SATIRE IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK

by

BYRON LAIRD FERGUSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department of

ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

AUGUST, 1950
Satire in the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock

ABSTRACT

Two main problems are investigated: Peacock's technique, his aims and method, as a satirical novelist; and his personal opinions, which, often obscured by irony, can be determined only by reference to biography, and to his letters, memoirs, and serious essays.

He aimed to satirize "public conduct and public opinion" and not private life. His characters, in the "humours" tradition, are abstractions of topical ideas, fads, and theories; others are caricatures of contemporary philosophers, politicians, and men of letters. All expose the folly of their opinion while indulging in after-dinner wine, song, and controversy. Peacock believed that pretentiousness and folly pervaded upper middle-class English society. As a satirist, he is a jester, not a reformer. His attack, diffuse and generally superficial, is governed by laughter rather than bitterness. His irony is discernible in his treatment of character and setting, in his scornful attitude towards his reader, and in his divided position as a humorist who sometimes poses as a serious critic. He is a stylist, a creator of witty and pedantic dialogue who is content merely to air disparate and extreme ideas, to pursue folly without attempting to slay it.

Peacock's personal opinions and prejudices are determined, thus to interpret his satire, in these broad areas:
society, politics, religion, education and science, and men of letters. He ridicules the current doctrines of primitivism and progress. He generally avoids comment on the upper and lower classes, and on the moral and humanitarian problems of the times. His most successful attack is against Tory anti-reform policy; but he also distrusts the political masses and the early Utilitarian appeal for a wide extension of the franchise. He accepts the idea of laissez-faire, particularly the assertion of man's right to personal opinion and religious belief. His religious satire changes with the times: in his early work, some unpublished, he attacks directly the drunkenness and ignorance of certain Anglican clergy; his religious attitude, more pagan than Christian, probably remains, but his later clergymen voice his opinions of classical literature and the "progress" of the times. His view of education is classical and aristocratic: he objects to education for the masses, to the training offered by the universities, and to the founding of Mechanics' Institutes. His real enemy is not "progress" but Lord Brougham, the Minister and educator whom he disliked personally.

His attack on Southey and Wordsworth also grows from personal enmity. He respects their poetry but he despises their politics. Both are charged as Tory hirelings. His caricatures of Coleridge, the Kantian philosopher and the lay preacher, are merely facetious. His most successful caricature exposes Shelley's folly as a youthful reformer and lover. He objects to Byron's misanthropical pose in Childe Harold, but he admires him as a fellow-satirist.
CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Background and Problems in Interpretation. 1
Peacock's novels in outline 1
Direction and scope of this study 3
Satire in Peacock's poetry 5
Peacock and his critics 7

Chapter 2. Peacock's Aims and Attitude 11

Chapter 3. Peacock's Method 20

Chapter 4. Social Satire 28

Chapter 5. Political Satire 37

Chapter 6. Religious Satire 49

Chapter 7. Satire of Progress in Education and Science 57

Chapter 8. Satire of Literary Contemporaries 64
Southey and Wordsworth 64
Coleridge 72
Shelley 80
Byron 87

Bibliography 96
SATIRE IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK

CHAPTER 1

Background and Problems in Interpretation.

Peacock's novels in outline.

The popular reader of fiction in 1815 was doubtless pleased with this conventional beginning of a new novel:

The ambiguous light of a December morning, peeping through the windows of the Holyhead mail, dispelled the soft visions of the four insides, who had slept, or seemed to sleep, through the first seventy miles of the road....

If the reader's tastes were typical, if he anticipated a novel of sentiment or terror with its setting in the ancient estate of Squire Headlong in Wales, he was perhaps startled to read on the following page:

The four persons were, Mr. Foster, the perfectibilian; Mr. Escot, the deteriorationist; Mr. Jenkinson, the statu quo ite; and the Reverend Doctor Gaster, who, though of course neither a philosopher nor a man of taste, had so won on the Squire's fancy, by a learned dissertation on the art of stuffing a turkey, that he concluded no Christmas party would be complete without him.

This beginning of Thomas Love Peacock's first novel, Headlong Hall, introduces the reader at once to traits common to all the "novels of talk": a set of characters who rarely become more than personified abstractions of a contentious interest or theory, who talk merely to expound without attempting to convince, who share a zest for good food and wine and talk, and who display their opinions and follies in passages that range

2. Ibid., p.11.
from farce and fantasy to sustained irony.

In considering this curious mixture of comedy and satire, this study will examine in some detail Peacock's seven published novels: five novels of talk or opinion, each with a contemporary setting, *Headlong Hall* (1815), *Melincourt* (1817), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), *Crotchet Castle* (1831), and *Gryll Grange* (1861); and two historical romances, in which the present is satirized obliquely in terms of the past, *Maid Marian* (1822), and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829).

The novels of talk all exploit a dominant theme or particular controversy that, being topical, invites satire. The contrary ideas of progress and primitivism are the basis of the discussion in *Headlong Hall*. As in all the novels, romantic love is here treated with extreme improbability, with the haphazard marriage of various lovers employed merely as a device to conclude the novel. *Melincourt*, the longest of the novels, contains the most diffuse satire. The central figure, Sir Oran, is a civilized though mute orang-outang who becomes the parliamentary representative of a rotten borough. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey are attacked as literary hirelings of the Tory party. Thus the satire becomes a many-sided attack on reactionary opinion in politics, philosophy, and literature. The satire in *Nightmare Abbey* is specific and coherent, directed against the cult of the Gothic and the "morbidities" which the author discerned in contemporary fiction. For plot and central figures, he draws upon the situation in which Shelley, Mary, and Harriet found themselves in 1814.
In the later novels of opinion, Crotchet Castle and Gryll Grange, the attack is centered on the progress, the "march of mind", of the century. The author introduces a host of extremists, faddists, and reformers in almost all the arts and sciences, and reveals his prejudices in attacks on political economy, popular education, the universities, and Lord Brougham. Attack on the Anglican clergy now almost disappears with the introduction of Dr. Folliott and Dr. Opimian, two Johnsonian divines who become spokesmen for the author's views on the major topics of progress and classical literature.

In the historical romances, the satire becomes more indirect and universal. Using a romantic and pictorial setting, Peacock refines his attack with ironic comment on the broad topics of social and political injustice by comparing the contemporary scene with the idealized past. In Maid Marian, a free adaptation of the Robin Hood legend, he praises ironically the "legitimacy" of an outlaw society. The Misfortunes of Elphin, set in sixth century Wales, is notable as satire mainly for the introduction of an original character, Prince Seithenyn, who serves as a vehicle of attack on Tory anti-reform policy.

Direction and scope of this study

The foregoing outline of Peacock's novels is intended to acquaint the reader with his range and topics as a satirist. No attempt is made in this study to catalogue his many objects of attack. The purpose is rather to estimate the literary value of his satire and, in particular, to consider two main problems. Chapters two and three tender an investigation of his aims and attitude, and his method as a satirist. His
technique is examined first because of the obscure relationship between his serious intentions and his facetious method. Peacock's novels represent a unique literary art, almost free from influence or tradition. They bear mainly the stamp of his personality, his crotchets and opinions. But he chose to hide his identity in an artificial, self-conscious form that cannot be likened precisely to either satire or fiction.

The discovery of Peacock's beliefs, the other problem, is thus rendered difficult by the obscurity of his manner. In the remaining chapters, four to eight inclusive, his satire is classified to show the major emphasis of his attack, extending over a half-century period, on the broad topics of society, politics, religion, education and science, and literature. The usual approach in his criticism, that of identifying Peacock with certain characters in his novels, is here largely avoided for several reasons. In his long career as a novelist, he seldom enunciates a fixed conviction. Nor can his philosophy, if he had one, be considered eclectic; he is an ironist who will sacrifice any opinion or theory for a jest. In Peacock, the reader enters into a game, the puzzle being to discover the author's position, concealed amid an array of conflicting opinion. In discovering his beliefs, thus to interpret his satire, this study follows mainly a biographical approach. This approach reveals that Peacock, the ironist, often overstates what he does not mean, and understates what he does mean. Although the bulk of his attack on the Lake poets, for example, is made on literary grounds, he admired their poetry. But he carefully hides his real judgment of their poetry.
because he despised their politics. Before considering his attack, one must be acquainted therefore with his background, two aspects of which are particularly relevant: his attempts as a satiric poet, before turning to the novel form; and his private life and opinions as distinct from his guise as a satirist.

**Satire in Peacock's poetry**

As a young poet, Peacock repressed an inclination for satire while attempting to "follow nature" as a disciple of Wordsworth. He deplored, for example, false sentiment. He asks in a letter to his publisher in 1809: "Is Wordsworth sleeping in peace on his bed of mud in the profundity of his Bathos, or will he ever again awake to dole out a lyrical ballad?"¹ Peacock's sole ambition was to establish himself in the literary world of the day; and he appears to have sought inspiration in nature as a contemporary, for he wrote from Wales in 1810:

> I have been climbing about the rocks and mountains, by the rivers and sea, with indefatigable zeal, carrying in my mind the bardic triad, that a poet should have an eye that can see nature, a heart that can feel nature, and a resolution that dares to follow nature; in obedience to which latter injunction I have nearly broken my neck.²

Peacock's innate humor, his physical robustness, and his scornful attitude towards all who do not share his views, indicate that he was ill-equipped to pursue nature introspectively.


At the same time, his early work does not reveal a capacity for outspoken criticism. An imitative quality partly explains the dullness of his poetry, most of which is literary and experimental, modelled on Gray, Ossian, and Pope. With the exception of a farcical ballad, *The Monks of St. Mark*, which recalls Rabelais and Butler, his poetry is traditional; and he is anxious to conform to accepted standards. His first publication of any size, *Palmyra and other poems*, 1806, is prefaced with this note to the reviewers: "no levell'd malice/ Infects one comma in the course I hold". He is careful not to be considered a rebel; but he is aware of subjects for attack. His indecision, the half-heartedness which marks his satire in the novels, is affirmed in a letter which describes his tour in preparation for the long panegyric poem, *The Genius of the Thames*, 1810. He is indignant to find "a ponderous engine over the very place of its nativity, to suck up its unborn waters from the bosom of the earth, and pump them into a navigable canal!" He notes that "the Thames is almost as good a subject for a satire as a panegyric"; but the published poem is mere uninspired praise of England's commercial prosperity.

The poetry of his mature years is also imitative and traditional: *Sir Proteus*, 1814, a clumsy attempt in parody, displays his first attack on Southey's politics; *Rhododaphne*, published anonymously in 1818, reveals his interest in the byways of classical literature; and *Paper Money Lyrics*, written

2. Ibid.
during the financial disturbances of 1825-6 and circulated privately among Peacock's friends at India House, was not published for twelve years until after the death of James Mill, who might have taken offence.

Peacock's background as a poet thus indicates a disposition which toys with satire as a medium, but which is governed by caution and self-concealment. He was what Shelley called him in his Letter to Maria Gisborne, "that shy bird". His bitterest attacks in the novels, notably on Southey, Wordsworth, and Lord Brougham, never become personal. Although he recognized the excellence of the poetry of all the great Romantics except Keats, he was seldom at ease among his "enthusiastic" contemporaries; he placed rational living above art; he distrusted the extreme and the emotional; and his tastes were profoundly classical. His satire in the novels, like his poetry, is mainly imitative; both exhibit his natural talent for parody and caricature. Unsuccessful as a poet in an age of transition, he turned to novel writing for pleasant relief from more serious pursuit. He produced his first novel while engaged with Hogg and Shelley in intense study of the classics. The time, he recalls, was "a mere Atticism. Our studies were exclusively Greek". ¹

Peacock and his critics

The differences between the real Peacock and his guise as a satirist continually confront the reader and critic. By birth, he belonged to the second generation of the new middle

class. His father, a London glass merchant died or disappeared sometime after Peacock's third year. As an only child, he enjoyed the constant companionship of his mother, from whom he was seldom separated until her death in 1833. In several respects Peacock was not typical of his class. This "new and enterprising type", Trevelyan generalized, "believed in Mr. Brougham, slavery abolition and the 'march of mind', hated Church Rates, Orders in Council, Income Tax and Corn Laws, and read the Edinburgh Review".¹ From his education, pursued mainly in private and under the supervision of his mother, Peacock derived an independent, self-reliant attitude of mind and an extraordinary love of classical literature. His extreme pedantry as a satirist, and his bias against the universities and the broadening of education are related closely to his position as a self-trained classicist who rails against opportunities he was denied or, so far as is known, opportunities that he was not disposed as a youth to accept. His letters to Shelley between 1818 and 1822 reveal his singular devotion to Cobbett. Along with Cobbett, he distrusted Brougham's attempts to popularize science through the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and to educate the working classes through Mechanics' Institutes. Nothing appears to stir his wrath as a satirist more than the progress of his times; yet he played a part in the expansion of the East India Company, and he was, in particular, largely responsible for the conversion of its merchant fleet from wood to steel and from sail to steam.

Peacock merely affects a cynical attitude in his satire. He poses as the enemy of romance and sentiment; he treats romantic subjects ironically in each of the novels. But he is a sensitive, sentimental person: the love affairs of his youth, discovered by his latest biographers, reveal an unsuspected human side that may partly explain the painful delicacy with which he treats the "love interest" in his novels; his sudden marriage, so amusing to Shelley, appears as the coincidental result of financial independence, but is symptomatic of romantic behavior; although his manner in public life and in the novels is aloof and unemotional, he wore throughout his life a locket of hair as a momento of one unfortunate love affair.

Peacock poses also as a lover of masculine conviviality. His novels abound in good-fellowship; but in life he was inclined to withdraw from society. Always reserved and discriminating in his friendships, in the later years of his life he recognized only one intimate friend, Lord Broughton. His whole literary career marks him as a satirist who prefers to hide his identity from an inquisitive public. Almost all his early work and most of his later was published anonymously. His novels are polished and impersonal, written in privacy by an amateur who acts as his own critic and who, although indifferent to public taste, is ever aware of public gaze. His satire is conceived, it would appear, for his own private pleasure rather than public delight or edification.

