

‘A tragedy [...] called “The Last Man”’: Hazlitt’s joke on Francis Place.

What can William Hazlitt’s observations on the early nineteenth-century preoccupation with the figure of the last man tell us about his views on theatre and utility theory, and his attitude to memory and nostalgia? A number of curious things, I would like to suggest. This essay will focus mainly on one passage from Hazlitt’s 1826 essay ‘On the New School of Reform.’¹ In the passage I will be talking about, Hazlitt refers to the ‘last man’ theme, linking it with the radical tailor, one-time Godwinian, and ultimately highly influential neo-Malthusian, Francis Place. What I want to discuss is the significance Hazlitt attaches to the trope of ‘the last man’ in the context of his attack on the utilitarian concept of reform. I then want to contrast this with Hazlitt’s own sense of left-behindness and nostalgia, which emerges in various places in his writing. Theatre plays a role both in his genuinely reflective thoughts on survival, and his comments on Place and the ‘last man’. I want to suggest that for Hazlitt, theatre is the antidote to economy. Of all the arts, it is the one Hazlitt associates most closely with real pleasure, which for him has nothing to do with the cost-deficit calculations advocated by utility theorists. This appears in much of his work, but I think it can be gauged particularly well from the ‘last man’ passage in ‘On the New School of Reform’.

‘On the New School of Reform’ first appeared in the *Plain Speaker* in 1826. It is one of several of Hazlitt’s essays that take issue with utilitarians and ‘Political Economists’.² This one takes the form of a dialogue between two characters, ‘Rationalist’ – who makes the argument for utility, and ‘Sentimentalist’ – who makes the argument against utility, and who we can safely assume represents Hazlitt’s own views. The argument accuses utilitarians and

¹ I am grateful to Stephen Burley for bringing Hazlitt’s ‘last man’ reference in ‘On the New School of Reform’ to my attention.

² Hazlitt’s dealings with the utilitarians and with Malthus have been treated from various perspectives. Hazlitt’s arguments against Malthus are discussed from a Malthusian point of view in Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), eg. pp. 291-95. Detailed attention to Hazlitt’s anti-utilitarian and anti-Malthusian rhetoric can be found in Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially pp. 145-150 and pp. 209-47.

economists of getting reform wrong, and among its most trenchant observations is that an economy-minded approach to reform is in fact anti-reform, and that utilitarians, bent on social improvement, are going about it in such a way that they are in fact doing the enemy's work, and helping the established order of things. The terms of the essay can sometimes seem extraordinarily prescient today – for instance Hazlitt writes of utilitarian-reformers:

They do not grapple with the rich to wrest his superfluities from him (in this they might be foiled) but trample on the poor (a safe and pick-thank office) and wrench his pittance from him with their logical instruments and lying arguments.³

This is an essay that asks of the utilitarians: 'Are they really in earnest, or are they bribed, partly by their interests, partly by the unfortunate bias of their minds, to play the game into the adversary's hands?' (p. 439). Whatever their stated aims, these new-fangled reformists are working with, not against, the powers that be, and against, not for the people. Hazlitt is recognising a problem that has become the subject of criticism recently, that there is, and was, a great deal of potential ambiguity in what is meant by 'reform'.⁴ When Hazlitt and others identified themselves as reformers, they meant, primarily, that they were in favour of parliamentary reform, but the word bundled other moral assumptions with it. What Hazlitt shows sensitivity to in 'On the New School of Reform', is that any broad, sweeping governmental change can be given a sheen of respectability and the illusion of improvement by being labelled a 'reform', even if, considered from a moral rather than an economic perspective, it's a change for the bad. This argument is given energetic expression in the essay, with 'Sentimentalist's' assertions that 'they', ie, utilitarians, amongst whom Hazlitt

³ William Hazlitt, 'On the New School of Reform', in *The Plain Speaker*, 2 vols (London: Colburn, 1826), I, pp. 429-65 (p. 443).

⁴ See Joanna Innes, "'Reform' in English Public Life, the Fortunes of a Word", in *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850*, ed. by Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 71-97.

seems to be counting Malthusians, 'wish to [...] relieve distress by withholding charity, to remedy disease by shutting up hospitals' (p. 438).

