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Edited by L. C. Knights, H. A. Mason and F. R. Leavis

Excerpt

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SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

L. C. KNIGHTS H. A. MASON

F. R. LEAVIS

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE : OR ANGLO-AMERICAN EXCHANGES

DR. BETSKY, writing with an authority to which I cannot (and did not) pretend, while apparently taking me to task, confirms the main features of the situation to which my heterogeneous collection of 'documents' seemed to point. The charge of bordering on complacency, however, came as a disagreeable shock to me, the more so as it was made by one quite obviously without unfair animus. Indeed I would be content to submit to his courteous strictures without further comment did I not believe that by amplifying one or two of the points I tried to hint at rather than to make I could dispose of the complacency charge or at least isolate the area of difference in 'valuation' which may be detected in Dr. Betsky's unambiguous (though occasionally it would seem, self-contradictory!) 'comment and reply' and may have provided the grounds for the wounding accusation. On the other hand, as I was not aware of exhibiting complacency in the 'Note', the taint may lie beyond my power to detect or eradicate. At the same time there is no doubt in my mind that complacency on either side would effectively prevent the understanding I believe can be reached and which would prove extremely beneficial to the English side (Dr. Betsky is kind enough to suggest ways by which the benefits might become mutual) in Anglo-American exchanges at *Scrutiny* level.

In my note I referred to the possibility or desirability of 'civilization-wide unity'. It may help to clarify matters if I recall some of the relevant facts. Dr. Betsky complained of the absence in the note of point-for-point comparison between the American and English 'scenes' and justifiably wondered from where I drew my comfort in reflecting on the literary world in such a centre as London. I simply took it for granted that English readers (for whom all my meagre scraps of borrowed information were intended) would supply the comparisons from the abundant stock of facts available to any reader of current English literary periodicals and what passes for literature in the judgment of the contributors to those periodicals. There is, notoriously, no comfort to be derived from even the most fragmentary acquaintance with the state of letters in England. Dr. Betsky will have noted in the number of *Scrutiny* in which his comment appeared a reference to the 'embarrassment facing anyone who is concerned for the contemporary function of criticism'. The embarrassment is in part a measure of the relative success obtained in creating a public for whom there is no further need to amplify the analysis made in the

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early numbers of *Scrutiny* of the system whereby our self-styled betters virtually govern unchallenged through a network of 'interlocking directorates'. But if none of the readers of this journal requires reviews of, say, the productions of Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene or V. S. Pritchett or needs reminding of the activity of these novelists in critical journalism, if the reader can supply his own comment on the phenomena connected with the recent canonization of the Sitwells, there is equally hardly a reader who does not meet in daily life with some evidence of the way in which the ramifications of the system choke his path and the extent to which in polite circles the *Scrutiny* opinion is still a minority opinion. Nor are there wanting siren voices inviting one to make things easier all round. 'After all', it is said, 'you have to recognize that we intellectuals (if you must use the word) are all in the same boat. Faced with governmental indifference and the alienation of the masses, we should pull together. We have the same concern for values (though we are less strident about it than you). And places could be found where your valuable contributions would resound to greater effect than in your self-chosen isolation'. Polite rejection of these well-meant overtures earns the epithets 'humourless', 'narrow', 'Puritanical', 'presumptuous', 'intolerant', 'hypercritical', 'unattractive', 'lacking in charm'. To fail to be impressed by Auden, Spender, Dylan Thomas *et hoc genus omne* and to say so in public is described as 'fouling the nest'.

In these days of restricted travel it is less a matter of common knowledge that cultural exchanges between the various centres of our civilization (which may be defined geographically as the area covered by the sales of the English, Italian, German and French language editions of *Readers' Digest*) are largely in the hands of the very people who govern at home and their 'opposite numbers' in other lands. A glance at the translations of English authors for sale in the bookshops of any foreign capital will reveal the channels through which contact with England is maintained. Five minutes' conversation with a foreign 'intellectual' on his reading in modern English literature yields the same names even when the foreigner himself goes to the originals. The 'coverage' of English literature in foreign reviews, when not entrusted to an English representative of the 'system', is regularly inspired by the dominating group. Of course, there are exceptions. I have been approached quizzically by cultivated foreigners with, 'Is Mr. Morgan (or Mr. Spender or any other fashionable name among the literary people who visit foreign capitals privately or as delegates) *really* the best you have to offer?'—or 'Can you explain to me just *what* makes Rosamund Lehmann (or Elizabeth Bowen or I. Compton-Burnett) a distinguished writer?' It is striking that authors of greater interest, if not carried by our distinguished travellers in literary wares, remain unknown abroad. The foreigner does not spontaneously prefer, say, Graham Greene to L. H. Myers. He hears only of the former and takes him as representative of the best the English can manage in the 'philosophical novelist's' line. It is equally striking

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that, as a general rule, our literary travellers bring home wares similar to those they have recommended abroad.