Peacock's satire therefore sometimes displays and

sometimes conceals his personal opinions, feelings, and pre­judices. Saintsbury, his most devoted editor and critic, notes the difficulty in drawing an integrated picture of the man and the satirist: "a good deal remains unexplained in Peacock... he is a treacherous subject for criticism".¹ The co-editors of his complete work, Brett-Smith and Jones, supply mainly a biographical estimate. Of all his critics, only Mr. Priestley has attempted a complete critical enquiry, which has led to a major conclusion that Peacock is a "baffled idealist" who "takes refuge in laughter".²

This conclusion, however, may not be accepted as final and complete by all readers. Peacock is consistent in one important respect: he distrusts all extremes. In his satire, the folly of one extreme is opposed by the equal folly of its opposite: Tory apathy and radical violence, mass education and mass ignorance, impractical schemes for the regeneration of man and reactionary suppression of the human rights asserted by Bentham. Peacock "takes refuge in laughter" merely to expose the folly of intellectuals and charlatans who impose their fixed opinions on a suffering society. He deals significantly in ideas that defy final answers. The host in Crotchet Castle, a retired stockbroker of Hebrew and Scottish extraction, ironically remarks:

The sentimental against the rational, the intuitive against the inductive, the ornamental against the useful, the intense against the tranquil, the romantic

---


against the classical; these are great and interesting controversies, which I should like, before I die, to see satisfactorily settled.¹

Peacock's attack on opinion is intentionally superficial and diffuse; it allows him to preserve his position as a comic observer without advocating or moralizing. He is not an interpreter or a critic of life; he is interested solely in controversy, in ideas for their own sake. Although he frames his satire in an artificial, fantastic world that is foreign to his nature, his attack is informed by a realistic sense of values in which he applies common sense as a corrective of all excesses that arouse his scorn.

CHAPTER 2
Peacock's Aims and Attitude

Peacock set himself the task of exposing the pretentious and false opinions of a host of extremists, some of them personified abstractions of a contentious idea or theory, such as Cranium, the phrenologist, Escot, the deteriorationist, and Chainmail, the medievalist; and others, including Malthus, Canning, Shelley, and the Lake Poets, members of the intellectual world of the time. To avoid dealing in personalities, and to restrict his view of society to a garrulous world of intellect, he creates a fanciful setting, in remote villas and abbeys where characters of opinion expose their folly while indulging in wine and controversy. In such an ironic setting,

no "character" can be regarded seriously. When the conversation becomes heated, the quarrelsome guests are restrained by such pacifying reminders as "buz the bottle". Thus in satirizing opinion, Peacock appears to conduct his attack in a frivolous, harmless manner. He believed, however, that satire of opinion rather than of individuals was consistent with the greatest comic art.

His critical essay on French Comic Romances, published anonymously in The London Review in 1835, contains evidence of his aims as a satirist. He was aware of "two very distinct classes of comic fiction": "one in which the characters are abstractions", and "opinions are the main matter of the work"; the other "in which the characters are individuals", and "opinions are merely incidental". 2 To the first class, he believes, belong all the great comic writers, from Aristophanes and Rabelais to Swift and Voltaire. Theirs is "the highest order of comic fiction - that which limits itself, in the exposure of abuses, to turning up into full daylight their intrinsic absurdities - not that which makes ridiculous things not really so, by throwing over them a fool's coat which does not belong to them". 3 This, certainly, was Peacock's didactic aim as a comic writer: to attack opinions rather than individuals, and his age, with its due share of charlatanry in society, politics, science, and literature, offered him broad scope for

2. Ibid., p. 258.
3. Ibid., p. 261.
attack. It seems probable, moreover, that Peacock patterns his manner as a satirist to some extent on that of one of his favorite authors: "Rabelais put on the robe of the all-licensed fool, that he might, like the court jester, convey bitter truths under the semblance of simple buffoonery".¹

Viewed in such a light, Peacock is much more than what his contemporaries, alluding to Democritus, called a "laughing philosopher". However slight may be his treatment of the important moral and humanitarian problems of his age, and however jovial he may appear on the surface, his position is clear. His attack is directed against ideas and not individuals. But he refuses to assume the rôle of the moralist or reformer. He is cautious; his satire is topical and seldom strikes deep. He prefers, like Rabelais, the impish rôle of the jester.

It cannot be implied, however, that Peacock chose Rabelais as his master. Their affinity is limited to their attitude as sardonic humorists and to their extensive use of farce. Both are products of their own time. Peacock's strength as a satirist is limited almost wholly to the depth and subtlety of his irony. He conforms with literary tradition: "the great Rabelaisian bellow", Frye observes, "has dropped out of literature. For that kind of satire flourishes in a world of solid assurances and unshakable values; ... the less sure society is of its assumptions, the more likely satire is to take the line of irony".² Peacock was no less sure of himself

or of his values than were his contemporaries. His attack, in many respects, is conventional, for the outpour of parody and caricature during the first quarter of his century is one of the greatest in our literature. Unlike Rabelais, unlike Swift, Peacock is never earthy. He adds dignity to his broadest humour, and refinement to the English novel. His depiction of fashionable society during the years immediately preceding the coronation of Queen Victoria is an idealized conception of the actual, in which "grossness of mind and conversation set the tone of male society...caricaturists delighted in making human beings as disgusting as a brilliant pencil could...and Rabelaisian toasts were a feature of masculine conviviality".¹

Peacock, in addition, was a satirist who guarded his position from an inquisitive public. Because of his intense dislike for gossip, he explains, he long refused to write on Shelley's life, and it was only because of the bias and distortion of fact that he found in three biographies, by Medwin, Hogg, and Mary Shelley, that he chose to write the Memoirs at all.² His novels had appeared without prefaces because, he writes in an 1837 edition of his work, "I left them to speak for themselves; and I thought I might very fitly preserve my own impersonality, having never intruded on the personality of others, nor taken any liberties but with public conduct and public opinions."³ In his strongest personal attack, on

Wordsworth and Lord Brougham, Peacock respected the private life of the individual, just as he guarded so secretly, even from his closest friend Shelley, his own peculiar love and domestic affairs. He intended, therefore, that his characters should be recognized not as individuals but as types of human frailty, and that their conversation should be a close imitation of all that was false and ridiculous in the tastes, feelings, and opinions of the time. Such people, he believed, are a part of all ages and all societies. Here at some length, for this remains the only direct statement of his satiric aims, are the types he lists:

Perfectibilians, deteriorationists, statu-quo-ites, phrenologists, transcendentalists, political economists, theorists in all the sciences, projectors in all the arts, morbid visionaries, romantic enthusiasts, lovers of music, lovers of the picturesque, and lovers of good dinners, march, and will march for ever, pari passu with the march of mechanics, which some facetiously call the march of intellect. The fastidious in old wine are a race that does not decay. Literary violators of the confidences of private lives still gain a disreputable livelihood and an unenviable notoriety. Match-makers from interest, and the disappointed in love and in friendship, are varieties of which specimens are extant. The great principle of the Right of Might is as flourishing now as in the days of Maid Marian: the array of false pretensions, moral, political, and literary, is as imposing as ever: the rulers of the world still feel things in their effects, and never forsee them in their causes; and political mountebanks continue, and will continue to puff nostrums and practise legerdemain under the eyes of the multitude...2

These, and many more, are the flimsily sketched figures who form the ranks of Peacock's parade. He was clear-

sighted enough to believe that such people "will march forever". He had no intention of adding himself to the ranks of the reformers, for to him human frailty is immortal. Fortunately, he did not share the complacent faith of his contemporaries in progress. He had a lasting distrust of what he termed "the march of mind", for he probably felt, like his character the Reverend Doctor Opimian, that "most opinions worth maintaining must have an authority two thousand years old".¹ His attack, therefore, is not penetrating or reformative; rather, he bites sharply at all that is extreme and pretentious.

Though human folly is thus persistent, that alone does not give a satirist standing; the quality of his satire remains to be judged. Shelley, for instance, believed that Peacock was "an enemy of every shape of tyranny and superstitious imposture"; he exhorts Peacock "to give the enemy no quarter. Remember it is a sacred war."² But most readers, less zealous, are inclined to agree with Claire Clairmont's advice in a letter to Mary Shelley: "Tell Peacock from me to make his book 'funny'".³ These comments illustrate precisely Peacock's dual position as a satirist and clownish humorist, a precarious position which weakens his whole attack.

He had at his disposal all the requirements of a satirist: a critical mind that could analyse the follies and extremes of his times in terms of common sense; an apparent

². Shelley to Peacock, July 1818, Letters, p.132.
skill as a sardonic humorist, possessed with a mature command of language and wit; a position in life whence he could observe with detachment the intellectual and commercial activity of a productive period in English history. But Peacock's satire lacks force. He enjoys the pleasure of conflict without attempting to slay the foe:

For satire one needs both pleasure in conflict and determination to win; both the heat of battle and the coolness of calculation. To have too much hatred and too little gaiety will upset the balance of tone.¹

In Peacock, gaiety is uppermost. He is too healthy to entertain an abiding hatred. Even his Tory foes in Melincourt, Wordsworth, Southey, Gifford, and Canning, indulge in friendly singing and drinking. His attack is sometimes indiscriminate and spontaneous. On the suspicion that Wordsworth and Southey had been bribed by the Tories to change their political allegiance, he attacks their poetry and their conduct as public figures.

In this important respect, lack of balance of tone, one can say that Peacock fails as a satirist. It is doubtful whether he ever intended to reform mankind through direct attack. He refuses in his satire to disturb himself unduly with whatever he found disagreeable. In Nightmare Abbey, for example, he avoids comment on Byron's private life, creating a kindly caricature and ignoring the current taste for scandal. Edith Nicolls' description of his disposition partly explains the lack of bitterness in his satire:

As he advanced in years, his detestation of anything disagreeable made him simply avoid whatever fretted him, laughing off all sorts of ordinary calls upon his leisure time. His love of ease and kindness of heart made it impossible that he could be actively unkind to any one, but he would not be worried, and just got away from anything that annoyed him.¹

In the novels, Peacock seldom becomes engaged in direct or sustained attack. He softens his attack because he believed that the pleasures of the dinner table would do much to mitigate the jealousies and hatred of mankind. This belief, which also explains in part his aims as a satirist, is given full expression in his formal essay, *Gastronomy and Civilization*, published in 1851, over the initials of his daughter, Mary Meredith:

Our public and great city dinners, where political, literary, and scientific bonds are cemented by common enjoyment, and animosities are softened by the intermediary offices of an unpremeditated libation, are productive of great good. Hearts expand simultaneously with mouths; the pride of office thaws in the refulgence of the reflected kitchen fire; genius and talent unveil themselves; and the mahogany of a goodly table frequently becomes the bond of reconciliation between ancient feuds; then the hitherto unperceived merit of an enemy is brought to light by a jorum of claret.²

To Peacock, the notes to this essay suggest, cookery is the most important of the sciences. In this essay, he addresses himself to "honourable members and learned gentlemen", the same select group which inhabits his novels. Thus despite his scorn, Peacock's satire is softened by a constant under-tone of tolerance and friendship. It may be inferred also


that a man basically genial enough to believe that a good dinner will dispel animosities is not likely to be a successful satirist.

To most readers, he reveals himself as he was in daily life: eccentric and crotchety, pretentious as a scholar and opinionated as a critic. He turned to novel writing, apparently, for personal enjoyment, reserved for winter evenings "when the time returns for lighting fires". He doubtless became weary of the intensely real world of contemporary opinion and controversy; in the solitude of his library it became a fantastic world in which indignation is almost lost in laughter. Thus fantasy - the civilized orang-utan in Melin-court, the legend of Taliesin in Elphin, the Aristophanic interlude in Gryll Grange - become basic in his bookish form of satire.

The creating of fantasy, it would appear, may be the peculiar gift of those who, like Peacock, are in real life particularly austere and rational. G.K. Chesterton remarks that Lewis Carrol was respected as "a singularly serious and conventional don", but was also "very much of a pedant and something of a Philistine"; he lived a "strange double life in earth and in dreamland...living one life in which he would have thundered morally against any one who walked on the wrong plot of grass, and another in which he would cheerfully call the sun green and the moon blue". Through the diverting

influence of fantasy and nonsense, Peacock's satire loses much of its bitterness. He is, in one respect, a dreamer and a philosopher rather than a satirist: his novels anticipate an age in which man has become civilized enough to accept the blessings of good fellowship and contrary opinion.

CHAPTER 3

Peacock's Method

Several causes for the peculiar form taken by Peacock's satire have been suggested in chapter two. He believed that, in satirizing opinion and not individuals, he was following a great tradition in comic art; he sought to expose intellectual folly which, he felt, pervaded the whole frame of society. His attack is softened by an over-abundance of gaiety; basically genial in temperament, he tends to suppress his animosity by resorting to laughter. He is a jester rather than a reformer; a satirist who is disinclined to commit himself to direct or outspoken attack.

His distinctive brand of satire, now to be examined, is therefore mainly indirect in form. He is an ironist and dramatic humorist who, by means of consistent understatement, allows his characters of opinion to expose their folly without comment from the author.

Peacock's irony is apparent on several levels. In
the quaintness of his setting and characters, his novels verge on fantasy. Even here, his ironic intent persists. His characters follow the "humours" tradition; they remain almost without exception two-dimensional, the mere embodiment of an opinion or a human frailty. He ridicule zealous reformers along with egoists and social misfits. Sylvan Forester, the tiresome disciple of Rousseau in *Melincourt*, annoys the reader with his pedantry and priggishness; Scythrop, the amusing lover and reformer in *Nightmare Abbey*, is the reformist author of the treatise, "Philosophical Gas; or a Project for a General Illumination of the Human Mind". The Honourable Mr. Listless, a dandy of the period, is probably a precursor of a character type in "fashionable" fiction which Hazlitt, writing in 1827, defined as "The Dandy School".¹ Mr. Listless is all that his name implies; he finds that Dante is now "growing fashionable, and I am afraid I must read him some wet morning."² The calamitous Mr. Toobad, also in *Nightmare Abbey*, is a typical Peacockian "crack-pot"; he moves with "spontaneous locomotion", exclaiming "The devil has come among you, having great wrath". All characters speak with fixed purpose, and all are gifted with uncommon fluency and precision of speech. "His method", Bakker observes, "was to let his characters anatomize themselves without knowing that they were shamelessly exposing

². *Nightmare Abbey*, Garnett ed., p.380
their insides". It is easy to follow the ironic mind of the author toying with his puppet characters.

