

LORD BYRON AND WILLIAM GIFFORD¹

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BYRON tried to dissuade John Murray from showing the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to William Gifford before publishing them. In such a proceeding, he wrote, there would be "a kind of petition for praise" (23 August 1811)²; and, deeply as Byron respected the eminent satirist, scholar, and critic, pride forbade him to become a petitioner. Nevertheless, Gifford saw the manuscript and liked the poem, and Byron told the friend who was acting as his literary agent how welcome to him was the approbation of one who had always been his "Magnus Apollo" (7 September 1811).

Gifford continued to admire the young poet's work. After the publication of *The Giaour*, he wrote what Byron described to Murray as "the kindest letter I ever received in my life" (18 June 1813). Byron had difficulty in thanking him:

If you knew the veneration with which I have ever regarded you long before I had the most distant prospect of becoming your acquaintance literary or personal—my embarrassment would not surprize you.—Any suggestion of yours even were it conveyed in the less tender shape of the text of the Baviad or a Monk Mason note in Massinger would have been obeyed—I should have endeavoured to improve myself by your censure—judge then—if I shall be less willing to profit by your kindness.—It is not for me to bandy compliments with my elders & my betters—I receive your approbation with gratitude—& will not return my brass for your Gold by expressing more fully those sentiments of admiration which however sincere would I know be unwelcome.

(18 June 1813)

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, the 23rd of October 1974.

² Quotations from Byron's prose come from L. A. Marchand's edition of *Byron's Letters and Journals* (London, 1973-) as far as this was available at the time of writing, that is, for the period ending 31 December 1813. Quotations from prose of later date come from R. E. Prothero's edition, *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals* (6 vols., London, 1898-1901). Individual letters and journal-entries are identified by their dates, so that they may be traced in either edition.

So deep is his gratitude that he then comes uncharacteristically close to apologizing for the religious scepticism apparent in his writings.

Subsequent developments confirm the truth of his protestations. Gifford sees *The Bride of Abydos* in advance of publication ("Journal", 14 November 1813) and even decides for its author which of certain alternative readings "is best—or rather *not worst*" (13 November 1813). Byron wishes him to have a preview of *The Corsair*, too, for from him "every comma is an obligation" (2 and 4 January 1814). He would like him to see the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (28 August 1816), and in due course he is "very much flattered by Mr. Gifford's good opinion of the MSS." (29 September 1816). Moreover, he would like Gifford to decide for him whether to append a note to a particular passage :

I do not know that this is necessary, and leave it to Mr. G.'s choice—as my Editor,—if he will allow me to call him so at this distance.

(9 October 1816)

Gifford continued to perform such editorial services. From Italy, he received "*Carte blanche* as to *The Siege of Corinth*" (2 January 1817). Byron felt uncertain about *Manfred* and told Murray to burn it if he wished, and if Gifford disliked it (25 March 1817); on learning of Gifford's objections, he rewrote the third act (14 April 1817); and he sent the new version to be printed "*under Mr. Gifford's correction*, if he will have the goodness to overlook it" (5 May 1817). Byron asked Gifford to choose for him between alternative readings in *Beppo* (11 April 1818), *Marino Faliero* (7 September 1820, 2 February 1821, 2 March 1821), and *Cain* (3 November 1821). He dwelt with pleasure upon Gifford's description of the language of the first act of *Marino Faliero* as "English, sterling *genuine English*" (11 and 28 September 1820, 12 May 1821), and he was glad when Gifford liked *Sardanapalus* (22 July 1821).

Admittedly, things went a little differently with *Don Juan* and *Cain*. These seemed alarmingly bold to Murray and his Tory advisers, including Gifford; even the radical Hobhouse feared that they would damage his friend's reputation. Naturally,

Byron was disappointed ; but he did not allow his disappointment to impair the " veneration " he had expressed to Gifford in 1813. As early as 1814, he had defied the other members of Murray's circle :

I care for none of you, except Gifford ; and he won't abuse me, unless I deserve it—which will at least reconcile me to his justice.

(15 January 1814)

A year after the scandal of his separation from his wife, he had assured Murray of his high regard for the man who had remained his friend

through thick and thin, in despite of difference of years, morals, habits, and even *politics*, which last would, I believe, if they were in heaven, divide the Trinity.

(15 February 1817)

He continued to think of Gifford as his " grand patron " (20 September 1821) ; and in Greece, a few weeks before his death, he found time to deny indignantly a rumour that he was the author of a recent satire on him :

It is not true that I ever *did, will, would, could, or should* write a satire against Gifford, or a hair of his head. I always considered him as my literary father, and myself as his ' prodigal son ' ; and if I have allowed his ' fatted calf ' to grow to an ox before he kills it on my return, it is only because I prefer beef to veal.