The bearing of these facts on any attempts made on behalf of *Scrutiny* to establish fruitful relations with other centres will be obvious. It has become extremely difficult to discover who are the significant authors in any foreign country and it is almost hopeless to expect a disinterested examination of our own authors by foreign critics. What can still be done is, perhaps, to study the intellectual climate in the centres that characterize our civilization. The significant varieties which may be discovered not only enrich our sense of the values we strive to keep alive at home, but provide a measure by which we can see ourselves as more or less removed from an ideal 'centre'. It may be true that the foreigner could profit by noting what is written in *Scrutiny* of the situation in England. I hardly think it likely that our 'foreign coverage' would prove enlightening to the native on the spot and it has certainly never been offered with such immodest pretensions.

That the U.S.A. presents for us the significant variety from studying which we are most likely to derive profit in the ways I have just outlined, has long been my conviction, and to judge by the volumes of *Scrutiny* it would seem that a similar conviction is pretty generally shared by *Scrutiny's* editors and contributors. The study of the cultural history of literary America would still be profitable even if we had not such admirable helps as are provided by Henry Adams, Henry James, Edith Wharton, George Santayana and Malcolm Cowley. (My 'note' was partly intended to point out the need for a continuation down to the present of *Exile's Return*). Contact with America is equally vital for the other reason I mentioned. We look to the lively critics in that country to tell us when our Emperor is naked. In the article to which Dr. Betsky referred I wrote, 'One of the happiest features of *New Republic* reviews for English readers is their immunity from respect for established English values'. America has long since ceased to accept dictation of its values from a London group, however powerful the hold of such a group on the moulding of opinion in England. Yet, I had to report in the same article, 'there is observable a distressing tendency to take over Bloomsbury values without question'. That was in 1939. Since then Edmund Wilson and others have shown that critical independence is possible.

Dr. Betsky, however, warns us against expecting too much. Whereas (he says in effect) the American critic is much livelier and much more devastating than the English critic when faced with an obviously immature American writer, when faced with an obviously immature English writer, such as Stephen Spender, 'writers for *Scrutiny* . . . would note in American magazines the uncertainty of evaluative judgment'. Why is this? Can it be that the English writer derives prestige in American eyes from crossing the Atlantic accompanied, as it were, by the echoes of a chorus of praising English critics? The American publishers would seem to think so. At least, a writer in *The Hudson Review* reports that, 'Along with

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE

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Mr. Graham Greene's new novel, Viking has supplied a booklet of gratuitous information for reviewers, on the cover of which, bordered by a bilious grey-green, is a sepia portrait of the novelist. Inside, a number of his English colleagues make liberal use of the adjective "great". The American publisher's advertisement of *The Song of the Cold* by Dr. Edith Sitwell (taken from *Partisan Review*) quotes from a review by John Lehmann (her English publisher) in the *New York Times Book Review*. *Horizon*, it will be recalled, sponsored the 'British Edition' of *Partisan Review*. The November 1948 number (American edition) of *Partisan Review* might be considered, with only slight exaggeration, an 'American edition' of *Horizon*. It contains an extract from an autobiographical work in progress¹ by Stephen Spender (reminiscences among other things of Auden at Oxford) and an extract entitled 'The Creative Life in Our Time' from a longer correspondence between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and V. S. Pritchett. Further parallels under the heading 'Over here—over there' might be made. For instance, the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* of F. O. Matthiessen's second, revised and enlarged, edition of *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* writes ' . . . the book, in spite of revision, seems here and there out of touch with present opinion. For instance, it is no longer usual to cite Miss Edith Sitwell as an example of the less effective aspects of modern poetry'. Whether the rest of America has moved with the (English) times I have not yet heard. The only 'document' I have to hand is a photograph taken from an American magazine² showing Dr. Edith and Sir Osbert Sitwell sitting in a New York bookshop and, as the caption tells us, receiving the homage, not only of the only other Englishman present, Mr. Spender, but also of a group of American poets and poetesses, including Mr. Auden, and with one of the two associate editors of *Partisan Review* in the foreground. The December 1948 number of *Partisan Review* contains a report of an interview with Sir Osbert, which if it is not an elaborate *mystification*, will surely have astonished Dr. Betsky. Since the English public has failed to support the 'British edition' of this journal and many *Scrutiny* readers will not have access to this number, I append a few snippets: ' . . . his autobiography is one of the most highly personal documents since Rousseau's *Confessions*, though without any of its indiscretions . . .'. 'At fifty-six he is a very imposing figure. Tall and slightly stooped, he has a dignity and calm, which, at the cost of a cliché, can only be

¹*The Life of Literature*.

