To learn to paint just as one can learn to stand on one leg or walk a tightrope (that is, to train the hand as the tightrope walker does the foot until finally it can do what is asked of it) is not the correct way; otherwise artists and tightrope walkers would be ranked the same. — That this is, unfortunately, generally the case I readily admit, but I claim that it ought not to be so.

The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If he does not see anything within him, he should give up painting what he sees before him. Otherwise his paintings will look like those Spanish screens behind which one expects only to find sick or even dead people. Herr XX has seen nothing which others do not see just as well; he cannot exactly be said to be blind, but what one demands of the artist is that he see more than others do.

This painter knows what he does, and that one feels what he does; if only it were possible to make a single artist out of the two of them!

1 Corinthians 13.

9 William Hazlitt (1778–1830) ‘Originality’

Hazlitt was one of the foremost English essayists of his time, ranging across literature, theatre, popular culture, philosophy and politics, as well as art. The son of a radical Unitarian preacher, Hazlitt spent part of his early childhood in the newly formed United States, and after the family’s return to London received a nonconformist education. He never lost his commitment to political liberty and to the legacy of the French Revolution. Before beginning his work in journalism, Hazlitt had contemplated a career as a painter, spending time in intensive study in the Louvre in 1802–3 during a lull in the Napoleonic wars. He subsequently wrote over fifty essays and reviews on art. These included the 1816 essay on ‘Fine Art’ for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in which he defended the Elgin marbles against the canons of neo-classicism, on the grounds of their vitality and naturalism. His opposition to the ideal also set him against Sir Joshua Reynolds’ concept of painting as part of an improving, public, political discourse. For Hazlitt, art was fundamentally an individual matter. Originality, the key to art, lay not in individual caprice, but in the truthful imitation of hitherto undiscovered aspects of the infinity of nature. The present, late, essay, was published in The Atlas on 3 January 1830. The extracts are taken from The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, P. P. Howe ed., volume 20, Miscellaneous Writings, London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1934, pp. 296–302.

Originality is any conception of things, taken immediately from nature, and neither borrowed from, nor common to, others. To deserve this appellation, the copy must be both true and new. But herein lies the difficulty of reconciling a seeming contradiction in the terms of the explanation. For as anything to be natural must be referable to a consistent principle, and as the face of things is open and familiar to all, how can any imitation be new and striking, without being liable to the charge of extravagance, distortion, and singularity? And, on the other hand, if it has no such peculiar and distinguishing characteristic to set it off, it cannot possibly rise above the level of the trite and common-place. This objection would indeed hold good and be unanswerable, if nature were one thing, or if the eye or mind comprehended the whole of it at a single glance; in which case, if an object had been once seen and copied in the most cursory and mechanical way, there could be no farther addition to, or variation from, this idea, without obliquity and affectation; but nature presents an endless variety of aspects, of which the mind seldom takes in more than a part or than one view at a time; and it is in seizing on this unexplored variety, and giving some one of these new but easily recognized features, in its characteristic essence, and according to the peculiar bent and force of the artist’s genius, that true originality consists. Romney, when he was first introduced into Sir Joshua’s gallery, said, ‘there was something in his portraits which had been never seen in the art before, but which every one must be struck with as true and natural the moment he saw it.’ This could not happen if the human face did not admit of being contemplated in several points of view, or if the hand were necessarily faithful to the suggestions of sense. Two things serve to perplex this question; first, the construction of language, from which, as one object is represented by one word, we imagine that it is one thing, and that we can no more conceive differently of the same object than we can pronounce the same word in different ways, without being wrong in all but one of them; secondly, the very nature of our individual impressions puts a deception upon us; for, as we know no more of any given object than we see, we very perversely conclude that we see the whole of it, and have exhausted inquiry at the first view, since we can never suspect the existence of that which, from our ignorance and incapacity, gives us no intimation of itself. Thus, if we are shown an exact likeness of a face, we give the artist credit chiefly for dexterity of hand; we think that any one who has eyes can see a face; that one person sees it just like another, that there can be no mistake about it (as the object and the image are in our notion the same) — and that if there is any departure from our version of it, it must be purely fantastical and arbitrary. Multum ab his imago [The image differs greatly]. We do not look beyond the surface; or rather we do not see into the surface, which contains a labyrinth of difficulties and distinctions, that not all the effects of art, of time, patience, and study, can master and unfold. […]