The joke about the last man and Francis Place occurs at a point where one of the characters in the dialogue, 'Sentimentalist', is accusing utilitarians of a hypocritical attitude towards art. He suggests that they prescribe philistinism but enjoy their aesthetic pursuits in private:

I have sometimes thought that the great professors of the modern philosophy were hardly sincere in the contempt they express for poetry, painting, music, and the Fine Arts in general – that they were private *amateurs* and prodigious proficients *under the rose*, and, like other lovers, hid their passion as a weakness – that Mr. M— turned a barrel-organ – that Mr. P— warbled delightfully – that Mr. Pl— had a manuscript tragedy by him, called "The Last Man," which he withheld from the public, not to compromise the dignity of philosophy by affording any one the smallest actual satisfaction during the term of his natural life.⁵

The passage is noteworthy for several reasons. It is reminiscent of Hazlitt's portrait of Jeremy Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age*, in which Hazlitt becomes very taken with the fact that Bentham plays the organ. Hazlitt seems tickled by this because it crystallizes, in several ways, the limitations of utility theory. He mentions the organ twice in the Bentham portrait. The first mention of Bentham as musician is there to provide an example of Bentham's comfortable, refined existence, which gives him little understanding of the criminal elements his panopticon aims to do away with:

What should Mr. Bentham, sitting at ease in his arm-chair, composing his mind before he begins to write by a prelude on the organ, and looking out at a beautiful prospect when he is at a loss for an idea, know of the principles of action of rogues, outlaws, and vagabonds?⁶

⁵ Hazlitt, 'The New School of Reform', p. 447.

⁶ William Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham' in *The Spirit of the Age, or, Contemporary Portraits*, second edition (London: Colburn, 1825), pp. 1-26 (pp. 15-16).

Hazlitt's second reference to Bentham's musicality seems to make the point that there are pleasures that can't be quantified, and that Bentham – despite his numbness to poetry and to Shakespeare – is not immune to them all: 'Mr Bentham relieves his mind sometimes, after the fatigue of study, by playing on a fine old organ.'⁷ A few lines later Hazlitt reflects 'if all the sources of satisfaction are taken away, what is to become of utility itself?' (p. 25), and there is a sense that he might be addressing this, amongst other things, to Bentham's fondness for music. This is reinforced in 'On the New School of Reform', in which it is acknowledged that Bentham, if not any of his followers, has an appreciation of at least one of the arts.

However the terms of the acknowledgement appear rather ironic. Just after the passage on utilitarians as 'secret proficient', Hazlitt has his 'Rationalist' announce that:

So far from being proficient, or having wasted their time in these trifling pursuits, I believe not one of the persons you have named has the least taste or capacity for them [the arts], or any idea corresponding to them, except Mr. Bentham, who is fond of music, and says, with his usual bonhommie (which seems to increase with his age) that he does not see why others should not find an agreeable recreation in poetry and painting.⁸

It is tricky to know what to make of Hazlitt's reference to Bentham's 'bonhommie'. In the context of the defence of the arts in 'On the New school of reform', and in light of Hazlitt's own dealings with Bentham – who had him evicted from York street in 1819 – it seems sarcastic.⁹ But Hazlitt had remarked on this quality in Bentham in 1824: 'There is a lackadaisical *bonhommie* about his whole aspect [...] a good humoured, placid intelligence [...] he is a beneficent spirit.'¹⁰ And at the end of his *Spirits of the Age* portrait Hazlitt added: 'Mr. Bentham, in private life, is an amiable and exemplary character. He is a little romantic

⁷ Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', p. 25.

⁸ Hazlitt, 'The New School of Reform', pp. 447-48.

⁹ For the eviction, see Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 277-78.

¹⁰ Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', p. 7.

or so.’¹¹ It is, however, also hard to gauge how sincere any of these remarks are. But it’s a clever ruse, in ‘On the New School of Reform’, to put the praise into the mouth of ‘Rationalist’, a Bentham supporter, since those who were part of Bentham’s inner circle really were devoted to him, and might well have attested to his ‘bonhomie’ without any of Hazlitt’s reservations.