(21 February 1824)

These are only a few of the references to Gifford in Byron's correspondence. Most of them occur in letters to Murray, who was evidently the normal channel of communication between the two men. Byron asks repeatedly after Gifford's health ; and he sends salutations ranging from the grave and formal, " Pray repeat my best thanks and remembrances to Mr. Gifford for all his trouble and good nature towards me " (30 September 1816), to the brief and cheery, " Love to Gifford " (12 October 1817, 16 August 1821).

The disclosure that anyone could send " Love to Gifford " would have dumbfounded those who had experienced the satirist's acrimoniousness in political and scholarly controversy. Nor is this the only reason for considering his association with

Byron extraordinary. Theirs was, after all, a friendly relationship between an elderly Tory scholar of plebeian origin and a young Whig poet of aristocratic birth.

Gifford had been born in Ashburton, between Exeter and Plymouth, in April 1756. His father, a small tradesman who had served in the Navy, died when William was eleven; his mother outlived her husband by less than twelve months. William and a brother about eleven years younger than himself came under the guardianship of William's godfather.

This man, named Carlile, sent the infant to the almshouse. He allowed William's schooling to continue for the three months it took public sympathy with the orphan to die down; he then sought to send him out to work. There was some difficulty in placing him because Gifford was far from robust and suffered from a deformity caused by his having accidentally pulled a table down on to his own chest during his father's lifetime. But shortly after his thirteenth birthday he started work on a Brixham coaster, the *Two Brothers*.

Life on this vessel was hard, and Gifford suffered especial distress at having no opportunity of reading. His adventures included a narrow escape from drowning. Nevertheless, he acquired during this period a love of the sea that was to endure throughout his life and that no doubt contributed to his liking for Byron's poems, in which the sea is often powerfully described.

In Ashburton, sympathy with the orphan had died down less completely than his guardian had supposed, and in 1770 public opinion forced Carlile to recall the youngster and allow him to resume his schooling. About a year later, however, Carlile apprenticed him to a shoemaker. Gifford hated the trade and found his master a narrow-minded, disputatious, Presbyterian fanatic:

he was possessed of Fenning's Dictionary, and he made a most singular use of it. His custom was to fix on any word in common use, and then to get by heart the synonym, or periphrasis by which it was explained in the book; this he constantly substituted for the other, and as his opponents were commonly ignorant of his meaning, his victory was complete.

In secret, Gifford studied mathematics. Having no pen, ink, and paper,

I beat out pieces of leather as smooth as possible, and wrought my problems on them with a blunted awl: for the rest, my memory was tenacious, and I could multiply and divide by it, to a great extent.

While continuing to reserve his best efforts for mathematics, he began to compose occasional verses. Then his master discovered what he was doing. Forbidden to study, and disappointed in a privately cherished hope of becoming a schoolmaster, Gifford lapsed into sullen resentment. The unselfish friendliness of a young woman of his own social class rescued him from this.

Some of his verses came to the notice of a local surgeon, William Cookesley, and interested him. Cookesley set on foot subscriptions to redeem Gifford from the last eighteen months of his apprenticeship and to enable him once more to resume his education. Just over two years later, when Gifford was pronounced ready for the university, this tireless benefactor discovered the patron who enabled him to enter Exeter College, Oxford.

This account of Gifford's first twenty-one years derives from the simple, modest, and dignified autobiography that he printed as a brief "Introduction" to his *Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis, Translated into English Verse* (London, 1802; revised editions, 1806, 1817). An explanation of the long delay in completing his version concludes the memoir. The tutor who prepared him for the university had first set him translating Juvenal, and the work had progressed far enough while he was at Oxford for Cookesley and the author to invite subscriptions towards its publication. This was on 1 January 1781. But the sudden death of Cookesley a fortnight afterwards, followed by a growing realization of the exceptional difficulties of the undertaking, made Gifford resolve to take his time. The volume appeared over twenty years later, only a few days before the death of the patron, Lord Grosvenor, to whom Gifford had dedicated it.

For some years after leaving Oxford, Gifford was a member of Lord Grosvenor's household.¹ As tutor to his patron's son,

¹ Forty letters written by Gifford to Lord Grosvenor and to Lord Grosvenor's son, who inherited the title in 1802, are preserved at Eaton Hall, Cheshire.

he travelled overseas ; between 1786 and 1789 he saw something of Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland and Italy. His two most important original works, *The Baviad* (1791) and *The Maeviad* (1795), satirized a group of poetasters some of whom sympathized with the French Revolution. So when George Canning and a few other Tories started a periodical, the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797-8), to combat subversive principles in philosophy and politics they were making a natural enough choice in appointing Gifford editor. Indeed, Gifford was a well-known supporter of the Tory government and of its counter-revolutionary policies. He held a couple of official appointments which were mere sinecures and was therefore in effect a government pensioner.

