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Edited by D. W. Harding, L. C. Knights, F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson

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# SCRUTINY

## A Quarterly Review

*Edited by*

D. W. HARDING

L. C. KNIGHTS

F. R. LEAVIS

DENYS THOMPSON

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## THE GREAT REVIEWS (I)

**I**N a previous number of *Scrutiny* (June, 1935) Mr. Denys Thompson drew attention to the fact that throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century this country possessed a serious, intelligent and responsible journalism, providing a focus for current movements of thought and opinion, a means of livelihood and a field of action for the middlemen of letters, and an authoritative expression of critical standards. The subject is obviously one for extended study, but a very limited inquiry is sufficient to bring home the fact that the present state of periodical criticism is exceptional, and that the easy excuse that things were always the same, so often used to defend a complacent acquiescence in the contemporary critical anarchy, is simply not true. I propose to concentrate here on the period which saw the foundation of the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, and *Blackwood's Magazine*, and their rapid assumption of critical authority, and within this period to consider mainly specific criticism of literature. These notes are intended as illustrations of the kind and quality of the critical work of the Reviewers: their preoccupations and preconceptions in matters of taste, their methods, and their authority and influence.

In the first place one cannot insist too strongly on the fact that the Reviews had a larger sale in actual numbers, without working out the proportion to the population, than most modern periodicals with anything approaching the same pretensions to intelligence and seriousness. The *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* were selling nearly 14,000 copies each at their peak period, about 1818 to 1819, and *Blackwood's* soon reached a similar sale. To this must be added the steady sale of the bound volumes, and it should be remembered that each copy was often handed round among several people. No genteel family, said Scott, could be without the *Edinburgh*, and Lord Cockburn described the effect of the first number as 'electrical':

'It was not merely that the journal expounded and defended right principles and objects. Its prerogative was far higher. It taught the public to think. It opened the people's eyes. It gave

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them periodically the most animated and profound discussions on every interesting subject that the greatest intellects in the kingdom could supply.'

It is significant that in *Mansfield Park*, when the company at Sotherton were tired of exploring the gardens, 'they all returned to the house together, there to lounge away the time as they could with sofas, and chit-chat, and Quarterly Reviews, till the return of the others, and the arrival of dinner.' It is unnecessary to suggest the modern social equivalent. Even their victims had to admit the power and distinction of the Reviews; Shelley confessed to Peacock that it was the talent with which the *Quarterly* was conducted that made it such a formidable political enemy. The *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* were the mouthpieces of the two great political groups of cultivated society, while at the same time they defined, moulded, and partially formed the opinions of their respective parties, and exercised a literary authority which was the legitimate successor of that of Addison and Johnson. *Blackwood's* had not the same authoritative position, but it made up for this in liveliness and audacity. It was in fact doing extremely varied kinds of work at all levels of seriousness, and its criticism contains a great variety of opinions. But the general critical level was high, and the resulting section through current literary opinion is very interesting. No modern periodical, of course, could combine sheer horseplay with highbrow critical essays, but that is only an illustration of how little the reading public of 1820 was stratified. It was still possible to write for the reading public as a whole, just as it was still possible for the reviewers to examine the whole output of the publishers. Besides these three, as Mr. Thompson pointed out, there were various periodicals of smaller circulation—the *Monthly Magazine*, the *Monthly Review*, the *British Critic*, the *London Magazine*, Campbell's *New Monthly*, the political journals of Hunt and Cobbett, all contributing to that "irrigation of the surface of society" which *Blackwood's* mentions with approval in the forty-second *Noctes Ambrosianae* (April, 1829).

