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Muriel J. Mellown

Francis Jeffrey, Lord Byron, and
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When the plan of the *Edinburgh Review* was conceived in 1801, its proponents, Sidney Smith, Francis Jeffrey, Francis Horner, and Henry Brougham, all brilliant, ambitious, and as yet unestablished in their professions, were looking for intellectual excitement, diversion, prestige, and a certain amount of material success. But in general they were not overly optimistic about their new venture, and certainly they did not foresee the way in which their expectations would be met. The first number, published on October 10, 1802, achieved a minor sensation. From the start it was apparent that here was a totally new approach to review writing; the length and selectivity of the articles, the intellectual content and polished style, above all the wit, incisiveness, and vigour, provided a sharp contrast to the dull work of the old *Monthly* and *Critical* reviews. The result was a triumph for the *Edinburgh* which continued unabated throughout the century.

The success of the review was of course due primarily to the efforts of Francis Jeffrey. As editor for twenty-seven years he made the periodical a powerful force in both the political and literary worlds. Although he retained the support and advice of his co-founders, the ultimate responsibility for the shape and tone of the review was his alone. To the first fifty numbers he contributed almost a hundred and fifty articles, on subjects as far ranging as poetry, drama, history,

biography, religion, and politics. Yet his authority extended even beyond his own contributions, for he corrected or revised practically all the articles submitted. The consequence was that in intellectual circles, Jeffrey came to be the acknowledged "kingmaker." As such he exercised considerable influence not only on the reading public but also on many writers. Certainly he had no effect on a poet like Wordsworth, whose confidence in his own genius rendered him largely impervious to any attack that Jeffrey could make. But his opinions could and did carry weight with writers of lesser stature or those who were by temperament inclined to favour his critical standards. Among the great Romantic poets Byron was the one most responsive to Jeffrey, and ironically the work which provides the clearest evidence of Jeffrey's influence upon him is *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*.

As early as 1807, just after the publication of his first volume, *Hours of Idleness*, Byron was writing to his Southwell friend, Elizabeth Pigott, that he was at work on another poem, a satire on contemporary poets to be entitled *British Bards*.¹ But when the *Edinburgh Review* published its attack on *Hours of Idleness* he extended the scope of the new poem to make it into a fitting response to his critic. Although the review was actually the work of Brougham, he attributed it to Jeffrey, whom he made the central figure in a wide-ranging satire on contemporary practices both in writing and in reviewing. The result was his first major work, *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*, published in March 1809. This satire is an amalgam of conventional views derived from a variety of sources. In particular, Byron's debt to earlier satires, such as William Gifford's *Baviad* (1791) and *Maeviad* (1795), the *Anti-Jacobin* poems (1797-1798), Lady Anne Hamilton's *Epics of the Ton* (1807), and *The Simpliciad* (1808), has often been pointed out.² However, because he was an eager reader of periodicals, Byron was affected just as forcibly by contemporary reviews, and the strongest influence upon him was not Gifford and the satirists but Jeffrey himself, the chief object of the satire.

Indeed, it seems that the very virulence of Byron's attack on Jeffrey and the *Edinburgh Review* was occasioned by his real approval of the periodical. By 1807 the review had acquired enormous prestige, and as yet, before the establishment of the *Quarterly*, it held an unrivalled position in the world of letters. It was characterized politically by its Whig principles and critically by its conservative attitude to poetry. Its stand on both issues would be likely to find favour with Byron. Byron had received a typical classical education which, as far as it touched on English literature at all, instilled in him respect for eighteenth-century writers; his friends were men of conventional tastes, admirers of Dryden and Pope;³

his own study of poetry was neither deep nor original, and it had not induced him to break away from the established standards. In consequence, he was disposed to agree with the literary estimates of Jeffrey and the other *Edinburgh* reviewers, and he echoes them clearly even while attacking their principal author.