But the contradiction that Bentham’s playing the organ seems to embody does not seem to be the point that is being made about utility and art in ‘On the New School of Reform’. While Bentham’s love of music is well documented beyond Hazlitt, I can’t find any evidence that James Mill, who is ‘Mr M—’ in the passage, actually played a barrel organ. This is probably because he did no such thing, and that’s the joke – as ‘Rationalist’ points out to ‘Sentimentalist’: ‘you are quite mistaken in this supposition, if you are at all serious in it’ (p. 447). But confusingly, this kind of absurd fabrication does not seem to be the way the joke works for ‘Mr P—’ who, according to Hazlitt, ‘warbled delightfully’. ‘Mr. P’ is generally supposed to be Thomas Love Peacock, the friend of Shelley, notable for satirical novels such as *Headlong Hall* and *Nightmare Abbey*. But although Peacock was associated with utilitarians and utilitarian arguments (notably in his essay ‘The Four Ages of Poetry, which provoked Shelley’s ‘Defense of Poetry’), he did not make his enthusiasm for art, literature and music a secret. Indeed, Leigh Hunt would write in 1832:

the Utilitarians themselves are poetical! [...] if you want a proper Bacchanalian uproar in song, you must go to the author of “*Headlong Hall*,” who will not advance utility itself, unless it be jovial. It is a moot point which he admires most, Bentham or Rossini.¹²

Hazlitt certainly seemed aware of this quality in Peacock by 1829. Marilyn Butler points out that in his 1829 essay ‘The Utilitarian Controversy’, ‘Hazlitt was declaring that Peacock’s

¹¹ Hazlitt, ‘Jeremy Bentham’, p. 24.

¹² Leigh Hunt, ‘Preface’ to *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt* (London: Moxon, 1832), p. liii.

position as a Westminster reviewer could not be reconciled with his passion for opera – or with his wit'.¹³ Perhaps Hazlitt simply knew Peacock better by 1829. There is not a great deal of material documenting Hazlitt and Peacock's acquaintance, though they must have known each other at least slightly. There are two entries in the Godwin diary that mention them both, though in such a way that it is not clear whether they were in the same place at the same time, and rather suggests they were not. On 17 July 1824 Godwin noted 'Peacock calls twice: Hazlit sups', and on 5 August 1824 Godwin wrote: 'Hazlitt calls. Peacock calls.'¹⁴

Of course, even in 1826, the reality of Peacock's love of song may be part of Hazlitt's joke – just as the reality of Bentham's musicality is part of the joke on him. But with Peacock this does not seem to be the case. As I have mentioned, 'Rationalist' assures 'Sentimentalist' that 'except Mr. Bentham', the rest of the new school have no capacity for the arts. And even if the joke against Peacock is to do with his real love of opera, this is not the way the joke against Francis Place (Mr. Pl—) functions. Just as it seems doubtful that there is any real suggestion that Mill actually plays a barrel organ, there does not seem to be a real basis to assume that Place has truly written a play called 'The Last Man'. It is this joke against Place that I am concerned with now, and the reasons why Hazlitt ascribes to him authorship, not just of any play of no particular genre, but of a 'tragedy' called 'The Last Man'.

In early 1826, when Hazlitt is thought to have written 'On the New School of Reform', 'the last man' as a theme was once more a matter for discussion. It had made

¹³ Marilyn Butler, *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in His Context* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 173. 'The Utilitarian Controversy' also contains another joke about Francis Place in relation to the theatre, this time about his relationship with the actress Louisa Chatterley, who would become Place's second wife in 1830. However, this relationship is unlikely to have been part of Hazlitt's joke in 1826, because Place's relationship with Louisa Chatterley seems to date from 1828 (Place's first wife, Elizabeth, died in 1827). See *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930-4), 20, p. 258 for the joke, and p. 430, n. 258 for details on Mrs. Chatterley, Francis Place, and their 'conspicuous courtship.' For another of Hazlitt's jokes about the utilitarian Place's involvement with an actress, see his 1829 essay 'Sects and Parties', in Howe, *Complete Works*, 20, pp. 264-267 (p. 265).