²*Life*, Dec. 6th, 1948—in which we read (it may as a matter of curiosity, be recorded): 'Edith is a candidate to succeed John Masfield as Poet Laureate, Osbert is literary adviser to Queen Elizabeth. In her book, *The Song of the Cold*, Edith takes her place among the topmost modern poets. With the just-published fourth volume of his autobiography, *Laughter in the Next Room*, Sir Osbert has not only hit the American best-seller list, but has also produced a classic chronicle of an amazing family'.

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described as Olympian'. Sir Osbert's views, as reported, are in keeping, but this is not the place to reproduce them. The interviewer concludes, 'Whatever one's personal assessment of his judgments it is impossible not to admire a man who, both in his work and in his personal life, has fought so hard and with such pleasing results for standards above the common'. (If this is the American equivalent of *pince sans rire*, I must stand convicted of lack of appreciation).

Dr. Betsky will accuse me of a frivolous want of balance (there have, to my knowledge, been voices on the other side) if I continue at this level. Our area of difference does not begin *here*. Before approaching nearer, however, I should like to touch on a further observation concerning *Scrutiny*. 'It has failed in recent years to report American poetry and novels'. This failure was not due to contemptuous neglect. There were material difficulties, of course, during the war years. But reading was done 'with a view to reporting' during those years and yet no reviews appeared. Here I must confine myself to my own share. Of the novels and stories that came my way (with the exception of *Go down, Moses*) not one seemed to me worthy of special mention and the list included *All the King's Men* and *The Middle of the Journey*, which I single out as having, in my opinion, been praised in both countries well above their merits. As for poetry, I can only wonder how much of the output of the last ten years Dr. Betsky will find himself re-reading in ten years' time.

When I come to Dr. Betsky's long list of critics (itself, apparently, a short selection) my embarrassment reaches its height. I can't pretend not to be acquainted with most of the names he puts forward. Indeed favourable mention has been made of some of them in these pages. Fortunately, I can refer Dr. Betsky to the article in the last number of *Scrutiny* by his distinguished compatriot for a placing of one, at least, and not the least prominent, of these figures. For the rest, I can only appeal to Dr. Betsky to institute relevant comparisons in the light of his own sober critical standards. Does he not, for instance, detect an enormous difference in the quality of Edmund Wilson's criticism and that of, say, John Berryman? Perhaps Dr. Betsky was over-insistent in the face of my apparent complacency? It is no easier to engage on the merits of American literary periodicals. If we balance American and English periodicals off against each other, the *Virginia Quarterly* against, say, *The Nineteenth Century* or *The Dublin Review*, etc., and proceed to exhaustion, are we left with anything beyond *The Kenyon* and *The Sewanee*? Of the other reviews I have seen, *The Hudson*, for instance, does not seem so far to have found a *raison d'être*. In surveying the journals I know I put to myself two simple questions. In the course of a year or so, how often has a challenging and convincing critical article appeared or how often a piece of model criticism that could be placed with profit in the hands of students? The *Nation* does not come at all well out of this test.

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE

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Once through this awkward Scylla and Charybdis which I saw no possibility of evading we emerge into a larger field of appreciation. Dr. Betsky does not seem to guess with what *brotherly* feelings his account of the plight of the American intellectual will be read by many *Scrutiny* readers, particularly those who have lived in environments where the money pressure is intense or where the contempt for the schoolmaster's career is extreme. (Of course, one comparatively hopeful conclusion does emerge. If some of the best of our younger critics have been formed in spite of unpropitious surroundings, part of the credit must go to English educational institutions, richly as they may have deserved Dr. Betsky's strictures). Dr. Betsky has largely *done* what I merely intended. He has shown that the plight of the intellectual is indeed similar in both countries and that advantages and disadvantages lie on both sides of the Atlantic. Now that I have (I hope) indicated how little I feel that English people have cause for self-congratulation I should like briefly to refer to the indebtedness, large and extensive, already incurred towards the free, generous, disinterested spirit of enquiry exhibited by the best American writers. It is in a sense 'academic' to enquire whether fruitful two-way contacts can be made. They *have been* made, as can be seen from the excellent articles by Americans in *Scrutiny* and the contributions of *Scrutiny* writers to American periodicals.