At a secondary level, no thoughtful reader can fail to sense that he too is the victim of Peacock's ironic laughter. In this respect, Peacock shares a literary kinship with Max Beerbohm. Throughout the novels, as in Beerbohm's essays and short stories, runs a vein of comic seriousness. Both excel in caricature, in the creation of a fantastic world of urbanity and wit; and both are masters of the literary hoax. Peacock wrote as he pleased, and at no time respected the tastes of the reading public. At times, however, he favors the reader with a sly wink. *Melincourt* ends with a sarcastic aside to the reader who has a taste for sentiment: "We must not conclude without informing those among our tender-hearted readers" that Miss Pinmoney's marriage was a "good match, through the skilful management of her mother". In *Nightmare Abbey*, he comments on his own detailed depiction of a Byronic pose: "We hope the admirers of the minutiae in poetry and romance will appreciate this accurate description of a pensive attitude". In the romances, he teases his reader with gross exaggeration, such as his assurance that Robin Hood could hit "a target of an inch at two English miles" with the longbow. In *Crotchet Castle*, after first describing minutely a rustic home and its occupants, he concludes:

We shall leave this tempting field of interesting expatiation to those whose brains are high-pressure steam engines for spinning prose by the furlong, to be trumpeted in paid-for paragraphs in the quack's corner of the newspapers.¹

As a novelist, Peacock set his own standards, ignoring both the conventions and the growing demands for realism in the novel. He wrote as an independent and at times indifferent amateur, and his readers no more than his characters can escape his irony.

There is finally a third though obscure level of irony, for Peacock was not above including himself as a butt for his satire. Fedden remarks, "The latinisms he indulges in from time to time, his copious footnotes, the seriousness into which he is sometimes to be caught lapsing, all consciously poke fun at 'Old Peacock' the author."² Here the critic is sensing a characteristic trait in Peacock's indefinable humour. Detached though he is in manner, his eccentric personality and ironic wit lurk on every page. His pedantry, therefore, rarely bores, and his seriousness is but momentary. Walter Raleigh observes in a criticism of Shaw: "The man who is afraid to be caught in a serious sentiment lest others should find it ridiculous, cannot tell a moving tale in a forthright, whole-hearted way. His mind is a kingdom divided against itself - under two kings, a warrior and a clown".³ Peacock's mind

is no less divided. He is too self-conscious to shed his impersonality. He assumes the rôle of the humorist who suspects, since all humanity appears ridiculous, that he himself may be open to ridicule. Raleigh contends that "The professions of reformer and humorist have never been successfully combined. The reformer does not care who laughs".¹ Peacock lacks both the personality and the inclination for the job of reformer. He becomes instead a humorist. His attack, intentionally diffuse and at times inconsistent, is directed against all that lends itself to ridicule. A considerable bulk of Peacockian criticism, however, is devoted to the discovery of his beliefs, and it is disconcerting to find that his sentiments in the novels are at once radical and reactionary. One answer to such speculation is found not in his satire but in his ironic position as a novelist — "Old Peacock", as he is called, the literary wag who refused to take even himself seriously, and who avoided exposing his own beliefs by applying dramatic technique to the novel form; for, as a dramatic humorist, he is able to speak impartially without identifying himself with the views of his characters.

It is significant that before his first novel he experimented with the drama. The framework of country-house comedy was first devised in his two unpublished plays, probably written about 1818; and both plays², The Three Doctors and The Dilettanti, contain characters, situations, and topical

satire that are repeated in his first novel.

In using the dramatic method, his interest is centered in the dialogue, which carries the whole action. He makes slight use of incident, and when he does, it is usually treated farcically. Typical of his restraint as a descriptive writer, and reminiscent of the heightened style of Fielding, is his account of an explosion, one of several in the novels, which is part of an attack on picturesque landscape gardening:

Mr. Milestone had properly calculated the force of the explosion; for the tower remained untouched: but the Squire, in his consolatory reflections, had omitted the consideration of the influence of sudden fear, which had so violent an effect on Mr. Cranium, who was just commencing a speech concerning the very fine prospect from the top of the tower, that, cutting short the thread of his observations, he bounded, under the elastic influence of terror, several feet into the air. His ascent being luckily a little out of the perpendicular, he descended with a proportionate curve from the apex of his projection, and alighted, not on the wall of the tower, but in an ivy bush by its side, which, giving way beneath him, transferred him to a tuft of hazel at its base, which, after upholding him for an instant, consigned him to the boughs of an ash that had rooted itself in a fissure about half-way down the rock, which finally transmitted him to the waters below.¹

No less restrained is his treatment of setting, which he invariably describes briefly and ironically:

The abbey of Rubygill stood in a picturesque valley, at a little distance from the western boundary of Sherwood Forest, in a spot which seemed adapted by nature to be the retreat of monastic mortification, being on the banks of a fine trout stream, and in the midst of woodland coverts, abounding with excellent game.²

In the depth of his irony, and in his simplification of character, plot, and setting, Peacock creates his own

¹. Headlong Hall, Garnett ed., p.54.
comedy of humours. His world is narrow and his satire is restricted; he chose to ignore or treat lightly most of the great controversial issues, moral and humanitarian, of the time. He is a stylist and pedant rather than a critic. Priestley believes that "The secret of Peacock's success is chiefly to be found in the piquantly flavoured dialogue."

The dialogue, based partly upon ideas culled from his reading, frequently falls heavy with aphorism. Forester, for example, speaks the moral platitudes of a Sir Austin Feveral, but like most Peacockian characters remains bloodless; in attacking the literary hirelings of the Tory party, he observes, "Vices of unfrequent occurrence stand sufficiently self-exposed in the insulation of their own deformity". Few men-of-letters are more quotable than Peacock, but a single excerpt cannot capture fully the even pace and ironic wit of his dialogue.

The Johnsonian humor of Dr. Folliott, in his comment on Scotsmen, "the modern Athenians", serves as a typical example:

The Rev. Dr. Folliott-

Sir, I say every nation has some eximious virtue; and your country is pre-eminent in the glory of fish for breakfast. We have much to learn from you in that line at any rate.

Mr. MacQuedy-

And in many other, sir, I believe. Morals and metaphysics, politics and political economy, the way to make the most of the mortifications of smoke; steam, gas, and paper currency; you have all these to learn from us; in short, all the arts and sciences. We are the modern Athenians.

3. Peacock's footnote: "Quasi Mac Q.E.D., son of a demonstration".
The Rev. Dr. Folliott—

I, for one, sir, am content to learn nothing from you but the art and science of fish for breakfast. Be content, sir, to rival the Boeotians, whose redeeming virtue was in fish... and leave the name of Athenians to those who have a sense of the beautiful, and a perception of metrical quantity.¹

Nothing, as this passage suggests, is allowed to disturb the digestion or the rigid convictions of Peacock's guests. They live in a larger world of ideas, in a world of eternal conflict. This, finally, is the basis of his method. The talk, now witty and facetious, now pedantic and serious, has a sufficiency of its own. It is immaterial whether the satire is always well-aimed, for no idea or individual escapes his laughter.

CHAPTER 4

Social Satire

Although Peacock developed a literary genre suited to his individuality and tastes, his novels are topical, and each indicates to some degree the current trend of controversy and opinion. He is consistent with literary practice: "in ages of political unsettlement...hardly any practical problem can be brought forward without leading to debate upon ultimate realities".¹ With the decline of the revolutionary spirit after 1820, and, more important, with his adjustment to a life of ease and security, Peacock's social satire becomes less universal and less bitter. Under settled conditions, "men rest content, for the most part, with debating particular problems in the light of current expediencies or personal preferences for one solution or another."²

Peacock's satire follows this pattern. His social criticism is most abstract in his early work; in the later novels of talk, it is limited almost exclusively to attacks on "fashionable society", with only slight ridicule of characters drawn from the upper and lower extremes of the social scale. This chapter examines these two main aspects of his social criticism: his treatment of current Romantic philosophy, and his attacks on contemporary types.

2. Ibid.
The bulk of Peacock's social satire in the early novels is directed against extreme aspects of the doctrine of primitivism. Escot, the most garrulous character in Headlong Hall, is a curious embodiment of the philosophies of Rousseau, Lord Monboddo, J.F. Newton, and Godwin. The theme in this novel, primitivism versus progress, is established in the first conversation. Foster, the perfectibilian, observes briefly that the present progress of man points to "a gradual advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection".¹ This aroused Escot to reply, in a paraphrase of Rousseau, that this advancement is "only so many links in the great chain of corruption, which will soon fetter the whole human race in irreparable slavery and incurable wretchedness"; and that man, "at the mercy of external circumstances", has degenerated rapidly "from the primitive dignity of his sylvan origin".² Escot's claim, based on Monboddo, that primitive man "had not the faculty of speech" arouses the Rev. Doctor Gaster to disagree, for such belief is contrary to "the authority of Moses". The polite mockery of Escot's reply is typical of numerous sallies against the Church and its doctrines:

  Of course, sir, I do not presume to dissent from the very exalted authority of that most enlightened astronomer and profound cosmogonist, who had, moreover, the advantage of being inspired...I am too often apt to lose sight of the doctrines of that great fountain of theological and geological philosophy.³

¹. Headlong Hall, Garnett ed., p.11.
². Ibid, pp. 11-12.
³. Headlong Hall, p.28.
While partaking of a hearty breakfast of eggs and beef, Escot's ironic views on vegetarianism recall Peacock's acquaintance with the pseudo-philosopher Newton and his disciple Shelley:

The natural and original man lived in the woods: the roots and fruits of the earth supplied his simple nutriment: he had few desires and no diseases. But, when he began to sacrifice victims on the altar of superstition, to pursue the goat and the deer, and, by the pernicious invention of fire, to pervert their flesh into food, luxury, disease, and premature death were let loose upon the world. Such is clearly the correct interpretation of the fable of Prometheus.

Godwinism is implicit in Escot's lengthy denunciation of the present system of marriage. Irony is here applied liberally, for Escot has tricked Mr. Cranium into exchanging the hand of his daughter, "the beautiful Cephalis", for the pseudo skull of Cadwallader. After admitting "I am the happiest man alive", Escot laments the rarity of marital happiness:

Females, condemned...to monastic celibacy..., become willing to take up with any coxcomb or scoundrel...Young men are driven from the company of the most amiable and modest of the opposite sex... Thus, the youth of one sex is consumed in slavery, disappointment, and spleen; that of the other, in frantic folly and intemperance: till at length, on the necks of a couple so enfeebled, so perverted, so distempered both in body and soul, society throws the yoke of marriage...what can be expected from these ill-assorted yoke-fellows, but that, like two ill-tempered hounds, coupled by a tyrannical sportsman, they should drag on their dissolute fetters, snarling and growling, and pulling in different directions?

As these examples suggest, Peacock was in sympathy with many of the philosophies of his day. Although he delights in mocking their extremes, he uses these extremes to

2. Headlong Hall, pp.89-90.
mirror the more real follies in contemporary society. It is
difficult, however, to determine his personal beliefs from
the bent of his satire, although it may be surmised that he
is on the side of the romantic past, for Foster, the perfec-
tibilian, has little to say, and his rôle is dispensed with
in later novels, while Escot is a prototype of primitivists
who appear in lesser rôles in all the novels of talk. Never-
theless, Peacock's main concern was to select, apparently at
random, ideas and controversies of the age, and to create
spirited discussion which usually results in ridicule of all
sides of a question. In Melancourt, for example, the central
figure, Sir Gran Haut-ton, satirizes at once Monboddo's
research in anthropology, Rousseau's return to nature, and
political corruption in England.¹

His application of current philosophy to social
conditions, therefore, is neither direct nor clearly biased.
That he is an observer rather than a reformer is indicated by
the sources from which he drew his material. First, as an
informed writer and conversationalist, he patterned his satire
on a theme already established in the popular literature of
the eighteenth century. The ideas of progress and primitivism
had been fully exploited in the fictional satires of his
immediate predecessors, particularly in Charles Lucas, Isaac
D'Israeli, Hannah More, George Walker, and Elizabeth Hamilton.¹

¹. Peacock acknowledges his debt to Monboddo in many footnotes.

². see Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress,
But Peacock, in contrast to these novelists, is neither didactic nor biased.

His close friendship with Shelley doubtless supplied the other source of his material. Peacock found in Shelley a mutual admirer and literary advisor. When they met, in 1812, Shelley was absorbed in the extreme intellectualism of the time: the fads of vegetarianism and astrology and the Godwinian doctrines of justice and determinism. At Bracknell, when Peacock visited with him in 1813, Shelley was surrounded by a group of faddists, including the Boinvilles and Newtons. Hogg describes this crowd in disgust:

They sighed, turned up their eyes, retailed philosophy, such as it was, and swore by William Godwin and *Political Justice*, acting, moreover, and very clumsily, the parts of Petrarchs, Werthers, St.Leons, and Fleetwoods.¹

Peacock, writing in 1858, is more tolerant:

Every one of them adopting some of the articles of their general church, had each nevertheless some predominant crotchet of his or her own, which left a number of open questions for earnest and not always temperate discussion.²

While in this group, Peacock's attitude was one of amused interest, and there he doubtless found both character types and topics of conversation which he incorporated into the novels.

To such character types, the extremists of the intellectual and commercial upper middle class, Peacock devotes the greater part of his attention as a social satirist. His complete indifference towards the humanitarian impulses of the

---

day is particularly noticeable. Because of his ironic attitude, it is difficult to determine whether or not he uses, in Melin-court, Burke's phrase, "the swinish multitude", as a term of direct derision. But whether or not he had any personal sympathy for the masses, the attitude established by Escot in Headlong Hall remains constant throughout his novels:

Sedentary victims of unhealthy toil, they have neither the corporeal energy of the savage, nor the mental acquisitions of the civilized man. Mind, indeed, they have none, and scarcely animal life.¹

But Peacock never moralizes, and when he does on occasion introduce lower-class characters his aim is usually to add comic incident. In Nightmare Abbey, for example, the character of the footman, Diggory Deathshead, represents as his name implies a burlesque of the fearsome servant type of the Gothic romance. Although he was dismissed because of his grinning and "unhailed laughter", "Diggory, however, had stayed long enough to make conquests of all the old gentleman's maids, and left him a flourishing colony of young Deathsheads to join chorus with the owls, that had before been the exclusive choristers of Nightmare Abbey"² Again, in Crotchet Castle, humorous incident serves as an introduction to a chapter of discussion on contemporary progress, and to an attack on Lord Brougham and his attempts to popularize science. The Rev. Doctor Folliott is "out of all patience with this march of mind", which he blames as the cause of a fire in his home. His cook had overturned a

candle while studying "hydrostatics in a sixpenny tract, published by the Steam Intellect Society...Luckily the footman went into the room at the moment in time to tear down the curtains and throw them in the chimney, and a pitcher of water on her nightcap extinguished the wick: she is a greasy subject, and would have burned like a short mould."¹

Unconcerned as Peacock is with the lower classes, he is even less disposed to attack the landed gentry. The hosts in the novels of talk are estimable fellows belonging to the squire class, and all are infected with an urge for philosophical discussion. Their prototype is Harry Headlong, who is "fond of shooting, hunting, racing, drinking...But unlike other Welsh squires...he became seized with a violent passion to be thought a philosopher and a man of taste".² Ebenezer MacCrotchét, however, is an exception; as the London-born offspring of a Scotsman, he affords Peacock an opportunity to ridicule at once the wealthy Scot in England and the commercial class who had for the past century been insinuating themselves into the ranks of landed aristocracy.