¹⁴ *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. by Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010) <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1824-07-17.html>> [accessed 13 December 2013] and <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1824-08-05.html>> [accessed 13 December 2013].

literary appearances, and been the subject of commentary, on and off since the publication of Byron's poem 'Darkness' in 1816. 1826 was a particularly fruitful year for last men, seeing the publication of Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*, Thomas Hood's poem, 'The Last Man' in his collection *Whims and Oddities*, and the production of a sketch by John Martin called 'The Last Man.' However, in the very early months of 1826 when Hazlitt was probably working on 'the New School', it is most likely that he would have been aware of only one of these. Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man*, was published on the 23rd of January 1826 – William Godwin noted the publication in his diary.¹⁵ He also recorded calling on Hazlitt on 3rd February, and Duncan Wu thinks that 'On the New School of Reform' was one of a number of essays that Hazlitt had finished writing by the 11th of February.¹⁶ Godwin had finished reading *The Last Man* by the 6th of February.¹⁷ I don't know whether Hazlitt read Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, at this time or at any other, but he may well have got the gist of its contents from Godwin, or from Mary Shelley herself. Godwin's diary records that Godwin, Mary Shelley, and Hazlitt dined together on the 29th of December 1825 (Godwin's abbreviation, 'adv.', indicates that Hazlitt turned up unexpectedly).¹⁸ Godwin recorded both Hazlitt and Mary Shelley at dinner again on January 5th 1826, just three weeks before Mary Shelley's *Last Man* was published, and around a month before Hazlitt is thought to have finished writing 'On the New School of Reform'.¹⁹ It seems highly likely that Mary Shelley's forthcoming book would have been a talking point during these dinners at Godwin's, and that Hazlitt would have had the subject in mind for this reason when he wrote his essay shortly afterwards.

¹⁵ *Diary of William Godwin*, <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1826-01-23.html>> [accessed 13 December 2013].

¹⁶ Duncan Wu, ed. *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, 9 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), 8, *The Plain Speaker*, p. 382.

¹⁷ *Diary of William Godwin*, <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1826-02-06.html>> [accessed 13 December 2013].

¹⁸ *Diary of William Godwin*, <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1825-12-29.html>> [accessed 13 December 2013].

¹⁹ *Diary of William Godwin*, <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1826-01-05.html>> [accessed 19 March 2014].

It wouldn't take detailed knowledge of the plot to have found out that Shelley's novel is a fairly grim one, concerned with an apocalyptic plague that destroys the whole of humanity, with the exception of the last man of the title, Shelley's hero, Lionel Verney. Modern critics have been quick to link Mary Shelley's apocalyptic vision with the dire predictions contained in Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, a work itself first written to take issue with the sanguine optimism of perfectibility theory as expounded by Godwin and others.²⁰ Although it is sometimes argued that Shelley's *Last Man* joins in a Malthusian critique of Godwinian optimism, I would argue that Mary Shelley doesn't share Malthus's value judgements about poverty, or make any argument that the alleviation of financial hardship via the state will be responsible for apocalyptic social breakdown that will affect even the ruling classes – and these are certainly among the strands in Malthus's writing that Hazlitt particularly dislikes.²¹ For instance in his essay on Malthus in *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt observes:

Mr Malthus's "gospel is preached to the poor." He lectures them on economy, on morality [...] and on the ungracious topic, that "the laws of nature, which are the laws of God, have doomed them and their families to starve [...]". This is illiberal, and it is not philosophical.²²

In Shelley's novel, plague is not dependent on human agency for its efficacy, it is, instead, an irresistible force of nature. As Anne McWhir puts it: 'Since Shelley's plague is not "contagious", it cannot be avoided by restricted trade or travel; consequently, its inflictions –

²⁰ Anne McWhir includes excerpts from Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* as an appendix to the Broadview edition of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. See Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. by Anne McWhir (Ontario: Broadview, 1996), pp. 398-99.

²¹ For the argument that Mary Shelley joins Malthus in critiquing Godwin, see Lee Sterrenburg, 'The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1978), 324-47 (p. 334): 'Godwin's prophecy of the rational anarchist future is so extreme that it virtually invites rebuttal. His critics, including Mary Shelley, tend to go to opposite extremes. Godwin forecasts a utopia that could come about once human population is brought under control. Thomas Malthus rebutted Godwin by envisioning a nightmare world of overcrowding, depleted resources, and human suffering. Mary Shelley rebutted her father's rationalism by envisioning the annihilation of the entire human race.'

