

# DAVID BROMWICH

*Critic, Moralist, and the Last Man of Letters*

Born New Haven, 1951 · Sterling Professor of English, Yale · Author of Nine Books

## THE CRITIC

**D**avid Bromwich belongs to a lineage that has nearly run out. He is an essayist-critic in the tradition of William Hazlitt and Ralph Waldo Emerson, for whom criticism is a moral activity rather than a technical procedure. His authority does not rest on method or theory but on cultivated perception. He writes as someone trained to see clearly, and to render that clarity in language that invites trust without demanding assent.

This places him at a distance from the dominant late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century academic paradigms, which increasingly ground authority in specialization, system, or alignment with theoretical frameworks. He is, in the most precise sense, a late representative of a form that no longer has a clear future.

*"The drift is an emphasis overwhelmingly centered on American culture and society today, conducted in a language derived from our usual ways of talking about ourselves."*

— Bromwich, on the state of literary studies

He was born in New Haven in 1951, raised in Los Angeles, and returned to Yale for his B.A. in 1973 and his Ph.D. in 1977. After rising to Mellon Professor at Princeton, he came back to Yale in 1988 and has remained. He is now Sterling Professor of English, the university's highest academic rank.

Yale is not incidental to his formation. It is one of the last American institutions where the older humanistic ideal of criticism as a moral art retains institutional prestige. Bromwich's career both depends on and interrogates that environment. He is at once a beneficiary of elite academic capital and a critic of the forces that sustain it.

# The Romantic Inheritance: *Hazlitt, Burke, and Wordsworth*

His early work established him as a leading interpreter of Romanticism. *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (1983) presented William Hazlitt not merely as a literary reviewer but as a moral psychologist whose disinterested yet passionate style offered a model of resistant, independent judgment. Bromwich portrayed Hazlitt as the critic who insisted on seeing clearly even when the crowd demanded flattery. The book remains the definitive modern study of Hazlitt and announced the method Bromwich would apply across his entire career.

*Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (1998) traced the psychological drama of Wordsworth's early radicalism and later retreat, showing how political transformation registers as tension within poetic voice. For Bromwich, Wordsworth's shift from revolutionary to conservative was not hypocrisy but the record of a mind under pressure—and therefore available to the same kind of moral scrutiny Hazlitt applied to the great men of his own age.

*Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (2001) extended this inquiry across twentieth-century poets, winning the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. The title names the stance. Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop use doubt as a tool. They do not claim to own the truth. They record the effort to see the world as it is. Bromwich finds in their work a resistance to the ego that mirrors his political stance. He suspects any power that claims to be absolute.

Across these studies, Bromwich treats literature not as an autonomous aesthetic object but as a record of moral struggle under historical pressure. The poem is interesting because a person wrote it under conditions that constrained and shaped what they could say. The critic's job is to recover those conditions and to take the poem seriously as the product of a particular intelligence operating under particular pressures.

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# Burke Reconsidered:

## *Sympathy, Empire, and Moral Imagination*

His work on Edmund Burke deepens this orientation. *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* (2014) rejects the reduction of Burke to a conservative icon and instead reconstructs him as a moral psychologist of power. Burke's writings on aesthetics, sympathy, and politics form a continuous inquiry into how human beings perceive suffering and how institutions dull or distort that perception.

Bromwich emphasizes Burke's critique of empire and his insistence that distance does not diminish moral responsibility. When Burke attacked British rule in India and Ireland, he was not mounting a conventional political argument. He was arguing that the capacity to feel the reality of distant suffering is the foundation of legitimate governance, and that the failure of imagination that allows the powerful to ignore that suffering is both a moral and a political catastrophe.

This reading aligns Burke with the broader tradition Bromwich traces through Romanticism, in which imagination is not escapist but ethically binding. A second volume on Burke's later career remains in progress.

### KEY CONCEPTS

#### *Moral Imagination*

Not a vague humanistic ideal but a disciplined mode of attention. It requires resistance to abstractions that erase particular lives, suspicion of language that sanitizes violence, and a sustained effort to apprehend the experience of others without reducing it to a category.

#### *Disinterestedness*

Drawn from Hazlitt: the faculty that allows a person to see from a point of view not their own. A passionate effort to understand the reality of others, as opposed to the tribal mind that only sees what helps its own side.

#### *Quiet Suppression*

Distinct from censorship. Operates through manners. In professional or academic environments, a remark signaling strong disagreement reads as impoliteness. No law is required. The milieu does the work.

#### *Group Thinking*

Consensus enforced not by argument but by social and professional pressure. The narrowing of acceptable speech through informal sanctions, reputational incentives, and the penalty attached to standing alone.

### SELECTED WORKS

#### *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*

1983 · Oxford University Press

#### *A Choice of Inheritance*

1989 · Harvard University Press

#### *Politics by Other Means*

1992 · Yale University Press

#### *Disowned by Memory*

1998 · University of Chicago Press

#### *Skeptical Music*

2001 · University of Chicago Press

#### *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*

2014 · Harvard University Press

#### *Moral Imagination*

2014 · Princeton University Press

#### *How Words Make Things Happen*

2019 · Oxford University Press

#### *American Breakdown*

2019 · University of Chicago Press

# Against Group Thinking: *Liberal Education and the Therapeutic State*

His 1992 book *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* anticipated much of what has intensified within universities in the decades since. He argued that academic institutions were becoming susceptible to forms of consensus enforced not by argument but by social and professional pressure. What he called group thinking operates through informal sanctions, reputational incentives, and the narrowing of acceptable speech.