To the invited guests, the members of fashionable society, Peacock directs his full attention as a social satirist. A complete index of his characters would reveal that scarcely a single contemporary theory, fad, or fancy escapes his scorn. It appears unimportant whether a character is "a crotcheteer with a dominating interest or theory", or "a caricature of an actual person", or "a more rounded and normal"

1. Crotchét Castle, p.656.
2. Headlong Hall, p.10.
type, as Mr. Priestly has classified the characters.\footnote{Priestley, Peacock, p.142.} All speak with singleness of conviction and all ride their own hobby-horse. A particular situation in Crotchet Castle illustrates the diversity of types and opinion. The contenders for the large sum of money offered by young Crotchet to "regenerate the world" include: a political economist, a co-operationist, a medical doctor, a geographer, a toxicologist, a dilettante composer, a mediaevalist, a transcendentalist, a meteorologist, and an Anglican clergyman of pagan beliefs. Only one result could possibly follow: "the schemes for the world's regeneration evaporated in a tumult of voices", but the contestants agreed to continue the discussion by spending the fund on "deliberative dinners".\footnote{Crotchet Castle, pp.685-694.}

Peacock's criticism of society, as this passage suggests, lacks force because he was not inclined to take a stand on any issue. The regeneration of man is soon forgotten in the pleasures of the dinner table. His reformers succeed in destroying themselves by their own pompous declamations. His skilful use of parody and caricature suggests that he was a sensitive observer of humanity. But his observations do not range beyond a narrow and intellectually select group. He suffers from a disability which Virginia Woolf believes is inherent in the English novelist: "His work is influenced by his birth...He is fated to know intimately, and so to describe with understanding, only those who are of
his own social rank." 1 Certainly almost the whole of his social criticism stems directly from his personal interest in the intellectual and commercial activity of his time.

His social satire lacks force also because he was simply not interested in humanity. Unlike his contemporaries, Dickens and Disraeli for example, he was not concerned with society en masse or industrialism and its attending evils. His complaints, against industrial smoke and the pollution of his beloved Thames, are petty and personal. Walker remarks, "The truth is that in Peacock the literary quality is superior to the human interest...What he lacks is humanity, just that which is the essence of the greatness of the great humourists- Cervantes, Rabelais, Shakespeare". 2 As a novelist commenting on intellectual society, Peacock laments the poverty of common sense in the schemes and controversies of the times. He considers human "madness" to be inevitable and immortal. As a young man, he wrote from Wales:

On the top of Cadair Idris, I felt how happy a man may be with a little money and a sane intellect, and reflected with astonishment and pity on the madness of the multitude. 3

These views Peacock apparently retained throughout his secure, well-ordered life.


CHAPTER 5

Political Satire

Peacock's political beliefs offer broad scope for critical speculation. The assumption that he was a radical in his youth and, because he avoided political comment in the later novels, a Tory in his middle and old age, is a commonplace. Mr. Priestley, for example, defines his political sentiments as "those of an aristocratic individualistic republican Radical with a strong Tory bias".1 Such is the trap into which Peacock leads his critics who attempt a complete definition of his position in terms of his satire.

Peacock, in the novels, viewed politics as he did most topics: as an observer of society, he had no commitments, political or other, to distort his view. His satire is topical, and he appears to select at random any abuses and follies which he feels inclined to attack. Accused in his old age of Tory bias as a political satirist, he replied:

I have endeavoured to be impartial, and to say what could be said on both sides. If I have not done so, it is because I could find nothing to say in behalf of some specific proposition.2

It is dangerous, therefore, to align Peacock with a particular party on the basis of his political satire. His early attitude, apparently one of political independence, is revealed in a letter to Shelley, written in 1818 immediately

following the publication of his anti-Tory satire in Melin-
court:

The Edinburgh Review just published has an
article on the "State of Parties", the cream of
which is, that the great panacea for the national
grievances is to bring the Whigs again into power,
without reforming the Parliament! The people must
be the swinish multitude indeed if they can believe
this.1

This comment explains in part his dual position as a political
satirist: he attacks the reactionary anti-reform policy of the
Tory party, but he cannot entertain the radical's sympathy
for the political masses. Nor can he be identified with a
particular party in his later novels. In these, his view
merely shifts from his earlier attacks on anti-reform to the
broader social topic of progress, attacking as he does the
complacency and self-satisfaction of the times.

The basis, then, of Peacock's political satire,
which finds its fullest expression in Melincourt, is parlia-
mentary reform. The companion chapters of "The City of
Novote" and "The Borough of Onevote", which represent in some
respects his supreme skill as a satirist, far outclass the
remaining desultory attacks against primitivism and the Lake
Poets which render the novel unpalatable to most readers.
Based on the theme of Burke's diatribe on "Old Sarum", these
chapters describe the election scenes in which Mr. Christopher
Corporate, the paid tenant of the Duke of Rottenburgh, and
the sole tenant of the borough, returns to parliament by his
own assent two members. Contrasted with this borough is the

city of Novote, with fifty thousand inhabitants and no representation, "the deficiency being virtually supplied by the two members for Onovote". On election day, Mr. Sarcastic, one of the representatives, addresses the large gathering of citizens from Novote, who, in a holiday mood, have followed "the long train of brewer's drays" to the borough. Sarcasm and irony are sustained throughout his oration, in which are mocked many of the familiar figures of speech then current in parliamentary rhetoric. Amid the shouts of the crowd, he addresses Mr. Corporate in the following vein:

Free, fat, and dependent burgess of this ancient and honourable borough! I stand forward an unworthy candidate, to be the representative of so important a personage, who comprises in himself a three hundredth part of the whole elective capacity of this extensive empire. For if the whole population be estimated at eleven millions, with what awe and veneration must I look on one, who is, as it were, the abstract and quintessence of thirty-three thousand six hundred and sixty-six people.¹

Later in his harangue he addresses the people of Novote, and assures them, "we shall always be deeply attentive to your interests, when they happen, as no doubt they sometimes will, to be perfectly compatible with our own".² His concluding rhetorical flourish "was received with great applause, acclamations rent the air, and ale flowed in torrents":

as long as the cry of Question is a satisfactory answer to an argument, and to outvote reason is to refute it; as long as the way to pay old debts is to incur new ones of five times the amount...so long must you rejoice in the privileges of Mr. Christopher Corporate, so long must you acknowledge from the

very bottom of your pockets, the benefits and blessings of virtual representation.\(^1\)

As these excerpts suggest, Peacock realizes in Mr. Sarcastic a character of great satiric proportions. Completely without scruples, and under no moral obligation to either himself or society, he is a man who reduces "practice to theory":

> When I get into Parliament I intend to make the sale of my vote as notorious as the sun at noonday, I will have no rule of right, but my own pocket... When my daughter becomes of marriageable age, I shall commission Christie to put her up to auction, the highest bidder to be the buyer.\(^2\)

The mute figure of the other borough representative, Sir Oran Haut-ton, stands in contrast with the eloquent Mr. Sarcastic. Sir Oran is much more than a double-edged attack on political corruption and Monboddo's primitivist theory. As a man-monkey endowed with superior manners and virtues, he sets in relief the gullible mentality and animal behavior of the political masses. Nowhere is Peacock's satire more spirited than in his description of the unruly mob of Onevote. In the riot which concludes the election scene, Sir Oran is the heroic victor of a club-swinging brawl. Melincourt, therefore, is no less an attack on the political masses than it is on Tory reaction.

This same two-sided attack is repeated, though less pointedly, in Maid Marian and in The Misfortunes of Elphin. In the former, the forces of reaction are praised ironically. The outlaw society of Robin Hood, for example, bases its

---

legitimacy on the principle of "might is right":

Our government is legitimate, and our society is founded on the golden rule of right, consecrated by the universal consent of mankind, and by the practices of all ages, individuals, and nations: namely, to keep what we have, and to catch what we can.¹

Described as "a profane, roaring, brawling, bumper-drinking, neck-breaking, catch-singing friar", the Rabelaisian Friar Michall is used as a vehicle for ironic comment. He proclaims that:

Robin Hood is king of the forest both by dignity of birth and by virtue of his standing army: to say nothing of the free choice of his people, which he has indeed, but I pass as an illegitimate basis of power...Is it not written that the fat ribs of the herd shall be fed upon by the mighty of the land? And have not they withal my blessing? = my orthodox, canonical, and archiepiscopal blessing?²

Peacock's intentions in this novel are all inclusive: to satirize at once a reactionary state power, the inherent subservience of the masses, and all parasites in Church and State. But here he treats injustice with unrestrained levity, and despite his ironic intentions, the satire never exceeds the bounds of farce. Because of the idealized background and the lack of direction in his attack, moreover, the novel becomes comic opera, and it was successfully produced as such in London, rather than as political satire.

In his second romance, The Misfortunes of Elphin, Peacock is more successful in treating satirically the romantic past. He persists with his favored topics of

parliamentary reform and the authority of might, and here the farce is restrained and the irony unmistakeable. The great comic figure of the novel, Prince Seithenyn, "the immortal drunkard", personifies the indifference and self-interest of the anti-reform Tory politicians. As High Commissioner of the Royal Embankment, which symbolizes the British constitution, his arguments on "decay" and "elasticity" are a close parody of the anti-reform speeches of Canning and the Duke of Wellington. When advised that the embankment is "in a state of dangerous decay", he replies: "Decay is one thing, and danger is another...That is the beauty of it, some parts of it are rotten, and some parts of it are sound." His whole speech, until he collapses in a drunken stupor, combines irony with the peculiar reasoning of the carefree alcoholic:

the parts that are rotten give elasticity to those that are sound; they give them elasticity, elasticity, elasticity. If it were all sound, it would break by its own obstinate stiffness: the soundness is checked by the rottenness, and the stiffness is balanced by the elasticity. There is nothing so dangerous as innovation.

Although this speech is clearly a direct attack on Tory policy, it also illustrates Peacock's two-sided position as a political satirist. For, as Saintsbury points out, the symbolism can be carried a step farther, and the imaginative or conservative-minded reader can identify the power of the sea with the forces

2. Elphin, p.561.
of extreme radicalism destroying the British constitution.

The remainder of the satire in this novel pales in comparison with the inspired declamations of Seithenyn. The chapter on the "Education of Taliesin", however, is the longest passage of ironic comment in the novels. In this, political satire is only a small part of the whole comparison, in which the present is contrasted satirically with the superior morals, manners, and institutions of an idealized past. Here, as in the War-Song of Dinas Vawr, the political satire is directed against the despotic power of the state, based on military force. Although the Arthurian society lacked "political science" and "the blessings of virtual representation", Peacock adds sarcastically:

Still they went to work politically much as we do. The powerful took all they could get from their subjects and neighbors; and called something or other sacred or glorious, when they wanted the people to fight for them. They repressed disaffection by force, when it showed itself in an overt act; but they encouraged freedom of speech, when it was, like Hamlet's reading, "words, words, words."  

It is understandable that the emphasis of Peacock's attack is completely shifted in Crotchet Castle, published in 1831, for during that year Lord John Russell brought before Parliament the first Reform Bill. His final fling as a political satirist is a generalized attack, not against a particular party or issue, but against the stupidity of both the political masses and government policy. While the rabble clamour at the door of Chainmail Hall, that "fortress of beef

and ale", seeking to arm themselves with the medieval weapons in its armoury, and interrupting the "Christmas gambols" of the guests, the action is suspended while the Reverend Dr. Folliott expounds ironically the present state of political affairs. As the spokesman of Tory Anglicanism, which he facetiously calls "the church militant", he compares the present demands for political emancipation to medieval "Jacquerie". The discontent among the labouring classes, he believes, is caused by foolish government policy:

> It is the natural result, Mr. MacQuedy, of that system of state seamanship which your science upholds. Putting the crew on short allowances, and doubling the rations of the officers, is the sure way to make a mutiny on board a ship in distress.¹

Peacock’s stand, if anything, is one of common sense. But he does not enter directly into the controversial political problems of the 1830’s. The whole generalized debate is soon ended when the more robust guests take on "the armour of the twelfth century" and, led by the militant Doctor, enter into the fray. Again, the satire follows the usual pattern. Peacock leads his reader to a point at which controversy shifts suddenly to lively farce:

> The rabble-rout, being unprepared for such a sortie, fled in all directions, over hedge and ditch. Mr. Trillo stayed in the hall, playing a march on the harp, to inspirit the rest to sally out. The water-loving Mr. Philpot had diluted himself with so much wine, as to be quite hors de combat. Mr. Toogood, intending to equip himself in purely defensive armour, contrived to slip a ponderous coat of mail over his shoulders, which pinioned his arms to his sides; and in this condition, like a chicken trussed for roasting, he was thrown

¹. *Crotchet Castle*, p.754.
behind a pillar, in the first rush of the sortie. Mr. Crotchet seized the occurrence as a pretext for staying with him, and passed the whole time of the action in picking him out of his shell.

"Phew!" said the divine, returning; "an inglorious victory: but it deserves a devil and a bowl of punch".1

The foregoing examples have been selected to suggest the trend and strength of Peacock's political satire. Seldom personal in his attack, he becomes even more abstract and generalized after his first attempt as a political satirist in Melincourt. Nevertheless, his novels contain a considerable body of brilliant, if at times uneven, comment on contemporary politics. He is aware of political injustice; but he softens his attack by extravagant use of farce. The duality of his position, attacking Tory anti-reform policy and distrusting at the same time political emancipation, and the veiled, ironic nature of his attack, suggest that he wished to remain as an informed but detached observer of the politics of the time. Neither in his satire, nor in his public life, so far as is known, does Peacock espouse a particular party.

His critics, as a result, disagree in defining his political beliefs. David Garnett's recent comment presents the opposing views:

Since Carl van Doren has referred to Peacock's toryism and George Saintsbury has laid it down that whatever Peacock may have been in politics, he was at no period a liberal, it is perhaps worth stating what he was. He was a radical individualist, an admirer of Cobbett, a Utilitarian who believed in laissez-faire. He distrusted Governments and hated State interference, loathed corruption and tyranny and had no illusions about the mob.2

As Garnett's broad definition of Peacock's politics suggests, much of the confusion arises from the meaning of terms. Peacock observes in his satire the transitional political scene between 1815 and the first Reform Bill. He found Bentham's ideas attractive, as did many of his generation without distinction of party. The bulk of his political satire is concerned significantly with reform. Referring to the "abundant legislative activity" of that period, Somervell remarks:

The great bulk of that legislation, whether enacted by Whigs or Tories, represents the influence of a single school of thought, the Liberal or Benthamite school...It was Liberal in the old and proper sense of that term, in that it stood for the liberation from legal restrictions of all individuals who were capable of intelligent and useful activity.¹

In this sense, Garnett would agree, Peacock was a "liberal"; and his persistent demands for reform further indicate the influence of Utilitarian thought on his satire.

