

## THE GREAT REVIEWS (II)

### V.

IN their criticisms of novels, the Reviewers began by distinguishing two main classes: the novel of manners, including the work of Maria Edgeworth and Fanny Burney, and the novel of melodrama, comprising all the forgotten imitations of Mrs. Radcliffe. To these were soon added the numerous offspring of German sentimentality and sensationalism, and later Scott and the historical novel. The novel of manners was a typical eighteenth-century product, so it is natural that Maria Edgeworth should have been favourably treated by all the Reviews. Both the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, however, censured her lapses into a too obvious didacticism: in the *Quarterly* for March, 1812, Gifford declared:

‘A novel, which is not in some degree a lesson either of morals or conduct is, we think, a production which the world might be quite as well without.’

but the reviewer of *Patronage* (January, 1814) warned the author that morality ought not to smell of the lamp. The *Edinburgh's* comments were similar. Jane Austen was ignored by the *Edinburgh*, but the *Quarterly* had two very favourable notices of her work. Scott, writing on *Emma* (Oct., 1815) comments upon the difficulty of preventing this kind of realistic description from developing into ‘a mere sign-post likeness,’ and mentions particularly, among her literary merits,

‘neatness and point, and a quiet yet comic dialogue in which the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect . . . The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand, but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.

Archbishop Whately (Jan., 1821) approved particularly of her moral teaching:

‘When this Flemish painting, as it were, is introduced, this accurate and unexaggerated delineation of events and characters,

it necessarily follows, that a novel, which makes good its pretensions of giving a perfectly correct picture of common life, becomes a far more *instructive* work than one of equal or superior merit of the other class ; it guides the judgment, and supplies a kind of artificial experience.'

The Reviewers were particularly alive to the effect of the novel in moulding the emotional life of its public—what D. H. Lawrence called leading 'the flow of our sympathetic consciousness'—and this led to a concern for morality in fiction which meant in practice no mere prudery but a vigorous campaign against sentimentality and sensationalism. The *Edinburgh's* comment on a novel called *Charles et Marie* (April, 1803) is typical:

'Where the effect is to rise chiefly from delineations of the heart, an author may be tempted to think that his knowledge of the heart is great, precisely as he can, with any degree of apparent justice, deduce powerful emotions from slight events. We shall thus have all the feelings in their distorted, rather than their natural state, and be told to look upon the sickliness of artificial refinement as the very health and vigour of passion.'

Scott's reviews of Godwin's *Fleetwood* (*Edinburgh*, April, 1805) and *Fatal Revenge, or the Family of Montorio* (*Quarterly*, May 1810) are typical diagnoses of melodrama: of the former he says:

'There is no attempt to describe the minuter and finer shades of feeling: none of that high finishing of description by which the most ordinary incidents are rendered interesting: on the contrary, the effect is always sought to be brought out by the application of the inflated language of high passion.'

The *Quarterly* described *Frankenstein* as 'a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity': the *Edinburgh* made short work of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (July, 1821):

'Mr. Maturin has contrived to render his production almost as objectionable in the manner as it is in the matter . . . And as we can plainly perceive, among a certain class of writers a disposition to haunt us with similar apparitions and to describe them with a corresponding tumor of words, we conceive it high time to step forward and abate a nuisance which threatens to become a besetting evil, unless checked in its outset.'

Lockhart, in his *Thoughts on Novel-Writing* (*Blackwood's*, Jan., 1819) discusses the growth of the novel of sentiment, an undesirable form, in reading which the will is inactive and the mind receives 'a temporary excitement, neither very pure in kind nor always agreeable to feel, from its want of harmony and consistency.' *Blackwood's* usually placed sentimentality and sensationalism quite adequately, though with less firmness than the older Reviews. The reviewer of Maturin's *Melmoth* (Nov., 1820) acknowledges his popularity and admits his sensational power, but warns him that even *The Mysteries of Udolpho* involved more thought and labour than works of this kind:

'He should remember that although his faults are not able to deprive him of the admiration of the present time, they may bid very fair to shut him out altogether, or nearly so, from the knowledge of posterity. He should remember that it is one thing to be an English classic, and another to occupy ample room and verge enough in every circulating library throughout the land.'