A satirist and a political partisan, he easily became involved in quarrels. One of these culminated in physical violence, with the victory apparently going to the frail Gifford against the burly Whig "Peter Pindar" (John Wolcot). After the publication of the *Juvenal* (1802), his principal literary achievements were his editions of various English Renaissance dramatists : Massinger (1805), Ben Jonson (1816), Ford (1827), and Shirley (published posthumously after completion by Alexander Dyce, 1833). The best of these, the Massinger, remains even today the standard complete edition. In all of them, Gifford's comments on his scholarly predecessors are liable to be harsh and contemptuous. On 1 January 1819, Thomas Moore, the Irish lyrist, remarked :

Have got through half of Gifford's 'Memoirs of Ben Jonson'. What a 'canker'd carle' it is ! Strange that a man should be able to lash himself up into such a spiteful fury, not only against the living but the dead, with whom he engages in a sort of *sciomachy* in every page. Poor dull and dead Malone is the shadow at which he thrusts in his 'Jonson', as he did at poor Monck Mason, still duller and deader, in his 'Massinger'.

(*Memoirs* (ed. J. Russell, 8 vols., London, 1853-6), ii. 248)

These include some in which he reports to the father on his son's European tour. In others, he comments upon political affairs, discusses the progress of the *Quarterly Review*, and refers to contemporary authors. Two-thirds of these letters are closely summarized in *The Cheshire Sheaf*, Fourth Series, vi (1971 ; published 1974). I am deeply indebted to Dr. Frank Taylor of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester for drawing my attention to this material.

In his Ford, the victim is Henry Weber, who had brought out a faulty edition a few years earlier. Given this habitual combativeness, Gifford's implication in various quarrels is hardly surprising.

His combativeness found a more widely influential outlet in his editorial direction of the *Quarterly Review*. Started in 1809 in deliberate opposition to the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, this was a Tory periodical of broader scope than the *Anti-Jacobin*. Canning, now Foreign Minister, had a hand in its establishment, and Murray owned and published it. Gifford worked with Murray both as editor of the *Quarterly* for its first fifteen years and as his principal literary adviser.

During this period he was living in St. James Street, Buckingham Gate, where Ann Davies served as his housekeeper and companion until her death in 1815. His health was always uncertain; he was a chronic asthmatic, and he suffered from attacks of jaundice. Each summer he recuperated at the seaside, usually at Ryde in the Isle of Wight. But in 1824, when he retired from the editorship of the *Quarterly*, he was too ill to accept the honorary doctorate which his university was eager to confer upon him. Later, he grew too weak even to receive his friends. He died at his home on the last day of 1826 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

R. B. Clark concludes the first chapter of his biographical and critical study, *William Gifford, Tory Satirist, Critic, and Editor* (New York, 1930), which has contributed appreciably to the present account of Gifford's adult life and literary career, with an assortment of testimonies regarding his subject's physique and character. From these, it appears that Gifford was a tiny man with a humped back, a large head, thick, glossy, brown hair, and eyes which, despite a bad squint, expressed lively intelligence. His friends found him gentle, modest, kindly, and considerate. What he was in himself seemed very different from what he wrote. John Taylor applied to him a line from Rochester's imitation of the Tenth Satire of the First Book of Horace, "The best good Man, with the worst natur'd Muse"; and Thomas Moore described him as "the mildest man in the world till he takes a pen in his hand, but then all

gall and spitefulness" (*Memoirs*, ii. 230). William Cobbett regretted that a man of such genius should have fallen among evil, Tory companions. But there are no grounds for doubting the sincerity of Gifford's respect for the political and ecclesiastical establishments to which he gave his lifelong support.

William Hazlitt, a fervent republican and Bonapartist, detested him for this support of things as they were. In the portrait included in *The Spirit of the Age*, he declares that Gifford

inclines, by a natural and deliberate bias, to the traditional in laws and government, to the orthodox in religion, to the safe in opinion, to the trite in imagination, to the technical in style, to whatever implies a surrender of individual judgment into the hands of authority and a subjection of individual feeling to mechanic rules.