But Peacock did not accept Utilitarianism completely. Although after 1824 he dined often with Jeremy Bentham, his relations with James Mill, his colleague at India House, were never cordial.² He appears, in Melincourt, to distrust Utilitarianism, as he did all schemes that could not stand the test of practical application. Mr. Fax, who personifies Malthus' theory of population, is frustrated in his solemn attempt to stop the marriage of a rustic couple. His appeal as "the representative of general reason" is nothing more than

"a mort o' voine words" to Robin and Susan.¹ Again, when Forester remarks, "Your system is sufficiently amusing, but I much question its utility", Mr. Sarcastic, the champion of self-interest and dishonest practice, replies that "moral theory" is beyond the comprehension of the masses:

I tried that in my youth, when I was troubled with the "passion for reforming the world"; of which I have been long cured, by the conviction of the inefficacy of moral theory with respect to producing a practical change in the mass of mankind.²

Peacock's attack in Melincourt therefore suggests that he did not agree completely with the early Benthamites, particularly James Mill, who "believed that a wide extension of the suffrage, coupled with complete freedom of political discussion, would almost automatically produce legislative wisdom".³ His later attacks, in Crotchet Castle, on the growth of popular education and on Lord Brougham, himself a partial Benthamite, further indicate that he was most scornful of the intellect of the masses.⁴ His political satire suggests that he accepted the unrest of the times as inevitable symptoms of man's political incompetence and of the historical differences in class society.

Peacock was smitten, however, by the idea that "pleasure" was the ultimate object in life. Although his answer to the political issues of the time is lost in many-

¹. Melincourt, pp.293-298
². Ibid., p.224.
⁴. See Ch.7.
sided attack, he sometimes reveals his Utilitarian sympathy. His answer to misanthropy, to the "mystifying and blue-devilling of society", may be found in Mr. Hilary's remark, "that the highest wisdom and the highest genius have been invariably accompanied with cheerfulness".¹ This faith in the intimate relationship between wisdom and cheerfulness is displayed in the framework of his novels. To Peacock, pleasure is derived by the select few from the stimulation of the intellect, and airing of disparate opinions and theories, but not from offering a conclusive answer to the topic discussed.

¹ Nightmare Abbey, p.413.
Of all Peacock's beliefs, those on religion are most carefully concealed. According to Shelley, writing in 1812, Peacock was considered to be an atheist by his friends in Wales, where "Bigotry is so universally pervading that the best are deeply tainted". It can be inferred, however, that Peacock's atheism was as conventional as his youthful radicalism. Jane Gryffydh, in answering his proposal of marriage, wished to be assured of his views on religion but did not doubt his faith:

your sentiments on the awful subject of religion I trust are changed; that is, if they required that change, which I understood you induced some of your acquaintances here to suppose they did, but which was never my firm opinion.

Peacock's sympathies were probably more pagan than orthodox Christian. His editors believe that to him: "the philosophy of Epicurus was probably nearer to the ideal rule of life than any other religious or philosophical system". His praise of Epicureanism, "the noblest philosophy of antiquity", gives credence to this view. A less specific though perhaps

more accurate comment on Peacock's intellectual attitude is given by Thackeray, who wrote in 1850: "he is a whiteheaded jolly old worldling...full of information about India and everything else in the world".¹

Whether his views on religion changed, his religious satire undergoes a marked transition. In the early novels, the clergy is treated with unrestrained levity; in the later work, the clergymen, the only characters who can be identified closely with the author's views and prejudices, are presented with noticeable sympathy. As a young writer, he is tempted to take religion as a topic for satire. The prose fragments of projected novels, Satyrane and Calidore, contain invective that is not found in his published work. Satyrane is patterned on the misadventures published in 1810 by George Vason, an apostate but repentant evangelist. The fragment is an ironic attack on a rum-drinking missionary who attempts "to save the souls of Australasian sinners with a large cargo of bibles and rum (it having been found by experience that the Indians will not swallow the first without the second of these commodities)."² Calidore describes two drunken Welsh clergymen who meet each Sunday at the local inn, with conversation limited to "Will you join me in another jug". Each evening ends with: "The vicar of Llanglasshyd was carried home by the postilions, and the rector of Bwlchpenbach was put to bed by

the ostler.\textsuperscript{1} This fragment was doubtless inspired during Peacock's sojourn in Wales in 1810-11, and the clergymen probably represent his future father-in-law, whom he described in a letter as "a little dumpy, drunken, mountain-goat."\textsuperscript{2}

In the early novels, drunkenness is again the basis of the satire. His clergyman in each of the novels of opinion belongs to the familiar class of worldly Anglican vicars and bishops who were then popular members of fashionable society. The Rev. Dr. Gaster, "tossing off a bumper of Burgundy", recalls ironically that "milk and honey was the pure food of the antediluvian patriarchs, who knew not the use of the grape, happily for them."\textsuperscript{3} The Rev. Mr. Portpipe explains their position: "When I open the bottle, I shut the book of Numbers".\textsuperscript{4} And the Rev. Mr. Larynx is described as typical: "a good-natured accommodating divine, who was always most obligingly ready to take a dinner or a bed at the house of a country gentleman in distress for a companion."\textsuperscript{5} As character types, these clergymen are gross and pleasure-seeking, and rarely enter into the witty dialogue. They are tolerated as conventional figures to complete the country-house cast and to supply low-comic relief. The Rev. Mr. Portpipe, for example, attempts to rid a deserted wing of Melincourt castle of "a colony of ghosts" by means of "pious incantations", often passing the night.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Calidore, vol. 8, p. 310.
\item Cited in Halliford ed., vol. 1, p. xliii.
\item Headlong Hall, Garnett ed., p. 27.
\item Melincourt, Garnett ed., p. 192.
\item Nightmare Abbey, p. 361.
\end{enumerate}
over a blazing fire with the same invariable exorcising apparatus of a large venison pasty, a little Prayer-book, and three bottles of Madeira;...he was always found in the morning comfortably asleep in his large arm-chair, with the dish scraped clean, the three bottles empty, and the Prayer-book clasped and folded precisely in the same state and position in which it had lain the preceding night.

In the two later novels of opinion, attack on the clergy almost disappears. The clergymen, Dr. Folliott and Dr. Opimian, now become spokesmen for the author. They assume the stature and manner of Dr. Johnson: pedantic intellectuals who direct the conversation and who speak as final authorities on all topics. The Rev. Dr. Folliott is described as "a gentleman endowed with a tolerable stock of learning, an interminable swallow, and an indefatigable set of lungs". As an opinionated classical scholar, he is the enemy of progress, which he sarcastically terms "the march of intellect". In particular, he is used as a vehicle for attack on contemporary progress in science and popular education. Peacock, according to Cole, his first biographer, "used to say that this character was intended by him to make the amende honorable to the clergy" for his earlier attacks.

He treats the last clergyman even more kindly. The Rev. Dr. Opimian appears as a self-portrait of Peacock in his old age: "His tastes were four: a good library, a good dinner, a pleasant garden, and

1. Melincourt, p.104.
2. Crotchet Castle, p.654.
rural walks."¹ The dialogue now becomes polite table-talk; Dr. Opimian expresses the author's research in classical literature, and his abiding distrust of progress and all "reformers, scientific, moral, educational, political."²

Peacock's religious satire thus ignores the pertinent topic of Church doctrine. The published satire is neither bitter nor reformative. With the exception of a mildly Rabelaisian account of gluttonous life in a medieval monastery, in Maid Marian, the satire is almost restricted to a representation of a class of Anglican clergymen. Two topics which doubtless express the author's views are touched upon incidentally. The Society for the Suppression of Vice had moved Peacock in 1821 to compose his burlesque lyrics, Rich and Poor. In Crotchet Castle he replies to an order of the Society "that no plaster-of-Paris Venus should appear in the streets without petticoats." Mr. Crotchet shows his contempt by filling "his house with Venuses of all sizes and kinds", and observes, "where the Greeks had modesty we have cant;...where they had everything that exhausts, delights, or adorns humanity, we have nothing but cant..."³ Peacock's real religious bitterness was probably directed against the reformist societies, and especially the Evangelicals, whose emotional fervour would disturb his Epicureanism, with its tenets of temperance and right reason. Thus in Satyrane he had considered attacking the Evangelicals,

¹. Gryll Grange, p.785.
². Gryll Grange, p.930.
³. Crotchet Castle, p.700.
who had formed the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, which resolved to promote "the most extensive circulation of the Holy Scriptures both at home and abroad."\(^1\) In *Elphin* he refers briefly but ironically to the superior culture of the ancient Welsh: "As the people did not read the Bible, and had no religious tracts, their religion, it may be assumed, was not very pure."\(^2\) Peacock doubtless deplored the current emphasis on Bible reading as a panacea for illiteracy and human misery. He was, we know by his letters, a devoted reader of Cobbett, who notes this trend:

> It is notorious that, where one Bible was printed a hundred years ago, a hundred Bibles and perhaps a thousand Bibles are printed now;...it is notorious that where one person was a pauper when Pitt was minister, there are now more than twenty persons paupers.\(^3\)

Peacock's religious satire, on the whole, is as superficial as his comments on human misery. Such topics are uncongenial and soon disposed of in the jovial world of the novels. Anglicanism offered him a topic for attack that was safe and within the bounds of humour. The notable feature of his religious satire is the complete change in his treatment of the Anglican clergy. Peacock's religious views may have changed, but this is doubtful. He accepted Bentham's idea of *laisser-faire*, which asserted man's right to personal opinion, including the free expression of religious belief. His review

---


(1830) of Moore's Letters and Journals of Lord Byron contains a scathing attack on the author, who had commented on Byron's "scepticism":

Mr. Moore wishes to persuade the public that he denies the right of private judgment in respect of religious belief. He seems to think that belief can be enforced, and treats disbelief as an offence.¹

In answering Moore, Peacock cites copiously from Thomas Jefferson's Memoirs, and indirectly reveals his own rational attitude towards religious belief:

Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness, but the uprightness of the decision.²

He concludes that "Mr. Moore...'invades the liberty of conscience of others' and 'betrays the common right of independent opinion'.³ What Peacock does alter in his novels is the manner of his attack. In the early novels, he attacks directly the hypocrisy and shallow intellect of the clergy. He treats the later clergymen, Dr. Folliott and Dr. Opimian, ironically; but the irony is almost lost because he uses these clergymen to present his own views on contemporary life and classical literature. He doubtless retained his contempt of the scholarship of the rural Anglican clergy. In the unpublished Essay on Fashionable Literature, he notes the rarity of a scholarly clergyman:

2. Ibid., p.120.
In orthodox families that have the advantage of being acquainted with such a phaenomenon as a reading parson (which is fortunately as rare as the Atropos Belladonna - a hunting parson, on the other hand, a much more innocent variety, being as common as the Solanum Nigrum)...1

Thus the tone of Peacock's attack on the clergy changed with the times, with the growth of Evangelicalism and the birth of the Oxford Movement co-inciding with the period which separates Nightmare Abbey (1818) and Crotchet Castle (1831). Mrs. Gisborne's comment to Mary Shelley expresses the attitude of the general reader of that period:

Peacock's Maid Marian I think a beautiful little thing, but it has not taken yet. Ollier says the reason is, that no work can sell which turns priests into ridicule.2

In deference to public taste, and because of his natural distaste for prominence, Peacock avoids religious attack in the later novels.

---


CHAPTER 7

Satire of Progress in Education and Science.

Headlong Hall, written in 1815, contains the lament that the domestic economy of "twenty years ago" has been replaced by the cotton-mill in which child labor is exploited "amid the smell of oil, the smoke of lamps, the rattling of wheels, the dizzy and complicated motions of diabolical mechanism."1 Gryll Grange, published in 1861 by a less caustic old man, is essentially a yearning for "the good old days" before the transformation of industry. Although Peacock's satire of "progress" is on the whole superficial, this broad topic becomes more prominent in the later novels with the changing events, and of these he appears to be especially alarmed at the broadening of education and the growth of science. He remains on the side of custom and tradition; and he shares neither the optimism nor complacency of the mid-Victorians.

His attacks on educational practice are linked closely with his training and prejudices. He refers to his education in a letter written a few years before his death:

I did not go to any University or public school, I was six and one half years at a private school on Englefield Green. I left it before thirteen. The master was not much of a scholar; but he had the art of inspiring his pupils with a love of learning, and he had excellent classical and French assistants.2

His personal views on education are not found in his satire but in his *Prospectus: Classical Education*, a fragment now first printed in the Halliford edition. This prospectus, drafted at an unknown date after his brief visit to the Lake Country in 1813, reveals that Peacock considered establishing himself as a private schoolmaster with "eight pupils, in a beautiful retirement in the county of Westmoreland." He intended to offer classical training in a Rousseauistic setting: "an intimate acquaintance with the poets, philosophers, and historians of antiquity", together with the language and literature of Italy, France and England, taught under "kind and skilful superintendence, amidst the wild beauties of nature..."\(^1\) "The youthful mind", he contends, "should be taught from the beginning to take pleasure in the acquisition of knowledge, and to pursue it for its own sake: when this object has not been accomplished, the end of education has not been answered."\(^2\) He is scornful of contemporary practice: "the total neglect of classical studies among the young men of the present age, who, in the language of the time, have finished their education..."\(^3\) Thus Peacock's view of education is essentially classical and aristocratic: leisurely growth of knowledge "for its own sake", pursued independently or in "select" company without concern for extrinsic gain.

3. Ibid.
He never became a schoolmaster; but in the prominent position of Examiner with the East India Company, "Peacock was delighted to find an Oxford first-class man who was unacquainted with Nonnus."¹ His satire in the novels displays this impish delight. As a successful official and a self-disciplined scholar who follows his own tastes, he is suspicious of both mass education and the University.