He contrasted two modes. Criticism—the tradition he practices, drawing on Hazlitt, Burke, Wordsworth, and William Empson—attends to texts as acts of moral and rhetorical imagination, enlarging sympathy and independent judgment. Theory, by contrast, treats novels and poems as instruments of social discipline, sites of power, or products of bourgeois ideology. He rejected what he called the current orthodoxy in literary theory that reduces fiction to prisons that maim and kill or products of totalizing discourse.

His 1993 London Review of Books essay on Paul de Man offered a measured but ultimately skeptical reckoning with deconstruction. He credited de Man with rhetorical insight and a bracing skepticism that stripped away naïve idealisms. Yet he faulted it for denying personal agency, mystifying key terms, and reducing criticism to obedience to linguistic patterns while evading moral choice and lived experience.

Bromwich views campus speech codes as the output of an administrative state that treats the university as a therapeutic site and assumes the student possesses an infinite fragility. He sees education as a process of individual growth through conflict, and any protection that stops that friction also stops the work of education itself.

He signed the 2020 Harper's Letter on justice and open debate, warning against the constriction of free inquiry. He defends the Woodward Report at Yale, which holds that the primary function of a university is to discover knowledge and that the right to free expression must supersede demands for civility and mutual respect.

The therapeutic logic turns the classroom into a ward. It focuses on the management of feelings. Bromwich believes that a person must face ideas that challenge their identity to learn. He sees the regulation of speech as a loss of nerve. It shows that the university now values the comfort of the group over the truth of the individual.

# A Life in Criticism

- 1951** *Born, New Haven*  
Father attends Yale Law School on the GI Bill after serving in Army Intelligence in China. Family moves to Los Angeles. Mother works as an educational psychologist. As a high-school student he takes courses at UCLA.
- 1973** *B.A., Yale University*  
Returns to New Haven for college. Begins graduate work immediately after. The institution that shaped him will remain his intellectual home for the rest of his career.
- 1977** *Ph.D., Yale University*  
Joins Princeton faculty as instructor. Rises to Mellon Professor of English. The Princeton years sharpen his critical range but do not produce his deepest allegiances.
- 1983** *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*  
First major book establishes him as a leading interpreter of Romanticism and signals his method: moral psychology applied to literary form. The book remains the definitive modern study of Hazlitt.
- 1988** *Returns to Yale*  
Named Housum Professor of English in 1995. Named Sterling Professor in 2006—the university's highest academic rank. Yale becomes the permanent home.
- 1992** *Politics by Other Means*  
His most prophetic book. Argues that literature departments had replaced genuine criticism with ideological templates. The book anticipates the campus speech debates of the following three decades.
- 2014** *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*  
His most sustained scholarly achievement. Reconstructs Burke as a moral psychologist of power, not a conservative icon. Demonstrates his method at full scale.
- 2019** *American Breakdown*  
His most direct political intervention. Diagnoses the Trump years as an expression of deeper failures: the collapse of diplomatic language, the rise of spectacle over persuasion, and the hollowing of democratic discourse.
- 2020** *Signs the Harper's Letter*  
One of 153 signatories warning against the constriction of free inquiry. Bromwich regards criticism of the letter as itself illustrating the problem the letter named.
- 2025** *Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences*  
Continues teaching the foundational Major English Poets sequence at Yale. Remains the department's most visible independent voice.
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# The Empire *and Its Rhetoric*

Bromwich views the Biden administration as a period in which imperial hubris reached a state of stasis. He argues that Biden oversaw the final transition of the American presidency into a figurehead for NATO. He points out that Biden did not speak to Vladimir Putin for three years after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. He sees this silence not as strategy but as moral failure: a refusal to engage with the world as it is, preferring instead the comfort of a vicarious war.

This vicarious war serves a psychological function for the American public. It allows citizens to feel moral purpose without the cost of direct sacrifice. He notes that war appeals to a craving for action in an age of modern drift. By supporting a proxy, the administration provides a spectacle of virtue. He argues that this insulates leaders from the reality of the violence they fund. It turns foreign policy into a branch of domestic theater.

His stance toward the American news media is equally severe. He describes the current liberal media as a primary force for the soullessness of contemporary culture. Journalists now demonstrate virtue by summoning long-settled moral struggles and treating these past battles as if they were living injustices. He views this as moral narcissism.

The connection between his critique of diplomacy and his critique of liberal education runs through what he calls the psychosis of collectivity. The same forces turning the classroom into a safe space turn foreign policy into moral theater. Both represent a retreat from the mental fight required to engage with a reality that does not conform to our desires.

For Bromwich, diplomacy is the international version of the liberal arts seminar. Both require sustained attention to the other—whether a text or a rival state—without immediately imposing your categories on them. Both require resistance to abstraction. And both fail when the participants refuse the discomfort of genuine encounter and retreat into the performance of virtue.

# The Free Radical: *Independence and Its Costs*

Within the contemporary intellectual landscape, Bromwich occupies an unusual position. He is too critical of American power to be comfortably aligned with establishment liberalism. He is too committed to the disciplines of liberal education and moral seriousness to align with populist or anti-elite currents. He resists both theoretical fashion within the academy and ideological consolidation in public discourse. The result is a form of independence that commands respect but does not easily translate into institutional influence or organized following.

His style is central to this stance. Bromwich writes with restraint, clarity, and a deliberate avoidance of rhetorical excess. In an environment where intensity often substitutes for precision, his prose models a different standard. The tone itself carries an argument. It enacts the independence from crowd emotion and ideological urgency that his criticism defends. The refusal to exaggerate is a refusal to participate in the moral inflation that characterizes much of contemporary discourse.