

# Trash talk and buried treasure: Northcote and Hazlitt

Mark Ledbury

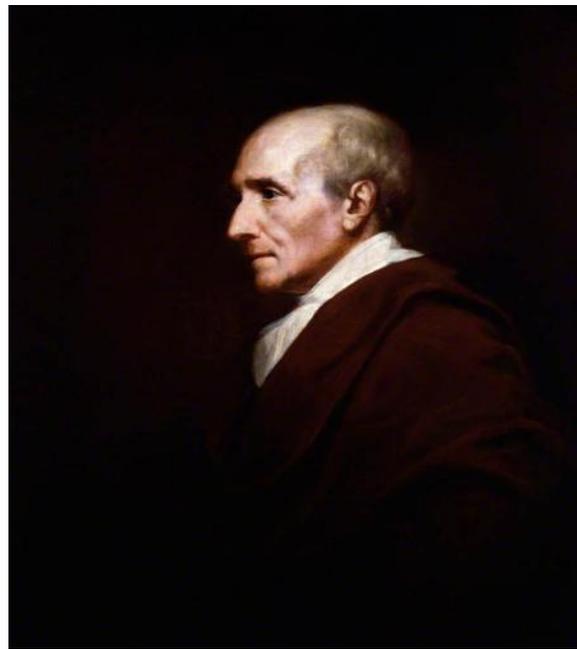


Fig. 1, William Bewick, *William Hazlitt*, replica by William Bewick of a drawing by Hazlitt himself, 1825. Chalk, 57.5 cm x 37.5 cm. London: National Portrait Gallery.

Fig. 2: James Northcote, *Self-Portrait*, 1827. Oil on Canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm. London: National Portrait Gallery.

William Hazlitt has enjoyed a meteoric resurgence of both reputation and resonance in the past few years, as journalist, critic, essayist, theoretician and ‘First modern man’.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, James Northcote would be only faintly remembered by the history of art had he not written the first and anecdotal biography of his fellow

<sup>1</sup> Duncan Wu, *New Writings of William Hazlitt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; John Barrell, *The political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: “The Body of the Public”*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; A. C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt*, London: Hachette, 2013; Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The first modern Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt’s radical Style*, London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

Devonian, erstwhile teacher and sometime landlord, Joshua Reynolds [figs 1,2].<sup>2</sup> More than this, Northcote has to posterity, and the historiography of art, seemed like he was on the wrong side; retardataire in his tastes, the story goes, he idolized Reynolds and history painting, but failed to understand the new generation of poets or painters, and was never generous towards his now far more prominent rivals, including Turner and Lawrence. He wrote to one of his important patrons, Sir John Fleming Leicester, in May 1823:

Our Exhibition at the Royal Academy is the very worst I have seen for many years and Turner has an outrageous landscape with all the colours of the Rainbow in it [fig. 3]. Lawrence has several but gaudy, careless and unfinished ( ... )<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1 Joseph William Mallord Turner, *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl*, exh.1823. Oil on Canvas, 145.4 cm x 237.5 cm. London: Tate.

and of Wordsworth Hazlitt reports his opinion thus:

do you imagine ( ... ) such trifles as descriptions of daisies and idiot-boys (however well they may be done) will not be swept away in the tide of time, like straws and weeds by the torrent?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds, LL. D., F.R.S., F.S.A. &c., Late President of the Royal Academy: Comprising original Anecdotes of many distinguished Persons, his Contemporaries: And a brief Analysis of his Discourses*, London: H. Colburn, 1818.

<sup>3</sup> James Northcote to Sir John Fleming Leicester, 20 May 1823, Cheshire Record office DLT C36 fol.2.

<sup>4</sup> 'Boswell Redivivus', no. 1, *New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 17, 1826, 116.

Perhaps because of this difference of opinion with posterity, Northcote remains a marginal figure, and while Hazlitt's star has burned ever brighter, Northcote's has hardly glimmered, despite the abundant available archival information, the exemplary publication of his account books, a biography over a century old, two books of conversations and my own interventions.<sup>5</sup>

To an extent, I believe that this imbalance clouds even the remarkable fictional entity that is the *Conversations* of Northcote and Hazlitt. These dialogues were first published episodically and in small chunks imitating the rhythm of personal visits in the *New Monthly Magazine*, *The London Weekly Review*, *The Court Journal* and *The Atlas*. The material was subsequently compiled with alterations and some amplifications into Hazlitt's *The Conversations of James Northcote*, shortly before the deaths of both men.<sup>6</sup> When literary historians have treated this work, it is usually in the context of a complex quarrel about these conversations that beset the two men in the last years of their lives (Hazlitt died in 1830, Northcote in 1831) and in this quarrel historians have tended to see Hazlitt as more sinned against than sinning (by Northcote, the Tory Press and Sarah Walker) and Northcote as spiteful recluse depicted in Benjamin Robert Haydon's caricature,<sup>7</sup> or the envious, miserly

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Lucius Gwynn, *Memorials of an Eighteenth Century Painter (James Northcote)*, London: T.F. Unwin, 1898; Jacob Simon, 'The Account Book of James Northcote', *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, 58, June 1995, 21–125; Mark Ledbury, *James Northcote, History Painting, and the Fables*, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> 'Boswell Redivivus' was published in the following sequence: *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, vol. 18, part 2, 1826, 113–8, 217–221, 334–340, 475–481; vol 18, part 2, 1827, 157–161, 277–80 (this last 'visit' contains the offending material on the Mudgetts and terminated Hazlitt's project with the *New Monthly Magazine*); Further instalments then appeared in *The London Weekly Review* (March 1829) and *The Atlas* in April to November 1829. The book version was published as William Hazlitt, *Conversations of James Northcote*, London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830; See William Hazlitt et al., *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, 12 vols, London: J.M. Dent & co.; New York: McClure, Phillips & co., 1902, VI, notes on 502–522; William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, Centenary Edition, London: JMDent and Sons, Ltd, 1930), vol. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846)*, ed. by Aldous Huxley and Tom Taylor, eds, New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1926, 22–23; 'I was shown first into a dirty gallery, then upstairs into a dirtier painting-room, and there, under a high window with the light shining full on his bald grey head, stood a diminutive wizened figure in an old blue- striped dressing-gown, his spectacles pushed up on his forehead. Looking keenly at me with his little shining eyes, he opened the letter, read it, and with the broadest Devon dialect said : \* Zo, you mayne tu bee a painter doo-ee ? what zort of painter ? \* \* Historical painter, sir.' Heestoricaul painter! why yee'll starve with a bundle of straw under yeer head!'