During the first quarter of the century, the Lancastrian movement had become an agency for the promotion of popular education. James Mill had advocated that these schools be open to students regardless of sect, that they were "schools for all". In mocking this phrase, Peacock points to Arthurian times, when the people "were lost in the grossness of beef and ale", and had no "pamphleteering societies" or "schools for all" to mar their happy condition.² In the satire, popular education appears as another fad. Peacock probably felt that ignorance is inherent in the masses, and that extensive formal education is often a waste of time. Certainly these contentions are repeated in the novels. Dr. Folliott claims:

> I hold that there is every variety of natural capacity, from the idiot to Newton and Shakespeare; the mass of mankind midway between the extremes, being blockheads of different degrees; education leaving them pretty nearly as it found them, with this single difference, that it gives a fixed direction to their stupidity, a sort of incurable wry-neck to the thing they call their understanding.³

---

². Elphin, p.586.
³. Crotchet Castle, p.674.
As always, vituperation is saved by a humorous twist. But the persistence of the attack suggests that Peacock had little sympathy with the attempts to broaden education, and that he felt, as he wrote in his old age, that more "nonsense" had been "talked on this subject of education...in the last quarter century" than on all other subjects combined.¹

His attacks on University education, however, may be more conventional than personal, although he probably considered himself fortunate to have escaped this "finishing process". Scythrop is typical of the fashionable young men in the novels:

...he was sent, as usual, to a public school, where a little learning was painfully beaten into him, and then to the University, where it was carefully taken out of him; and he was sent home, like a well-threshed ear of corn, with nothing in his head:²

By the "University", Peacock means Oxford, the finishing ground of the Tory aristocracy, where at that time, during the Regency, wealthy students lived riotously. In Crotchet Castle, Oxford is described as "a Babylon of buried literature"; and the distinguished gentlemen deplore the lack of scholarship, although their visit is in July: "Dr. Folliott laid a wager with Mr. Crotchett 'that in all their perlustrations they would not find a man reading', and won it."³

Thus, despite his prejudices as a self-trained classicist, Peacock's satire of education is restrained and

---

impersonal, with one exception. Lord Brougham, referred to as the "learned friend" and "Lord Facing-both-ways" in the last two novels, is singled out for attack. As a classicist, Peacock decried the growing emphasis on science in education. In 1827 he wrote but did not publish a scathing attack in verse on the founding of University College, London, satirically called Brougham's "Cockney College", which was dedicated to the pursuit of modern studies, including science. In the novels, the attack centers on Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, founded in 1825. Although Peacock belonged to the second generation of the new middle class, he did not share their faith in Brougham and adult education, which offered mechanical knowledge to the industrial workers. He believed that the diffusion of knowledge was dangerous. He deplored "such science as the learned friend deals in: everything for everybody, science for all, schools for all, rhetoric for all, law for all, physics for all, words for all, and sense for none." After an interval of thirty years, his attitude is unchanged. Brougham's followers, now called the Pantopragmatics, arouse the comment: "The society has divided its work into departments, which are to meddle with everything, from the highest to the lowest - from a voice in legislation to a finger in Jack Horner's pie"

As this banter suggests, Peacock is a vague and mischievous critic. Indeed, he sometimes forsakes his personal beliefs merely to indulge in raillery. His attack on the founding of London University, for example, is doubtless insincere. Hogg writes to him that the University was "prospering", and adds:

I have no doubt, although you sometimes show your ingenuity by arguing against that institution, that you are equally glad.¹

His real enemy is not progress but Brougham, the pompous Minister who had become, to the lower and middle classes of 1830, a symbol of progress. Because of personal animosity and the narrowness of his views on education, Peacock refused to acknowledge Brougham's service as an enlightened educator of the working class.

Apart from his persistent attack on Brougham, Peacock's views on education and science are detached. He believed that knowledge in unskilled hands is dangerous. Thus he deplored the popularization of science among the masses. His quarrel is not with science but with man: "High-pressure steam boilers would not scatter death and destruction around them, if the dishonesty of avarice did not tempt their employment, where the more costly low pressure would ensure absolute safety".² From his detached position he could see the duality, the good and the evil, in most opinions, whether

2. Gryll Grange, p.808.
they be on education or scientific progress. Nowhere is his
clearsightedness more noticeable than in Dr. Opimian's pro-
nouncement on science, which is even more topical in this
century:

Science is one thing, and wisdom is another.
Science is an edged tool, with which men play like
children, and cut their own fingers...I almost
think it is the ultimate destiny of science to
exterminate the human race.¹

Peacock's views, moreover, are essentially aristocratic.
Wisdom, he believed, could not be spread thinly over the
masses. His training and habit of mind suggest that he favour-
ed intensive, leisurely scholarship. Thus he deplored, in
1830, the superficial training offered by Oxford, and by both
the National and Dissenting school systems, both of which
stressed Biblical instruction and employed the monitorial
system. As an intellectual, he believed that mental differences
are inherent in society. He probably felt that the ideal of
mass enlightenment was an illusion, an unrealistic fad of
enthusiastic reformers. He was, finally, suspicious of the
members of his own class; and he was certain that the masses
were immeasurably happier in pre-industrial times:

They had no steam-engines, with fires as eternal
as those of the nether world, wherein the squalid
many, from infancy to age, might be turned into
component portions of machinery for the benefit
of the purple-faced few.²

---

2. Elphin, p.581.
CHAPTER 8

SATIRE OF LITERARY CONTEMPORARIES

Southey and Wordsworth.

Peacock's laughter ceases in only one novel. In his malicious attack in *Melincourt* on Southey and Wordsworth as poets and political turncoats, he allows personal animosity and political bias to distort his judgment of men of letters. His suspicion that Southey and Wordsworth had been bribed by the Tories to change their opinions governs his attack - an attack which flourished during the decade following their acceptance of political sinecures. Peacock merely joins the general cry which, led by the *Edinburgh Review*, combined charges of apostasy and time-serving with ridicule of Lake "school" poetry and the poetic principles of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Leigh Hunt's comment, in 1814, is a mild expression of the feeling of the attackers: "Mr. Southey, and even Mr. Wordsworth have both accepted office under government; of such a nature, as absolutely ties up their independence."¹ As late as 1822, despite Wordsworth's general acceptance as a great poet, the *Edinburgh Review* persists in its usual vein:

The laurel seems to have proved mortal to the vivacious Muse of Southey... The contact of the Stamp-office appears to have had nearly as bad an effect on Mr. Wordsworth...since he has openly

taken to the office of a publican, and exchanged the company of leech-gatherers for that of tax-gatherers...1

Peacock's satire in Melincourt, following this pattern, was therefore provoked on political and not literary grounds. Evidence for this important distinction may be traced to the direct influence of Shelley. Melincourt was revised during Shelley's visit with Peacock at Marlowe in 1817. Brett-Smith believes that it was lengthened to meet the demands of Peacock's publisher:2 a leisurely tour and the addition of visits with the Lake poets delay the logical ending of the novel. In addition to this flaw in structure, the satire is "shrill in tone" and, Garnett suspects, "in places the shrillness is an echo of Shelley's voice."3 Certainly, Shelley's influence might explain the abundance of invective and stilted argument which distinguish Melincourt from Peacock's other novels.

However conclusive these deductions may be, Peacock and Shelley agreed on the apostasy of Wordsworth and Southey. Peacock writes in 1818, referring to the election in Westmoreland:

Southey and the whole gang are supporting the Lowthers...and seem inclined to hold out a yet more flagrant specimen of the degree of moral degradation to which self-sellers can fall under the dominion of seat-sellers...Wordsworth dines every day at Lord Lonsdale's.4

Shelley's reply expresses their shared conviction:

What a beastly and pitiful wretch that Wordsworth! That such a man should be such a poet.¹

The attack in Melincourt, based on moral and political grounds, is conducted in the same bitterness revealed in the letters. Southey and Wordsworth symbolize reactionary opinion and hypocritical conduct which Peacock identifies with the Tory party. But the attack on the Lake poets is only a part of a larger design. A radical individualist and devoted reader of Cobbett, as his letters reveal, Peacock in the novel denounces rioting and government repression and demands parliament reform. In addition to these immediate issues, he sees the greater danger of moral decay, illustrated for example in the completely unscrupulous Mr. Sarcastic. Indeed, the degeneration of man is the theme which underlies all the satire in the novel. Through his spokesman, Forester, he defines his broad intentions as a satirist:

The vices that call for the scourge of satire, are those which pervade the whole frame of society, and which, under some specious pretence of private duty, or the sanction of custom and precedent, are almost permitted to assume the semblance of virtue, or at least to pass unstigmatized in the crowd of congenial transgressions.²

Southey and Wordsworth, to Peacock, are not personalities but merely specimens of a degenerate group that is found at all levels of society.

The caricatures of the poets thus become bare


². Melincourt, p.195.
sketches, based upon their opinion and conduct as public figures. Southey, who had accepted the laureateship in 1813, is labelled as Mr. Feathernest, a poet who "burned his Odes to Truth and Liberty" and now followed "the motto, 'Whatever is at court, is right!'". This current slur against the laureate and the change in the topics of his poetry leads to heated comment by Forester on the literary hirelings of the Tory party. When Feathernest asks, "I presume, Sir, every man has a right to change his opinions", he provokes the most venomous attack in all the novels. Forester agrees that opinions may change "from disinterested conviction", but "when it is obviously from mercenary motives, the apostasy of a public man is a public calamity":

for there is in these cases no criterion, by which the world can distinguish the baying of a noble dog that will defend his trust till death, from the yelping of a political cur, that only infests the heels of power to be silenced with the offals of corruption.

As this Johnsonian outburst indicates, the satire is almost lost, to the modern reader, in bombastic oratory. Peacock considers neither the drudgery in which Southey existed as a writer nor the personal convictions which drove him from the revolutionary to the Tory camp. His charges against Southey, in addition, suffer from gross exaggeration and vague generality:

1. Melincourt, p.144.
2. Ibid. p.194.
3. Ibid. p.194.
if he purchase leisure and luxury by the prostitution of his talent to the cause of superstition and tyranny, every new exertion of his powers is a new outrage to reason and virtue, and in precise proportion to those powers is he a curse to his country, and a traitor to mankind.¹

By "superstition and tyranny", Peacock doubtless refers to religion and Tory policy. But when he accuses Southey of "leisure and luxury" and treachery, his charges are consumed in verbosity and he becomes an exponent of the literary dishonesty that he has been railing against.

The vehemence of his attack on Southey suggests that Peacock was moved by more than differences of political opinion. Evidence again indicates that Shelley probably influenced Peacock's attitude towards Southey. In his Memoirs of Shelley, Peacock records the bitter quarrel between Southey and Shelley which followed the elopement with Mary Godwin in 1814. Southey, it is reported, claimed that "a man ought to be able to live with any woman."² Peacock, in the Memoirs, is most scornful of this apathy, and is sympathetic in his explanation of Shelley's conduct as a lover. It can be inferred, therefore, that the presumptuous attack on Southey's public morality was partly inspired by personal animosity which Peacock shared with Shelley.

The attack on Wordsworth is even less convincing than the tirade against Southey's public morality. Wordsworth's acceptance of office as Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland in 1813 signified to Peacock and Shelley that he also had sold

¹. Melincourt, p.200.

himself to the Tory cause. Introduced in Melincourt as Mr. Paperstamp, the host of "Mainchance Villa" in Westmoreland, Wordsworth expresses no real opinion; he merely voices approval of the reactionary sentiments of his friends, Southey, Canning (Mr. Anyside Antijack), and the Quarterly reviewers, Gifford (Mr. Vamp) and Croker (Mr. Killtheded). No caricature of Wordsworth is attempted beyond describing him as an egoist who praises "his own virtues and talents" and identifying him with the rustic characters in his poetry. Tory opinion, drawn largely from a current issue of the Quarterly Review, is reduced to absurdity. Canning, the spokesman of the group, refuses to discuss the real issues of the time - "boroughs, taxes, and papermoney" - and concludes to Forester:

I am very sorry to find a gentleman like you, taking the part of the swinish multitude, who are only fit for beasts of burden, to raise subsistence for their betters, pay taxes for placemen, and recruit the army and navy for the benefit of legitimacy, divine right, the Jesuits, the Pope, the Inquisition, and the Virgin Mary's petticoat.1

What is intended as spirited attack turns to drivel. Whenever the pertinent issue of reform is broached, Paperstamp joins in the cry "The Church is in danger!" This current Tory tactic, employed to counteract popular demands for franchise reform, induces Paperstamp to observe:

a little pious cant goes a great way towards turning the thoughts of men from the dangerous and jacobinical propensity of looking into moral and political causes, for moral and political effects.2

Thus the religious note that was becoming prominent in

2. Ibid. p.319.
Wordsworth's poetry, in the *Thanksgiving Ode* and, later, in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, draws from Peacock the insinuation of "pious cant".

To Peacock's suspicious mind, cant was discernible in the public life of Wordsworth and Southey because they did not share his political opinions. He fails, in his satire of the poets, to dissociate politics from literature, and their personalities from their work as writers. His attack is grounded only on the suspicion that, in accepting political sinecures, Wordsworth and Southey had been bribed. Their opinions did undergo pronounced change. But it is impossible to prove that their motives were mercenary; indeed it is contrary to fact. Wordsworth's political beliefs, whether right or wrong, are marked by a disinterested concern for humanity, in both his revolutionary *Letter to the Bishop of Landaff* and his Tory *Two Addresses to the Freeholders in Westmoreland*. Although Herbert Read claims, referring to the change in Wordsworth's political beliefs, that "Apostasy is not too strong a word to use"¹, enquiry into the "motives" of Wordsworth and Southey remains personal speculation.

Peacock's satire of the poets fails also as literature. Lacking originality, he bases his attack on quotations culled from the radical literature of the time. His satire thus becomes a pompous attack, displayed in the platitudes of *Fax* and *Forester*; it becomes at times a sermon,

filled with such pontifical remarks as: "Vices of unfrequent occurrence stand sufficiently self-exposed in the insulation of their own deformity".¹ The hollow ring of Peacock's inflated style warns the reader that he is no serious critic. Yet the commonest error in Peacockian criticism is to regard the author too seriously. He is a mischievous critic who, when he is most sincere, becomes a jester. For this reason, his sincere attack on the politics of Wordsworth and Southey has been distinguished from his superficial criticism of their poetry. The Four Ages of Poetry, for example, appears as an attack on poetry in general, but was conceived for the main purpose of ridiculing the Lake poets, the poets of "the age of brass". This essay, written in the bantering tone which pervades Melincourt, is partly an elaborate hoax which attempts to conceal Peacock's distaste for the politics of the Lake poets. In the manner of the political essayists of the time, he describes the Lake poets as:

shining models of purity and virtue, passing the whole day in the innocent and amiable occupation of going up and down hill, receiving poetical impressions, and communicating them in immortal verse to admiring generations.²

His irony is here unmistakable; but he was apparently successful as a jester, for Shelley, before writing the Defence of Poetry, complained to Peacock that "your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage".³ Peacock's honest

¹ Melincourt, p.194.
appraisal of the Lake poets is carefully hidden: in the unpublished and incomplete Essay on Fashionable Literature, he praises Coleridge; and in his last novel, he speaks no longer as a clown:

Shakespeare never made a flower blossom out of season. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey are true to nature in this and in all other respects: even in their wildest imaginings.1

Coleridge

Although Coleridge is referred to in Peacock's footnote in Melincourt as a species of "poetical and political turncoat", he is not, like Wordsworth and Southey, identified directly with the Tory party. Peacock, in addition, returns to his usual manner of allowing a character to expose himself without opposition by spokesmen of the author. Thus the caricature, a distorted representation of Coleridge's opinions as a philosopher and theologian, adds comic relief to the otherwise sombre attack on the Lake poets.

