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 978-0-521-14830-6 - Peacock: His Circle and His Age
 Howard Mills
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Introduction

What does Peacock offer the general reader, and what is the justification for a book about him?

He is not a 'seminal mind', a creative thinker. Nor is it appropriate to call him a great creative artist. For, even in a successful imaginative work like *Nightmare Abbey*, he strikes us primarily as a keenly intelligent mind responding to and offering us insight into outstanding men who rank above him in his age, as well as the minor talents and the ephemera below him. This book about Peacock is therefore equally about Shelley, Coleridge and Byron.

His response to his age has a striking variety—variety of quality, of the subjects he engaged with, and of the media of letters, memoirs, reviews, poetry, novels. Yet with all this variety one rejoices to find a distinct and tangible central object: Peacock's relationship with Shelley. Instead of stumbling vaguely over Peacock's 'Response to Romanticism', for instance, we can study a tangible example of that response. In Shelley, the personality and the writer, many aspects of Romanticism are embodied. 'Embodied' here does not mean 'personified' in any abstract sense. Quite the reverse: what in the period we have to study as 'trends' or 'currents' or 'spirits', we find in Shelley as flesh and blood and nerves. When Peacock himself rejoiced in this palpable study he won his great advantage over any abstract History of Ideas. This is acknowledged in Humphry House's comment on a scene in *Nightmare Abbey*, that 'a whole long chapter of Professor Irving Babbitt says little more'.¹

This book will argue that the friendship *made* Peacock: it was the central fact in his development, the central condition of his quality. Before 1812 he was in the pejorative sense what Hazlitt calls 'a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age'.² The

¹ H. House, 'The novels of Thomas Love Peacock', *The Listener*, XLII (8 Dec. 1949), 998. ² *Complete works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930–4), xi, 86.

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friendship, which coincides with the Regency decade, made him find himself, and gave authenticity to his criticism of the Romantic personality and more widely of the literature and society of the Regency.¹ Humphry House rightly says that ‘it is the true focus . . . to think of him as . . . the intimate friend of Shelley . . . Not only in his reading, but in this friendship most of all, Peacock lived through the major phases of romanticism, and he speaks of it with that intimate knowledge.’²

The three novels of the 1810s centre on a response to a different aspect of Shelley and, through and around that, to Shelley’s age. After that friendship—with Shelley’s last period abroad and his death—Peacock’s work declined into a more rigid conservatism of attitude that dominates ‘The four ages of poetry’ and colours the later novels although relaxed in his later literary and musical reviews.

The chapters bringing this out will cut slightly across chronology, surveying Peacock’s life, poetry and critical essays up to 1820 before returning to concentrate on the friendship with Shelley. An appeal to experience will show why this is so. When we look back on our own life, or our relationship with someone, it presents itself as a number of strands, each involved with the others, but each demanding to be followed separately along its full length before we return to pick up another. And often it is only in retrospect, and even then only in following the other strands, that we realise which one was crucial. The reader who feels that this is all very well, but who for clarity wants for Peacock the kind of chronological summary which he can supply for his own life, may consult the table on page xiii.

To get our bearings on Peacock’s relative position, and give a fairer and more subtle reading of his mind and his friendship with Shelley, we need to apprehend him as one of a group of friends with their balanced and changing relationships. The main figures are Shelley, Peacock, Leigh Hunt and

¹ ‘The Regency decade’ refers in this book to the decade 1811–20, which are exactly the years in which George acted as Regent. However the term ‘Regency’ is often used with traditional latitude for the rough period 1800–30. It also usefully provides a more neutral and more comprehensive label for the period than does ‘the Romantic Age’. Where anything more is implied, the context will make it clear.

² ‘The novels of Thomas Love Peacock’, p. 997.