The contradictions and inconsistencies of Jeffrey's literary criticism have often been noted.⁴ While he was in many ways a neo-classical survival of the eighteenth century, fiercely hostile to writers whom he could not understand, Jeffrey was also a man of his time and by no means indifferent to some of the new trends in literature. He looked for "enthusiasm" and "invention" in poetry, he deplored verse devoid of feeling, and he denounced over-refinement and artificiality. Like Coleridge, he revered Shakespeare, and, even more significantly, he was an admirer of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists such as Beaumont, Fletcher, Ford, and Webster. Indeed he considered the Elizabethan period the greatest in English literature and questioned the achievements of the eighteenth century. As early as 1811, in his review of Weber's edition of Ford, he declared Pope to be deficient in passion and fancy and characterized him as "a satirist, and a moralist, and a wit, and a critic, and a fine writer, much more than he is a poet."⁵

This concern for passion and naturalness, however, was combined with a deep distrust of radical innovation in the subject matter or method of poetry. Like his predecessors in the eighteenth century, Jeffrey maintained that the poet's business was to address himself to man as an educated social being and to make no unusual demands on his reader's imagination, sympathy, or sensibility. Furthermore, he believed that rejection of the established canons of poetry would jeopardise the critic's authority as an interpreter of the rules and an arbiter of taste and good sense and would subordinate literary criticism to the arbitrary, even eccentric, whim of the writer and reader. The main thrust of his writing then was to uphold the established conventions. Time and again he attacked what he called the "new schools" of poetry, and his real objection to the Lake poets was that he saw in their work a threat to accepted traditions. This position he made clear at the outset of his career with the *Edinburgh*, declaring categorically in his review of Southey's *Thalaba* (1801): "Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question" (1 [Oct. 1802], 63). From this opinion he never budged. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and 1807 *Poems* he found more revolutionary and therefore more reprehensible than Southey's

work. Even Scott, whom he genuinely admired, he considered a dangerous author, tinged with the same radical views as the Lake poets.

The marked combination of neo-classicism and romanticism may have been one reason for Byron's early interest in Jeffrey. In five years' time Byron was to publish the first cantos of *Childe Harold*, seemingly the highest distillation of the romantic spirit, yet in theory he continued to resist changing poetic modes and to reassert traditional values. His principal thesis in *English Bards* rested on the contrast, as he saw it, between past and present, and he contended that modern writers, with few exceptions, had neglected their great heritage from Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, and Pope. It cannot, of course, be concluded that Byron was deliberately imitating Jeffrey in his attempt to recall the standards of an earlier age. Jeffrey was not alone in his regard for tradition; rather he was the most fluent spokesman of an attitude widely held both by reviewers and by the satirists whose example Byron was following. Yet it is clear that a measure of agreement existed between the two men, and this agreement becomes even more striking when their specific critical terminology is considered. Both writers applied the old critical vocabulary, and they looked in poetry for reason, good sense, and correct taste, ignoring the fact that these terms could not legitimately be applied to works based on different principles. Thus while Wordsworth and Coleridge were developing new concepts of the imagination and the creative power of the mind, Jeffrey and Byron relied on traditional definitions of poetry, with the result that their final judgments were frequently narrow or imperceptive.

Jeffrey's influence on Byron, however, went beyond general standards and methods to particular evaluations. Not all the specific portraits in the satire can be related to the *Edinburgh*, since some of the writers introduced by Byron had published nothing since 1802 when the periodical first appeared, but Byron's treatment of poets whose work had been reviewed parallels in almost every case the criticism made by Jeffrey. The resemblances are so close, even in minor details, as to suggest a direct influence of which Byron could not have been unaware.