Richard III type of Fuseli's [fig. 4]; a hypocrite, liar, and poisonous and the merciless exploiter of his brilliant young friend and interlocutor.<sup>8</sup>

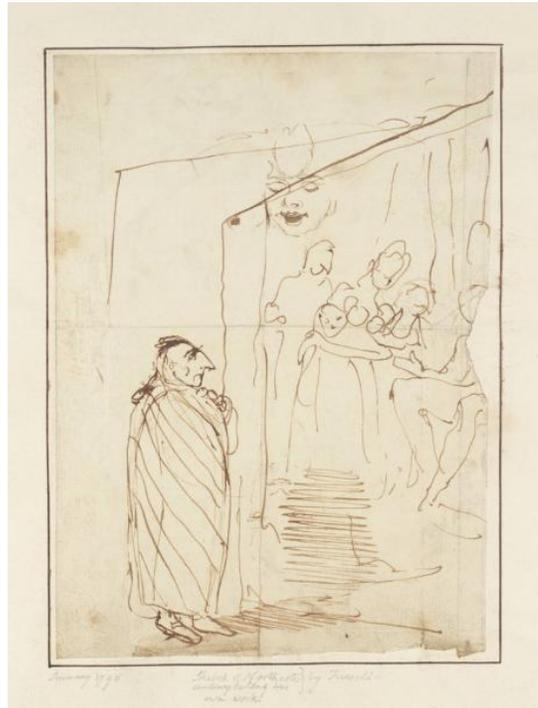


Figure 4 Henry Fuseli, *Caricature of James Northcote*, c. 1820. Ink on paper. London: Tate.

Perhaps only the perceptive and important article by Ludmilla Jordanova began to understand some of the importance of Northcote's contributions and the stakes of Northcote and Hazlitt's animated exchanges, as she argued for the importance of Northcote's blunt, confrontational, impolite anecdotes as they oppose a polite history of art, and relate to Northcote's own 'self-portrait' and his discussions of Titian.<sup>9</sup> Duncan Wu's convincing and documented assertion that in fact, in all but name, Hazlitt and his son could be called the authors of Northcote's *Life of Titian* does not negate Jordanova's insights but I will argue here for Northcote's significant writerly part in the creation of the conversations.<sup>10</sup> Rather than re-litigating the origins of the *Life of Titian*, (which is anyway a much duller and less innovative book than Northcote's earlier *Life of Reynolds*) I wish to reopen the rather complex origins of the dialogues between the men and look again, in

<sup>8</sup> Stewart C. Wilcox, 'Hazlitt and Northcote', *ELH* 7, no. 4, December 1, 1940, 325–332; Stanley Jones, 'Haydon and Northcote on Hazlitt: A Fabrication', *The Review of English Studies* 24, no. 94, May 1, 1973, 165–78; Wu, *First modern Man*, 426–8.

<sup>9</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Picture-Talking: Portraiture and Conversation in Britain, 1800-1830' in Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn, eds, *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2008, 151–69.

<sup>10</sup> Wu, *First modern Man*, chapter 25, 413 and seq.

particular, at the trouble caused by the Mudge affair as it developed and dogged the *Conversations* – in a political as well as historiographical light. My argument will be that Hazlitt and Northcote created in these dialogues, as they were first published episodically in the late 1820s, a version of anecdotal history that would nostalgically evoke not the Tory talk of Reynolds' studio and circle, or the stiff politeness of Cunningham's vast Vasari-like *Lives of the English Painters*, but the radical cultural and political conversations of a turbulent epoch.<sup>11</sup>

If we remember Northcote at all, it is for his special place in the developing 'conversational' history of art, one that we might characterize in terms of the search for a tone of art writing that would be more specifically based on other forms than the theoretical treatise or the 'rise and fall' history that had so marked late eighteenth-century historiography, from Winckelmann to Gibbon. In a way, the model that Northcote helped pioneer in the English language with his *Life of Joshua Reynolds*, the genre of the memoir-monograph, combining aspects of the Vasarian and Walpole paradigms, has become one of the staples of our current art historiography – as Gabriel Guercio and others have explored.<sup>12</sup> One thinks of the astonishing memoirs by pupils and close friends that have become authoritative biographies – John Richardson on Picasso or even William Feaver on Lucien Freud – which are based on long-held conversations.<sup>13</sup> The 1830 Hazlitt-Northcote *Conversations* are one of two sets of published conversations with Northcote, with the young aspiring and struggling James Ward's many notes and diary entries of his visits and discussions with Northcote also being published at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Such enterprises owe much to the public thirst for the studio anecdote and, of course, from Northcote and his generation's admiration of Boswell's methods and achievement in his *Life of Johnson*. But this is not, in my view, the essence of Hazlitt's *Conversations* or its importance. This lies elsewhere: in the fleeting glimpses they afford of a faded radical history of British art and culture; in the orality and ephemerality of dispute, debate, and insight; and in the history of art as conversational collage rather than linear or logical progression.

## Two writers, two artists in dialogue

In this light, we should pay great attention to the circumstances of the first publication of Hazlitt's fiction of his conversations with Northcote in the episodic 'Boswell Redivivus', published across six episodes in the *New Monthly Magazine* in

<sup>11</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the most eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, London: J. Murray, 4 vols., 1829–1833.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and its Project*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Johnathan Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 4 vols, New York: Random House, 1990–2019; William Feaver, *The Lives of Lucian Freud: The Restless Years*, New York: Alfred J Knopf, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Fletcher (ed.), *Conversations of James Northcote, R. A. with James Ward, on Art and Artists*, London: Methuen & Co., 1901.