The novels of Scott were in general treated by the Reviews almost as an absolute value in fiction, but the chorus of praise was not entirely unqualified. Jeffrey's review of *Waverley* (Nov., 1814) remarks that it is obviously hastily and unskilfully written, and speaks of 'the laborious, tardy and obscure explanation of parts of the story that the reader would be better pleased to forget.' He describes the 'flippant and smart' style where the author speaks in his own person as 'considerably below mediocrity.' Even Gifford, in the *Quarterly* (July, 1814), expressed some doubt as to the value of historical novels as a class:

'We confess that we have, speaking generally, a great objection to what may be called historical romance, in which real and fictitious personages, and actual and fabulous events are mixed together to the utter confusion of the reader, and the unsettling of all accurate recollections of past transactions; and we cannot but wish that the ingenious and intelligent author of *Waverley* had rather employed himself in recording historically the character and transactions of his countrymen *Sixty Years Since* than in writing a work which, though it may be, in its facts, almost true, and in its delineations perfectly accurate,

will yet, in sixty years hence, be regarded or rather, probably *disregarded*, as a mere romance, and the gratuitous invention of a facetious fancy.'

The *Quarterly* declared *Guy Mannering* (Jan., 1815) much inferior to *Waverley*, with many absurdities of plot and trite and hackneyed sensational incidents ; but in general the reviewers agreed with the popular verdict on Scott, and simply made comparisons between the various works. Occasionally there were absurdly extravagant comparisons with Shakespeare, and it became the fashion to bracket Scott with Cervantes, and to declare him superior to all the eighteenth-century English novelists. The *Quarterly's* review of *The Fortunes of Nigel* (July, 1822) sums up the later attitude :

' It seems to be generally admitted that the author is the greatest writer who has ever adorned this department of literature. It seems admitted, though with a less approach to unanimity, that his characters are superior to his plots, his humble to his higher life ; his Scotland to his England ; his tragedy to his comedy, and in general, his earlier to his later works.'

Various imitators of Scott, particularly Galt, Lockhart and Wilson, received general commendation ; *Blackwood's* especially praised Galt's naturalness and accuracy of observation of Scottish life. The praise of *Graham Hamilton* (June, 1822) shows what *Blackwood's* expected from a novelist :

' It presents a spirited picture of the manners and follies of the times, in that portion of society with which the reputed author may be supposed most familiar ; the characters are well drawn ; the story possesses considerable interest, and it has a moral kept sufficiently in view without being offensively obtruded upon the attention at every moment.'

The reviews of fiction in *Blackwood's* are often little more than summaries of the story of each novel, with long extracts, and a few general introductory remarks. On the whole the criticism of the novel in the Reviews is disappointing ; too often an elaborately judicial manner is found to be supported by no very acute discrimination. At the same time, the grosser examples of melodrama and sentimentality were firmly placed, and it should be remembered

that it was a comparatively new development in criticism to treat the novel as a serious literary form at all. The *Quarterly's* novel reviews were the most satisfactory ; it dealt adequately with the 'Fashionable Novels' of the 'twenties, and rarely pretended that the second or third rate was anything else.

## VI.

The chief problem in the criticism of the drama was to account for the decadent state it had reached, and then to suggest some possible means of rejuvenation. At first we find the *Edinburgh* discussing whether the moderns ought to write on the French model or the Elizabethan, and deciding chiefly in favour of the Elizabethan, though efforts like Lamb's *John Woodvil* met with short shrift, and Joanna Baillie was criticized for the obvious nature of her borrowings. The German influence, represented particularly by Kotzebue and Schiller, was considered uniformly pernicious. The reviewer of Barry Cornwall's *Dramatic Scenes* (*Blackwood's*, June, 1819) defended poetic drama and unrealistic conventions :

'Without poetry we could have no worthy drama. It would never do for the imaginary beings who move across the stage to be bound down to the language of real life, any more than to be clothed in its habiliments . . . The language of drama . . . cannot be the language of life—for its characters are not the characters of life . . . No living man ever spoke as Macbeth speaks. Indeed, all the principal characters of Shakespeare use a language which is anything but natural, if by natural be meant that of real life.'

He describes the language of most drama since Shakespeare as 'a sort of measured and monotonous slang,' and praises Joanna Baillie, Coleridge and Maturin for trying to restore the Elizabethan dramatic verse. On the other hand, the writer of the article *On the Drama*, *Ducis' Shakespeare and Jouy's Sylla* (April, 1822) emphasizes the necessity for drama to have its roots in the people, and ascribes the decline to the narrowing process which took place after the Restoration. Byron and Scott, he says, will never write tragedies :

' All those pretty affectations that mark the *petit-maitre* of the day, and they go off very well over a tea-table, pass for nothing in the huge ear of a theatrical assemblage. It is nonsense to say that a writer should consult but his own taste ; it must be influenced, be it ever so unconsciously, by floating opinion, and the more secluded he lives, the more will he be influenced by the little he does hear.'

It is no use copying the sixteenth century style, since it is manifestly unnatural to a modern ; and in any case the Elizabethans have been over-rated :

' As to Mr. Lambe, he deserves to be hanged for wasting talent, like the Schlegels, in making silk purses out of sows' ears.'