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Hogg. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley's Oxford friend, and co-editor of the defence of atheism that led them both to be expelled, will be a frequently used 'third term' as we chart Peacock's position in relation to Shelley. For Hogg is the simple Regency figure that Peacock is often mistaken for. He can with little unfairness be nailed down by the ringing finality of M. Mayoux's Gallic epithets:

Hogg, le solide, le positif, l'épais, à côté de qui Peacock est plus que raffiné, est plus que délicat, presque éthéré. . . Solide, égrillard, érudit, bon vivant, mais vivant, c'est une figure typique de l'ancien barreau anglais, présentant un mélange curieux de personnalité et de convention, de curiosité intellectuelle et d'essentielle matérialité.¹

Peacock should also be compared much more freely than is usual with other critics of the Regency. Three major ones—Crabb Robinson, Hazlitt and Byron—are considered at length in chapter 7. Specific comparisons with other writers are made when they are called for: thus, for instance, the treatment of society in *Melincourt* calls for comparison with treatments by Southey, Samuel Bamford, Cobbett and others. The provision 'when called for' applies also to my account of the age. This book avoids opening with a general social history but (for instance), where Peacock invites us in *Melincourt* to consider Malthus, an investigation will be made of what he stood for in the age, as help in judging Peacock's interpretation. This practice arises from an important principle. Peacock is often condemned by the obtuse method of laying down a dogmatic account of his period and noting that he does not share that account. To complain that he does not see his age as we do, nor mentions Karl Marx,² is no better than the old chestnut about Jane Austen and the French Revolution.

The first justification for a new book on Peacock is dissatisfaction with previous ones, a feeling that the accepted view of him has gradually become more and more crude.

¹ J.-J. Mayoux, *Un Epicuréen anglais: Thomas Love Peacock* (Paris, 1933), p. 123. Mayoux also characterises Leigh Hunt and his family: 'Les Hunt. . . exubérants, sentimentaux, cajoleurs' (p. 129).

² See for example R. Mason, 'Notes for an estimate of Peacock', *Horizon*, LX (1944), which still turns up in 'Select Bibliographies' on Peacock.

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Shelley's admiration¹ should guard us from thinking Peacock was out of touch with the Regency: he praised the novels in terms resembling his praise of *Don Juan*, 'Something wholly new and relative to the age'. And, although no considered appraisal appeared until the 1830s,² the Reviews took it for granted that Peacock should be discussed as an informed critic of his period. The *Westminster review* in 1831 admitted that the attack in *Crotchet Castle* on its own Utilitarian ranks had hit home.³ Spedding's article in *The Edinburgh review* of 1839 is one of the best accounts of Peacock ever written, in its subtle discussion of the sense in which he is 'serious', and of the development in technique and understanding from one novel to another. Saying that Peacock began as a court jester, 'the disturber-general of favourite systems', the review argues that after *Headlong Hall* 'the humour seems to run deeper; the ridicule is informed with a juster appreciation of the meaning of the thing ridiculed; the disputants are more in earnest, and less like scoffers in disguise; there is more of natural warmth and life in the characters. . . .'⁴

The change in attitude to Peacock (corresponding, incidentally, to that towards Crabbe) can be picked up in the scanty Victorian references, and in Lord Houghton's Preface to the 1875 edition. Standing at the same distance from his subject as Leslie Stephen's distance from Crabbe a year later,⁵ Lord Houghton has lost all the sharpness and fine detail we noted in these views of the 1830s. Peacock has become a harmless eccentric just as Crabbe became a Parson Adams. His novels, like Crabbe's tales, are blurred together. His treatment of the ideas of his time was only for the sake of 'the intellectual gaiety to which the follies, inconsistencies, exaggerations, conceits and oddities of other men supply a continual fund of interest'.⁶ And, 'although brought . . . in contact with the best influences and most powerful impulses of the nineteenth century, he belonged in all his tastes, sentiments, and aspects of life to the

¹ In letters to be quoted in chapters on the relevant novels.

² Apart from an attack (mainly political) on *Melincourt* in *The British critic* in 1817, reviews did little more than tell the story and give extracts, in the manner of *The literary gazette*. ³ xxix (July 1831), 208 ff. ⁴ lxvii (Jan. 1839), 432.

⁵ In his essay in *Hours in a library*, 2nd series (London, 1876).

⁶ *Works of Peacock*, ed. H. Cole, 3 vols. (London, 1875), 1, vii.

