

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-44253-5 - Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens

Nikki Hessell

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: reporting and  
the individual talent*

The literary careers of Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt and Charles Dickens encompass a diverse range of genres, periods, influences and styles. But while their literary careers might not have much in common, their careers as parliamentary reporters share some compelling attributes. All four began reporting on Parliament at a relatively young age: Hazlitt was only thirty-four, Johnson and Coleridge were not yet thirty and Dickens was not yet twenty. All were drawn to parliamentary reporting as a source of income readily available to talented writers, but also appear to have had an ongoing fascination with both politics and oratory. None of the authors had established a literary reputation at the time they began reporting, with the partial exception of Coleridge, who nevertheless still had many of his major works ahead of him. All four were ultimately prolific journalists and, perhaps more importantly, understood the role that journalism played in supporting and developing a literary career.

There is one final significant connection between them: their parliamentary journalism has been subjected to very similar scholarly critiques over the past century. These critiques typically manifest at least one of the following characteristics. They evaluate the author's reports with little or no reference to contemporary examples from other journalists. They do not take into consideration the conditions governing parliamentary reporting in the relevant period. They read the author's reports with one eye on his later literary reputation and then, perhaps predictably, find the embryo of that reputation in the parliamentary journalism. Finally, and as a result of these approaches, they conclude that the author's reports were special, memorable, transcendent.

It is a common feature of the popular conception of literary lives to enjoy the early struggles of the unappreciated genius; there is a sense in which we are quite pleased, for example, by the attacks on Keats's work

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because it helps to reinforce an image of the wider world as hostile to the fragility of talent. But this particular brand of satisfaction can only occur if we believe that the overlooked sparks were in fact there. In the case of poems, plays and novels, literary critics and readers tend to have the background and the information to make these judgments; juvenilia and promising false starts can thus be justly analyzed. As has long since been argued within the field of periodical studies, genres such as journalism require the same approach; they need to be read within the context of a solid foundation of knowledge about the form in general and the conditions of composition in particular. Because this knowledge is often absent from the critic's or biographer's repertoire in the case of parliamentary reporting – and thus not passed on to the reader either – the template of the literary life is superimposed instead: the sparks of genius, especially the peculiar genius of the writer in question, were there, because they must have been. This chapter outlines the various critical heritages that have come down to us in relation to the four authors' parliamentary reports. At its conclusion, I offer an alternative approach to these heritages, one that involves direct engagement with the abundant source material on normal gallery procedure, the expectations of editors, journalists and readers, and the style of reporting in each of the relevant eras.

#### THE CRITICAL HERITAGE: SAMUEL JOHNSON'S CREATIVE ABILITIES

Lawrence Lipking presents a common view of Samuel Johnson's collected parliamentary reports, *Debates in the Senate of Lilliput*, when he writes that Johnson "dedicates his hack work to the ages."<sup>1</sup> The implication is that even Johnson's dreariest literary outputs are written for posterity, moving beyond their immediate context and fitting in neatly with his later monumental reputation. Such a view helps to generate sympathetic readings of the debates but also contributes to a general unwillingness to evaluate them as pieces of journalism operating within a specifically journalistic context, attributing Johnson's success as a parliamentary reporter instead to an underlying genius that is inherently literary, in the sense that what are considered to be the successful elements of his reports are those which bear his stylistic signature or which manifest an attention to such

<sup>1</sup> Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 74.

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literary devices as rhetoric and allusion, rather than those that emerge from the competitive market for magazine journalism at the time.

This interpretation began with the Stockdale edition of the *Debates*. Johnson himself had pointed out that he had only attended Parliament on one occasion and instead worked from notes supplied by others.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to the collected debates, Stockdale suggested:

It is undoubtedly true, that the Parliamentary motions, which are contained in the following sheets, were made, and that they were supported and opposed by the assigned speakers: but, it must be acknowledged, that Johnson did not give so much what they respectively said as what each ought to have said. These debates, then, may be considered as so many distinct dramas, in which, on extraordinary occasions of public expectations, known characters of considerable consequence were brought forward to act their particular parts.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in the same year, Sir John Hawkins reserved special praise for Johnson's reports: "Never were the force of reasoning or the powers of popular eloquence more evidently displayed, or the arts of sophistry more clearly detected than in these animated compositions."<sup>4</sup>