Similarly the *Edinburgh* reviewer of Byron's *Sardanapalus* (Feb., 1822) concludes that the moderns suffer from being too obviously and too consciously imitators of the Elizabethans :

' . . . they speak an unnatural dialect, and are constrained by a masquerade habit ; in neither of which is it possible to display that freedom and those delicate traits of character which are the life of the drama.'

The *Quarterly* (*Brutus* and *Evadne*, Jan., 1820) objected to the hybrid 'dramatic poem,' and lamented the lack of judgment among theatre audiences :

' We do not remember a single good tragedy of modern date ; Mr. Coleridge's *Remorse* and Mr. Milman's *Fazio*, indeed, considered merely as proofs of poetic talent are distinguished performances, though we think them . . . very imperfect as plays. But . . . their fate seems to be decided in a way still less creditable to their judges. Chance, caprice, anything but true principles appears to direct the judgment of a first audience.'

In the earlier numbers of the *Edinburgh* there are several passages showing that the reviewers still regarded character in drama as *part* of the total effect in the eighteenth century manner, and had not yet adopted the nineteenth century dogma that it was all-important, especially the review of Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* (July, 1803) :

‘The skilful delineation of character is no doubt among the highest objects of the drama, but this has been so generally admitted, that it was the less necessary to undervalue all the rest. The true object of the drama is to interest and delight; and this it can frequently accomplish by incident, as well as by character.’

In a consideration of a French tragedy, by Raynouard (*Edinburgh*, Oct., 1806) there is a remark that has obvious bearings on the later developments of Shakespearean criticism:

‘The admirers of poetry would not thank the antiquary who should prefix to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* a clear and indubitable statement of the events on which these tragedies are founded.’

But in August, 1824, *Blackwood's* made an elaborate defence of Joanna Baillie against the *Edinburgh's* earlier criticisms and the writer of an article on the *Causes of the Decline of the British Drama* (July, 1822) applies a completely realistic criterion: —‘dramatic—that is to say, like *life*.’ The logical conclusion of this tendency is Hartley Coleridge's essay *On the Character of Hamlet* (Nov., 1828) with its notorious suggestion:

‘Let us, for a moment, put Shakespeare out of the question, and consider Hamlet as a real person, a recently deceased acquaintance. In real life it is no unnatural thing to meet with characters every whit as obscure as that of the Prince of Denmark.’

But in 1828 this attitude was still far from general.

## VII.

At the beginning of its career, the *Edinburgh* showed a hearty contempt for the discussion of the theory of criticism:

‘In matters of taste . . . we conceive that there are no discoveries to be made, any more than in matters of morality. The end of poetry is to please, and men cannot be mistaken as to what has actually given them pleasure.’

But this eighteenth century confidence (Oct., 1805: review of Southey's *Madoc*) did not last long. Already in 1806 we find

Hallam reviewing Knight's *Principles of Taste*, in a typically common sense essay. He begins by defining the various uses of the word 'taste,' selecting for his own purposes the meaning: 'the power of discrimination in the fine arts, or the feeling associated with it.' He makes short work of those who, like Knight, deny any positive standards; and proceeds to assign three causes of divergence in taste—insensibility, insufficient knowledge, and hastiness of decision. On the last point he remarks:

'This practice of "judging by perception" (that is, we presume, according to our first impressions) has conduced to make taste appear uncertain and capricious.'

and he concludes with a warning against the warping of critical judgment by personal associations. Discussion of the principles of criticism often leads to discussion of the duties of the critic, and there are many passages which show the reviewers to have been fully conscious of their responsibilities. In a review of James Montgomery's poems (Jan., 1807) Jeffrey says:

'It is hard to say what numbers of ingenious youth may be led to expose themselves in public, by the success of this performance, or what addition may be made in a few months to that great sinking fund of bad taste, which is daily wearing down the debt which we have so long owed to the Classical writers of antiquity.'

His review of *The Lady of the Lake* (Aug., 1810) contains a long discussion of the relation between popularity and intrinsic value:

'The great multitude, even of the reading world, must necessarily be uninstructed and injudicious, and will frequently be found, not only to derive pleasure from what is worthless in finer eyes, but to be quite insensible of those beauties which afford the most exquisite delight to more cultivated understandings.'

Good judges, on the other hand, are

'in that very state . . . to which all who are in any degree capable of tasting those refined pleasures would certainly arrive if their sensibility were increased, and their experience and



reflection enlarged. It is difficult, therefore, to avoid considering them as in the right, and calling their taste the true and the just one, when it appears that it is such as is uniformly produced by the cultivation of those faculties upon which all our perceptions of taste so obviously depend.'