## II.

The first question demanding consideration is the attitude of the reviewers to the Romantic poets, and particularly to the Lake

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School. The *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* based their judgments firmly on the eighteenth-century principles of Reason, Truth and Nature, and although there are hints of a gradual modification of this attitude, a change which is more marked in the later *Blackwood's*, it is generally at the bar of Good Sense that the Romantics are tried. For an age which accepted Romantic standards as absolute, this procedure stood manifestly self-condemned as at once sacrilegious and obscurantist, but it ought now to be possible to consider the question without prejudice. A little examination of the actual criticism should make it clear that this detached and ironical attitude to the new school often produced extremely pertinent and profitable results. The *Edinburgh* opened the attack in its first number, with Jeffrey's long article on Southey's *Thalaba*. He begins in the orthodox eighteenth-century manner, saying that the standards of poetry 'were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers whose authority it is no longer lawful to question,' and he denounces the Lake Poets as a sect of wilful eccentrics, tracing the new style back to Rousseau, Kotzebue and Schiller, to Cowper, Ambrose Philips, Quarles and Dr. Donne. It is the authors' 'unquestionably very considerable portion of poetical talent which makes them a 'formidable conspiracy against sound judgment.' His criticisms of the cult of simplicity are shrewd and intelligent, and it has been overlooked, I think, that he anticipates several of Coleridge's points against Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria*. His chief points are that passionate language may be simple, but that in the more prosaic intervals their method is liable to produce meanness and insipidity; that the Wordsworthian simplicity is 'assumed and unnatural' to an educated author, so that he will be continually deviating from it; that 'the language of the higher and more cultivated orders . . . is adapted to poetry by having been long consecrated to its use' and that there is in these poets an 'exaggeration of thought' (Coleridge's 'mental bombast'):

'There must be a *qu'il mourût* and a "let there be light" in every line . . . A whole poem cannot be made up of striking passages.'

His final judgment, amply supported by examples, is that Southey possesses 'an amiable mind, a cultivated fancy and a perverted

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taste.' Later reviews of Southey placed him finally as second-rate: already in the article on *Madoc* (Oct., 1805) Jeffrey speaks of his 'diffuse and interminable redundancy,' and remarks that the great easiness of his loose and colloquial blank verse 'will one day be his ruin.' The *Quarterly* treated him more kindly, though Scott's praise of *Kehama* was not unqualified (Feb., 1811). *Blackwood's* once referred to him as a poet of the very highest order (*Noctes Ambrosianae*, Dec., 1828), but the review of the *Life of Wesley* (Feb., 1824) says that 'he himself is now the only man who ever alludes to Southey's poems,' and the *Tale of Paraguay* is described (Sept., 1825) as 'with many paltry, and a few fine passages, an exceedingly poor poem, feeble alike in design and execution.'

The *Edinburgh's* first review of Wordsworth was the article on the *Poems* (July, 1807). The merits of the *Lyrical Ballads* are admitted: 'in spite of their occasional vulgarity, affectation and silliness, they were undoubtedly characterized by a strong spirit of originality, of pathos, and natural feeling,' but Wordsworth is described as a mannerist, and his childishness ('some namby-pamby to the small celandine') and bathos ('a Hymn on Washing-day, sonnets to one's grandmother—or Pindarics on gooseberry-pye') are particularly attacked. At the same time several exceptions are noticed: the *Song at Brougham Castle* is highly praised, together with the sonnets and *The Happy Warrior*. As for the summary dismissal of the *Immortality* ode, it can easily be justified by a short analysis, and if further argument is needed, one may appeal to the criticism of Coleridge, and more particularly of Arnold, who found it 'declamatory.' It is pointed out that Wordsworth writes best when he is not writing consciously to a theory, and the review concludes:

'When we look at these and many still finer passages in the writings of this author, it is impossible not to feel a mixture of indignation and compassion at that strange infatuation which has bound him up from the fair exercise of his talents, and withheld from the public the many excellent productions that would otherwise have taken the place of the trash before us.'

The review was at least an attempt to discriminate among Wordsworth's mixed output. Jeffrey's opening sentence on *The Excursion* (Nov., 1814) is known to everyone, but, apart from

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the fact that no important critic has ever attempted to defend the poem as a whole from the charges of 'interminable dullness and mellifluous extravagance,' it is not often realized that this review contains a good deal of praise and several long extracts to illustrate Wordsworth's peculiar merits. On Book I he says:

'We must say, that there is very considerable pathos in the telling of this simple story ; and that they who can get over the repugnance excited by the triteness of its incidents, and the lowness of its objects, will not fail to be struck with the author's knowledge of the human heart, and the power of stirring up its deepest and gentlest sympathies.'

and elsewhere, referring to the passages he had quoted with approval:

'When we look back to them, indeed, and to the other passages which we have now extracted, we feel half inclined to rescind the severe sentence which we passed on the work at the beginning ; but when we look into the work itself, we perceive that it cannot be rescinded. Nobody can be more disposed to do justice to the great powers of Mr. Wordsworth than we are ; and, from the first time that he came before us, down to the present moment, we have uniformly testified in their favour, and assigned indeed our high sense of their value as the chief ground of the bitterness with which we resented their perversion.'