1826 and 1827, which explicitly distances the conversations from Boswellian biography, and in which the following note/preface by the (anonymized) Hazlitt appears:

I differ from my great original and predecessor (James Boswell, esq. of Auchinleck) in this, that whereas he is supposed to have invented nothing, I have feigned whatever I pleased. I have forgotten, mistaken, mis-stated, altered, transposed a number of things. All that can be relied upon for certain is a striking anecdote or a sterling remark or two in each page. These belong as a matter of right to my principal speaker; the rest I have made for him by interpolating or paraphrasing what he said. My object was to catch the tone and manner, rather than to repeat the exact expressions, or even opinions; just as it is possible to recognize the voice of an acquaintance without distinguishing the particular words he uses. Sometimes I have allowed an acute or a severe remark to stand without the accompanying softenings or explanations, for the sake of effect; and at other times added whole passages without any foundation, to fill up space. For instance there is a dissertation on heraldry at p.75-6, the particulars and the Tory turn of which are entirely my own. My friend Mr N--- is a determined Whig. I have however, generally taken him as my lay-figure or model, and worked upon it, *selon mon gré*, by fancying how he would express himself on an occasion and making up a conversation according to this preconception in my mind. I have also introduced little incidental details that never happened; thus, by lying, giving a greater air of truth to the scene - an art understood by most historians! In a word, Mr. N-- is only responsible for the wit, sense, and spirit there may be in these papers; I take all the dullness, impertinence and malice upon myself (...).<sup>15</sup>

Most commentators, if they have noticed this at all, have tended to see this note as a kindness on Hazlitt's part towards the loose-tongued Northcote, a defence in advance against the inevitable fall-out among contemporaries that such a publication would surely have. However, why not instead take Hazlitt at his word: This is not Boswell's *Johnson* or indeed Northcote's *Reynolds*: it will be, Hazlitt warns, the art history of the unreliable narrator, doubled, as his Boswell is reincarnated not as the painstaking chronicler of the 'true', but the capricious filter for untrammelled anecdote, the tone of which is genuine but whose substance is neither verifiable or historically accurate, and sometimes might be gleefully and wilfully falsified to add to its somehow enduring 'truthiness'. The tone, in fact, becomes the only guarantor of the authenticity, veracity or 'recognizability', and the conversations that follow are often an anecdotal *mise-en-abyme*, mimicking the encounter of minds, memories and experiences. The fictional N --- (for thus is

<sup>15</sup> *New Monthly Magazine* vol. 18, no. 68, August 1826, 113.

Northcote named in the original text, (he is rechristened J-- in the subsequent serial publications), himself frequently resorts to relaying conversations he heard or partly heard by further anonymized if recognizable personalities who accompany or visit him over various years.

But this preface does practice one fundamental deceit: the distancing of Northcote's input as an author from the account of the genesis of the conversations. I will argue for the knowing, if not always willing participation of Northcote in the creation of this alternative history of British art – co-author, not 'Lay-Figure', and, further, that this very ownership of the *Conversations* by the artist being the centre of the tensions that marked the complex history of their publication.

We should note that Hazlitt had set the public up to believe in a 'spontaneous' Northcote already, in his absolutely marvellous, if deceptive, essay, first published in 1825, 'On the old Age of Artists', which paints a portrait of an artist whose conversation is spontaneous and unconscious:

Mr. Northcote's manner is completely *extempore*. It is just the reverse of Mr. Canning's oratory. All his thoughts come upon him unawares, and for this reason they surprise and delight you, because they have evidently the same effect upon his own mind.<sup>16</sup>

Hazlitt strives hard here to create this fiction of Northcote as unconscious and spontaneous (a clear sign, in my view, that the idea for the *Conversations* was brewing in 1824 or 1825). But we should also note the contrast made here by Hazlitt of Northcote's fresh and untrammelled speech with the rhetoric of the then dominant Tory minister and fixer, George Canning. This part of Hazlitt's comment points to what I will argue is always implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the original papers of the *Conversations*, a political tone and preoccupation that if not fully shared, is understood between the two men.

More certainly, we must banish from our minds the idea that Northcote was a naive and unknowing interlocutor, the artist as opposed to the writer, an eccentric, fascinating old man whose anecdotes burst forth uncontrollably. Northcote himself was in the 1820s already a published author in many genres, and had participated in *The Artist*, edited and assembled by his close friend Prince Hoare, and to which he contributed many articles including an odd allegorical tale, *The slighted Beauty*, the first of his fictions designed to tell the tale of British Art.<sup>17</sup> Northcote's allegory of

<sup>16</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the Old Age of Artists', first published in *Table-Talk; Or, Original Essays*, London: A. and W. Galignani, 1825, 50–73.

<sup>17</sup> Prince Hoare, *The Artist: A Collection of Essays, relative to Painting, Poetry, Sculpture, Architecture, the Drama, Discoveries of Science, and Various other Subjects*, vol. II, London: John Murray; Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co.; Dublin: M.N. Mahon, 1810, nos 7, 13, 17. Northcote had contributed numerous essays of a more orthodox bent to the first volume of the *Artist* as well as incarnating a fictional character in 'Letters from a disappointed genius'. Prince Hoare, *The Artist: A Collection of Essays, Relative to Painting, Poetry, Sculpture*,

British art as the strange story of a much maligned young beauty was told episodically throughout the *Artist* and is prefaced by an ironic narrator equal to the one Hazlitt dreams up:

I have therefore related her case in the manner of a narrative, from the time of her birth to the moment I was sitting at her bed-side, where she was confined by a sad cold, caught, I believe, by wearing wet shoes.