The *Quarterly* reviewer of Repton's *Fragments on Landscape Gardening* (Jan., 1817) quotes with approval a passage from the book in which Repton has been discussing those 'whose ideas of perfection are contained in a few words, "I know what pleases myself"':

'But the man of good taste endeavours to investigate the causes of the pleasure he receives, and to inquire whether others receive pleasure also. He knows that the same principles which direct taste in the polite arts, direct the judgment in morality, that the knowledge of what is good whether in actions, in manners, in language, in arts, or science, constitutes the basis of good taste, and marks the distinction between the higher ranks of society and the inferior orders of mankind, whose daily labours allow no leisure for other enjoyments than those of mere sensual, individual or personal gratification.'

The reviewer of Milman's *Samor* (*Quarterly*, Dec., 1818) was pessimistic about contemporary criticism (though the state of affairs he implies in his very complaints seems wholly admirable in comparison with modern conditions) and blamed particularly the type of criticism which attempts to be itself creative literature:

'How should the *genus irritabile* respect the opinions of the modern critic? They see in him in general an ambitious rival, one who approaches them most injudiciously on their own ground, who is not intent upon laying before the world a fair examination of their faults and beauties but solicitous only that the critique should be at least as shining and poetical as the poem itself.'

The result is that the poet neglects all rules—'no one aims at producing a perfect poem . . . but to give proof by brilliant flashes that he might if he pleased have written such a poem'—and the legitimate function of criticism is not fulfilled:

'Now we hate the cant of criticism as much as any wit or poet of any age or nation . . . but of criticism itself rightly employed, we will say that the poet who denies its jurisdiction has never thoroughly considered, and does not rightly understand, the real nature of the poetic character.'

A typical concern for the maintenance of standards is shown in Southey's review of Dr. Sayers' *Works* (*Quarterly*, Jan., 1827):

'The mediocrists may more truly be said to withdraw their contemporaries from the contemplation of what is excellent in their respective arts, so far as they succeed in obtaining attention for themselves. And successful they frequently are; in spite of Horace's sentence, men and booksellers favour them, whatever the Gods may do.'

There are many instances in *Blackwood's* of the same consciousness of responsibility. The essay *On the Reciprocal Influence of the Periodical Publications and the Intellectual Progress of this Country* (Nov., 1824) comments on the part played by the Reviews in raising the standard of public thought and feeling, and declares:

'The intellect of the country . . . cannot advance in strength and influence over the condition and the happiness of the community; it cannot be raised to that standard to which it is capable of reaching, while the reasoning powers are weak and the taste is bad.

Taste . . . may, indeed, be produced and nourished simply by the perusal of works of a high standard; but if so produced and nourished, it is apt to partake too much of mere feeling, to be too much under the authority of example, and it can scarcely escape being contaminated by some elements of weakness and error. Whereas, if the mind is prepared for the perusal of such works by an insight into the principles of taste, the progress will be more steady and regular, and the object in view will be obtained in its highest purity, and placed on its firmest and securest basis.'

In May, 1822, there appeared a very interesting *Letter on the Different stages of Taste*, which aimed at showing that 'certain principles of classification as to the qualities and grades of feeling, have an existence *in rerum natura*.' The same insistence on

emotional discrimination as the most important duty of the critic appears again in the comparison between Hazlitt and Jeffrey (*Blackwood's*, June, 1818):

'But the intellectual faculties of a critic are not the sole means to be employed in forming his judgments. His moral constitution should be as much awake to sentiment as his understanding to the relation of ideas. To estimate the truth and propriety of different tones of feeling is even a more difficult task, in some cases, than to reason. I do not allude so much to the appreciation of what is morally beautiful and decorous between man and man, for there we have the accumulated suffrages of ages and of multitudes to appeal to. The most difficult questions in morals are those which relate to the temper of mind with which the world and the business of life ought to be contemplated, since the propriety of our feelings, on those subjects, must depend on very extended and complicated considerations.'

The essay on *Eloquence* (Sept., 1820) sums up this belief in the importance of literature and literary criticism in the assertion:

'Civilization has essentially subsisted among men, neither in the security of law, nor in the invention of the arts of life, but in the condition of the minds of those who have held the highest places of society.'

At the same time, however, there were signs in *Blackwood's* of the beginnings of an attitude to criticism which was to become more and more popular throughout the following century. The typical statement of this point of view is to be found in the article *On Literary Censorship* (Nov., 1818):

'Literature should be generous and aspiring . . . the best we can expect from criticism is a refreshing shower, or a stirring breeze . . . We cannot make power; but we can cherish and invite its natural growth, or we can repress it.'

But this was still very much the minority view.