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eighteenth, the age pre-eminently of free fancy and common sense.¹

There have been isolated and uninfluential hints of a subtler account in our century. J. B. Priestley in 1927 questioned Lord Houghton and distinguished (much too arbitrarily) between Peacock the ‘humorist, expressing a universal mockery’, and the serious ‘satirist’.² But this is not elaborated in his anecdotal general guide. From the six hundred pages of J.-J. Mayoux’s French study³ can be extracted a cautious and just account of Peacock; but he relies on exhaustive detail rather than judicious inferences. At the other extreme Humphry House’s acute judgement covers only two pregnant pages.⁴ Largely for the reasons suggested, these three accounts have not been influential; and how much cruder the common view has become since 1875 can be seen by comparing the quotations from Lord Houghton made above with the following sample from 1965: ‘For the truth of the ideas, Peacock seems to care very little; it is their quaintness, their picturesqueness, their absurdity that catches the eye. . . To make the ideas amusing, and therefore impossible, is the sole intent.’⁵ That this is the official view is indicated by its closeness to Dr Jack’s chapter in *English literature 1815–92* (Oxford, 1963). The simplification is not in Dr Jack but in the modern opinions which it is the policy of the *Oxford history of English literature* to summarise instead of venturing independent insights. But, if, as the series claims, ‘all the contributors are acknowledged authorities on their periods, and each volume incorporates in text and bibliography the results of the latest research’,⁶ then Peacock is badly in need, if not of research, of critical study. Hence the present book.

To re-open the case of Peacock, like any other, calls for fresh evidence. Many previously unpublished letters by Peacock, Shelley and Hogg, and new biographical research,⁷ have

¹ *Ibid.* pp. viii–ix.

² *Thomas Love Peacock*, ‘English Men of Letters’ (London, 1927), p. 32.

³ *Un Epicuréen anglais: Thomas Love Peacock*.

⁴ *The listener*, XLII (8 Dec. 1949), 998.

⁵ A. E. Dyson, *The crazy fabric, essays in irony* (London, 1965), pp. 58 and 62.

⁶ See the advertisements and dust-jackets.

⁷ Notably *New Shelley letters*, ed. W. S. Scott (London, 1948), which contains many by Peacock and Hogg; *Shelley and his circle, 1773–1822*, the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, ed. K. N. Cameron (Oxford, 1961); *The letters of Shelley*,

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appeared since the last books on Peacock and the last complete edition,¹ and largely modify those previous verdicts. Yet the most recent book on Peacock is a reprint, without any alteration, of the one Priestley wrote in 1927 before even the later Halliford volumes had appeared.²

But I shall also attempt a fresh and more scrupulous weighing of previous evidence. For instance, 'The four ages of poetry' will be balanced against the usually ignored 'Essay on fashionable literature'. *Melincourt* will be given much more attention, and the representation of Coleridge in *Nightmare Abbey* entertained more seriously, than is usual. Fuller credit will be given to the 'Memoirs of Shelley', and to the music reviews and articles. The latter particularly deserve extended treatment because literary critics give them only a passing mention, and because they appear not to be known by music historians—who, however, when introduced to them are impressed by Peacock's intelligence and knowledge.³

The established idea of Peacock will be taken for granted as the background of this study, and so Priestley, Van Doren and Freeman rarely cited—or reiterated. Above all this study, unlike theirs, will present the complexity of Peacock in preference to fixing a clear-cut judgement.

Dealing with a writer like Peacock calls for a particularly strong sense of proportion and tact; so that two instances of

ed. F. L. Jones (Oxford, 1965). I found minor help in the unpublished letters of Peacock in the Broughton papers (British Museum unplaced manuscripts 47225). The works on Shelley by Cameron, White and Notopoulos (see bibliography) belong to the 1940s and 1950s, as does Lady W. Scott's biography *Jefferson Hogg* (London, 1951).

¹ Benvenuto Cellini's study appeared in 1937; the Halliford Edition from 1924 to 1934. The only strictly new book, by O. W. Campbell (1953), is hardly longer than a pamphlet-monograph like J. I. M. Stewart's.