I have so sincere a friendship for this lady, that I am filled with apprehensions of not having given her case that entertaining and attractive air, which might create an interest for her suffering virtues, and make her painful situation sufficiently known for her own benefit. I was always a great lover of strict and hard truth, and have told her disastrous history without any of those beautifying incidents which captivate the polite readers of the present day. This compendium of sorrows is no novel of invention, in which you are to expect astonishing adventures and hair-breadth escapes; it contains no scenes of disappointed and distracted love, no display of unexampled villainy, no ghosts, witches, enchantments, foundlings, sentimental court ladies, philosophers, waiting-maids, lords, gamesters, assassins, or inn-keepers. Moreover, the perfections and imperfections of my unfortunate friend are here set down without fancied or fantastic exaggerations. In short, the whole interest must depend on its being received as a simple and true statement of her sad case.<sup>18</sup>

Given that Northcote had, only a few years previously, written precisely such a Gothic tale as his narrator disparages, the ironies keep building.<sup>19</sup> Northcote then, was not the *painterly* voice which was transformed by Hazlitt's *writerly* one, he was himself writerly, already, self-conscious and knowing, capable of misleading preface, dissembling anonymity, allegorical writing, and other writerly tactics as he wrote an alternative history of British art. Northcote, then, as he entered into dialogue with Hazlitt over many years, and as the *Conversations* took shape, knew full well the imaginative, authorial license, the narrative powers of his interlocutor by personal experience of the process of fiction and fictionalization.

If Northcote was a writerly painter, Hazlitt was a painterly writer, or at least one whose manual competences, training as an artist, background, kinship and friendship networks led him to be able to talk to and of visual artists in ways which paid heed to the difficulties of learning technique, and getting to grips with materials – themes fairly frequent in the *Conversations*. In a way then, despite their difference in age (Northcote the Octogenarian, Hazlitt middle-aged) the minds of

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*Architecture, the Drama, Discoveries of Science, and various other Subjects*, London : [s.n.], 1807, nos. 2, 4, 9, 19, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Northcote, 'The Slighted Beauty', part 1, in *The Artist*, no. vii, 1810, 78–9

<sup>19</sup> Anon., [James Northcote], *The Convent of Saint Michael: A Tale...*, London: Cundee, 1803.

For attribution of this novel to Northcote, see Ledbury, *James Northcote*, 162 and notes.

the men were often in tune and there is something of a chamber music rhythm to the best of the *Conversations* as the men spar and pursue themes and memories.

### Anecdotes of radicalism



Figure 5 James Northcote, *Portrait of William Godwin*, 1802. Oil on Canvas, 74.9 x 62.2 cm. London: NPG.

It should be remembered that Hazlitt and Northcote shared more than an interest in visual art and literary endeavour; both men were the sons of families of dissenters, both with sympathies sometimes openly and dangerously expressed for radical politics. Furthermore the two men became acquainted not in the eccentric ageing artist's painting room in Argyll Street, but in the politically charged and conversationally charmed circles of William Godwin in the 1790s [fig. 5].

We seldom figure James Northcote as anything, politically, but an eccentric and half-hearted Whig; but evidence would point elsewhere. Northcote's friends and networks were, from the first, tinged with radicalism, from his dissenting abolitionist youth to his associations with Wolcot, Opie, and his long friendship with the radical sculptor, Thomas Banks and other political 'persons of interest'.<sup>20</sup> He became friendly with William Godwin in the heat of the mid 1790s, and Godwin

<sup>20</sup> Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

had been for Northcote a conduit into a circle of not only prominent political figures on the radical edge of liberalism (including Horne Tooke) but also a world of forthright writers, including Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the Plumptres, Amelia Alderson, (later Opie), and the youngish Hazlitt, who first came to into Godwin's circles via Thomas Holcroft in the same moment.<sup>21</sup> From Godwin's diaries we also know that as early as August 1799 Hazlitt and Northcote were in conversation as they shared Godwin's table - at a dinner with among others the musician Muzio Clementi, the Radical(ish) reverend Charles Este, the philosopher and chemist William Nicholson, and the young, brilliant and volatile George Dyson.<sup>22</sup> Godwin's circle did more for Northcote than stimulate his writerly ambitions - it was clearly a politically charged environment in which Godwin's often uncomfortably radical friends and networks were in close proximity.

And it is not merely a matter of radical acquaintances: The polarizing issues of Revolution in Europe saw Northcote's sympathies pinned clearly to the radical mast; for all his horror of the *Terreur*, and later disparagements of Jacobinism, Northcote was responsible for three of the most remarkable visual engagements with the French Revolutionary process of all English Art. The first and best known is the surprising depiction of the Bastille apparently painted by Northcote sometime in 1789-90 [fig. 6], the basis for Gillray's print published in 1790 and described as 'the only heroic rendering in British painting of a scene inside the Bastille' by David Bindman.<sup>23</sup> There followed the ill-fated but fascinating speculative project with the (then radical) printmaker S.W. Reynolds in 1797, focused on a hero of the early Revolution and famous captive, that resulted in the painting *Lafayette in the Prison at Olmütz* [fig. 7]<sup>24</sup>; and lastly the extraordinary full length equestrian portrait of Napoleon created in 1799-1800, engraved in 1801 [fig. 8], all well before the peace of Amiens) and transformed under duress into the countenance of Alexander I (see British Museum, 2010,7081.5255).

<sup>21</sup> Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy and Mark Philp, eds, *The Diary of William Godwin*, Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010. <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

<sup>22</sup> <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1799-08-05.html> (Fol 29r).

<sup>23</sup> David Bindman, ed., *The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution*, London: British Museum Publications, 1989, cat. 24. One interesting note about this print, however, is that a similar print appears in France with entirely different attributions of painter (Klooger) and printer (Hartner). See BNF

Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE QB-201 (171)-FT 5. Hennin, 10347 <ark:/12148/btv1b6946874w>.

<sup>24</sup> See Ledbury, *James Northcote*, 104-6



Figure 6 James Gillray, after James Northcote, *Le triomphe de la Liberté en l'élargissement de la Bastille, dédié à la Nation Françoise*, 1790. Etching and Engraving. London: British Museum.

Figure 7 James Northcote, *Lafayette in the Dungeon at Olmutz*, 1797. Oil on Canvas. Manchester: Manchester University, Tabley House Collection.

Figure 8 Samuel William Reynolds after James Northcote, *Bonaparte*, 1801. Mezzotint. London: British Museum 2010,7081.5254.

