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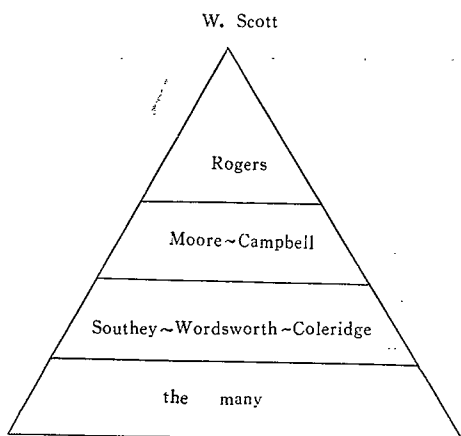
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BYRON'S TRIANGLE

— Byron's View of Wordsworth and Coleridge —

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The entry of November 24, 1813 in Byron's journal contains a triangle, which the poet calls 'a triangular *Gradus ad Parnassum*'¹ :



This is the grading he gave to the poets of his time. He qualifies his statement by saying, "I have ranked the names upon my triangle more upon what I believe popular opinion, than any decided opinion of mine."² Yet one cannot help suspecting that Byron, on the whole, accepted what he called 'popular opinion', since he expressed more or less the same kinds of opinions over and over again. What intrigues us modern readers is Byron's ranking Scott, Rogers, Moore and Campbell above Wordsworth and Coleridge, who are now considered to be *the* romantic poets. Scott's romances and novels have seen their day. As to Rogers and Campbell, very few, if any, read them nowadays. And

Moore now occupies a modest place as a lyrical poet among his fellow poets. Though Byron's triangle was drawn in 1813, and his critical judgement did undergo some changes since then, generally speaking, he did not change his opinions on these poets in any striking way. This paper attempts to treat Byron's attitude to Wordsworth and Coleridge, which is ambivalent and complex, and hence needs a special attention.

Throughout his career Byron never stopped condemning the lake poets, whom he called 'lakers' or even 'waterworms'. The reason for this attitude is twofold, personal and literary. As is well-known, they held revolutionary ideas in their youth, but their enthusiasm subsided, and they became conservatives in the end. Byron, who was critical of the ruling class of his day, thought they were nothing but the political renegades. Besides, Byron quarrelled with Southey, since the latter wrote a savage, personal attack on Byron. And then, he heard that Coleridge had spread the unfounded rumor.³ Hence his attack on Coleridge, and Wordsworth, too, just because he belonged to the same group. As Goode says, Byron made the mistake of "allowing his impressions of Southey, the least worthy of the three, to extend to and include the others."⁴

With regard to poetics, Byron was incensed at the authors of *Lyrical Ballads* on account of their denunciation of Pope, whom he regarded as the master poet of England. He says in *Don Juan*:

And for the fame you [lake poets] would engross below,
The field is universal, and allows
Scope to all such as feel the inherent glow:

Scott, Rogers, Campbell, Moore, and Crabbe, will try
 'Gainst you the question with posterity.

(*Don Juan*, Dedication, 7)⁵

One of the main reasons why he ranked Rogers, Campbell and Crabbe higher than Wordsworth and Coleridge is due to the fact that these minor poets by today's standard wrote in the Augustan tradition, that is, they stuck to the heroic couplet. His weakness as a literary critic lies in the fact that he makes bold and general remarks without quite characterizing the object of his criticism. All we hear about Roger's poetry is that it possesses elegance and harmony. We are told that Campbell is good, but we do not know why he is so good. Crabbe is drawn merely as 'nature's sternest painter, yet the best' (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, 1, 858). Moore is termed as "the epitome of all that is exquisite in poetical or personal accomplishments."⁶ Byron thinks especially highly of his lyrics, and calls him 'Anacreon Moore' (*Don Juan*, I, 104).

In the case of Scott, however, Byron says the most. He read Scott's novels voraciously. He claims he has "read all W. Scott's novels at least fifty times."⁷ The reason for his liking of Scott may be best explained by a passage in *Don Juan* :

Scott, the superlative of my comparative —

Scott, who can paint your Christian knight or Saracen,
 Serf-Lord-Man, with such skill as none would share it, if
 There had not been one Shakespeare and Voltaire,
 Of one of both of whom he seems the heir.

(*Don Juan*, XV, 59)

Elsewhere he is called 'Scotch Fielding'.⁸ What can be deduced

from these is that Byron liked the human interest which runs through Scott's works. Byron's interest in literature is people, and Scott satisfied this literary inclination of his. The fact that Scott's novels deal with the history of Scotland pleased him, too, because he not only spent his childhood in Scotland, his mother being Scottish, but he liked history itself from his early years.