² Priestley makes this bland comment in a brief new preface: 'I must regret that the concluding volumes of Messrs. Constable's fine Halliford Edition of the complete works, volumes that may possibly contain a little new material, were not to hand while I was writing these chapters. I can hardly imagine, however, that such material would interfere with any judgment on Peacock's character or work to be found there' (London, 1966, p. vii).

³ I have been able to use Peacock's own copies of the music periodical *The harmonicon* and of Lord Mount Edgcumbe's *Musical reminiscences*, the latter bearing Peacock's pencilled marginal marks and personal index of topics and page-references inside the back cover. These books are in the Pendlebury Library at Cambridge.

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these qualities may be pinned up, as it were, as exemplary reminders. The first was written by Spedding in 1839. While my own general estimate of Peacock will be pitched higher, Spedding is enviable for the tact and nicety with which he balances Peacock's human understanding and wide intellectual grasp against the relative lack of depth 'which only deeper purposes can impart'. Spedding attributes to him

An eye and a heart open enough to impressions and opinions of all kinds, so that vanity be the end of all; a perception of the strangeness and mystery which involves our life,—keen enough to enliven the curiosity, but not to disturb or depress the spirit; with faith in some possible but unattainable solution just sufficient to make him watch with interest the abortive endeavours of more sanguine men, but not to engage him in the pursuit himself; a questioning, not a denying spirit;—but questioning without waiting for an answer; an understanding very quick and bright,—not narrow in its range, though wanting in the depth which only deeper purposes can impart; a fancy of singular play and delicacy; a light sympathy with the common hopes and fears, joys and sorrows of mankind, which gives him an interest in their occupations just enough for the purposes of observation and intelligent amusement; a poetical faculty, not of a very high order, but quite capable of harmonizing the scattered notes of fancy and observation and reproducing them in a graceful whole.¹

Spedding's portrait is one of intelligence and curiosity qualified by an ultimate reserve and unadventurousness: the range of Peacock's perceptions is remarkably wide, yet he is seldom deeply disturbed, or disturbs the reader, by what he perceives.

There is a different kind of balance in my second 'exhibit', written by F. R. Leavis in 1948. It conveys how Peacock, while being limited, within those limits is valid and inexhaustible: 'In his ironical treatment of contemporary society and civilization he is seriously applying serious standards, so that his books, which are obviously not novels in the same sense as Jane Austen's, have a permanent life as light reading—indeinitely re-readable—for minds with mature interests.'² The sense of proportion—the sanity—of a book on Peacock will depend on its never losing sight of what that passage acknowledges: the way in which Peacock is at once 'serious' and 'light'.

¹ *Edinburgh review*, vii (Jan. 1839), 438.

² *The great tradition* (London, 1948), p. 18 n.

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Peacock in the Regency

The aim of this and the following chapter is to use Peacock's biography, letters and critical essays so as to give a setting to the Regency novels: to evaluate his way of life in the 1800s and 1810s, and to evaluate his mind as it responded to the classics and to contemporary literature.

In chapter 3 the key subject will become Peacock's standards as they engaged with the literary practice of his age. But it takes time, a certain maturity and self-knowledge, to achieve any standards or coherent point of view, conservative or otherwise. Until this happens Peacock, like us all, is the mere receptacle of current habits and feelings, watered down and mingled from Augustan and Romantic, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alike. To try another metaphor: if the swamp of current fashions is one of the things we mean by the 'spirit of the age', then Peacock takes time to emerge from that swamp and to look down on it critically. Hence the crude distinction in the chapter-headings, to be refined by the chapters themselves, of 'Peacock in the Regency' and 'Peacock on the Regency'.