All the Reviews contain articles emphasizing the importance of directing a keen critical scrutiny upon the words in which a poet expresses himself: an essay in *Blackwood's On the Study of*

*Language as essential to the Cultivation of Literature* (April, 1819) insists that criticism of style is at the same time criticism of the writer's personality:

'For in the study of the words of language we seek to feel their beauty and power as parts of living speech . . . This perception of the force of words is at once severely exact, delicate and passionate . . . In fact, the study of the form by which the mind is to express itself, is at the same time the study of that mind which is to find expression in such a form.'

The *Quarterly* reviewer of Milman's *Fazio* (April, 1816) deals with this same question, in censuring Milman for an 'unnatural and artificial sustainment of language':

'Some part of the frequency of this fault may be attributed to the common error in books of criticism of considering the qualities of diction distinctly from those of matter, the mode of expression from the thing expressed. Such a separation either in theory or practice is false and dangerous. The former ought clearly to be in entire dependence on the latter. If diction can for a moment be separated from thought, then verses composed at random, of words selected from a Poetical Dictionary, may have *some* value, while, on the other hand, if thoughts alone confer value on words, the whole efforts of criticism should be directed to the right cultivation and regulation of the mental powers.'

The *Edinburgh* provides several examples of intelligent analysis of a poet's use of language. The reviewer of Moore's *Anacreon* (July, 1803) remarks:

'We meet with rosy bonds, rosy rays, rosy forms, rosy bosoms, and a number of other odd rosy things . . . We suppose that to a listless Arcadian reader the diction has the effect of introducing a number of very agreeable and confused images; but it only reminds the attentive critic of the little artifices of poetry, and puts him on his guard against their effect.'

or again, Jeffrey comments in his review of *Lalla Rookh* (Nov., 1817) on the 'profusion of gems and sweets':

‘We have spoken of these as faults of style—but they could hardly have existed without going deeper ; and though they strike us at first as qualities of the composition only, we find, upon a little reflection, that the same general character belongs to the fable, the characters and the sentiments—that they all sin alike in the excess of their means of attraction—and fail to interest, chiefly by being too interesting.’

Scattered throughout the pages of the Reviews there are interesting asides on various critical problems: rhythm, the difficulties of translation, the function and value of poetry, and so on. The following discussion of the difference between the methods of poetry and prose is by an *Edinburgh* reviewer who shows elsewhere in the article a thorough knowledge of Coleridge ; it occurs in a review of a number of anthologies (April, 1825):

‘The grand distinction, in short, which exists between poetry and prose, is, that the former (independently of its principle of elevation) presents two or more ideas, linked or massed together, where the latter would only offer one. And hence arises the comparative unpopularity of the latter with ordinary readers, who prefer humble rhyme to poetry, and a single idea to a complicated one, inasmuch as it saves them from the fatigue of thinking.’

It is interesting to compare the conception of poetry implied here with that of Macaulay’s famous essay on Milton (Aug., 1825):

‘He who in an enlightened and literary society, aspires to be a great poet, must first become as a little child.’

The various attitudes taken by the Reviewers to the question of morality in literature show, as one might expect, a vacillation between the good sense of the eighteenth century and the squeamishness of the Victorians. At first one finds, along with the commonplace that art should contain moral instruction, the kind of intelligence shown by the following comment on a bad novel:

‘The *moral effect* of a work ought perhaps to be the same with its *moral*, but it is not always so ; and under correction, it forms a far more important subject of inquiry.’

or by Sydney Smith's diagnosis of a favourite type of sensationalism at the end of his review of *Delphine* ('this dismal trash') in the *Edinburgh* for April, 1803:

'It is in vain to say that the fable evinces in the last act, that vice is productive of misery. We may decorate a villain with graces and felicities for nine volumes, and hang him in the last page. This is not teaching virtue, but gilding the gallows, and raising up splendid associations in favour of being hanged.'

The later attitude is shown in the *Edinburgh's* approval of Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* (Oct., 1821). On this particular subject the *Quarterly* was much more sensible; a footnote in the review of Schlegel's *Cours de Littérature Dramatique* (Oct., 1814) deals with the proposed expurgation:

'We live in an age of pedantic affectation and exaggerated sensibility . . . Among the most extraordinary attempts at moral improvement, none, perhaps, is better calculated to excite a sarcastic smile than the publication of a "Family Shakespeare" from which all objectionable passages are expunged. This is Jack tearing off Lord Peter's coat, with a vengeance!'