So when Hazlitt's preface to 'Boswell Redivivus' uses a political example (his 'Tory' discussion of Heraldry) to show how his text differs from the opinions of 'N-' he is not merely flagging how ironic and dissembling his writing is but alluding to a shared radical history, and the description of Northcote as a 'Confirmed Whig' in the preface is in fact a kind of shorthand for a reference to a fiercer politics and another time and place, for Hazlitt's own reflection on a shared idealism and a period of mutual radical interests. We hear for example 'N -' casually drop into conversation that he was on his way with Hoppner to the hustings to vote for

'Horne Tooke' – who stood, famously for the Westminster seat in 1790, and 1796 and who was arrested and imprisoned briefly for treason between times in 1794.<sup>25</sup> Northcote, Godwin and Tooke were frequently in each other's company thereafter at Godwin's, especially in the early 1800s.<sup>26</sup> And a large chunk of the opening episode of 'Boswell Redivivus' is dedicated to a somewhat coded and diffuse discussion of Thomas Paine and his ideas. I would argue that given Hazlitt's own sympathies, and this history, it is unwise to overlook the consistent political inflection of the *Conversations* in their original form. They are powerful in evoking a dissenting, radical conversation which remained ever bright and for which Hazlitt seems to have felt much nostalgia, considering what Duncan Wu and others have revealed about Hazlitt's increasingly depopulated affective London in the 1826–7 moment at which the conversations with Northcote were published.<sup>27</sup>

The examples of such overt or covert political reminiscence are surprisingly widespread in the episodes of 'Boswell Redivivus'. Indeed we very seldom entirely leave the realm of politics throughout the texts. One obvious way in which Northcote and Hazlitt's roots and a political history cross is in the strong but 'oblique' strain in these dialogues that focuses on religious dissenters and their opposition to orthodoxies. Indeed, the public spat between Northcote and Hazlitt, usually discussed in terms of the astonishing *mauvaise foi* of the artist, who continued to seek Hazlitt's company and help while casting him as a devil, might better be seen as one of the ways in which dissenting religion and politics erupts into Hazlitt's project. The catalyst for this spat, who makes his first appearance in the fifth episode of 'Boswell Redivivus' is an unlikely one: the eighteenth-century Plymouth dissenter, schoolmaster and biographer John Fox who appears first in the context of 'N—' bringing up the example of his description of his ideal marriage.<sup>28</sup> Northcote was in possession of the manuscripts of Fox's memoirs, which Fox's grandson had lent or given to Samuel Northcote (James's brother) in 1790, (this gift being an indication of the closeness of Fox to Northcote's own kinship and dissenting networks); Northcote indeed would make two copies of them and

<sup>25</sup> 'Boswell Redivivus', I, 114: 'I once went to the hustings with Hoppner to vote for Horne Tooke'. On John Horne Tooke see especially David and Christina Bewley, *Gentleman Radical: a life of John Horne Tooke, 1736–1812*, London: Tauris, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> They dined in company at Godwin's on at least five occasions: see the data in tabular form at <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/mmbrowser/TOO01.html> (accessed 8 October 2019).

<sup>27</sup> See Wu, *First modern Man*, 394 and seq.

<sup>28</sup> For the passage on John Fox, see Hazlitt, 'Boswell Redivivus', V, 161; on John Fox see David Wykes, 'Fox, John' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10039> (created 2003, accessed October 4, 2019). For the publication of Fox's own memoirs, see 'Memoirs of himself, by Mr John Fox ( . . . ) with biographical sketches of some of his contemporaries; and some unpublished letters', *Monthly Repository*, 16, 1821, 129–35, 193–200, 257–62, 270–76, 325–31, 441–6, 505–7, 569–74, 633–5, 697–8, 721–7, see also notes by J. T. Rutt, 221–4, 721–7.

annotate them adding his own rather strange anecdotes to them.<sup>29</sup> After a discussion of various topics including another nostalgic and charged evocation of the 1790s in 'N--'s' evocation of Alderman Boydell, Hazlitt ends the instalment thus:

N-- then read me from a volume lying by him, a character written of his deceased wife by a Dissenting Minister, Mr John Fox, on the death of his wife ( ... ) ( ... ) which is so beautiful that I shall transcribe it here.<sup>30</sup>

It remains striking, in this conversational fiction, that a verbatim citation of a letter of sixty years earlier appears, and this 'transcription' was surely facilitated by Northcote sharing the actual manuscript with Hazlitt, (indeed I believe that the entire project of 'Boswell Redivivus' was, at origin, a collaboration of two minds and two writers who shared documents and manuscripts freely during 1826–7). It also points to the premeditation and structure of the dialogues – because it functions as a strong indicator of character and plausibility of Fox ahead of the troublesome conversation that follows.

In the ill-fated sixth episode of 'Boswell Redivivus', published in volume 19 of the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1827, citation of another part of Fox's memoirs apparently plunged Northcote into rage and despair (even though, of course, he knew their contents and was responsible for copying them out many times and sharing them, I conjecture, with Hazlitt). In this instalment, Fox's memoirs are used as a counter-narrative to orthodox histories of worthies, including Reynolds and his circle, and a dissenting, radical voice against an Anglican Tory establishment. In part VI, Hazlitt makes 'N--' first say some cutting things about Edmund Burke, and his possible hand in some of Reynolds' *Discourses*, and then comes a devastating passage on the difference between orthodox histories and informed ones in the form of accounts of Zacharia Mudge:

I remember an instance of this that happened with respect to old Mr. Mudge, whom you must have heard me speak of, and who was held up as such an idol by Burke, Dr. Johnson, and all the rest of them. Sir Joshua wanted to reprint his Sermons and prefix a Life to them, and asked me to get together any particulars I could learn of him. So I gave him a manuscript account of Mudge, written by an old school-fellow of his (Mr. Fox, a dissenting minister in the West of England); after which I heard no more of the Life: for it contained stories of Mudge having run away from the Academy where he was brought up, because Moll Faux, the housemaid, would not have him; of his sleeping in a sugar-cask all night at Wapping, finding a halfpenny in the strict, with which he bought a loaf to prevent himself from starving, and

<sup>29</sup> Northcote's transcription with annotations was further transcribed in 'The Fox memoirs: worthies of Devon', *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 28, (1896), 114–73; 29, 1897, 79–94; the original ms. was then lost in the fire at the Devon Subscription Library.