²² William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Malthus', in *The Spirit of the Age, or, Contemporary Portraits*, second edition (London: Colburn, 1825), pp. 227-250 (pp. 243-44).

air-borne, invisible, inescapable – seem as remote from human agency as any supernatural force.²³ Within the novel itself, we get: 'The plague was not in London alone, it was every where, it came on us [...] like a thousand packs of wolves, howling through the winter night, gaunt and fierce' (pp. 209-10), and:

Where was the plague? "Here – every-where!" one voice of horror and dismay exclaimed, when in the pleasant days of a sunny May the Destroyer of man brooded again over the earth [...] With one mighty sweep of its potent weapon, all caution, all care, all prudence were levelled low: death sat at the tables of the great, stretched itself on the cottager's pallet, seized the dastard who fled, quelled the brave man who resisted: despondency entered every heart, sorrow dimmed every eye. (p. 215)

The plague in *The Last Man* affects rich and poor alike, but there is no causal connection between what Hazlitt calls 'the relief afforded to the poor' ('Mr. Malthus', p. 244) and plague, as there would be in a properly Malthusian scenario. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that plague is unleashed in *The Last Man* due to an act of aristocratic unilateralism – its provenance is connected to the behaviour of Lord Raymond, the novel's Byronic character. So if anything Mary Shelley's plague is a plague that trickles down, not one that creeps up. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that during the Reform crisis in 1830 Mary Shelley would observe, disparagingly, of what she called 'the Aristocrats': 'Our sick feel themselves tottering'.²⁴

But Mary Shelley's separate purposes might not have mattered to Hazlitt, a fierce anti-Malthusian, who would have recognised *The Last Man* as a novel that takes a pessimistic, Malthusian theme. He may also have known about Merrival, a character in *The Last Man* who appears to be a satirical portrait of Godwin: he is so preoccupied with his

²³ McWhir, 'Introduction' to *The Last Man*, p. xxxi.

²⁴ Letter from Mary Shelley to Frances Wright, 30 December 1830. In *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), II, pp. 123-24.

speculations about the future that he only becomes aware of the plague too late. As Mary Shelley puts it: ‘He was far too long sighted in his view of humanity to heed the casualties of the day.’²⁵ This Malthusian scepticism about gradualist perfectibility is enough for ‘The Last Man’, as a theme, to be brought in as a comment on Francis Place.

From early Godwinism, Place ‘converted’ to Malthusianism in the 1820s. In fact Place’s Malthusianism was quite different to Malthus’s Malthusianism – Place is a neo-Malthusian because he promoted contraception, unthinkable to Malthus, who was arguing instead for the necessity of ‘misery’ as a natural check to population. But for Hazlitt’s purpose in ‘The New School’ the differences between Place and Malthus do not seem to matter any more than the differences between Mary Shelley and Malthus. Hazlitt signifies Place’s shift in allegiance (from Godwin to Malthus) by imagining the play he has written to be ‘called “The Last Man”’. Malthus’s pessimism and the apocalyptic predictions arising from his theory of population are gestured at in ‘Sentimentalist’s’ idea that Place’s play would be ‘a tragedy’. Through a series of associations – the last man with Place, Place with ‘Political Economists’, political economists and utilitarians with a betrayal of reform – playing the game into the ‘adversary’s hands’ – the signification of the last man trope as interpreted by Hazlitt emerges. For him, the last man is symbolic of the false consciousness of ‘The New School of Reform’. This is not because ‘the last man’ symbolizes the egotism of the artist, as some critics have argued in recent years, but because it symbolizes the egotism of the self-interest theorist.²⁶

But there is ambiguity here, too. ‘Sentimentalist’ does suggest (albeit negatively) that, had Place’s hypothetical ‘last man’ play not been a ‘manuscript’ and ‘withheld from the public’ it *would* have given someone some small ‘actual satisfaction’, just by virtue of its

²⁵ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 226.