It was natural for Byron to give Scott pride of place in *English Bards*, and his mixture of censure and admiration shows clearly his absorption of Jeffrey's opinions. Scott's enormous popularity among both general readers and reviewers first made apparent the ambiguities of conventional literary criticism, for while critics disapproved of Scott's extravagant subject matter and his departure from the canons of sense and reason, they were compelled to acknowledge the force of his

imagination and emotion. Jeffrey was the chief proponent of this view. Although he reviewed *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* with unwonted enthusiasm, he wrote of the plot, "However well calculated it may be for the introduction of picturesque imagery, or the display of extraordinary incident, it has but little pretension to the praise of a regular or coherent narrative" (6 [April 1805], 6). To support his contention he cited two examples: the goblin page he considered "the capital deformity of the poem," and he found the mountain and river spirits almost as offensive, declaring, "We do not know what lawful business they could have at Branksome castle in the year 1550" (*Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19). While Jeffrey admitted that the defect was of secondary importance in a work whose chief aim was to give a sequence of vivid incidents and descriptions, it is clear that his practicality was repelled by the more fantastic elements in the poem. This was precisely Byron's response. Attacking the ridiculous and incongruous subject matter, he followed Jeffrey in pointing out the weakness of a poem in which "mountain spirits prate to river sprites" (l. 155), and "goblin brats" are shown to "frighten foolish babes, the Lord knows why" (ll. 157, 160).⁶

Byron's discussion of *Marmion* similarly reveals his debt to Jeffrey. His criticism here rested principally on the poem's confused moral values, since its hero is

Not quite a Felon, yet but half a Knight,
The gibbet or the field prepared to grace;
A mighty mixture of the great and base.

(ll. 168-70)

In this judgment he concurred with Jeffrey, who consistently connected ethical and aesthetic values. Jeffrey had already objected to Scott's characterization in *Marmion*, declaring that the virtuous figures are briefly sketched, while the main characters are so worthless that they should not arouse the reader's sympathy. *Marmion* he deemed "not only a villain, but a mean and sordid villain" (12 [April 1808], 11). Yet even in his condemnation Jeffrey was at pains to demonstrate that Scott possessed "extraordinary talents" (*Ibid.*, p. 34), and Byron made a similar concession, albeit rather grudgingly, in his long invocation to Scott as a writer of true genius worthy of "vast renown" (l. 944). Like Jeffrey, he was attracted by the power and spirit of Scott's romances, but mistrusted his innovations in style and subject matter, his introduction of incredible events, and his sympathetic portrayal of wicked characters.

Similar defects, Byron felt, were even more obvious in Southey's poetry, which was totally lacking, moreover, in the

redeeming features of Scott's work. In fact, he reserved his strongest invective for Southey, and thus began a personal and literary feud which was to continue throughout his life. In deriding the subject matter of *Thalaba* (1801) and *Madoc* (1805), he was again following the lead of the reviewer. Jeffrey had stated that *Thalaba* "consists altogether of the most wild and extravagant fictions, and openly sets nature and probability at defiance" (1 [Oct. 1802], 75), and he had also pointed out the lack of interest, coherence, and probability in *Madoc*. Aside from these objections, Jeffrey and Byron both criticized Southey's technique, particularly his irregular metres. In an address to Southey, Byron remarked that "startled Metre fled before thy face" (l. 217), a line which repeats Jeffrey's allegation that the versification "is a jumble of all the measures that are known in English poetry (and a few more), without rhyme, and without any sort of regularity in their arrangement" ("*Thalaba*," p. 72).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Wordsworth and Coleridge were deemed less important than Southey, who, having published far more than they, was considered the leader of the new school. Yet Jeffrey at least realized the significance, if not the merit, of Wordsworth's poetry, and often in reviews dealing with other topics he obtruded his views on the poet, even at the risk of irrelevance. Thus in discussing Southey's *Thalaba* and *Madoc* he analyzed the Lake poets in general and Wordsworth in particular; and he exemplified the merits of both Crabbe and Burns by comparisons with Wordsworth. In the review of *Thalaba*, for example, he refuted Wordsworth's theory of diction, and in his article on Crabbe's 1807 *Poems*, he demonstrated Crabbe's realism by allusions to Wordsworth's "whimsical and unheard of beings" (12 [April 1808], 133). Later, in a review of Burns's *Reliques*, he contrasted the Scots poet's true simplicity with the affectation of Wordsworth's "hysterical school-masters and sententious leech-gatherers" (13 [Jan. 1809], 276). The various arguments were presented most forcefully in the critique of the 1807 *Poems*, when Jeffrey censured once more the poet's diction and "low, silly, or uninteresting" subjects (11 [Oct. 1807], 218). Such views were widely shared: they can be found repeated by other reviewers and by the satirists to whose attack Wordsworth was particularly susceptible. Although he was clearly familiar with this body of opinion, Byron treated Wordsworth with mild condescension, regarding him as a simple, but harmless eccentric rather than as a radical setter of dangerous precedents. Whereas Scott and Southey were threats to be reckoned with, Wordsworth could be dismissed more lightly. Nevertheless, the basis of his criticism still rested on Jeffrey's earlier statements, and he ridiculed Wordsworth's trivial subject matter and prosaic dic-

