

On William Hazlitt  
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William Hazlitt (1778-1830) was an English philosopher, essayist, social commentator, lecturer, journalist, literary critic, and portraitist. Little known in our time, his essays are arguably among the best ever written in the English language, providing readers with fresh insights into such notables as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Byron, Milton, and Keats. He also dealt with candid and revealing personal material: the title of one of his essays, “On the Pleasures of Hating.” Hazlitt has been called “the original blogger.”

Hazlitt championed human freedom. Reputed to be his last written words were these:

I have had nothing to do all my life but to think, and have enjoyed the objects of thought, the sense of truth and beauty, in perfect integrity of soul. No one has said to me, believe this, do that, say what we would have you; no one has come between me and my free will. I have breathed the very air of truth and independence. Compared with this unbiased, uncontrolled possession of the universe of thought and nature, what I have wanted is light in the balance, and hardly claims the tribute of a sigh. Oh! Liberty, what a mistress art thou! Have I not enjoyed thee as a bride, and drank thy spirit as of a wine-cup, and will yet do so to my latest breath!<sup>1</sup>

A collection of his maxims, *Characteristics: In the Manner of Rochefoucault's Maxims*, can be read free online. <https://archive.org/details/characteristicsi00hazl> An example, Hazlitt on what we would call in our time giving and getting the cold shoulder: “Obstinate silence implies either a mean opinion of ourselves or contempt of our company, and it is more provoking as others do not know which cause to attribute it.” And on this same topic: “Silence proceeds either from want of something to say or from phlegmatic indifference which closes our lips.”

The playwright David Mamet has, he says, drawn upon Hazlitt (I couldn't find what may have prompted it in the book of maxims) to suggest: “Don't try to suck up or even be nice to your intellectual inferiors. They'll only hate you more for it.” And Mamet offers this

corollary: “If you are smarter than the other guy, be smarter than the other guy.”\*\*

Hazlitt’s essay collections, *Table Talk: Essays on Men and Manners* (free) and *The Plain Speaker* (\$5.99) can be obtained in Kindle editions at Amazon, as well as in university libraries. Also, there is two relatively recent biographies of Hazlitt: *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt*, by A.C. Grayling (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000); and the one by Duncan Hu cited in the first footnote below.

It might be worth your time to check into Hazlitt to see what’s there for you.

\* Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition, 2010) p.43.

\*\* Quoted in John Lahr, *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles* (Overlook Press, 2000) p. 47.