²⁶ For ‘the last man’ as a symbol of the egotism of the artist, see Sara Lodge, *Thomas Hood and Nineteenth-Century Poetry: Work, Play and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 64.

being art. In the form of drama, what Hazlitt regards as the mean-spiritedness of Place's Malthusianism would have been tempered by artistic license and made, on some level, enjoyable. Nevertheless, *The Plain Speaker* keeps returning to the egotism of 'Political Economists' (including in the essay 'On Egotism'), and their inability to credit those who are good at things they do not value: 'A man is a political economist. Good: but this is no reason he should think there is nothing else in the world, or that every thing else is good for nothing.'²⁷ By having Place's imagined play be entitled 'The Last Man', 'Sentimentalist' also links him with the kind of philosophical arrogance that imagines itself to be lonely in superiority. Lastness as ascribed to Place is connected to a point Hazlitt keeps returning to, that "'a few and recent writers"' (he uses the phrase, replete with incredulous inverted commas, seven times in 'The New School of Reform') wish to 'monopolize all true greatness and wisdom [...] to themselves' (p. 449). 'Sentimentalist' compares the utilitarian to 'the religious fanatic', noting the 'strong desire of the ELECT to narrow the privilege of salvation to as small a circle as possible, and in "a few and recent writers", to have the whole field of happiness and argument to themselves' (pp. 435-36). Lastness, as linked to Place, could also be a comment on this 'narrowing', since there is no smaller circle than one, and no better way to monopolize than by claiming sole survival.

Hazlitt's joke linking lastness to utilitarian proselytes, though strictly unnecessary and strangely throwaway, has manifold applications. It suggests that utilitarians are concerned with passing fashions, and hints that they are pessimistic, arrogant, and vain of their own role in bringing 'the greatest happiness to the greatest numbers' (p. 442), to the point that they exclude all others from participation in this project. Hazlitt throws ridicule onto the idea of lastness insofar as he connects it to the cynicism and reductionism of 'The New School of Reform'. But at the same time as he associates lastness with utilitarian wrong-headedness and

²⁷ William Hazlitt, 'On Egotism', in *The Plain Speaker*, I, pp. 375-403 (p. 382).

philistinism, he also suggests an alternative role for it: that it has the potential to make a *bona fide* work of art, and in its artistic form, to provide a non-utilitarian, but more important ‘actual’ form of ‘satisfaction’.

Hazlitt does not, then, totally do away with lastness by his satiric associations. Indeed, the essay itself suggests an affinity with the type of lastness that identifies itself with a previous movement of reform-oriented sociability, an ‘old school’ of reform. It reveals nostalgia for a different era of politics, for ‘Sheridan, Fox and Burke’ (p. 442), and waxes protective over ‘the cause of Reform’, fearful that utilitarians and political economists want to ‘strip’ it, to ‘disgust the friends of humanity, and cheer its enemies’ (p. 440). In his portrait of Godwin, collected in *The Spirit of the Age* the year before *The Plain Speaker*, Hazlitt himself employed the sole survivor trope in earnest:

Mr. Godwin has kept the best company of his time, but he has survived most of the celebrated persons with whom he lived in habits of intimacy. He speaks of them with enthusiasm and discrimination; and sometimes dwells with peculiar delight on a day passed at John Kemble's in company with Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Curran, Mrs. Wolstonecraft [sic] and Mrs. Inchbald, when the conversation took a most animated turn, and the subject was of Love. Of all these our author is the only one remaining. Frail tenure, on which human life and genius are lent us for a while to improve or enjoy!²⁸

Hazlitt's writings on Godwin usually contain a mixture of admiration and disparagement – rude remarks on Godwin's conversation in *The Plain Speaker* led to their estrangement after 1826 – but there is no irony or satire in this portrayal of Godwin as a last man figure. Hazlitt uses the trope to confer a special nostalgic status on Godwin because for Hazlitt, Godwin as survivor of this oppositional, dramatic, intellectual social group has an inherent fascination. This particular gathering is mentioned again in *The Plain Speaker*:

²⁸ William Hazlitt, ‘William Godwin’ in *The Spirit of the Age, or Contemporary Portraits*, second edition (London: Colburn, 1825), pp. 27-54 (p. 53).

[Curran] and Sheridan once dined at John Kemble's with Mrs. Inchbald and Mary Woolstonecroft [sic], when the discourse almost wholly turned on Love [...] What a subject! What speakers, and what hearers! What would I not give to have been there!²⁹