Mr. Moley Mystic, Coleridge, is isolated from society, living in Cimmerian Lodge on the "Island of Pure Intelligence", surrounded by fog and the "Ocean of Deceitful Form". In this fanciful setting he expounds a philosophy of transcendental gibberish which is a parody of the first Lay Sermon (1816) and the "new principles" advanced in the Biographia Literaria (1817):

I divide my day", said Mr. Mystic, "on a new principle: I am always poetical at breakfast, moral

at luncheon, metaphysical at dinner, and poetical at tea... General discontent shall be the basis of public resignation! The materials of political gloom will build the steadfast frame of hope. The main point is to get rid of analytical reason, which is experimental and practical, and live only by faith, which is synthetical and oracular.¹

Continuing in this vein, while the dinner guests remain silent, Mr. Mystic finally turns to his "cylindrical mirror", in which he has "discovered the difference between objective and subjective reality: and this point of view is transcendentalism":²

Ha! in that cylindrical mirror I see three shadowy forms: - dimly I see through the smoked glass of my spectacles. What art thou? Mystery! - I hail thee! Who art thou? - Jargon! - I love thee! Who art thou? - Superstition! - I worship thee! Hail the transcendental Triad!³

Carried away by his portrait of Coleridge, the prophetic crystal-gazer, Peacock cannot resist concluding the chapter in farce: the usual explosion occurs; Mr. Mystics taper ignites the escaping gas in his chamber, "blowing the transcendentalist down stairs, and setting fire to his curtains and furniture".⁴

The visit ends with Mr. Mystic superstitiously lamenting his fate, for he sees in the explosion an evil omen of "an approaching period of light", when "metaphysical mystery" and "ancient superstition" will be replaced by "the plain common-sense matter-of-fact of moral and political truth".⁵

1. Melincourt, p.280.
2. Ibid. p.280.
3. Ibid. p.281.
5. Ibid. p.282.
The reasons for this many-sided attack on Coleridge's opinions can only be inferred. Its inclusion in a novel dedicated to the satire of anti-reform policy suggests that Peacock saw in Coleridge a Tory threat to the enlightenment and material progress of the middle class. The tone of his attack suggests that Peacock was merely amused by the figure of Coleridge, the lay preacher who appealed to faith alone as a cure for the ills of his time. Peacock's distrust, however, was well-founded, since the Lay Sermons mark the beginning of Coleridge's political writing, which ended in his pamphlet on the Constitution of the Church and State, and "procured for Coleridge the name of High-churchman and Tory." Peacock was indeed aware of the direction of Coleridge's politico-religious thought, for he includes "metaphysicians" in minor rôles in his later novels, Mr. Flosky in Nightmare Abbey and Mr. Skionar in Crotchet Castle. Thus the attack, later softened, has two distinct aspects: Coleridge, the Kantian philosopher who is ridiculed as a contemporary type in three of the novels of opinion; and Coleridge, the politician and literary critic who provokes Peacock's strongest attack and can be identified only in Melincourt.

Peacock doubtless objected to Coleridge's subjective approach to literary criticism on numerous points. The main charge, obscurity, probably arose from his impatience with Coleridge's style as a critic and delivery as a lecturer. This was a common charge by the satirists of Tory men-of-letters.

The *Edinburgh Review* describes Chapter 4 of the *Biographia Literaria* as a:

long-winding metaphysical march...the formidable ascent of that mountainous and barren ridge of clouds piled on precipices and precipices on clouds, from the top of which the author deludes us with a view of the Promised Land that divides the regions of Fancy from those of the imagination...1

As a conversationalist and lecturer, Coleridge probably annoyed many of his listeners; he admits, "My illustrations swallow up my thesis. I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each...."2 At the same time, he claims, "Few men, I will be bold to say, put more meaning into their words than I, or chose them more deliberately or discriminately."3

Peacock, however, did not want to understand Coleridge. In 1817, along with Hogg, Hunt, and Shelley, he considered himself an "Athenian".4 He was, Barrell claims, one of the few of his time who "perceived the intellectualism of the Greeks," who in his life was able "to place reason above all other faculties, to regard wisdom as chief among the virtues".5

Being a crotchety if not profound scholar of the classics, he despised German philosophy. His sarcastic footnote in Melincourt, referring to Coleridge's Kantian nomenclature,6

3. Ibid.
indicates that he considered German metaphysics pretentious and unintelligible. Coleridge's tribute to Bowles and his remarks on the classics, at the beginning of the Biographia Literaria, would at once clash with Peacock's sympathies, which were classic and traditional:

The great works of past ages seem to a young man things of another race...his faculties must remain passive and submiss...But the writings of a contemporary...possess a reality for him, and inspire an actual friendship as a man for a man.¹

That Peacock was incapable of such "friendship" is implicit in the letter he received from Hogg in 1817:

What would be the barbarity of the present age, but for the revival of Grecian literature?²

Beyond these differences in literary taste, it is impossible to determine Peacock's real estimate of Coleridge the critic. We know, however, that he admired Coleridge's poetry. The Essay on Fashionable Literature, written within a year of Melincourt, contains a lengthy defence of Christabel against the charges of the Edinburgh Review. His interpretation of the poem, and his claim that he failed to find "anything unintelligible or incoherent"³ in Kubla Khan, indicate sensitive appreciation of imaginative poetry. It is possible, therefore, that he was favorably impressed by the Biographia Literaria, and that his ridicule of Coleridge's literary criticism may have been a deceptive attack intended to obscure

his very real objections to Coleridge's political and religious opinions.

The first Lay Sermon, I, The Statesman's Manual, professes a dual purpose: "the removal of ignorance" by returning to the Bible for "wisdom", and the urging of "qualified" men "to an especial study of the Old Testament as teaching the elements of political science."¹ Coleridge's son remarks that "the leading idea" of the sermons "is the transfusion of a religious element throughout the social fabric, with the Bible as a text-book of state-wisdom..."² Peacock, a free-thinker and later intimate with Utilitarian leaders including Bentham,³ must have regarded Coleridge's proposals as a reactionary plan to keep the masses in superstition and ignorance. To him, considering the emphasis of his attack in Melincourt, they represented another Tory tactic to maintain power and delay the immediate problem of domestic reform. Above all, he deplored the current interest in the Bible as a handbook for the masses.⁴ Coleridge's additional proposal, that the Bible serve as a guide for political scientists, was undoubtedly to Peacock the most presumptuous of all. Such a proposal was so ridiculous that he refused to consider Coleridge seriously.

Although moved in his attack by profound distrust of

4. See Ch.6, p.54.
Coleridge's theology and politics, Peacock's personal reactions are almost lost in whimsy and nonsense. He was observing in 1817 Coleridge's early attempts as a religious and political pamphleteer, and he appears amused rather than alarmed. The *Lay Sermons*, representing Coleridge's answer to the post-war distresses of the country, call for moral improvement and ignore the issue of political reform, which was, Peacock believed, the glaring iniquity of the times. Peacock and Coleridge belonged in separate camps. With the Utilitarians, Peacock saw the repercussions of the French Revolution in England as "an assertion of the rights of reason as against tradition"; to Coleridge, these repercussions represented "the revenge of enthusiasm for its long repression by the rationalism of the eighteenth century":

> It was this aspect that appealed to Coleridge, to whose ardent fancy it seemed to promise the incarnation of those views of universal love inspired by his reading of the religious mystics...when the Revolution disappointed him...he became a Tory, and yet his essential faith was unchanged.¹

Peacock was probably aware in 1817 of the ultimate end of Coleridge's reasoning in the *Lay Sermons*: an alliance between religion and politics, which was later set forth in Coleridge's plan for a National Church as part of the state in a legislative sense.² He was probably aware also that Coleridge's metaphysics represented an attempt to reconcile Christianity and transcendentalism. But he refuses to include religious

---
controversy as a topic for satire in his later novels. As a public official, conscious of the refinement in public morality and manners, the loose-living Regency code giving place to Victorianism, and probably conscious of Coleridge's influence on the religious revival which became the Oxford Movement, Peacock is content in his later novels to regard only a trivial aspect of Coleridge - the jargon-speaking Kantian philosopher. Thus in the eyes of his reading public, Peacock remained safe. Miss Mitford refers to his next portrait of Coleridge, in *Nightmare Abbey*, as "an amiable piece of raillerie...Mr. Peacock...throws him down and then dances over his body."\(^1\)

---

Shelley

Commenting on Peacock's "method of building up characters from opinions", Brett-Smith observes: "When he knew the opinions too little, or mocked them too much, the result is unsympathetic...But when Peacock understood his sitter, he drew brilliantly."\(^1\) This distinction applies particularly to his caricatures of the Romantic poets. The portraits of Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge in *Melincourt* suffer from deliberate falsification and from Peacock's studied ignorance of the personal convictions which caused the Lake poets to renounce their radical sympathies. In *Nightmare Abbey*, however, he draws from intimate knowledge. Scythrop, the central figure, is a lively portrait of the youthful Shelley of the period between his banishment from Oxford (1811) and his elopement with Mary Godwin (1814). This portrait, Blunden believes, "is nearer to Shelley in life, sofar as it goes, than official biography."\(^2\) Peacock carefully avoids including the tragic love affair. By combining Shelley's situation with the plot in Goethe's *Stella*, Peacock creates his own plot and preserves the comic tone: "Shelley had preferred one of the heroines, Goethe's Fernando had been left with both, Scythrop is able to secure neither."\(^3\) Whereas the caricature of

---

Shelley dominates the novel, Byron, the misanthropical Mr. Cypress, appears only briefly. Although Byron's portrait is thus incomplete, it is integrated perfectly into the comic design of the novel.

Nightmare Abbey, Peacock explains to Shelley, has as its object, "to bring to a sort of philosophical focus a few of the morbidities of modern literature, and to let in a little daylight on its atrabilious complexion." This resolve seems intended to impress Shelley, who looked upon satire as a "sacred" weapon for reforming human folly. Although Shelley was "delighted" with the character of Scythrop, and praised "the lightness, chastity, and strength of the language of the whole", he considered Nightmare Abbey inferior to Melincourt, which "had more of the true spirit, and an object less indefinite, than in either Headlong Hall or Scythrop". Shelley, however, is alone in his judgment. Peacock is successful in this novel, his best, because he does not pretend to be a reformer. He reveals himself more clearly to Hogg: he writes for personal amusement, and his aim is not reform but laughter:

At present I am writing a comic romance with the title of Nightmare Abbey, and amusing myself with the darkness and misanthropy of modern literature, from the lantern jaws of which I shall endeavor to elicit a laugh.

Peacock's satire in this novel is therefore frivolous, containing none of the animosity which appears in his attack on the Lake poets.

By restricting his talk to the topics of gloom and despondency, which he attributes largely to the influence of Germanic romances on the literature of the period, and by fixing attention on the fanciful portrait of Shelley, an impetuous reformer and lover, Peacock achieves for once an artistically-convincing plot. He creates a "hero" who is not a colorless adaptation of priggish opinion, and who is not in the end disposed of in marriage as a means of concluding the novel. Scythrop is a comic hero who chooses Madeira in preference to suicide as a remedy for disillusioned love.

As a character sketch, Scythrop closely resembles Peacock's later description of Shelley in the Memoirs. The novel begins with Mr. Glowry consoling his son, who is lamenting the loss of his first love, Miss Emily Girouette. Peacock recites the affair in ironic terms:

He fell in love; which is nothing new. He was favourably received; which is nothing strange. Mr. Glowry and Mr. Girouette had a meeting on the occasion, and quarrelled about the terms of the bargain; which is neither new nor strange. The lovers were torn asunder, weeping and vowing everlasting constancy; and, in three weeks after this tragical event, the lady was led a smiling bride to the altar, by the Honourable Mr. Lackwit.1.

In the Memoirs, Peacock records that Shelley's atheistic tract and expulsion from Oxford had "brought to a summary conclusion

his boyish passion for Miss Harriet Grove.\textsuperscript{1} Shelley, like Scythrop, is described as the comic victim of "boyish passion". Peacock presents detailed evidence to refute the claims of Shelley's biographers, Middleton and Medwin, that the affair with Harriet Grove was an "enduring passion". He quotes Shelley's letter to Hogg, which identifies the union of Emily and Mr. Lackwit in \textit{Nightmare Abbey} with the sudden marriage of Harriet Grove to a "clod":

Jan. 11, 1811. - She is gone. She is lost to me forever. She is married - married to a clod of earth.\textsuperscript{2}

Both Shelley and Scythrop soon forget their first love; and Scythrop's irrational behavior as a lover corresponds with Peacock's description of Shelley, who had recently met Mary Godwin:

Nothing that I ever read in tale or history could present a more striking image of a sudden, violent, irresistible, uncontrollable passion...His eyes were bloodshot, his hair and dress disordered. He caught up a bottle of laudanum, and said: "I never part from this"...Again he said more calmly: "Every one who knows me must know that the partner of my life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet is a noble animal, but she can do neither".\textsuperscript{3}

The distinction which Shelley makes in comparing Harriet and Mary is applied to the heroines in the novel. Marionetta and Harriet Westbrook are of a like beauty and temperament; both are "noble animals" but not intellectually

\begin{enumerate}
\item Peacock, "Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley", \textit{Works}, vol. 8, p. 60.
\item Peacock, Memoirs, p. 61.
\item Peacock, Memoirs, pp. 91-92.
\end{enumerate}
appealing.\textsuperscript{1} Stella, of greater beauty than Mary Godwin, possesses her intellect and many of her interests. Stella's mind is "full of impassioned schemes for liberty"; she is possessive and jealous in love: "'If I ever love', said she, 'I shall do so without limit or restriction...I will have no rival...';\textsuperscript{2} she condemns outspokenly her "sex's slavery", and she quotes Mary Wollstonecraft as her authority.\textsuperscript{3}