<sup>30</sup> Hazlitt, 'Boswell Redivivus', V, *New Monthly Magazine*, xix, 1827, 161.

returning home in the greatest distress, where he soon after left the dissenters to go over to the church, because the former would not give him some situation that he wanted. N- said, Sir Joshua took no farther notice, and I believe he burned my MS. for it was not to be found among the papers at his death, though Malone at my request had made every search for it. The truth is, they were mortified to find one whom they had been in the habit of crying up not only as a person of the highest capacity (which he was) but as a saint and the model of a Christian pastor, turn out little better than a vagabond and mountebank. It was besides an imputation on their own sagacity. Mudge was in effect a man of extraordinary talents and great plausibility, and by flattering, and in a manner personating the High Church notions of Dr. Johnson and Sir Joshua (for he was inclined the same way) had persuaded them he was a sort of miracle of virtue and wisdom. There was, however, something in Mr. Fox's plain account that would strike Sir Joshua, for he had an eye for nature, and he would at once perceive it was nearer the truth than Dr. Johnson's pompous character of him, which was proper for a tomb-stone.<sup>31</sup>

Hazlitt is careful here to ensure the truthiness of Northcote's tale by having him voice some key details, such as the attempt to recover the Ms. after Sir Joshua's death, etc. But this is really a vindication of orthodox vs unorthodox histories, as Fox (whose character, we remember has been painted so sympathetically by a previous instalment) comes to stand for the anecdotal truth teller whose knowledge of the youth of a complex establishment character sheds light on his current status as grandee and worthy. 'N--'s' attack on the 'High Church notions' of the Reynolds circle here, particularly Johnson and Burke, makes this more than an ad hominem attack: Mudge's 'conversion' to Anglicanism is a venally motivated betrayal of dissenting belief for hypocrisy and Toryism, and its evocation is Hazlitt's attack on that very orthodoxy.

However, as Northcote must have realised as he read the words they had put in 'N--'s' mouth, here, his own history was also evoked. After all, It was Zacharia Mudge whose family connections had led Northcote to the orbit and home of Sir Joshua Reynolds, as his own letters demonstrate.<sup>32</sup> Northcote, too, bowed in this new life to decorum, fear and pressure in the forced deletion of his own dissenting background (shared by his Brother and Father) as he entered Reynolds' employ, and later as his academic colleagues disapproved his radicalism; Northcote had been himself in thrall to Boswell, Johnson and the rest; had both benefited and suffered from Reynolds' failure as teacher and mentor, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Hazlitt, 'Boswell Redivivus', VI, *New Monthly Magazine*, xix, 1827, 277–8.

<sup>32</sup> Edmund Southey Rogers, 'Biographical Sketch', in *Fables, Original and Selected: Second Series*, London: John Murray, 1833, xiii-liv, (esp. Letter of Northcote to his father, 23 July 1771, xix-xxi).

Fox's account of Mudge is, also in itself, a historical parallel to the actions and positions of the fictional 'N--' in the *Conversations*, who in the dialogues is occasionally allowed to become the informed, anecdotal, dissenting teller of sometimes unpalatable truths about hallowed establishment heroes not suitable for their tombstones. This deployment of Fox is thus at once brilliant and devastating as a tactic, and we are now far from the extempore recollections of an ageing painter; instead, reading between the lines, barely disguised, 'Boswell Redivivus' is a determined anti-Tory, anti-Boswellian history – one motivated, perhaps by Hazlitt's contemporary struggles with the Tory histories and rhetorics then in the ascendant, represented by Canning and Scott; it was also fuelled by Northcote's odd, conflicted relationship both with religious and political dissent and with his 'failing father', Joshua Reynolds, whose fame was so enormous but whose pupils found themselves mired in failure and poverty. To aid and ground his history, Hazlitt consciously, teased out in a diffuse, fragmentary, but powerful way Northcote's own occluded and repressed radical history.

However, the consequences for Northcote were painful because precisely this return of the repressed and exposure of his debts and his dissent was not entirely welcome to his conflicted political self, particularly in the 1820s as he was finding himself reinvented as a grand old man of British History Painting through his exhibitions with the Society of British Artists, British Institution and the Academy; but this very late career 'worthiness' disguised the roots of his ambitions of the 1780s, which belonged to the ferment and cultural politics of the 1780s and 1790s. An obvious painterly example of the palimpsest of Northcote's late career was his submission to the Second British Society of Artists exhibition in 1825 of his strange and somewhat contorted *Tsar Alexander of Russia*, an ostensibly fully monarchical work whose structure nevertheless echoed and evoked the earlier transformation of the equestrian Napoleon into Alexander in the 1790s, as well as the ambition and grandeur of Northcote's Shakespeare projects, and the persistent themes of drowning and death that were his privileged subjects in the 1780s [fig. 9].<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Reviews of the 'Tsar Alexander' were sparse, but see the *New Monthly Magazine's* review of the Society of British Artists Exhibition, Thomas Campbell et al., *The New Monthly Magazine*, E. W. Allen, 1825, 1 May 1825, 205–6, in which Northcote is complimented on his rendering of the group of peasants rather than his portrait of the Emperor and a discussion takes place precisely on the perils of 'History painting of the living'.



Fig. 9: James Northcote, *Portrait of Tsar Alexander I of Russia on Horseback* 1820. Oil on Canvas, 240 cm x 165 cm. London: Royal Society of Medicine.

We remember that the preface to ‘Boswell Redivivus’ emphasizes that Northcote is a ‘Determined Whig’; however, Northcote’s continuing friendships with many old Devon families, including the Rosdews, the Elthams, the Dunstervilles, the Mudges and the family of Sir Stafford Northcote, many of them equally determined Tories, and his surprisingly close ties to William Knighton and to Government circles, even to Sir Walter Scott, in the 1820s made the evocation of this complex, more dissenting past a disturbing disinterment. Northcote was probably himself surprised by how ‘N--’ emerged, and the rhetoric, the excess of his documented reaction needs to be carefully read.