Interestingly, Godwin is left out this time – this is partly necessary for rhetorical reasons, since later on the same page Hazlitt will declare that Godwin does not 'talk well' on any subject. Godwin cannot therefore be celebrated amongst this group of 'speakers' and 'hearers' if the disparaging comment that follows is to be believed. By expressing his own sense of identity with the group, Hazlitt effectively replaces Godwin as last man with himself. Gregory Dart has commented on Hazlitt's tendency to depict himself as 'the last of the old-style Jacobins', and something similar, or at least parallel, is happening here.³⁰ Nevertheless, this reiteration of the 'day passed at John Kemble's' does shed light on the aura of lastness conferred on Godwin the survivor in the *Spirit of the Age* portrait. Godwin the survivor represents what Hazlitt missed on this occasion, the experience of having 'been there'. Godwin as last man is a living memorial to some extraordinary, unrepeatable, gatherings. For Hazlitt, the nostalgia for a select group that this represents is perfectly valid. It is more valid, in fact, than any notion of lastness that the 'New School of Reform' can claim because unlike the utilitarians being attacked, the group at Kemble's being lamented are known for their links to the arts and to sentiment – they are actors, dramatists and writers who both engage in and critique the language of sensibility. This may be another reason Godwin is left out of the reiterated account: though he reintroduced sympathy into his philosophy (and critics such as Victoria Myers have observed that it was never really absent), his name would not (and does not) immediately call to mind the culture of sensibility.³¹ Hazlitt is not worried about the

²⁹ Hazlitt, 'On the Conversation of Authors: The Same Subject Continued', in *The Plain Speaker*, pp. 77-98 (p. 92).

³⁰ Dart, p. 229. See also p. 223: 'Hazlitt was increasingly to depict himself as the last of the Jacobins; a microcosm of the unified general will'.

³¹ For the presence of sentiment in Godwin's earlier thought, see Victoria Myers, 'William Godwin and the Ars Rhetorica', *Studies in Romanticism*, 41 (2002), 415-44.

sentimental implications of lastness. Instead, as his joke against Place reveals, he is worried by lastness in its unsentimental aspect. In this instance, Hazlitt is satirical regarding lastness only when it behaves as a token of the cold school of reform.

The contradiction that allows Hazlitt to ridicule lastness as a trope associated with Malthusians and Benthamites, but celebrate it when it is a mark of belonging to a purer, older, *dramatic* reform movement is, perhaps, another manifestation of what Kevin Gilmartin calls Hazlitt's 'split social vision' – he comments that: 'Unique to Hazlitt's prose was the way an anxiety about merit was channelled from politics into culture, resulting in a split social vision.'³² Lastness as a mark of distinction is permissible as a signifier that someone has belonged to the hierarchy of genius. But Hazlitt's last man joke indicates that the discourse of lastness has the potential to be usurped by politicians, who will use concepts more at home in the arts to give their 'lying arguments' a dramatic interest. They are, as Hazlitt says of Malthus, 'sophist[s] and party writer[s]'.³³ They are plundering emotive rhetoric to make mechanistic theories convincing, even whilst disclaiming the utility of the disciplines they borrow from: stealing from the arts in order to denigrate art. The absurdity in the statement, 'that Mr. Pl— had a manuscript tragedy by him, called "The Last Man"', comes, not from anything innately laughable about Place, or about lastness, but from the disjunction that Hazlitt finds between them. The idea that an exclusive inhabitant of the 'political republic' should explore a theme only befitting the 'republic of taste' is ludicrous.³⁴

So I suppose I'm suggesting several levels to this joke, which has a number of possibilities. In the first instance, Hazlitt imagines Place's play to be 'The Last Man' because it's a Malthusian theme, and Place is a Malthusian. But Hazlitt never says that 'The Last

³² Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 229.

³³ William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Malthus', in *The Spirit of the Age, or, Contemporary Portraits*, second edition (London: Colburn, 1825), pp. 227-250 (p. 246).

³⁴ For the 'political republic' and 'republic of taste', see Gilmartin, p. 229, where he is citing John Barrell.

Man' is a bad theme for a work of drama, in fact it might make a good tragedy, and be 'actually satisfying' – and this is why Place's play is 'withheld'. Hazlitt himself seems fairly taken with ideas about solitary survival. But for Hazlitt to regard himself, or, in good moods, Godwin, as a last man figure is his prerogative, as someone who understands drama, and by extension, the human condition, more than an economically minded politician ever could. The last man is fine as a theme, but only for the sensitive, not for Place, and here lies the incongruity. But then again, maybe the fun comes from knowing that Francis Place is no more capable of writing a play, even on his favourite theme, than James Mill is able to play a barrel organ.