosophy throughout his career, Lamb (unknowingly) follows Hume as he ‘respond[s] to the challenge of scepticism by turning philosophical doubt against philosophy itself’ (216). Lamb thereby frees reason from the appropriating purpose of knowledge acquisition, while also sharing ‘Hume’s interest in elevating the epistemological status of sociability’ (221). Hazlitt, in comparison, ‘addresses his reader through a form of aestheticized intersubjectivity, the normative force of which […] is figured as noumenal and aesthetic rather than as consensual (à la Hume) or sceptically didactic (à la Johnson)’ (239). Reading Hazlitt as a quasi-Humean proponent of polite conversation would indeed be a stretch. Milnes’s explanation for this is that Hazlitt asserts the ‘priority of the expressive over the performative’ (243). In such expressiveness lies the immediacy or sublime force of Hazlitt’s imagination as well as its intrinsic moral truth. Hazlitt’s dialogical style, then, avoids didacticism and the notion of an underlying stable identity as it dynamically circumscribes an ‘incommunicable but authentic feeling’ (251). By contrast, the ‘creative act of imagination that underlies selfhood in Lamb is the product of a thoroughly artistic performance’ (246). Elia (famously the anagram of ‘a lie’) hence develops an ‘essayism’ which ‘grounds itself not in truthfulness but in the enchantment of a performance’, while ‘model[ling] its experimental approach to life entirely upon the trials of communication’, making the ‘admission of defeat’ its ‘enabling principle’, and thus ‘convert[ing] epistemic disappointment into affective profit’ (247–9). Hume’s smooth, or easy, sociability, however, is replaced by Lamb’s gently contrarian whimsicality (251).

Perhaps it goes without saying that a chapter on ‘Romantic Essayism’ will contain a plethora of references to Hazlitt and his multifaceted work. But the reader of Milnes’s book will have to work those out for her- or himself, because the
index does not give them away. It lists only those three references to our essayist that can be traced in the preface and introduction (275). Nor does the index list any subheadings for references to Hazlitt, Lamb, and Johnson, as it does for Hume, Reid, Stewart, Smith, and Locke. Yet such a limitation of meta-testimony, as it were, is misleading insofar as it implies an imbalance within the book, which is far from the case. Quite the contrary: the reader’s active engagement with the book’s Hazlittean concerns will be well worth the effort, as the breadth of Milnes’s reading impresses just as much as the logical precision and cogency with which he pursues his line of argument. Where Milnes excels the most – and this is also what makes his book essayistic in character – is the ease with which he switches intellectual perspectives in order to examine the interrelationships among his chosen authors. With every new angle, his reader discovers a new constellation of parallels, likenesses, and disagreements, and thus experiences the complexity of the subject matter. All in all, then, Milnes’s book is a finely discriminating and persuasive contribution to the scholarly debate on philosophies of intersubjectivity and disinterestedness, candid conversational style amid social conventions, and ethics that lies at the very heart of Hazlitt’s incomparable achievements as an essayist.

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The Hazlitt Society grew out of the project to restore Hazlitt’s long-neglected grave in St Anne’s churchyard, Soho. It was restored by public subscription and the renewed gravestone, in black Lakeland slate, was unveiled by Michael Foot on the 225th anniversary of Hazlitt’s birth, 10 April 2003. The committee which was formed for the purpose of the restoration established the Society to encourage appreciation of Hazlitt’s work and to promote his values.

Each year there is a lecture by an eminent Hazlitt scholar on the Saturday closest to 18 September, the day Hazlitt died. A newsletter, sent out in the spring of each year, alerts members of the Society to this lecture, which is free of charge, and any other events that may be of interest to admirers of Hazlitt.

The Society is closely associated with the annual Hazlitt Day-school that takes place on the same day as the annual lecture in London. Members qualify for concessionary rates.

The Society publishes The Hazlitt Review.

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