We can chart this friction and disquiet not only in the letters to the editor of the *New Monthly Magazine* from outraged Devonians such as the Rosdews, but also in Northcote’s own adoption of apocalyptic rhetoric in his letters to editors and others in the wake of the publication and in the lead up to the republication of the *Conversations*, in altered, expanded and muted form, in 1830.<sup>34</sup>

In perhaps the fullest letter of response, written on 9 March 1827 to Thomas Campbell, poet and editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*, Northcote here casts Hazlitt in demonic terms and ranted at the betrayal of his friendship and privacy by Hazlitt and the consequences this had for his friendship networks and reputation.

I have at these times in the closet indulged in idle conversation, not knowing whom I was with, in all the confidence of Friendship. I thought no more of what was said by either of us afterwards concluding that it had passed off in the air. But now I find to my sorrow that *this despicable and worthless Trash* has

<sup>34</sup> William Hazlitt, *Conversations of James Northcote* ( ... ), London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830.

*been treasured up* and is proclaimed at the Market Cross where my family connections and dearest friends are brought forward to publick inspection with their names at full length properly spelt in order to prevent any possible mistake being made ( ... ).(emphasis mine).

He calls Hazlitt, among other epithets, 'a Wretch who has thus betrayed me and who is gone to France to escape the vengeance of those he has injured'.<sup>35</sup> But despite the railing here, the truth of the situation is conveyed in the first sentence – anachronistically one might use the phrase 'in the closet', used by Northcote simply to mean 'private', to perfectly describe the somewhat occulted, even hidden radical history, and the togetherness of minds, that was unwillingly revealed in the episodic 'conversations'. At no point does Northcote deny ever having made the comments: this is not untruth but a leak from a complex and private realm, a return of the repressed that threatens the stability and stirs complex memories of decades of rocky and ambiguous relations with Plymouth networks.

Northcote then had many a fire to put out with Devon friends, but as many have pointed out, not only did the 'papers' continue to circulate, but Northcote and Hazlitt continued a close working relationship - resulting in a slew of collaborations including the Titian monograph, the *Fables* and the *Conversations* - though matters between the men remained fairly tense, if jocular, especially around the *Conversations*. When one of Northcote's Devon family friends got in touch to indicate that Northcote was in trouble in the county, so to speak, as further episodes of the conversations began to appear in *The Atlas*,<sup>36</sup> Northcote wrote to Alderman Dunsterville:

I never sought the acquaintance of Mr Hazlett [sic] in my life, but I do not know how to get rid of him without personally affronting him which would draw his vengeance upon me.<sup>37</sup>

However, as many have pointed out, Northcote was protesting too much: this menacing visitor was a trope that masked the artist's own use of the *Conversations* to air views and anecdotes repressed in his own academic circles of sociability. Indeed when we read his reaction to rumours reaching him of how the painter Richard Westall had been offended by his characterization in the dialogues

<sup>35</sup> Copy in Northcote letter book, Bodleian Library, Ms. Eng Misc. e.143, fol. 37-41 [38]. If Northcote is right, this argues for Hazlitt in France in Spring 1827. See Wu, *First modern Man*, 408.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, a copy of letter from Richard Rosdew, Banker and Plympton worthy, in Bodleian Ms. Eng Misc. e143, fol. 74, threatening legal action against publisher and Hazlitt: see also Wu, *First modern Man*, 425, though his reading of Northcote: 'a calculating man whose essential cowardice emerged when confronted with force' is very far from mine.

<sup>37</sup> Copy in Northcote's letter book of a letter to Bartholomew Dunsterville, September 15, 1829, Bodleian Ms Eng Misc. e.143, fol. 66 - and Wu, *First modern Man*.

we recognize an unapologetic and sarcastic tone very different to that he employed with Dunsterville et. al.<sup>38</sup>

And we should also not take Northcote at his word when he protests against the reappearance and continuation of the dialogues in 1829. The freewheeling and sometimes dangerous spirit of 'Boswell Redivivus' lived on in March 1829 in *The London Weekly Review* as 'Real Conversations', (with an obfuscating preface claiming absolute veracity that reminds one very much of Northcote's *Slighted Beauty* preface), and then from April to November 1829 in *The Atlas* as 'Conversations as Good as Real', and again in 1830 in the *Court Journal* as 'Conversations with an Eminent Living Artist'.<sup>39</sup> These fragments give insights into both Hazlitt's manipulations as an author but also to there being *va-et-vient* if not active collaboration between the men, as at one point in 'Conversations as Good as Real', in a discussion of Fielding, the character J-- (standing for Northcote) says 'I find in the last conversation I saw, you make me an admirer of Fielding ( ... )' implying of course, in its fiction, and in fact, (given the closeness of publication dates) that Northcote had sight of all these conversations before they went to press. Indeed these 1829 *Atlas* contributions reflect on the two men's friendships and attitudes towards one another in rather self-conscious ways. And surely the proof of both this and the insistent desire of Northcote to tell a different and unofficial history is the version of what became the fifteenth conversation that was published in the *Court Journal* in February 1830, with the rambunctious account of Mudge compared to John Bunche, the 'Unitarian Don Quixote' - an account again vastly toned down in the 1830 publication.<sup>40</sup>

We surely must conclude from this that Northcote, elaborate fiction-spinner as he had often been, colluded in the fiction of his character, was aware of the texts in advance and must be seen not merely as *Alter Ego* in a fictional sense, as Hazlitt feigned, but as the joint author of the fiction of himself in these dialogues. Northcote, I would speculate, saw in this collaboration with Hazlitt a way of allowing an alternative, gossipy yet somehow truthful historiography to leak through what was starting to be a stiff and orthodox historiography of British art,

<sup>38</sup> See Bodleian Ms Eng Misc. e.143, fol.64

<sup>39</sup> The publication of these conversations, broken into smaller chunks across the *London Weekly Review* and the *Atlas* in 1829, and the *Court Journal* in 1830, has been known and documented since the complete works of 1902, but yet the 'dulling' of the texts attracts little textual attention even though they are revelatory of both process and tone changes. The most comprehensive mapping of the texts of the *Conversations* against the original dialogues published in serial form is in P.P Howe, A.R Waller and A. Glover, eds, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, Centenary Edition, 21 vols., London: JM Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1930-, vol. XI, 187-376, especially notes, 350-76.