There was every excuse, too, for Jeffrey's witty destruction of *The White Doe of Rylstone* (Oct., 1815). The story, it is said, would have made 'a pretty subject for a ballad; and in the author's better day, might have made a lyrical one of considerable interest.' The article on Wordsworth in the February number, 1822, is a severe but just account of his later work:

'Since he has openly taken to the office of publican, and exchanged the company of leech-gatherers for that of tax-gatherers, he has fallen into a way of writing which is equally distasteful to his old friends and old monitors—a sort of prosy, solemn, obscure, feeble kind of mouthing—sadly garnished with shreds of phrases from Milton and the Bible—but without nature and without passion—and with a plentiful lack of meaning, compensated only by a large allowance of affectation and egotism.'

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Unfortunately the reviewer makes the bad blunder of including the Duddon sonnets in this condemnation.

The first review of Wordsworth in the *Quarterly* was Lamb's article on the *Excursion*, not very interesting except as evidence that Wordsworth's reputation was now fairly well established. Gifford's article on the *White Doe* and *Poems* (Oct., 1815) begins with a generous tribute to Wordsworth's powers, but complains that 'he has by no means turned these valuable endowments to their greatest advantage.' He answers the arguments of the Preface that the passions are more easily observed in rustic life by pointing out that poetry is not the same thing as 'metaphysical' (*i.e.* psychological) analysis, and that

'As in every other production of the human intellect, so in poetry: the superior pleasure which one subject affords rather than another is mainly ascribable to the comparative degree of mental power which they may require.

The reasons he assigns for Wordsworth's bathetic lapses are interesting: he criticizes the exclusive concern of the Romantics with their own feelings, and objects to the description of this kind of 'exuberant sensibility' as specifically 'poetic,' apart from ordinary human sensibility, and says that it is not the intensity of the poet's own feelings which matters, but his power of evoking feelings in others. He repeats the warning against the affectation of a ballad style which 'can never be natural to a man like Mr. Wordsworth,' and notes that simplicity of language may often be purchased at the expense of perspicuity. The whole review is a particularly intelligent and temperate piece of criticism. Coleridge's *Remorse* was made the excuse for a general discussion of the methods of the Lake Poets (April, 1814). The reviewer notes that they work by evoking associations rather than by statement, but that they also go in for analysis of the minutest emotions,

'preferring, indeed, from the greater skill required in the task to trace to their causes the slight and transient rather than the strong and permanent feelings of the mind.'

This leads to the actual cultivation of emotions arising from slight causes, and hence to distortion of values, and to a self-consciousness which makes the emotions of these poets often appear strained and

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fictitious. *Blackwood's* accepted the Lake Poets from the first, and its condemnation of the *Edinburgh's* strictures is only one sign of its more Romantic tendencies; even the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* were made the pretext for a general eulogy of Wordsworth—'indisputably the most original poet of the age,' and one to whom all contemporary poets were indebted. The *Noctes Ambrosianae*, which so often act as a kind of safety-valve for conversational outspokenness, and consequently contain much interesting criticism, yield some comments in a different tone, as when the Shepherd says (Oct., 1823):

'Yon lakers . . . Great yegotists; and Wordsworth the worst o' ye a'; for he'll alloo nae merit to ony leeving creatur but himsel'. He's a triflin' cretur in yon Excursion; there's some bonny spats here and there, but nae reader can thole aboon a dozen pages o't at a screed, without whumming ower on his seat. Wudsworth will never be popular. Naebody can get his blank poems off by heart; they're ower wordy and ower windy, take my word for't. Shackspear will sae as muckle in four lines as Wudsworth will sae in forty.'