In general the *Quarterly* was more easily shocked than the *Edinburgh*, but in many cases, as in its dealings with sensational fiction, the moral concern turns out to be part of a genuine seriousness. *Blackwood's* had similar moral prejudices, amply illustrated in their articles on the Cockney School and Byron, but there are several instances of shrewd attacks on squeamishness and cant which show that the eighteenth century common sense was still flourishing. An article on Jeremy Collier (July, 1820) denounces the inconsistencies of recent taste in drama:

'With a passion for tragic characters of the most overwrought and unnatural atrocity, we have weakened our comedy by a morbid fastidiousness, which is perhaps a leading cause of the present striking inferiority, or rather, comparative extinction of this species of writing . . . The cant of delicacy has done ten times the injury to the drama that sheer downright fanaticism has ever done.'

In the fifteenth *Noctes* (June, 1824) Odoherthy comments on the Chancellor's attempts at censorship:

‘Discountenancing *Don Juan*—strangling Byron’s memoirs (so far as the English MS. was in question). Fine doings—fine doings—we shall be a pretty nation soon, I calculate.’

while in the thirty-ninth *Noctes* (Nov., 1828) the Shepherd, in a spirited defence against the accusation that the *Noctes* are indelicate, asserts:

‘There canna, sir, be a mair fatal symptom o’ the decline and corruption o’ national morals than what’s ca’d squeamishness.’

These and similar passages should be taken into account as a counterweight to the shocked horror of the comments on *Prometheus Unbound* and *Don Juan*.

### VIII.

The critical vigilance of the Reviews when faced with the unequal, the mediocre, or the utterly worthless, could be illustrated from almost any number. Many of these articles are extremely lively and amusing, as for instance Sydney Smith’s disposal of Dr. Langford’s Sermon in the first number of the *Edinburgh*, or his account of Lewis’s *Alfonso* in the second. It was Sydney Smith, of course, who referred to a dull book of *Voyages en Islande* as ‘this very tedious and authentic book.’ The reviewer of Mant’s *Poems* (*Edinburgh*, Oct., 1807) refuses to encourage mediocrity:

‘Though we are happy to tell him that we think his talents respectable, yet we feel it a duty to announce to him that we have not been able to discern in his works any of the tokens of immortality; and to caution him not to put himself in the way of more unmerciful critics.’

Moore’s review of Lord Thurlow’s *Poems* (*Edinburgh*, Aug., 1814) is a witty castigation:

‘Lord Thurlow . . . loves the Muse with a warmth which makes us regret that the passion is not mutual.’

‘Book-making’ was severely treated, in whatever form it manifested itself: the following extract is from a review of Hayley’s life of Cowper, in the fifth number of the *Edinburgh*:

‘ Mr. Hayley seems to have exerted himself to conciliate readers of every description, not only by the most lavish and indiscriminate praise of every individual he has occasion to mention, but by a general spirit of approbation and indulgence towards every practice and opinion which he has found it necessary to speak of. Among the other symptoms of book-making which this publication contains, we can scarcely forbear reckoning the expressions of this obsequious and unoffending philanthropy.’

The *Quarterly* had some amusing ironical summaries of third-rate novels: the reviewer of Maturin’s *Women, or Pour et Contre* (Dec., 1818) pretended that the book was a satire and praised it for giving such a thorough exposure of sensational fiction. Mrs. Barbauld’s satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* was greeted with cheerful scepticism:

‘ Our old acquaintance Mrs. Barbauld turned satirist! The last thing we should have expected, and now that we have seen her satire, the last thing that we could have desired.’

On Lord John Russell’s tragedy, *Don Carlos*, Croker pronounced the following verdict (July, 1823):

‘ In tragic poetry, some little may be done by intensity of feeling without power of intellect; but nothing by power of intellect without intensity of feeling. In both these qualities we consider this writer to be mainly deficient. We do not mean that he has not his fair share of understanding, or that his feelings may not be lively enough to give harmony and pleasure to domestic intercourse. Were the noble author a young man emerging into literary life, it would be our duty to warn him against engaging too seriously in a pursuit to which his powers appear so inadequate.’

At a time when literary albums were at the height of their vogue the *Quarterly* commented on a batch of them (Oct., 1827):

‘ Are the classics of our age to continue to see their beautiful fragments doled out year after year in the midst of such miserable and mawkish trash as fills at least nineteen pages out of every twenty in the best of the gaudy duodecimos now before us? It



is admitted on every hand that there are few good painters among us, and very few good engravers ; and it is admitted by all but the editors of the " pretty pocket-books " themselves that there are not many good writers. Why should publishers of eminence go on year after year encouraging that busy mediocrity in letters, which even the humblest of their brethren would blush to patronize in the arts?'