It is unfortunate, except in the case of Scott, that Byron fails to quite characterize his favorite poets. Yet, on the whole, one can say that they either wrote in the heroic couplet, were good executioners in versifying, or good painters of human nature. And we should remember that all these are the qualities of Pope's poetry. Pope not only writes in the heroic couplet, but his versification is elegant, harmonious, and even perfect, according to Byron.⁹ Even in point of '*Imagination*, passion, and *Invention*' Byron notices 'the ineffable distance' 'between the little Queen Ann's man, and us of the Lower Empire'.¹⁰ Furthermore, the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry, the object of which is 'to make men better and wiser'.¹¹ Therefore, poetry must contain ethical truths, which must be intelligible. Since these are Byron's literary opinions, it is no wonder that Pope is his champion, and that he could not but find faults with Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Byron's earliest criticism of Wordsworth appears as a review of *Wordsworth's Poems* of 1807.¹² While Wordsworth's poetry is praised for its 'naive elegance, natural and unaffected', it is condemned for treating trifling subjects in 'not simple, but puerile language'.¹³ After this review, Byron holds negative views of Wordsworth. Byron's advocacy of the heroic couplet renders him

unable to accept Wordsworth's precept that "there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition."¹⁴ He is unable to appreciate Wordsworth's choice of trifling subjects. He laments the situation thus :

"Pedlars," and "Boats," and "Waggons !" Oh ye shades
Of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this ?¹⁵

(*Don Juan*, III, 100)

Besides these aspects of Wordsworth, what disturbed the mind of Byron was what he thought the unintelligibility of Wordsworth. He is termed as 'metaquizzical', or 'drivelling'. He is very often compared to such mystic figures as Brothers, Southcote, or Swedenborg. Brothers (1755—1824) was a fanatic who said he must usurp the crown, since he was a descendant of David, and the 'revealed' ruler of the world. Joanna Southcote (1750—1814) was also a fanatic who claimed she was about to bring into the world a new Messiah. Swedenborg (1688—1772) "considered himself divinely appointed to interpret the scriptures."¹⁶ Byron's butt of attack is *Excursion*. It is a 'drowsy, frowzy poem', and "builds up a formidable dyke/Between his own and others' intellect." (*Don Juan*, III, 94, 95) Wordsworth is said to have created a 'new system to perplex the sages' in *Excursion* (*Don Juan*, Dedication, 4).

It is unfortunate that Byron's criticism of Wordsworth involves personal resentment, yet his critical principle is always clear. In his opinion poetry ought to be concrete, tangible, and even factual. He writes to John Murray : "There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar."¹⁷ Or in *Don Juan* he says :

... my Muse by no means deals in fiction :
 She gathers a repertory of facts,
 Of course with some reserve and slight restriction,
 But mostly sings of human things and acts.

(*Don Juan*, XII, 13)

The world of *Don Juan* is factual, and paints human nature. It is almost the world of a typical novel. It is natural that, holding these views, Byron considers Wordsworth's poetry as a 'mystic's raving', which has nothing to do with the real, the tangible and the concrete. They were seeking different things in poetry. A difference as Keats thought existed between him and Byron is also the difference between Wordsworth and Byron; Keats says, "He describes what he sees — I describe what I imagine."¹⁸ Byron showed little tolerance towards Wordsworth, partly because he possessed a different literary creed, and partly because he was incited by personal resentment. One should remember, however, that Byron remains not without some literary debt to Wordsworth. He owns he has imitated Wordsworth's style in a poem entitled "Churchill's Grave".¹⁹ His pantheistic treatment of nature in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* would have been impossible, had he not received some influence from Wordsworth.²⁰ Byron met Wordsworth personally at least once, and according to Lady Byron, he felt nothing but reverence for Wordsworth's dignified manners.²¹

Byron's view of Coleridge is much more favourable. He knew him personally. They exchanged correspondence. Byron helped Coleridge's *Remorse* to be performed at Drury Lane, when he was

on the management. And he loved "Christabel". He says, "I won't have any one sneer at 'Christabel'; it is a fine wild poem."²² He owes the motto of a poem entitled "Fare Thee Well", and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III, 94 to the same poem.²³ Just like Shakespearean phrases have become a part of his vocabulary, so he quotes lines from "Christabel" freely.²⁴

For all his love of "Christabel", Byron does criticize Coleridge. In an early criticism of Coleridge Byron says:

Shall gentle Coleridge pass unnoticed here,
To turgid ode and tumid stanza dear?
Though themes of innocence amuse him best,
Yet still obscurity's a welcome guest.
If Inspiration should her aid refuse
To him who takes a pixy for a muse,
Yet none in lofty numbers can surpass
The bard who soars to elegise an ass.²⁵

(*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, II. 255—262)

The reason for this attack is the same as the one on Wordsworth: the subject is too puerile for poetry. Later in life Byron did take back this attack in one of his letters to Coleridge: "The part applied to you is pert, and petulant, and shallow enough."²⁶ When he heard that Coleridge had spread the rumour created by Southey, however, his anger caused him to see Coleridge in a different light. His attack is now on *Biographia Literaria*, and not on Coleridge's poetry. Byron had heard Coleridge lecture on Shakespeare, the fact of which shows he was interested in this man of great intellect. Yet he was rather sceptical about the

lecturing Coleridge: "Coleridge is lecturing. 'Many an old fool,' said Hannibal to some lecturer, 'but such as this, never'."²⁷ We are not told what Byron held against Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare, but he is specific in criticizing *Biographia Literaria*:

And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing,
But like a hawk encumbered with his hood, —
Explaining Metaphysics to the nation —
I wish he would explain his Explanation.