Although Peacock was never friendly with Mary Godwin, he appraises his heroines without prejudice. He attempts to portray in fine detail Shelley's relations with Harriet and Mary. Harriet never shared in Shelley's intellectual pursuits; Peacock recalls that, among the faddists and reformers at Bracknell, "Harriet Shelley was always ready to laugh with me, and we thereby both lost caste."\textsuperscript{4} Harriet was also flirtatious, causing Shelley on one occasion to quarrel violently with Hogg over an intimacy that was probably imaginary.\textsuperscript{5} These characteristics, along with Shelley's motives in marrying Harriet, are suggested in the novel:

she (Marionetta) knew nothing of the world and society beyond the sphere of her own experience... when his love was flowing, hers was ebbing. Scythrop took it for granted...that she had great natural talents, which were wasted at present on trifles: but coquetry would end with marriage, and leave room for philosophy to exert its influence on her mind.\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{enumerate}
\item cf. \textit{Nightmare Abbey}, p.366, and \textit{Memoirs}, p.95.
\item \textit{Nightmare Abbey}, p.406.
\item \textit{Ibid}, p.404.
\item Peacock, \textit{Memoirs}, p.70.
\item \textit{Nightmare Abbey}, p.407.
\end{enumerate}
Peacock's pronouncement in the *Memoirs*, "that Shelley's second wife was intellectually better suited to him than his first",¹ is confirmed in his description of the second heroine:

Stella was no coquetry, no disguise: she was an enthusiast in subjects of general interest; and her conduct to Scythrop was always uniform.²

Underlying these portraits of the heroines and the caricature of Shelley is the same respect for personal opinion and the sanctity of private life which distinguishes Peacock's biography. There is also the same biased sympathy with which Peacock regarded Shelley's weaknesses. Scythrop is a fool, but a very human fool. Like Shelley, he "became troubled with the passion for reforming the world"³ and, adopting Kant instead of Godwin as his guide, he had published unsuccessfully a treatise on "the regeneration of man"⁴ which recalls Shelley's *Address to the Irish People* (1812). Like Shelley, who was obsessed with suicide and who at Eton had drunk from a skull to raise a ghost, Scythrop threatens suicide by poison taken from his "ancestor's skull".⁵ But Shelley's delusions and tormented love are turned to farce: the poison is only madiera and his pledge, which terrifies Marionetta, is a parody of German tragedy and Shelleyian philosophy:

> Let us open a vein in the other's arm and mix our blood in a bowl, and drink it as a sacrament of love.

---

² *Nightmare Abbey*, p.407.
³ *Nightmare Abbey*, p.362.
⁴ Ibid., p.363.
⁵ Ibid., p.371.
Then we shall see visions of transcendental illumination, and soar on the wings of ideas into the space of pure intelligence.¹

To readers unfamiliar with Shelley's biography, or prejudiced because of his treatment of Harriet, the real Shelley is lost in hilarity and exaggeration. Peacock, however, was one of the few contemporaries who understood and consoled Shelley. He saw that Shelley's restless temperament and disrespect for authority resulted from persecution in childhood and public life:

His own father, the Brentford schoolmaster, the head master of Eton, the Master and Fellows of his college at Oxford, the Lord Chancellor Eldon, all successively presented themselves to him in the light of tyrants and oppressors.²

Peacock saw also that Shelley's intellectual energy was often wasted on impractical schemes. In one of his last "projects", Shelley sought "to be employed politically at the court of a native prince" in India.³ Though Peacock considered this idea ludicrous, he replied with kindly advice:

There is nothing that would give me so much pleasure... than to see you following some scheme of flesh and blood - some interesting matter connected with the business of life, in the tangible shape of a practical man.⁴

1. Nightmare Abbey, p.368.
In Scythrop the readers see in extreme the ridiculous side of Shelley, his folly as a reformer and a lover. The human side, Shelley himself discerned. He seems to be justifying his earlier conduct in his observation on Scythrop:

...looking deeper into it, is not the misdirected enthusiasm of Scythrop what J.C. calls the "salt of the earth".1

Byron

Among the numerous attacks in Nightmare Abbey on "philosophic gloom" and morbid opinion, Peacock includes a sally on Lord Byron. He explains his purpose to Shelley:

I think it necessary to "make a stand" against the "encroachments" of black-bile. The fourth canto of Childe Harold is really too bad. I cannot consent to be auditor tantum of this systematical "poisoning" of the "mind" of the "reading public".2

As his quotation marks indicate, Peacock is half-sincere, half-scornful, in his aim to improve "the mind of the reading public". His objection to Canto IV probably arises from his aversion to emotional excess. As a scholar with pronounced classical tastes, Peacock objects facetiously but with apparent sincerity to "three ingredients" in poetry: "the rant of unregulated passion, the whine of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment".3 In particular, he

attributes the current literary taste for misanthropy to German romanticism, symptoms of which he discerns in the Gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and William Godwin and in the Kantian metaphysics of Coleridge. He disposes of Godwin's Mandeville, for example, with the comment: "Devilman, a novel! Hm. Hatred - revenge - misanthropy - and quotations from the Bible. Hm. This is the morbid anatomy of black bile."¹ His attack on Canto IV, carried in this superficial manner, is integrated into his satire of German romanticism and ignores completely the personal basis of Byron's morbidity.

In Canto IV Byron discards his flimsy guise as a pilgrim knight. This canto summarizes in personal terms his gloomy contemplation of the vanity and decay of human endeavor. He returns to the former centers of Italian culture. "To meditate amongst decay, and stand/ a ruin amidst ruins".² He perceives in the "dying Glory" of Venice and Rome an expression of himself - his own suffering and moral decay. He becomes, like the dying Gladiator, the victim of a society in which men "plot in sluggish misery/ Rotting from sire to son, and age to age."³ He proclaims that "our life is a false nature"⁴: man's mind, the artist, "fevers into false creation"⁵; human

2. Childe Harold, Canto IV, verse xxv.
3. Ibid., verse xciv.
4. Ibid., verse cxxvi.
5. Ibid., verse cxxii.
love is a "frenzy", a "Reaping the whirlwind from the oft-sown winds";\(^1\) and life itself is "Withered", "sick", and plagued with "Disease, death, bondage, all the woes...which throb through/The immedicable soul".\(^2\) In the end, he forsakes humanity, turning to nature for spiritual rest.

Critics have interpreted Byron's despair, growing from his abnormal personality and his real or imagined sense of guilt, as a representative expression of "the feeling of ennui in cultivated society" of the time.\(^3\) Elton's view of Childe Harold is still larger: he observes that Byron's "vast and warranted egoism...gave impulse to the enlargement of the European spirit", and that in Byron is an "emancipating power":

the spectacle of a large nature, at issue with itself, and losing itself, at least for passing solace, both in the pageant of the past, and in a vision so splendid of the banded peoples of the world, as should even now steel us against all the allurements of Reaction...\(^4\)

Peacock, however, does not attempt a critical estimate of Byron. His view is restricted, being made at close range and six years before the last addition to Don Juan. However much he disapproved of Byron's emotional, public display in Canto IV, Peacock is content in his satire merely to mock the more despondent lines of the canto without commenting on Byron's personality or his social and literary influences.

---

1. Childe Harold, Canto IV, verse cxxiii.
2. Ibid., verse cxxvi.
Although the satire of Byron is topical, Peacock does not, in the fashion of the times, indulge in scurrilous reference to Byron's recent separation and departure from England. Mr. Cypress - the name being one of the most repeated symbols of mourning in Childe Harold - is "on the point of leaving England." Scythrop's charge, that he "forsakes his country" for "a degenerate race of stupid and shrivelled slaves", echoes Shelley's estimate of the Italian people revealed in his letters to Peacock. Cypress replies in Byron's facetious manner, indirectly disclosing Peacock's judgment of the offensively sentimental Fare thee well:

Sir, I have quarrelled with my wife; and a man who has quarrelled with his wife is absolved from all duty to his country. I have written an ode to tell the people as much, and they may take it as they list.

Most of Byron's subsequent remarks are prose paraphrases of despondent passages in Canto IV. The closeness of the paraphrase is indicated in these excerpts:

Our life is a false nature...We wither from our youth; we grasp with unslaked thirst for unattainable good...There is no beauty but in the mind's idea. Love sows the wind and reaps the whirlwind...The mind is diseased of its own beauty, and fevers into false creations.

2. Nightmare Abbey, p.408.
5. Ibid., pp.410-413.
In detaching these lines indiscriminately from their setting in the poem and from the personality of the poet, Peacock attempts unsuccessfully to show, in the ironic setting of the after-dinner party, that Byron's "gloom and grandeur" is merely an affectation. His charges against Byron are neither direct nor specific, and are not intended to generate heated discussion. He resorts to platitude rather than invective. The remarks of Mr. Hilary, a foil to morbid philosophy and doubtless the author's spokesman, illustrate the general answer to Byronic despair:

To reconcile man as he is to the world as it is, to preserve and improve all that is good, and destroy or alleviate all that is evil, in physical and moral nature - have been the hope and aim of the greatest teachers and ornaments of our species. I will say, too, that the highest wisdom and the highest genius have been invariably accompanied with cheerfulness.¹

Peacock, it appears, is not attempting effective attack. He seems to be amusing himself, rather than his reader, in delivering a sermon to Byron. But he redeems himself in the hilarious departure of Mr. Cypress. The drinking songs which conclude the chapter display his skill as a parodist. Mr. Glowry laments "Let us all be unhappy together". In response, Mr. Cypress sings the parody, beginning, "There is a fever in the spirit/ The brand of Cain's unresting doom", ² which ridicules the Byronic spirit rather than a specific poem. To counteract this "fever", Mr. Hilary and the Rev. Mr. Larynx sing the catch, "Seaman three", and "the whole party in spite

1. Nightmare Abbey, p.413.
2. Ibid., p.414.
of themselves" join in the chorus: "And our ballast is old wine". Byron, "having his ballast on board", departs in a jovial mood "to rake seas and rivers, lakes and canals, for the moon of ideal beauty".\(^1\) In *Childe Harold*, Byron closes with sombre tribute to the Ocean, a "society where none intrudes"; in *Nightmare Abbey*, he departs as a drunken sailor.

By treating Byron in a spirit of friendly banter, and by ignoring his private life, Peacock draws a sympathetic portrait which Byron himself enjoyed.\(^2\) Peacock doubtless felt that Byron's despair was partly the result of dissipation; Shelley informed him at the time that Byron's poetic talent was being destroyed by association with the lowest prostitutes of Venice.\(^3\) Hazlitt's interpretation of *Canto IV* is merely a refinendent of this charge, which at the time was common gossip:

> It is the lassitude or feverish tossing and tumbling of the imagination, after having taken a surfeit of pleasure, and fed upon the fumes of pride...He is in love with misery, because he has possessed every enjoyment.\(^4\)

Peacock, however, refuses to pander to the public taste for scandal. Although his works do not contain a critical estimate of the poet, we know that he admired Byron's satire. Peacock observes to Shelley:

---

2. See Brett-Smith, "Introduction", *Works*, vol.1, p.lxxxvii.
Cain is fine; Sardanapalus I think finer; Don Juan is best of all. I have read nothing else in recent literature that I think good for anything.¹

In his review of the *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, Peacock attacks Byron's biographers, Hunt, Medwin, and Moore, and not the poet. He claims that Byron in his conversation and writing dealt "very largely in mystification", and affected a "spirit of badinage" because he was haunted "by varieties of the small Boswell or eavesdropping genus, who...would take the first opportunity of selling his confidences to the public..."²

Peacock agrees with Byron that in all respects, moral, religious, and political, "The staple commodity of the present age in England is cant."³

That Byron appealed to Peacock as a fellow-satirist is suggested in the friendly portrait in *Nightmare Abbey*. The glaring defects in Byron's character - his arrogance, his vindictiveness, and his immorality - Peacock ignores. No species of degenerate man disgusted Peacock more than the "violators of the sanctity of private life"; this phrase he repeats many times in his letters and critical essays. But this fixed attitude does not explain completely his sympathetic treatment of Byron. Of all his literary contemporaries, Byron comes closest to Peacock in spirit. Both were convinced that hypocrisy was the major social evil of the times; both excel

3. Ibid., p. 115.
in badinage, in hiding their personal feelings in mischievous and at times indiscriminate raillery against their cultivated contemporaries. With the exception of Byron, the leading Romantic poets were not successful in their attempts to be humorous. After examining these attempts in Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, one critic concludes that:

The gift of laughter was by them in a sense self-denied. Electing other preoccupations, they never had it in their heart to be merry; having other recourse from experience, they felt no compulsion to laugh at it.¹

In all other respects, Peacock and Byron differ as satirists. Byron's heart was seldom "merry"; Peacock's satire is over-charged with merriment. Unlike Byron, Peacock could not sustain his bitterness; nor could he feel in his heart the self-righteous bitterness which underlies Don Juan. In all his novels, even Melincourt, the friendly atmosphere of the dinner table prevails. Peacock is essentially content in his adjustment to nature and society. His detailed descriptions of nature, the Lake country in Melincourt, the sea in Elphin, the mountains of Wales in Crotchet Castle, reveal a feeling for natural beauty that is Wordsworthian in tone. His attack is softened by noisy indulgence in food and wine and by lyrics and drinking songs that resound in all the novels. Romantic love, treated with a respect that is not always ironic, is also a basic ingredient; and his heroines are all intellectually equal and often superior, particularly Clarinda

in Grotchet Castle, to his male characters. Although less prominent than his scorn, these sympathies, for nature, good-fellowship, and human love, betray the real Peacock as much as does his satire. As a result, he is almost caught in his own ironic attack. He is not, like Byron, intent on slaying his enemy. His attack, lacking emotional force, appeals almost completely to reason. He agrees with Hazlitt, that "the pleasures of the chase" are not in catching "the game", but in the "exercise" and "excitement..in hunting it down".¹ As a satirist of opinion, Peacock deals in never-ending controversy: his quarry is seldom caught; his goal is seldom attainable:

...so it is in the exercises of the mind and the pursuit of truth, which are chiefly valuable (perhaps) less for their results when discovered, than for their affording continual scope and employment to the mind in its endeavours to reach the fancied goal, without its being ever (or but seldom) able to attain it.²

---


2. Ibid.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Peacock's Works and Correspondence


11. General Works


Barrell, Josheph, Shelley and the Thought of his Time, Yale University Press, 1947.

Kitchen, George, A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1931.
Pierce, Frederick E., Currents and Eddies in the English Romantic Generation, Yale University Press, 1918.
Sedgewick, G.G., Of Irony, especially in Drama, Toronto, University Press, 1935.
Trevelyan, G.M., British History in the Nineteenth Century, London, Longmans, Green; 1922.

III. Periodicals and Literary Publications