The overlapping concepts of 'the spirit of the age', *Zeitgeist*, and 'fashion' have never been clearly distinguished. The first is a literal translation of the second, yet the second has acquired (certainly since Matthew Arnold) a pejorative meaning much nearer that of the third. 'The spirit of the age' can indicate the important movements of the time which are worthy of influencing great creative minds and to which those minds can in turn contribute and give a direction. The apparent paradox in the relation between individuals and this kind of 'spirit' can be analysed no further than it is by Shelley in his Preface to *The revolt of Islam*:

There must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot

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REGENCY VERSE

escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live; though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded.¹

But an age also has its ephemeral fashions, which may be quite independent of literature or at least have their centre of activity elsewhere. For instance, the fashion for tours of the Lake District, which was growing around the turn of the century, *may* have helped Wordsworth's reputation and *may* in time have been helped by it; but this is no reflection on Wordsworth nor credit to that fashion. *Lyrical ballads*, and the trip to the Lakes, belong to different spheres and to different levels. Yet there is a good deal of verse on mountains and solitude—by Wilson, for example, or Byron in *Childe Harold's pilgrimage*—where the realm of fashion is dictating to the realm of literature.

The relation of the talented writer, rather than the genius, to the fashions by which he is influenced, comes out very clearly in Regency verse. A brief survey of this verse will give us a contemporary setting for Peacock's own early poems and his tastes as a reader of poetry.

Dr Johnson himself unwittingly provided a description of the violent flood of literary change that was to follow his own age:

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to . . . burst the inclosures of regularity. . . every new genius produces some innovation, which, when invented and approved, subverts the rules which the practise of foregoing authors had established.²

Despite the Romantic poets, the eighteenth century still stands. Yet for most modern readers their flood has swept away and drowned those lesser figures of the Regency who tried to uphold the Pope tradition. It has swept away the opinion of Byron who, in *English bards and Scotch reviewers* (itself a desperate exhumation of Pope applied to the world of 1809) reserved his praise of contemporary poetry for Rogers, Campbell and Crabbe. But it is essential to distinguish between these three, for each represents a different kind of conservatism.

¹ *Poetical works*, ed. Mary Shelley, 4 vols. (London, 1839), vol. 1, 149.

² *The rambler*, 125, in Samuel Johnson, *Works*, Oxford English Classics (1825), vi, 344–5.

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PEACOCK IN THE REGENCY

Scott wrote to Rogers in 1820: 'As you have made the most classical museum I can conceive, I have been attempting a Gothic.'¹ He was in fact referring to their houses: as Scott designed Abbotsford, so Rogers designed his house in St James's Square, London, in a mode more ultra-classical than any Georgian building, as is the case with all self-conscious revivals or pastiches. But Scott's remark applies equally well to their verse. Rogers's fastidious technique, enervated couplets and 'philosophical' sentiments in the Regency poem 'Human life' (1819) show no development from 'The pleasures of memory' (1792) —or from the stock of reflective verse of the previous half-century. His work is mere dead conservatism, a classical museum.

Byron's second figure, Campbell, belonged to a group of which Rogers was in fact the 'father' and host, and Moore, Luttrell and the early Byron the other chief members. Each mixed conservatism with one kind of 'development'. The result is a loose combination of the worst of both qualities that would better be labelled as 'derivative but fashionable'. In his chapter on 'The London society poets', F. E. Pierce writes that:

As a literary phenomenon, the chief mark of this group was the close union of romantic medievalism, Orientalism, and Wertherism with the most unadulterated type of the Pope tradition. Every member of it except Rogers and Luttrell wrote poetry that according to any possible definition would be called wildly romantic. Every member of it without exception wrote a considerable amount of verse in the most servile imitation of Augustan models.²

Sometimes they drifted to and fro unconsciously with the *Zeitgeist*; more often they consciously cashed in on fashion.

Stick to the East [Byron advised Moore in 1813], the oracle, Stael, told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South and West have all been exhausted; but from the East we have nothing but Southey's unsaleables... The little I have done in that way... if it has had any success, that also will prove that the public are orientalis-ing, and pave the path for you.³

¹ P. W. Clayden, *Rogers and his contemporaries* (London, 1889), I, 305.

² *Currents and eddies in the English romantic generation* (Yale and Oxford, 1918), p. 129.

³ Byron, *Works... letters and journals*, ed. R. E. Prothero (London, 1903), II, 255.