tion, referring to the lines from "The Tables Turned" which Jeffrey had already quoted and, inevitably, to "The Idiot Boy."

Although both Jeffrey and Byron were sincere in their hostility to experiments in the matter and manner of poetry, there was a deeper reason for their misunderstanding of Wordsworth. Just as their practicality caused them to rebel against the plots of Southey and Scott, so it prompted their aversion to Wordsworth's attempt to expound a personal philosophy. They objected to what they were later to term his "mysticism," his effort to penetrate to a spiritual reality and to see a new relationship between man and nature. As yet, neither critic stated this objection explicitly. Jeffrey merely referred to the Lake poets' "affectation of excessive refinement and preternatural enthusiasm" ("Madoc," 7 [Oct. 1805], 3) and to Wordsworth's "eloquent and refined analysis of [his] own capricious feelings" ("Crabbe's Poems," 12 [April 1808], 133). Byron suggested a similar response in his remarks on "Christmas stories tortured into rhyme" which "Contain the essence of the true sublime" (ll. 245-6). Such hints of disapproval were not expanded until the appearance of *The Excursion* in 1814, but the dislike of subjectivity and of attempts to convey a spiritual rather than an external reality underlay all Jeffrey's writings on Wordsworth, and it is probable that Byron concurred with his objection.

Byron singled out Scott, Southey, and Wordsworth for detailed satire, discussing less controversial authors more succinctly. However, even the brief portraits attest to the influence of the *Edinburgh*. Following Jeffrey's denunciation of Thomas Moore's *Epistles, Odes, and Other Poems* (1806), he rebuked Moore for immorality and licentiousness, although in this instance his criticism was less severe than Jeffrey's, largely, we may suppose, because the venial lyrics had in fact provided some of his own favorite reading.⁷ Parallels of this kind occur throughout the satire. Byron's treatment of Matthew Lewis corresponds to the disapproval of "Mrs. Radcliffe and her imitators" found in the review of *Marmion* (12 [April 1808], 9). His condemnation of Darwin's "pompous chime" (l. 893) resembles Jeffrey's criticisms of "the pedantry and ostentatious learning" displayed in *The Botanic Garden* (*Ibid.*, p. 32). And his appeal to Richard Cumberland as representative of an older and better school of drama recalls Jeffrey's praise of the dramatist's early works in his review of Cumberland's *Memoirs*. Finally, the effect of the *Edinburgh*, although not of Jeffrey himself, is suggested by Byron's treatment of William Lisle Bowles. His ridicule of *The Spirit of Discovery* (1805) for its confused subject matter and organization echoes the objections expressed in the periodical, and his defence of Pope matches Campbell's refutation in the *Edin-*

burgh of Bowles' attack on Pope in his new edition of the poet.