<sup>40</sup> See Pope et.al, *Complete Work*, vol. xi, 367 for the original account. See Moyra Haslett, ed., *The Life of John Bunche, Esq., by Thomas Amory: Containing various Observations and Reflections, made in several Parts of the World; and many extraordinary Relations*, Portland: Four Courts Press, 2011.

particularly in the light of, and perhaps directly reacting to, the publication in 1829 of Cunningham's *The Lives of the most eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.<sup>41</sup> Northcote was never kindly treated by Cunningham who relied on several sources not particularly sympathetic to the artist.

In this respect, the collected *Conversations* when they were eventually published in 1830, were not well served by their editing or collection, as Hazlitt acknowledged in his description of the 'present subdued tone of the *Conversations*' in a letter Northcote copied.<sup>42</sup> Hazlitt even seems to have added certain passages (an attack on Rousseau by 'N—' in the 16th Conversation that did not appear in the corresponding serial instalment in *The Atlas* for example), and left out others, including a passage on the tyranny and absurdity of absolute monarchy that featured in 'Conversations as Good as Real' and which disappears entirely from the *Conversations* text.<sup>43</sup> This seems to have been done deliberately to emphasize not the kinship of the two in nostalgic radicalism, or even their joint authorship, but rather the differences between their world views and personalities. It is this deliberate dulling and alteration of Northcote's political palette, as well as the effect of gathering all the conversations into one place, that leads to the sense that a conversational adventure that marked 'Boswell Redivivus' and the subsequent original papers had turned into a rather more plodding back-and-forth. Worse still, some of Hazlitt's own preoccupations and beefs, including his complex relations with Godwin, his rivalry with Walter Scott and other personal issues break the conversational tissue at many points, indicating strongly their author's essayistic talents and turn of mind – including, for example the cruel words on Godwin included in conversation nine the long passage on Rousseau, Scott, and Toryism in the sixteenth conversation.<sup>44</sup>

The publication, however, did not entirely repress the energy of the original dialogues, and indeed at moments the strength of shared convictions and memories shines through. Discussions such as that of Shakespeare, Milton and language in conversation the tenth, for instance, sparkle with anecdotal insight on Byron and Fuseli, and covertly include discussion of Napoleon, Paine, and religion.<sup>45</sup> There are moments that bring Hazlitt's voice into a kind of unison with Northcote's such as in the end of the ninth conversation about servility to monarchy, upstart rulers and about 'We in modern times have got from the *dead* to the living idol, and now bow

<sup>41</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the most eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 3 vols, London: John Murray, 1829–34), vol. I, 1829 which included an 'alternative' life of Reynolds, 206–318.

<sup>42</sup> Bodleian Ms Eng Misc. e.143, fol.79.

<sup>43</sup> See 'Conversations as Good as Real: II', *The Atlas*, 26 April 1829 as compared to the corresponding 'Conversation the sixteenth' 189, in which Hazlitt has 'N—' say 'I must inform you that Rousseau is a character more detestable to me than I have power of language to express.'

<sup>44</sup> Hazlitt, *Conversations of Northcote*, 1830, 180–9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 145–8.

to hereditary imbecility'.<sup>46</sup> The tenth conversation retains some fascinating plain speaking, and humour, as 'N—' rails against strictures to morality and paints a picture of the current Royal Academy as full of busybodies, 'dressed in a little brief authority', then breaks into a free-associative linguistic game around riveret and rivulet, and squeezes in telling anecdotes of Northcote's bond and jealousy of Opie and a meditation on the worth and status of artists.<sup>47</sup> It was such moments of seditious unison as these that angered both academic grandees and Plymouth Tories. And but for Hazlitt's and Northcote's deaths the ripples from even this toned-down version of the dialogues might have been more widespread and resonant.

### Buried alive

Northcote's profoundest preoccupation, in all his 1820s projects, including not only the *Conversations* but the *Fables* was to shore up fragments against his ruin and create new forms of art and dialogue out of his own experiences and insights.<sup>48</sup> Sadly, the complexity of these enterprises taxed the octogenarian artist and tested all his certainties and beliefs, and even more sadly, the processes that led to the final product of these projects were often occulted or lost. Only the studio-visiting intimates of Northcote knew that a marvellous, inventive, witty practice of collage preceded and to an extent grounded the exquisite woodcuts of the *Fables*. And only those same intimates, including Hazlitt himself, knew the extent to which Northcote's playful, contradictory, mercurial, but deliberate authorial voice was part of the tissue of the *Conversations*.

When Northcote's will was announced in public, (by which he left a variety of gifts to friends including Hoare, Godwin and a good many of his closest colleagues – he had included Hazlitt among these friends until the codicil made after Hazlitt's death), one of its strangest features was the stipulation that his body be examined and left unburied long enough to prevent any doubt that he might be buried alive.<sup>49</sup> The specificity of this request was unusual, and it might be taken as metaphor, with a little license, for a fear present to the artist as he wrote his will: that the complexity, depth, controversy, ferment of the art world he helped to chronicle would be lost in a polite, linear, and ultimately bland official history; that the anger, wit, spark, even the truth of his artistic epoch would be stifled and forgotten. Alas, to an extent that 'burial alive' came to pass, in the case of the muted, stifled *Conversations* as finally published, in the reception of Northcote since, and in much of what passed for the history of British art in the mid nineteenth century.

<sup>46</sup> Hazlitt, *Conversations of Northcote*, 1830, 135.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 141–5.

<sup>48</sup> Northcote's two volumes of *Fables* were published first in 1828 and then a second volume (handsomely paid for by the terms of his will) published posthumously in 1833. For the complex history of the *Fables*, collages and wood-engravings, see Ledbury, *James Northcote*.

<sup>49</sup> BL, Add MS 42524, ff. 12–35.

**Mark Ledbury** is Power Professor of Art History and Visual Culture and Director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney. He took his degrees at the University of Cambridge and the University of Sussex, and held positions at the University of Portsmouth, the University of Manchester, and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts. His research focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth century European art and art writing. Recent book publications include: *James Northcote, History Painting and the Fables*, New Haven/London, 2014; *Fictions of Art History* (as editor), Williamstown, 2013.

mark.ledbury@sydney.edu.au



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