Later critics have been more circumspect but remain influenced by the notion of Johnson's superior literary talent as a driving force in the success of the coverage. In particular, these scholars have noted the thematic patterns in reports, patterns that are generally attributed to Johnson's own political and intellectual interests. Edward A. Bloom argues that the success of Johnson's reports rests "not on the fact or lack of historical veracity, but rather on their literary and philosophical quality. His achievement was the reshaping of scanty facts available to him so that they became the unmistakable expressions of his own attitudes."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most excessively, W. Jackson Bate calls Johnson's reportage "one of the most remarkable feats in the entire history of journalism."<sup>6</sup> The latest spate of Johnson biographies, published to coincide with the 300th anniversary of his birth, repeat many of these claims.<sup>7</sup>

Greater caution and more reasoned analysis can be found in the work of Benjamin Beard Hoover, Donald J. Greene, James L. Clifford and Thomas Kaminski. In making his case, Hoover rightly reminded readers

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, *An Essay*, 45.      <sup>3</sup> S. Johnson, *Debates in Parliament*, 1: vi–vii.

<sup>4</sup> Hawkins, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 64.      <sup>5</sup> Bloom, *Samuel Johnson in Grub Street*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Meyers, *Samuel Johnson*, 141–45, and Martin, *Samuel Johnson*, 178–81. While neither biography makes especially grand claims for Johnson's reports, the standard narrative of his achievement is not challenged.

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that the *Debates* are not “a magnificent *tour de force*,” but even he was prone to praising Johnson’s “classical eloquence.”<sup>8</sup> Greene likewise elevates Johnson’s technique by calling him “the Thucydides of the great political wars of the 1740s.”<sup>9</sup> Clifford, meanwhile, points out that Johnson’s debates

[d]espite occasional dramatic touches, with interruptions and quips as if in actual debate ... are more like short essays on a particular theme. They are moral disquisitions, full of abstract reasoning, expressed in Johnson’s own characteristic strong and antithetical manner.

Forced to make up a large part of his material, Johnson took the opportunity to stress many of his own dominant interests. In his imagined great arena of Parliament he could discuss what most concerned him – the power of the people, representative government, basic questions of individual liberty and civic morality. He was always intent on a larger design, on universal principles, much more, we may suspect, than were the real Parliamentary speakers in their actual orations. Here was a ready-made public forum in which he could discuss at length the major political and ethical problems of the age.<sup>10</sup>

Clifford’s suspicion that Johnson naturally gave more thought to “universal principles” than did MPs is not substantiated, beyond an appeal to a common critical and popular bias that authors are more profound thinkers than statesmen. Even more problematically, Clifford implicitly proposes that reports that highlighted such universal principles were inherently excellent, as if the quality of parliamentary reporting in the 1730s and 1740s was undoubtedly measured in such a way. Finally, in one of the most recent and persuasive evaluations of Johnson’s parliamentary work, Thomas Kaminski calls the debates neither “detailed records of fact [nor] particularly realistic fictions,” positing instead that Johnson “could express [politicians’] sentiments more elegantly than they could themselves, and he could hone their reasonings and marshall [*sic*] their arguments with an eye to the overall effect of the debate.”<sup>11</sup>

While Greene, Clifford and Kaminski provide rational readings of this aspect of Johnson’s oeuvre that remind readers not only of the many flaws and limitations of the debates but also of the extent to which they were deliberate reconstructions molded by other practices, their interpretations remain centered on Johnson’s personality, habits and literary talents.

<sup>8</sup> Hoover, *Samuel Johnson’s Parliamentary Reports*, 55, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Greene, *Politics of Samuel Johnson*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 248–49.

<sup>11</sup> Kaminski, *Early Career of Samuel Johnson*, 129.

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Johnson himself sits at the heart of these readings, a figure whose later fame and genius inevitably color the interpretations of even such overtly contextualized scholarly titles as *Young Samuel Johnson*. In particular, the literary characteristics that so enchanted contemporaries such as Hawkins remain an important benchmark for analyzing and assigning value to the Lilliputian debates. Very few comparisons with other reports, undertaken by reporters such as those at the rival *London Magazine*, are made to support the assertion that Johnson's reports were unique or exemplary.<sup>12</sup> They are instead read simply as Johnsonian.