If I may be allowed to 'clinch' the argument by a particular case I would refer to the review by Jerome Salzmänn of Mr. Bentley's selection from *Scrutiny*. Mr. Salzmänn, while unequivocally welcoming the 'revaluations' of established classics, draws the line and tries to explain away the unflattering treatment of Auden, Connolly, Virginia Woolf, etc. Yet (I should have thought) the same critical insight and power of discrimination were at work in dealing with past as with contemporary writers. If the critic spontaneously recognizes merit in one set of articles, surely also in the other—? It would be the same with the most challenging questioning of the articles on established classics. The same fruitful and valuable challenge should be given, one would think, in the field where we have no established values to fall back on, where first-hand judgment alone can help. We look to America for a courageous consistency and disinterested handling.

I have left for final consideration a point surprisingly not made by Dr. Betsky. One of the great services which might be expected of a country so rapidly renewing itself at every moment would be the emergence of a fresh point of view. The critics in both countries now at the height of their powers received the decisive shocks from, let us say, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot. Naturally, the very much inferior work of the poets and novelists who first appeared in the 'thirties was judged severely by men and women who had come to maturity partly by living through the work of these greater figures. The function of criticism during those years involved rejection by the standards set up in that earlier time of the great mass of subsequent literary output. I have not heard a convincing

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appeal against the broad lines of this rejection. But the critical faculties are undoubtedly numbed by constant repudiation and there is a danger (which we can never safely ignore) that the emergence of genuine new talent might be overlooked. Again, the successful application of a critical method calls for increasing vigilance as the years pass. The capacity for self-criticism has its limits however resolutely practised. Why should the graftings and cross-fertilizations not come from the America one senses over the horizon? The process need not be strictly dialectic, but perhaps by the application, in a sort, of, measure for measure?

H. A. MASON.

THE COLLOQUIAL MODE OF BYRON

I.

IT would be conceded by most critics that the poems in which Byron made his most substantial contribution to literature are *Beppo*, *A Vision of Judgement*, and *Don Juan*. All three exhibited a new tone that struck and charmed Byron's readers from the first. Jeffrey did an excellent job of isolating this tone in his review of *Beppo* in the *Edinburgh Review* for February 1818. Remarking enthusiastically on the style, he says that its ease and gaiety imply

'... the existence of certain habits of dissipation, derision, and intelligence in general society . . . It is perfectly distinct both from the witty, epigrammatic and satirical vein, in which Pope will never be surpassed—or equalled; and from the burlesque, humorous and distorted style which attained its greatest height in *Hudibras* . . . The style of which we are speaking is, no doubt, occasionally satirical and witty and humorous—but it is on the whole far more gay than poignant, and it is characterized, exactly as good conversation is, rather by its constant ease and amenity, than by any traits either of extraordinary brilliancy, or of strong and ludicrous effect . . . The great charm is in the simplicity and naturalness of the language—the free but guarded use of all polite idioms, and even of all phrases of temporary currency that have the stamp of good company on them . . .

This is excellent criticism from a man whose merits are sometimes obscured, and it is criticism that Mr. Bottrall (who seems to have been unacquainted with the Jeffrey review) writing in *The Criterion* in 1938 could do little more than substantiate and enlarge in his essay entitled 'Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English

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THE COLLOQUIAL MODE OF BYRON

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Poetry'. The author of *Beppo* (Byron had published it anonymously) has presented us, Jeffrey had said, with 'about one hundred stanzas of good verse, entirely composed of common words, in their common places; never presenting us with one sprig of what is called poetical diction, or even making use of a single inversion, either to raise the style or assist the rhyme—but running on in an inexhaustible series of good, easy colloquial phrases, and finding them fall into verse by some unaccountable and happy fatality'. To Jeffrey the tone of *Beppo* had seemed a complete innovation ('—unique we rather think in our language'), and the nearest approach to it he could think of was Prior, Peter Pindar, or Moore in the facetious vein.

