



## Hazlitt as a Thinker

**H**enry Hazlitt was not only a prolific writer, he also succeeded at it early in life. In an unpublished autobiography, Hazlitt recalls that before landing his job at the *Wall Street Journal* in 1913, at the age of about 18, he finished writing his first book, “with the modest title” *Thinking as a Science*. He gave the manuscript to a friend, Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), who later became a prominent critic and historian, for comment.

Meanwhile, Hazlitt sent it to five or more publishers, each of which returned it with a form rejection. “Finally discouraged,” he recalls, “I put it away in a drawer somewhere, where it lay for many months.”

Then Mumford, having just read a book on thinking that he regarded as inferior to Hazlitt’s, inquired about his manuscript. “I was ashamed to tell him of all my rejections and final discouragement,” Hazlitt says. “So I mailed the manuscript off to still another publisher, E. P. Dutton & Company, then wrote Lewis admitting the previous rejections, but telling him the book was now in Dutton’s hands.”

About a month later, Hazlitt received a phone call from his mother while he was at work. “Dutton’s has taken your book!” she said. Hazlitt assumed she had misunderstood the letter, so she read it to him. The first thing he did was “leap in the air.”

His next feeling was fear. “I was afraid to accept Dutton’s invitation to come to their

office. I was sure that when they saw this kid they would try to get out of their offer. But finally I overcame my reluctance.” He snapped at Dutton’s offer, though the terms “would be considered incredible today”: no royalties on the first 1,000 copies. “I do not believe the royalty rate rose above 10 percent,” he writes.

As Hazlitt recalled the big day:

A Mr. Acklom, who interviewed me, seemed to feel at one point that I did not sufficiently realize the chance they were taking on me. “You know, we make money on only one out of five of the books we print,” he said.

I must have looked at him as if he were a fool. “Why do you publish the other four?”

Hazlitt reports that the book “sold well for the market in those days.” But how many copies, he didn’t remember.

“So I was an author,” Hazlitt wrote. “The notion went a little to my head, and it led me to make a serious mistake.” The mistake was to imitate the writing style of Arnold Bennett, the British author whose self-improvement books had caught Hazlitt’s fancy. “Then I wrote a full-length book, *The Way to Will Power*, in direct imitation of his style and themes, and submitted it to Dutton’s. They published it! They had hardly done so when I realized that I had done the wrong thing; and for years, up to the present writing, I did not list the book among my writings in my *Who’s Who* entry.”

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*Thinking as a Science* came out in 1916, when Hazlitt was 21. He begins by noting that for each person a particular evil stands out above the rest. “I, too, have a pet little evil, to which in more passionate moments I am apt to attribute all the others. This evil is the neglect of thinking. And when I say thinking, I mean real thinking, independent thinking, hard thinking.” And by that he meant “thinking with a purpose, with an end in view, thinking to solve a problem.”

He proceeds to ruminate on thinking in great detail, outlining various methods and offering advice on how to think efficiently and maintain concentration. He discusses the relationship between thinking and writing, and thinking and reading. On the latter, Hazlitt endorses Schopenhauer’s statement that “the safest way to have no thoughts of one’s own is to take up a book every moment one has nothing else to do.” Hazlitt was a champion of engaging in a little “unaided thought” about a subject before reading anything about it. To the man who claimed that one cannot say anything intelligent about economics before reading *The Wealth of Nations*, Hazlitt replied, “If this be true, Adam Smith himself was hardly qualified because he certainly could not have read his own book before he had written it!”

### **“Rules Are Needful”**

Hazlitt concedes that “The great thinkers of the past improved their innate powers not by the study of rules for thinking, but by reading the works of other great thinkers, and unconsciously imitating their habitual method and caution.” But he goes on to state that “Rules are needful because they teach in little time what would otherwise require much experience to learn, or which we might never discover for ourselves at all.”

Hazlitt’s chapter on prejudice is particularly relevant to those who wish to help others see the virtues of the freedom philosophy. He points out that people often hold to an opinion for reasons other than its validity. A person may resist changing an opinion because he has a personal interest in it, or because he has held it for a long while, or because changing it would require changing other opinions too, or because his current opinion is fashionable—or unfashionable. What we can learn from Hazlitt is that such a person is not likely to be open to the logic of sound economics and political philosophy. This fact reinforces FEE founder Leonard E. Read’s principle that one should speak about the freedom philosophy only when someone has expressed interest in it. Force-feeding is not likely to succeed. Hazlitt’s chapter brings to mind Jonathan Swift’s maxim: “It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into.”

For Hazlitt, prejudice is not something to watch for only in others: “The distinguishing mark of the great thinkers of the ages was their comparative freedom from the prejudices of their time and community. In order to avoid these prejudices one must be constantly and uncompromisingly sounding his own opinions. Eternal vigilance is the price of an open mind.”

In 1969 a new, slightly updated edition of Hazlitt’s book was published. (This edition was reissued by University Press of the Pacific last summer.) In a new preface, Hazlitt explains that he resisted the temptation to rewrite the book, but he did add an epilogue discussing how he’d write it anew. Hazlitt fans will enjoy seeing the changes in this remarkable man’s thinking between the ages of 21 and 75. □