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE: SAMUEL TAYLOR  
COLERIDGE'S POETIC LICENSE

Coleridge's time in the gallery has not received such detailed criticism as Johnson's, in part because it resulted in a small body of work: just three reports for the *Morning Post* in the space of a few weeks in February 1800. It is not discussed, for example, in the overview of his journalism by Deirdre Coleman, and is mentioned only briefly by Richard Holmes in his biography.<sup>13</sup> Yet the limited critical analysis of these reports manifests some of the same characteristics as the analyses of Johnson's work, in that the author's literary pedigree and personality is front and center. Coleridge's short career in the gallery is almost inevitably discussed in terms of his poetry and his character, not the work of his fellow journalists or the nature of their reports. As I have already suggested, and as is the case for all four authors in my study, this approach is natural and understandable in studies that are concerned primarily with the life and work of a major literary figure, but it does not guarantee (and perhaps even hampers) a sound and substantiated account of his achievement as a gallery journalist. The earliest history of journalism to investigate this moment in Coleridge's career, for example, painted him as manifestly unsuitable for such work owing to an almost stereotyped notion of the

<sup>12</sup> The sections of the major critical and biographical studies that deal with Johnson's parliamentary reporting rarely offer any direct comparisons with the *London Magazine's* coverage or other sources for the speeches. This lack can be seen, for example, in Folkenflik, "Johnson's Politics," 108–9; Greene, *Politics of Samuel Johnson*, 113–33; Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 175–207; Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 74; Cannon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England*, 279–81; Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print*, 162–63; and Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 246–53.

<sup>13</sup> Coleman, "The Journalist," 126–41, and Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 256.

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poetic sensibility; the post of parliamentary reporter was one “the poet and philosopher was unfitted to fulfil.”<sup>14</sup> This impression of unsuitability remained influential, and can be seen in Zachary Leader’s comment, in his sparkling reassessment of the journalism, that as well as composing political articles for the *Morning Post*, Coleridge wrote “non-political essays, profiles, leading paragraphs, even parliamentary reports,” that suggestive “even” implying some surprise that Coleridge would have involved himself in the work of the press gallery.<sup>15</sup>

In the analyses that followed Andrews’s study, Coleridge emerged as a much better gallery reporter than this suggests, but the stereotype of the visionary Coleridge, familiar to fans of the major poems, persisted. Wilfrid Hindle, whose history of the *Morning Post* appeared in 1937, only mentions Coleridge’s parliamentary reports in passing, but it is revealing that he titles the relevant chapter “Lake Poets in Grub Street.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Michael Macdonagh’s research in the early twentieth century praised Coleridge’s achievement as a parliamentary reporter but also firmly linked it to his literary abilities. Having quoted part of another journalist’s account of one particular speech, for example, Macdonagh turns to the question of “how the author of that weird and enchanting poem ‘The Antient Mariner,’ bent himself to the prosaic task of recording the same passages. I think it will be agreed that they were most finely rendered of all by the poet, philosopher and metaphysician.”<sup>17</sup> It is useful to see some direct comparison made in this assessment, but the definition of what constitutes the finest passages seems inherently literary, not journalistic. Macdonagh clearly wants us to read the reports in the context of Coleridge’s poetry. In that context, he is also surprised by the pleasure his subject took in some of his reports; one particularly effusive remark from Coleridge leads Macdonagh to comment that “[i]t would seem as if his wonderful poem, ‘The Rime of the Antient [sic] Mariner,’ gave less exaltation to Coleridge than his version of what William Pitt said on a certain night in the House of Commons.”<sup>18</sup> The apparent incongruity of a literary luminary lowering himself to the task of reporting sits uneasily with Macdonagh, who asks: “Was it not, then, a strange and incongruous phase of his career that he with a brain so extraordinarily fertile in brilliant thoughts on all sorts of subjects ... should have set himself

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, *History of British Journalism*, II: 6.

<sup>15</sup> Leader, “Coleridge and the Uses of Journalism,” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Hindle, *Morning Post*, 86–104. <sup>17</sup> Macdonagh, *Reporters’ Gallery*, 304.

<sup>18</sup> Macdonagh, *Reporters’ Gallery*, 299.

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to the task of recording the reflections on politics of men of far inferior intellects?"<sup>19</sup> This uneasiness might be the automatic response of most fans of great literature, but it does raise an interesting question: why is it important to us to construe this period of a writer's life as either inherently demeaning or something that they are able to rise above, in preference to a sustained and substantiated analysis of how (and how well) they performed the task at hand?