The general essay in December, 1818, probably by Wilson, *On the Habits of Thought inculcated by Wordsworth*, is altogether a very intelligent and discriminating appreciation of his work, and it contains some interesting comments on what Arnold was to call 'Wordsworth's healing power': Wilson quotes the last few lines of Book I of the *Excursion*, referring to 'the relation which the consideration of moral pain or deformity bears to this far-extended sympathy with the universe,' and comments:

'Notions like those of Mr. Wordsworth are evidently suited only to a life purely contemplative; but that universality of spirit, which becomes true philosophy, should forbid, in persons of different habits, any blind or sudden condemnation of them.'

It has long been the fashion to marvel at the obtuseness of the Reviewers when confronted with the productions of the new school in poetry, but it is very much to be doubted whether any modern poet could count on receiving from the current literary periodicals reviews, however laudatory in tone, which would show more genuine appreciation and understanding of his aims than was



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shown by contemporary critics of Wordsworth. Even when the Reviewers were frankly unsympathetic, like Jeffrey, their strictures were based on recognized principles, and they showed more real discernment and discrimination than most critics writing to-day in the little-read highbrow journals, let alone periodicals of the same circulation and influence.

## III,

The other Romantics were criticized from the same more or less eighteenth-century standpoint. Jeffrey's review of the *Reliques of Burns* (Edinburgh, Jan., 1809) has an excellent diagnosis of the Romantic idea of the artistic temperament—'the dispensing power of genius and social feeling in all matters of morality and common sense. This is the very slang of the worst German plays and the lowest of our town-made novels . . . It is humiliating to think how deeply Burns has fallen into this debasing error.' The same essay emphasizes Burns' debt to a rural culture and points out that he was using a living language with a poetic tradition. Scott's review of the same book in the first number of the *Quarterly* regrets that the author's fastidiousness has led him to omit such poems as *The Jolly Beggars* and *Holy Willie's Prayer*. He remarks on Burns' power of uniting the ludicrous and the macabre, and points out that his satirical power declined immediately he tackled general subjects not connected with his own immediate observation. In the case of Scott's own poems, the Reviewers mostly agreed with the enthusiastic popular verdict, but their praise was usually discriminating, and Jeffrey's famous review of *Marmion* (1808) struck at the whole cult of mediævalism:

'We must remind our readers that we never entertained much partiality for this sort of composition . . . To write a modern romance of chivalry seems to be much such a fantasy as to build a modern abbey, or an English pagoda.'

The *Quarterly* reviewer of *The Lord of the Isles* (July, 1815) discusses Scott's great popularity and its significance:

'Whether this is a sort of merit which indicates great and uncommon talents, may perhaps admit a doubt; but at all events it is a very useful one to the public at large.'

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Scott is said to write mainly with a view to pleasing, and is censured for carelessness, in

‘ not bestowing upon his publications that common degree of labour and meditation which, we cannot help saying, it is scarcely decorous to withhold . . . ’

Much of the criticism of Byron was fairly favourable, but the Reviewers usually objected to his misanthropy and Romantic Satanism (‘ the searching of dark bosoms ’). The *Edinburgh* review of *Childe Harold*, Canto IV (June, 1818) compares him with Rousseau, and censures his egotism:

‘ Posterity may make fewer allowances for much in himself and in his writings than his contemporaries are willing to do ; nor will they, with the same impetuous zeal, follow the wild voice that too often leads into a haunted wilderness of doubt and darkness . . . But they will not, like us, be withheld from sterner and severer feelings.’

The following remarks from the same review foreshadow Matthew Arnold’s criticisms of the Romantics:

‘ But highly as we estimate these merits of our modern poetry, it is certain, that the age has not yet produced any one great epic or tragic performance. Vivid and just delineations of passion there are in abundance, but of moments of passion—fragments of representation.’

The *Quarterly* took up much the same position. Scott’s review of *Childe Harold*, Canto III (Oct., 1816) is very favourable, and contains the sentence quoted by Arnold which describes Byron as ‘ managing his pen with the careless and negligent ease of a man of quality ’ ; but in April, 1818, he said of the fourth Canto:

‘ His poetry is like the oratory which hurries the hearers along without permitting them to pause on its solecisms or singularities.’

and although he praised the poem highly he declared that the chief reasons for Byron’s great popularity were, first, the novelty of this exposure of a personality, and secondly, the Byronic melancholy, which, he insists, is only curable in healthy relations