As the mind advances in the knowledge of nature, the horizon of art enlarges, and the air refines. Then, in addition to an infinity of details, even in the most common object, there is the variety of form and colour, of light and shade, of character and expression, of the voluptuous, the thoughtful, the grand, the graceful, the grave, the gay, the I know not what, which are all to be found (separate or combined) in nature, which sufficiently account for the diversity of art, and to detect and carry off the spolia opima [richest spoils] of any one of which is the highest praise of human genius and skill —

‘Whate’r Lorrain light-touch’d with softening hue,
Or savage Rosa dash’d, or learned Poussin drew.’

(Thomson, The Castle of Indolence)

All that we meet with in the master-pieces of taste and genius is to be found in the previous capacity of nature; and man, instead of adding to the store, or creating any thing either as to matter or manner, can only draw out a feeble and imperfect transcript, bit by bit, and one appearance after another, according to the peculiar aptitude and affinity that subsists between his mind and some one part. The mind
sort of dealing with the Devil, or some preternatural kind of talent. Poets lay a popular and prescriptive claim to inspiration: the astronomer of old was thought able to conjure with the stars; and the skilful leech, who performed unexpected cures, was condemned for a sorcerer. This is as great an error the other way. The vulgar think there is nothing in what lies on the surface; though the learned only see beyond it by stripping off incumbrances and coming to another surface beneath the first. The difference between art and science is only the difference between the clothed and naked figure; but the veil of truth must be drawn aside before we can distinctly see the face. The physician is qualified to prescribe remedies because he is acquainted with the internal structure of the body, and has studied the symptoms of disorders: the mathematician arrives at his most surprising conclusion by slow and sure steps; and where he can add discovery to discovery by the very certainty of the hold he has of all the previous links. There is no witchcraft in either case. The invention of the poet is little more than the fertility of a teeming brain — that is, than the number and quantity of associations present to his mind, and the various shapes in which he can turn them without being distracted or losing a 'semblable coherence' of the parts; as the man of observation and reflection strikes out just and unforeseen remarks by taking off the mask of custom and appearances; or by judging for himself of men and things, without taking it for granted that they are what he has hitherto supposed them, or waiting to be told by others what they are. If there were no foundation for an unusual remark in one's own consciousness or experience, it would not strike us as a discovery: it would sound like a jeu-d'esprit, a whim or oddity, or as flat nonsense. The mere mob, 'the great vulgar and the small', are not therefore capable of distinguishing between originality and singularity, for they have no idea beyond the common-place of fashion or custom. Prejudice has no ears either for or against itself; it is alike averse to objections and proofs, for both equally disturb its blind implicit notions of things. Originality is, then, 'the strong conception' of truth and nature 'that the mind groans within', and of which it cannot stay to be delivered by authority or example. It is feeling the ground sufficiently firm under one's feet to be able to go alone. Truth is its essence; it is the strongest possible feeling of truth; for it is a secret and instinctive yearning after, and approximation towards it, before it is acknowledged by others, and almost before the mind itself knows what it is. Paradox and eccentricity, on the other hand, show no depth of originality; as bombast and hyperbole show a depth of imagination; they are the desperate resources of affectation and want of power. Originality is necessary to genius; for when that which, in the first instance, conferred the character, is afterwards done by rule and routine, it ceases to be genius. To conclude, the value of any work of art or science depends chiefly on the quantity of originality contained in it, and which constitutes either the charm of works of fiction or the improvement to be derived from those of progressive information. But it is not so in matters of opinion, where every individual thinks he can judge for himself, and does not wish to be set right. There is, consequently, nothing that the world like better than originality of invention, and nothing that they hate worse than originality of thought. Advances in science were formerly regarded with like jealousy, and stigmatized as dangerous by the friends of religion and the state: Galileo was imprisoned in the same town of Florence, where they now preserve his finger pointing to the skies!