David Erdman's 1960 study of Coleridge's reports is both more detailed and more balanced than these accounts, and contains an extremely important comparison of the reports with other contemporary examples, but it is also occasionally caught up in the idea that its subject's poetic talent elevated him above his fellow reporters. While making it clear that Coleridge "was not the only creative journalist in the gallery of the House," Erdman still links the evidence of creativity to the canonical poems.<sup>20</sup> When attempting to deduce the motives for reporting a speech in a particular way, for example, Erdman writes that "Coleridge more often makes the poet's kind of reinterpretation," suggesting a creative reportorial style that derives directly from his verse.<sup>21</sup> It is telling that Erdman called his article "Coleridge in Lilliput," in a clear reference to Johnson's *Debates in the Senate of Lilliput*; Coleridge's literary legacy proves to be just as inescapable as that of his forebear. Though they provide worthwhile insights into the way scholars have thought about Coleridge's parliamentary journalism, these analyses are all many years out of date and naturally do not reflect the latest thinking in periodical research.

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE: WILLIAM  
HAZLITT'S CRITICAL EYE

Accounts of Hazlitt's parliamentary reporting almost invariably suggest, with palpable admiration, that he loathed the job. Catherine Macdonald Maclean noted that "[d]ay in day out he had to listen to the same things repeated over and over again. This to a man of his temperament was galling."<sup>22</sup> Stanley Jones believes that "we may imagine moments when the debates he was now forced to attend for long hours made him angry as well as ashamed. A man of his political views must have found it difficult to record impartially claims and assertions that filled him with

<sup>19</sup> Macdonagh, *Reporters' Gallery*, 306–7.<sup>20</sup> Erdman, "Coleridge in Lilliput," 46.<sup>21</sup> Erdman, "Coleridge in Lilliput," 48.<sup>22</sup> Maclean, *Born Under Saturn*, 297.

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irritation or disgust.”<sup>23</sup> Reporting is variously described in these accounts as “lowly,” a form of “drudgery,” or a descent “from the sublime to the (comparatively) ridiculous.”<sup>24</sup> Hazlitt is portrayed as being “confined ... to the journalists’ benches in Parliament.”<sup>25</sup> In these narratives, reporting is always something that was inflicted on Hazlitt, something he was forced to do, never something that he might have chosen, despite evidence to the contrary.

These accounts often do not acknowledge four important nuances in Hazlitt’s relationship with Parliament. The first of these nuances is that, as James Mulvihill has persuasively argued, parliamentary oratory always fascinated Hazlitt, from his work on *The Eloquence of the British Senate* through to his later reflections in the essay “On the Present State of Parliamentary Eloquence” and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Listening to parliamentary speeches, whether as a reporter or as a member of the public, provided him with some important material for later reflections, and he returned again and again to the source of this material. Second, while it is true that Hazlitt was often scornful about parliamentary speech, he also drew critical strength from such instances, using his experiences as the basis for thorough meditations on the nature of speechmaking and reasoning. His consideration of the shortcomings of George Canning’s addresses, for example, occupied eight pages of *The Spirit of the Age* and provided Hazlitt with important insights into the nature of oratory and rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> Third, his scorn was by no means universal. Parliamentarians such as Plunket and Whitbread receive a lot of praise in his work, and even less capable or more odious speakers are discussed in some analytical detail. Finally, the critical accounts often conflate Hazlitt’s scorn for parliamentary speaking with scorn for the role of the reporter. In fact, he left very few comments on the work of the press gallery, and those that remain are not unequivocally damning. As A. C. Grayling has highlighted, his contemporaries did not feel that he loathed the work; Crabb Robinson described Hazlitt “in high spirits; he finds his engagement with [the *Morning Chronicle*’s

<sup>23</sup> S. Jones, *Hazlitt*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Baker, *William Hazlitt*, 192 and 193; and Birrell, *William Hazlitt*, 96, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Wu, ed., *New Writings*, 1: 27.

<sup>26</sup> Mulvihill, “Hazlitt on Parliamentary Eloquence,” 132.

<sup>27</sup> Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, xi: 150–58. There are similar insights about other politicians in “On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking,” xi: 262–79, especially 265–75. For a discussion of these insights, see Mulvihill, 132–46, and Anderson and King, “William Hazlitt as a Critic of Parliamentary Speaking,” 47–56.