At the end of *English Bards* Byron modified his sketch of contemporary literature by turning to the few poets of the day whom he considered to be truly gifted, and here again he was at one with Jeffrey. In an evaluation which now seems almost wilfully distorted he pointed to Campbell, Rogers, and Crabbe as the chief poets on the literary scene. Campbell and Rogers were favorites of Jeffrey, but he had not at this time stated his admiration of them publicly. However, his lengthy review of Crabbe's *Poems* (1807) expounded views which Byron repeated. Jeffrey perceived in Crabbe a strict adherence to the standards of sense and reason, and he distinguished him as "one of the most original, nervous, and pathetic poets of the present century" (12 [April 1808], 132). For him Crabbe's supreme merit lay in his truth to nature, his realism, and the exactitude of his descriptions, "drawn from that eternal and universal standard of truth and nature, which every one is knowing enough to recognize, and no one great enough to depart from with impunity" (*Ibid.*, p. 136). Jeffrey praised Crabbe for representing common people as they really are, comparing his "manly sense and correct picturing" with Wordsworth's affected idealization of rustic characters (*Ibid.*, p. 137). Byron stressed the same virtues in Crabbe, who, he maintained, provides a contrast to those who say

That splendid lies are all the poet's praise;
That strained Invention, ever on the wing,
Alone impels the modern Bard to sing.

(ll. 850-2)

Using Jeffrey's own terminology, he concluded in a similar vein that Crabbe is "Nature's sternest Painter, yet the best" (l. 858). Their reliance on the old standards of truth to nature served Jeffrey and Byron well in this instance. Despite his subject matter, Crabbe was close to the neoclassical writers in his concept of poetry and the function of the poet, and his kinship was with the early eighteenth century rather than with the preromantics who were his contemporaries. As a result, Byron and Jeffrey were able to reach a truer understanding of him than of the Romantic poets. The similarity of their views is particularly obvious here, and it is significant that the article in the *Edinburgh* appeared in the year when Byron was working on *English Bards*. He could hardly have failed to recognize that his attitude to Crabb coincided in all respects with that of the reviewer.

The literary criticism of *English Bards* is an amalgam of that commonly found in satires and reviews, and no one writer

may be regarded as the sole source of Byron's opinions. However, his debt to the *Edinburgh* was outstanding, for he repeated its views consistently and precisely. The conclusion, then, seems inescapable that Jeffrey exerted some formative influence on Byron during his early years.

There are several possible explanations of Jeffrey's appeal to Byron. The first lies in the method of Jeffrey's criticism. Although Jeffrey supported eighteenth-century conventions, he did not formally defend them or lay down a complete set of poetic principles. Rather than formulating abstract theories, he expressed his own immediate reaction to the poem under discussion. What displeased him he dismissed as nonsense or childishness, impressing his readers by the sheer force of his personal response. Carlyle aptly remarks that he began "the rash reckless style of criticising everything in Heaven and Earth by appeal to *Molière's Maid*; 'Do you like it? Don't you like it?'"⁸ This pragmatic approach must have attracted Byron. Throughout his life Byron opposed any attempt to systemize poetry: he too disliked abstract theorising, whether on poetry or life, and it is noticeable that in *English Bards* there are few statements of general principles, but rather a rapid succession of specific literary portraits. His literary estimates have the same sweeping character as Jeffrey's and suggest that Byron must have appreciated the latter's lively displays of personality.

Byron and Jeffrey were in accord also in their basic approach to literature. Both were essentially practical. Concerned with the society of men and the visible or measurable facts of human existence, they were suspicious of individual intuition or insight. Thus they ridiculed any attempt to reveal a spiritual reality and distrusted Wordsworth's mysticism or his reliance on personal philosophies. For the same reason they ridiculed improbable narratives based on fantastic situations and extravagant incidents, and so they united in their scorn of Southey and even of Scott.

A further reason for Byron's acceptance of Jeffrey's views may lie in Jeffrey's position at the time. Jeffrey had created a new kind of periodical criticism; he was without a rival in this field; he was widely respected and exercised enormous sway in the literary world. His style reflected his prestige. He wrote dogmatically, with an air of authority and assurance, as one who would brook no opposition. At the same time he expressed his views clearly, enlivening his work by biting wit and vivid statement. Always impressed by power and the assumption of authority, Byron would respond favorably to the decisiveness of Jeffrey's method and style.