*Blackwood's* was equally unwilling to pretend, like the America lady mentioned by Arnold, that excellence was common and abundant. The reviewer of *The Martyr of Antioch* (March, 1822) accuses Milman of being the *enfant gâté* of criticism :

' There may be some minds so constituted as to thrive better under this sort of general favour than under any other treatment, but we think that the event has shown that it is not so in the case of Mr. Milman . . . In these volumes he has exhibited no ordinary command over the resources of the poetical language . . . But . . . *what have these four volumes added to the literature of England?* Would our literature have been a whit less complete than it is had Mr. Milman never published one line of all he has written? We are afraid that there is but one answer which any candid man can make to this trying question . . . The fact is, that Mr. Milman appears to have entirely neglected those habits of sincere self-examination, by means of which alone the power of intellect can be built up higher and higher.'

The article on Hayley's *Memoirs* (Sept., 1823) is an example of *Blackwood's* in a more outspoken mood :

' William Hayley was, beyond all doubt, the most distinguished driveller of his age. Devoted to literature upwards of threescore years—constantly reading or writing, or talking with reading and writing people, ambitious of literary fame, not without a sort of dozing industry, and at all times inspired with an unsuspecting confidence in his own powers, flattered by a pretty extensive circle of personal friends, petted by the Blues, and generally in high odour with the gentlemen of the periodical press—it is certainly rather a little singular, that never once, on any occasion whatever, great or small, did one original idea,

or the semblance of one, accidentally find its way for a single moment into his head.'

Modern criticism is more polite, but it would be very difficult to contend that in order to achieve good manners it was either desirable or necessary to sacrifice this kind of alertness and sense or responsibility. Politeness, too, has its own possible corruptions: it would be a mistake, for instance, to suppose that because the Reviews accused each other of the practice of puffing that the puff was more common then than now. The real difference is that to-day it is ungentlemanly to suggest that such a thing as puffing exists, whereas in the time of the Reviews puffing was sure to meet with a speedy and thorough exposure. *Blackwood's Magazine* published adverse reviews of Blackwood's own publications; and it dealt amusingly with Colburn's attempts at modern advertising methods. He rashly announced a number of forthcoming novels as 'Works of the First Importance': *Blackwood's* seized on the phrase and for a long time insisted on referring to every novel of Colburn's which was under review as 'this work of the First Importance . . .'

There are several passages in which the reviewers defend their own plain speaking. Jeffrey's review of Hogg's *Queen's Wake* (*Edinburgh*, Nov., 1814) is typical:

'The great end of public criticism, we hope our readers are aware, is not the improvement of those who are its immediate objects, but public example and information; and therefore it is that we seek to exercise it chiefly on authors who have obtained some degree of notoriety—their errors being by far the most dangerous, and their excellences the most likely to attract imitation. It is for the same reason that it is generally of greater consequence to point out the faults than the beauties of writers who have risen to distinction: for this distinction . . . is the natural reward of their beauties, while their faults are often so mixed up with their general merits that unless they are clearly discriminated they are extremely apt to be praised along with them and sometimes even imitated in their stead.'

The reviewer of Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* (*Edinburgh*, Jan., 1814) welcomes writers who are capable of standing up to criticism:

‘ It is indeed delightful now and then to meet with authors who neither dread the lash nor the spur ; whose genius is of that vigorous and healthful constitution as to allow the fair and ordinary course of criticism to be administered without fear that their rickety bantlings may be crushed in the correction . . . Such a writer is Miss Edgeworth.’

There seems little more to say, except to point to the state of modern reviewing: it is obvious which is the healthier attitude to criticism.

### IX.

The homogeneity of the reading public at this time is well illustrated by the fact that the poems of Clare, which were published by a provincial bookseller, did not escape the notice of the *Quarterly*: Southey gave them a favourable and encouraging review in May, 1820. Jeffrey, reviewing Crabbe’s *Tales* (Nov., 1812), remarked:

‘ In this country, there are probably not less than two hundred thousand persons who read for amusement and instruction among the middling classes of society. In the higher classes there are not as many as twenty thousand.’

but he is confident that a great part of the larger body are ‘ to the full as well-educated and as high-minded as the smaller.’ All the Reviews showed great faith in the spread of education and they were generally confident that this happy state of affairs could be maintained. An article *On the Effects of Knowledge upon Society* (*Blackwood’s*, Oct., 1818) makes important reservations:

‘ If reading communicates vigour to their internal spring [that of the passions and sentiments] and increases their impulsive power, then everything is to be expected from the diffusion of knowledge ; but if reading enervates them and renders them passive, there can be no doubt that the splendour of human existence will diminish in proportion.’