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editor James Perry] as Parliamentary reporter very easy ... He seems quite happy.<sup>28</sup>

Duncan Wu's recent work on Hazlitt in the edition *New Writings of William Hazlitt* and the biography *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* avoids many of these oversimplifications. Wu points out that Hazlitt seemed to enjoy the work and that there were speakers he admired.<sup>29</sup> Some of Wu's language, however, reflects the older consensus about this phase of his subject's life; he describes Hazlitt's "irritation at the enforced passivity" of parliamentary journalism and, in a telling metaphor that occurs several times, refers to "the straitjacket of parliamentary reporting" that Hazlitt wished to escape.<sup>30</sup>

What is also striking about the existing scholarship is how little it has to say about Hazlitt's reports themselves. We are provided with images of Hazlitt undertaking (and disliking) the work, but almost no sense at all of what he produced. There seems to be virtually no interest, in fact, in establishing which reports he might have written for the *Chronicle*. This approach is particularly extraordinary given that, like Coleridge, Hazlitt left behind a notebook that he used in the gallery, containing priceless evidence about which debates he reported, and how he reported them. The notebook, which is now held in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, belonged to Hazlitt's wife, Sarah Stoddart Hazlitt, and contains an important transcription of Coleridge's "Christabel" in her hand.<sup>31</sup> The existence of these parliamentary jottings is not unknown; Stanley Jones mentions them in passing in his biography, though he misdates them.<sup>32</sup> Surprisingly, however, the resulting reports in the *Morning Chronicle*, which are undoubtedly Hazlitt's work, do not appear in Wu's *New Writings*. This omission is not due to any apparent distaste for or disinterest in Hazlitt's parliamentary

<sup>28</sup> Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age*, 153–56, and Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, 1: 116.

<sup>29</sup> Wu, *William Hazlitt*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Wu, ed., *New Writings*, 11: 431. For the references to the "straitjacket," see *New Writings* 11: 433; and *William Hazlitt*, 149 and 157.

<sup>31</sup> A typed memorandum in the notebook describes its provenance; it was passed on to Hazlitt's grandson, W. C. Hazlitt, by his grandfather's contemporary and fellow reporter John Payne Collier, who remarked, "I never knew much of your Grandfather in private; but I have a book in which he took notes of Speeches in Parliament, when he and I belonged to the Morning Chronicle."

<sup>32</sup> S. Jones, *Hazlitt*, 107. Jones writes that the notes place Hazlitt in the gallery in June–July 1814, but a comparison with the official record of Parliament shows that the debates covered in the notebook are clearly from late May and early June 1813.

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reports; two examples are included in the volumes, with detailed and helpful notes.<sup>33</sup> But the attribution of these two reports is not straightforward, as I will discuss in the chapter on Hazlitt. In other words, while problematic attributions are being proposed, the best evidence of Hazlitt's abilities and habits as a parliamentary reporter is being ignored; my book contains the first full discussion of that evidence, and thus some entirely new attributions.

The Hazlitt that emerges in the existing accounts is critical, in two senses of the word. The early biographies portray him as generally critical of Parliament and thus of parliamentary reporting as a task. Wu's analysis is more subtle, proposing that Hazlitt is critical in the sense of expert, a clever observer of the nuances of a parliamentary debate. In both cases, however, it is Hazlitt's personality and his reputation as a literary critic that provide the lens for reading the reports. What he actually did, rather than what we might suppose him to have done, has not been fully explored.

#### THE CRITICAL HERITAGE: CHARLES DICKENS'S RENOWNED ACCURACY

Just as Johnson's friends and contemporaries set the tone for the reception of Johnson's parliamentary journalism, Charles Dickens's friend and biographer John Forster established the critical foundation for considering his reports. In his 1872–74 *Life of Charles Dickens*, Forster combined recollections from his subject with comments from his colleagues to produce an enduring image of the young reporter. Dickens's memory that he “made a great splash in the gallery” is reinforced by the opinion of his fellow reporter Thomas Beard, who remarked that “[t]here never *was* such a short-hand writer,” and by the journalist James Grant, “a writer who was himself in the gallery with Dickens, and who states that among its eighty or ninety reporters he occupied the very highest rank, not merely for accuracy in reporting, but for marvellous quickness in transcribing.”<sup>34</sup> In summary, Forster suggests that his friend's time as a reporter “was of the utmost importance in its influence on his life, in the discipline of his powers as well as of his character.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Wu, ed., *New Writings*, 1: 31–45 and 1: 94–120.

<sup>34</sup> Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 39, 37 and 41, respectively.

<sup>35</sup> Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 40.