(*Don Juan*, Dedication, 2)

As is clear from the quotation above, his ground of criticism is again the question of unintelligibility. To Byron, Coleridge's metaphysics is 'muddling', and as difficult to grasp as Wordsworth's *Excursion*. Byron's attitude to Coleridge was made harsh, when he read *Biographia Literaria*, and perceived "an attack upon the then Committee of D. L. Theatre for acting *Bertram*."²⁸ Coleridge offered his drama also, which was, however, rejected by the committee because it "though poetical, did not appear at all practicable, and *Bertram* did."²⁹ The drama in question seems to be *Zapolya*, which was turned down by the committee in March, 1816.³⁰ In the same breath he degrades Coleridge's enthusiasm as a man of letters:

Mr. Coleridge may console himself with the "fervour, — the almost religious fervour" of his and Wordsworth's disciples, as he calls it. If he means that as any proof of their merits, I will find him as much "fervour" in behalf of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcote as ever gathered over his pages or round his fireside. He is a shabby fellow, and I

wash my hands of and after him.³¹

Coleridge is made a fanatic by being compared to Brothers and Southcote. Again it is unfortunate that Byron's criticism takes a coloring of personal resentment.

For all his attack, however, Byron did possess a very high opinion of Coleridge, and was aware of his genius. Byron regrets critics have used Coleridge severely, and asks Moore to review him favourably when his 'two volumes of poesy and Biography' come out. He also says, "I do think he only wants a pioneer and a sparkle or two to explode most gloriously."³² Or he comments, "I consider Crabbe and Coleridge as the first of these times, in point of power and genius."³³ When all is said, one should remember a comment made by Hunt: "He pretended to think worse of them [the lake poets] than he did."³⁴

- 1 *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, ed. R. E. Prothero, 6 vols. (London, 1898—1901), II, p.344.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*, IV, Appendix IX: "Reply to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine", p.482.
- 4 Clement Tyson Goode, *Byron as Critic* (New York, 1964), p.188.
- 5 The edition used for quoting from Byron's works is *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (Oxford Standard Authors, 1904, 1945).
- 6 *Letters and Journals*, II, pp.77—78.
- 7 *ibid.*, V, p.151.
- 8 *ibid.*

- 9 *ibid.*, IV, Appendix IX: "Reply to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine", p. 489.
- 10 *ibid.*, IV, p. 169.
- 11 *ibid.*, V, Appendix III: "Controversy between Byron and Bowles as to the Poetry and Character of Pope", p. 554.
- 12 *ibid.*, I, Appendix I: "Review of Wordsworth's Poems, 2 vols. 1807", pp. 341-343. The article originally appeared in "Monthly Literary Recreations" for July, 1807.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 342.
- 14 William Wordsworth's, *The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York, 1948), "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*", p. 11.
- 15 Wordsworth sings of a boat in *The Waggoner*, and *Peter Bell*.
- 16 See *Don Juan*, ed. Leslie Marchand (Boston, 1958), Notes, p. 459.
- 17 *Letters and Journals*, IV, p. 93.
- 18 Keats's letter of 20 September, 1819, quoted in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London, 1970), p. 265.
- 19 The debt is acknowledged on the manuscript sheet of the poem. See Goode, *Byron as Critic*, p. 190.
- 20 Byron acknowledges his debt: "Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea." See *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, 1966), p. 194.
- 21 *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (New York, 1954), p. 129.
- 22 *Letters and Journals*, III, p. 369.

- 23 *ibid.*, IV, p.31. Furthermore, he says of the poem: "‘Christabel’ was the origin of all Scott’s metrical tales, and that is no small merit. . . . Some eight or ten lines of ‘Christabel’ found themselves in ‘The Siege of Corinth,’ I hardly know how; . . .” See *Medwin’s Conversations of Lord Byron*, p.177.
- 24 Byron writes on his birthday: “It is three minutes past twelve. — ‘Tis the middle of the night by the castle clock,’ and I am now thirty-three!” See *Letters and Journals*, V, p.182. The quoted line is the first line of “*Christabel*”, and is quoted again in *ibid.*, p.397. See also *ibid.*, p.226, for another quoted line from “*Christabel*”.
- 25 The reference, of course, is “To a Young Ass”.
- 26 *Letters and Journals*, III, p.192.
- 27 *ibid.*, II, pp.75—76.
- 28 *ibid.*, IV, pp.171—172. D. L. stands for Drury Lane.
- 29 *ibid.*, p.172.
- 30 *The Complete Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (London, 1912), II, p.883.
- 31 *Letters and Journals*, IV, p.172.
- 32 *ibid.*, III, p.233.
- 33 Byron casually met a copy of the suppressed edition of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in 1816, and wrote his mature views on the poem on its fly-leaf. See Goode, *Byron as Critic*, pp.75—76.
- 34 Lovell, *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, p.333.