Byron never met Jeffrey, but in later years he came to know of him through many mutual acquaintances, and expressed his

admiration openly. Despite his acerbic criticism, Jeffrey's was not an unattractive personality. Witty and self-assured, he could not be dismissed simply as arrogant or conceited. His manner was cheerful, his general disposition kindly, and his company both stimulating and entertaining. It says much for his character that he finally came to be on agreeable if not friendly terms even with those whom he had most bitterly attacked. Such a nature, worldly, sophisticated, and keenly intelligent, would appeal to Byron, who despised the rigidity and pettiness of narrow literary circles. He was then, in later years, lavish in his praises of Jeffrey. When Jeffrey reviewed first *The Giaour* and then other poems, Byron responded warmly, remarking on the critic's kindness and generosity of spirit.⁹ From then on the two maintained a cordial relationship, and when Byron proposed to publish the early *Hints from Horace* one of his chief anxieties was to ensure that the lines on Jeffrey be omitted.¹⁰ He continued to express regard for Jeffrey and the *Edinburgh* even after Jeffrey's adverse criticism of the dramas and *Don Juan*,¹¹ and his final address to the critic appears more as a tribute than a remonstrance:

And all our little feuds, at least all *mine*,
 Dear Jeffrey, once my most redoubted foe,
 (As far as rhyme and criticism combine
 To make such puppets of us things below)
 Are over.

(*Don Juan*, X, 16)

Jeffrey's critical influence on *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers* was not a passing phenomenon which the poet outgrew. Admittedly Byron later found it expedient to suppress the satire, declaring that it no longer represented his views, but none the less he had formulated in it some basic attitudes which he retained throughout his life and which distinguished him absolutely from his fellow Romantics. In fact, although his evaluations of such writers as Scott and Moore were later modified by personal acquaintance, subsequent years served only to strengthen the views first expressed in the satire. The generally conservative stance, the practicality, common sense, and down-to-earth approach are reflected later in the vigorous letters of Byron's maturity and in the pervasive innuendoes and direct statements of *Don Juan*. Jeffrey's early influence on Byron, unacknowledged but clearly not unrecognized, was therefore a minor but significant factor in his development. Both in his critical approach and in his own position as a scholar, man of letters, and man of the world, Jeffrey established a model which Byron naturally respected. In this way, Jeffrey may have contributed, albeit in a limited,

indirect fashion, to the literary standards of Byron's whole career as a poet.

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NOTES

¹ 26 October 1807, *The Works of Lord Byron. Letters and Journals*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 6 vols. (London, 1898-1901), I, 147.

² See *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 7 vols. (London, 1898-1904), I, 294-5; and Claude M. Fuess, *Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse* (New York, 1912), pp. 59-64.

³ Thomas Moore remarks on Byron's "fond and admiring deference" towards his college friends (*Life, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* [London, 1860], p. 14). Of Byron's friends probably John Cam Hobhouse and Francis Hodgson exercised the greatest influence upon him. Both accepted established models, and in 1809 both published volumes of conventional verse, Hobhouse issuing *Imitations and Translations from the Ancient and Modern Classics*, and Hodgson issuing *Lady Jane Gray*.

⁴ A summary of studies of Jeffrey is given in John Clive, *Scotch Reviewers, The Edinburgh Review, 1802-1815* (London, 1957), pp. 151-65.

⁵ *Edinburgh Review*, 18 (August, 1811), 281. Succeeding references to the *Edinburgh Review* are given in the text.

⁶ Quotations are taken from *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry*, ed. E. H. Coleridge.

⁷ See *Letters and Journals*, II, 251; V, 42, 169.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. E. E. Norton (London, 1887), p. 271.

⁹ *Letters and Journals*, II, 403; III, 64, 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, V, 255, 343.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 54, 80.