It is an unusual thing about much Byron criticism that having isolated predominant virtues in Byron's work, sometimes with a good deal of sensitivity as in the Jeffrey review, critics have had a tendency to look upon these qualities as an anomaly in the English tradition. Byron's apparent intractability is partly due to the impact of his personality on the somewhat narrow imagination of much traditional criticism rather than to the impact of his actual poetry on a responsive sensibility. Despite what the vaunters of the Italian influence may hint to the contrary, his poetry is intensely English; but a shock like that felt by Scrope Davies and Byron's estimable friend, John Cam Hobhouse, when the first cantos of *Don Juan* reached England (a shock that was to be widely and deeply shared), seems somehow to have implanted the persistent idea that there is something slightly alien about Byron's modes of feeling. Even Matthew Arnold's admirable estimate is influenced when he sees Byron so largely against a background of continental evaluations, and sets him up as so largely the opponent of British Philistinism. With Arnold on Byron I should not wish to quarrel, but his emphasis does underline the situation. And Mr. Eliot is in the tradition (but on the whole, less amiably) when he writes in his essay on Byron: 'He was right in making the hero of his house-party a Spaniard, for what he [Byron I take it, not Don Juan] understands and dislikes about English society is very much what an intelligent foreigner in the same position would understand and dislike'. Yes: but surely an intelligent Englishman also. This remark of Eliot's is enlightening from several points of view, but it also suggests that Byron doesn't quite 'belong'. The snub is gentle (perhaps *not* when read in the full context), but it is effective.

What occurs in Byron criticism occurs also in much Byron scholarship. Mr. Claude M. Fuess in his *Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse* is typical when he writes that *Beppo* may be taken as marking the turning point between the old era of Augustan influence, and the new one to come. 'It is significant', he continues, 'that this poem is written, not in the characteristically English heroic couplet, but in the thoroughly foreign ottava rima. Responsive to an altered and agreeable environment, Byron found in Italy and its literature an inspiration which affected him more profoundly than it had Goethe only a few decades before. The results of this

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influence, shown to some extent in his dramas though more decidedly in his satires, justify terming the years from 1817 until his death his Italian period. A mere mention of its contribution to satire indicates its importance: it produced *Beppo*, *A Vision of Judgement*, and *Don Juan*. But Fues then rather amusingly admits: ' . . . we may feel convinced that Byron drew from the Italian satirists something of their general tone, and yet be unable to clarify our general reasons for this belief or to frame them into an effective argument. Of such a sort, indeed, is much of the influence which Pulci, Berni, and Casti had on Byron. It is vague and evasive . . . '

In line with the Italian 'influences' one other may be mentioned, and it must be confessed that Byron himself is largely responsible. In 1817 he wrote to Murray: 'Mr. Whistlecraft has no greater admirer than myself. I have written a story in 89 stanzas, in imitation of him, called *Beppo*'. The poem in question was, of course, John Hookham Frere's wooden and worthless *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work* purportedly written by the brothers Whistlecraft. Since Frere was a student of the Italian burlesque writers this admiration of Byron's has been seized on by a good many scholars for anything they can make of it, with the result that Byron's greatest works are coupled in print with a title that can do little more than obfuscate their real merits and hide their real intentions. This is not to say that Frere's work, his use of ottava rima for example, may not have been suggestive to Byron, but his usefulness was mechanical and it has been critically misleading.

Against this background Mr. Bottrall's attempt to insist on the traditional English quality in Byron must evoke sympathy. But Jeffrey in noting the sharp distinction between Byron and Pope had been perfectly right. It is therefore unfortunate that in setting up what he calls a 'colloquial tradition' for the purpose of securing Byron firmly to native bedrock Mr. Bottrall runs the tradition from Dryden through Pope. He makes the best of the case by emphasizing *not* Byron's couplet poems, where the evidence would be weakest, but the later, richly colloquial poems. Yet his argument, when carefully considered, is not equal to the force of Mr. F. R. Leavis's note in *Revaluation*. 'The eighteenth century element in him', says Mr. Leavis of Byron, 'is essential to his success, and yet has at the same time the effect of bringing out how completely the Augustan order has disintegrated'.

In the following pages I wish to go a little further and suggest that Byron not only represents the deterioration of the Augustan order, but that his colloquialism (that aspect of his genius which is of interest here) sideskirts the Augustan Age altogether, and refers back to *certain* Caroline poets. One may as well begin one's argument by freely admitting that had Dryden and Pope never written we might not have *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. But that would not be because Byron was using effects taught him by the Augustans. Pope was a stimulant on Byron's imagination, but they belong to