The reviewer of Schlegel’s *History of Literature* (*Blackwood’s*, Aug., 1818) questions whether the modern age has the same right to congratulate itself on developments in the arts as on its progress in useful knowledge, and speaks of the ‘ triumph of the *philosophes* ’:

‘ Even the common people begin to take more pride in having some general ideas than in retaining that warmth of attachment to one set of objects which entirely depends, as they have been told, upon ignorance of that which is beyond their circle. The travelling regiments of books which pour in their heterogeneous impressions from the four quarters of the heavens, level all peculiarities before them, and turn the private enclosures of attachment and opinion into a thoroughfare. When the mind is artificially supplied, by means of books, with more sources of sentiment than are able at once harmoniously to keep possession of it, the speculative understanding steps in to settle their claims, and concludes by leaving the whole man in a woful state of obliteration.’

The prophetic awareness of this writer may be compared with the even more penetrating essay by Carlyle in the *Edinburgh* for June, 1829, called *Signs of the Times*:

‘ Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical or Moral Age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age . . . Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery but the internal and spiritual also. Here too, nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old, natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its pre-established apparatus, it is not done by hand but by machinery . . . These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates, not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand . . . At no former era has Literature, the printed communication of Thought, been of such importance as it is now . . . The true Church of England, at this moment, lies in the Editors of its Newspapers.’

But even Carlyle is not unduly pessimistic ; although he admits that literature is itself not unaffected by the trend of the new industrial civilization, he does not consider it impossible for it to take over these immense new responsibilities. In 1829 it was still possible to be optimistic, particularly in regard to the state of

periodical criticism. In the April number of *Blackwood's*, the forty-second *Noctes* contained a discussion on criticism between North and the Shepherd:

*North* Now—all our philosophical criticism—or nearly all—is periodical; and fortunate that it is so both for taste and genius. It is poured daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, into the veins of the people, mixing with their heart and blood. Nay, it is like the very air they breathe . . . Our current periodical literature teems with thought and feeling, James,—with passion and imagination . . . Who so elevated in intellectual rank as to be entitled to despise such a Periodical Literature?

*Shepherd* Nae leevin' man—nor yet dead ane.

*North* The whole surface of society, James, is thus irrigated by a thousand streams; some deep—some shallow.

*Shepherd* And the shallow are sufficient for the purpose o' irrigation.

I think that the above extracts show that these claims were not unreasonable. The Reviews made mistakes, they allowed themselves to be influenced on occasion by political and social feeling, they expressed themselves impolitely and sometimes brutally. On the other hand their prejudices, like those of Johnson, are obvious, and it is easy to make allowance for them: at the same time their offences, which have been greatly exaggerated by a more sentimentally genteel race of critics, are seen on examination to be very small in comparison with their solid merits of seriousness and critical conscientiousness. They never doubted that literature deserved the serious concern of the adult intelligence, and that it was their business to maintain standards of taste which had behind them the consensus of educated opinion. They consistently refused to pretend that excellence was 'common and abundant,' and with their extraordinary influence and authority, they played the major part in creating for the writers of their age that informed, intelligent and critical public without which no literature can survive for very long, and which is so conspicuously lacking to-day.

R. G. Cox.

## ABRAHAM COWLEY AND THE DECLINE OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY

COWLEY'S epitaph in Westminster Abbey, hailing him as 'Anglorum Pindarus, Flaccus, Maro, Deliciæ Decus, Desiderium Aevi Sui' represents the height of his contemporary éclat. His friend Sprat<sup>1</sup> also wrote an obituary eulogy, but here, if one discounts the more obvious excesses, the impressions of the man and his work remain the most satisfactory critique that has been written of him. His reputation had fallen low by the end of the century, but though the interest of critics has been directed towards different portions of his work, he has always been looked upon as an important minor poet. As far as one can gather from comparisons made and the kind of praise and blame bestowed upon him he has stood at a very similar level in the estimation of Addison, Hurd,<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Coleridge,<sup>3</sup> Lamb, Mr. Havelock Ellis,<sup>4</sup> Professor Grierson, M. Loiseau,<sup>5</sup> and Mr. Nethercot.<sup>6</sup> This rather motley company suggests that Cowley's poetry is both varied in style and that it is probably possible for the critic to 'read into it,' to find more of the quality that he happens to find congenial, than is actually there.

Cowley's versatility—or perhaps adaptability would be a more suitable word in his case—was indeed remarkable. There is ample

<sup>1</sup>*An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley*, prefixed to Cowley's Works, 1668.

<sup>2</sup>*Select Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley*, with Preface and Notes, 1772. The best selection. Notes contain much period and some permanent interest.

<sup>3</sup>*Miscellaneous Criticism*, edited by T. Raysor, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>*Abraham Cowley*, 'The New Statesman,' July 12th, 1919, Vol. XIII. Admirable brief survey.

<sup>5</sup>*Abraham Cowley : Sa vie : son œuvre*. A lengthy *thèse*.

<sup>6</sup>*Abraham Cowley ; The Muse's Hannibal*. Standard biography.