Though the feeling of this betrays its author's bias, the sense of it is accurate enough; and Hazlitt admits without hesitation that Gifford's conservatism was "natural and deliberate". But, when he goes on to wonder why he should have attempted a translation of Juvenal, he fails to appreciate how congenial Gifford must have found the Roman poet.

Juvenal writes as an outraged conservative. The existing social order and the accepted moral code have his full support, but he fears that he is witnessing the betrayal of that code and the destruction of that order. He observes the irresponsible conduct of the aristocracy, the vulgar behaviour of the newly rich, and the corrupting effect of money upon traditional relationships. Though the spectacle fascinates him, it excites his indignation. He attacks anyone or anything he can blame for the decline he senses.

His invective is eloquent and bitter. Switching from topic to topic with an abruptness that may disconcert his reader, he can nevertheless over a few dozen lines fuse an apparently haphazard sequence of observations into a vividly impressionistic rendering of a whole expanse of society. His savage, blistering wit repeatedly crystallizes into compact and pungent aphorisms.

Gifford's translation is unmistakably Augustan in style. Closed couplets, balanced constructions, and guarded diction

give an air of deliberation and composure to much of it. But by no means to all. Couplet can run uninterruptedly into couplet, balanced constructions are not everywhere evident, and Gifford's care for his diction does not deter him from writing harshly and colloquially when he sees fit. The reader who starts with some experience of the couplet as handled by earlier authors will note Gifford's readiness to impart an aggressive emphasis to a verse style that remains on the whole in the tradition of Dryden and Pope.

Gifford's scholarship was not impeccable; moreover, the squeamishness of his age obliged him to bowdlerize slightly. But the Roman conservative of the reign of Domitian, seventeen hundred years earlier, evoked in the Georgian Tory a sympathy which enabled him to produce one of our standard translations of an ancient poet. His version has energy and spirit; and, if it lacks the sonority of Juvenal's Latin, it has many passages of an admirable trenchancy and power.

In the great Sixth Satire, for example, Juvenal denounces the woman whose cosmetics, applied for the sake of her lover, make her repulsive at home to her husband. Gifford rounds off the portrait with the savage lines :

But tell me yet ; this thing, thus daub'd and oil'd,
Thus poultic'd, plaister'd, bak'd by turns and boil'd,
Thus with pomatums, ointments, lacquer'd o'er,
Is it a FACE, Ursidius, or a SORE?

Here a series of progressively more violent metaphors, several of them stressed by bold alliteration, works the rhetorical question up to a fierce climax of disgust. When Gifford translates the passage in the Tenth Satire on the ills attendant upon the old age which most men desire, he evidently does not feel free to reproduce Juvenal's frank speech about sexual impotence. Nevertheless, his final phrase gives conclusive expression to the horror, grief, and contempt which greedy senility can inspire :

The sluggish palate dull'd, the feast no more
Excites the same sensations as of yore ;
Taste, feeling, all, a universal blot,

And e'en the rites of love remember'd not :
 Or if—through the long night he feebly strives,
 To raise a flame where not a spark survives ;
 While Venus marks the effort with distrust,
 And hates the gray decrepitude of lust.

No doubt this differs markedly from Dr. Johnson's paraphrase :

. . . Life protracted is protracted Woe.
 Time hovers o'er, impatient to destroy,
 And shuts up all the Passages of Joy :
 In vain their Gifts the bounteous Seasons pour,
 The Fruit Autumnal, and the Vernal Flow'r,
 With listless Eyes the Dotard views the Store,
 He views, and wonders that they please no more ;
 Now pall the tastless Meats, and joyless Wines,
 And Luxury with Sighs her Slave resigns.

Johnson's lines have a solemnity and a measured gravity that Gifford's cannot claim. But in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* Johnson was offering an imitation, not a translation, of Juvenal's Tenth Satire ; and Gifford's lines are closer to Juvenal's in their fascinated horror and frightened anger. Nor would it be difficult to find many other passages in which Gifford can help an English reader with inadequate Latin to a clear notion of the great Roman satirist who could announce in his manifesto, the First Satire :

Whatever wild desires have swell'd the breast,
 Whatever passions have the soul possess'd,
 Joy, Sorrow, Fear, Love, Hatred, Transport, Rage,
 Shall form the motley subject of my page.

Gifford's more original satires appeared during the years when this translation of Juvenal was slowly maturing. His naming the chief of them after Bavius and Maevius, the two malevolent poetasters who attacked the work of Virgil and Horace, notifies us that he has taken his subjects from literary life. His main victims are the so-called Della Cruscan.

These poets are now forgotten as completely as the Spasmodics of the 1840s or the Apocalyptic of the 1940s. Robert Merry, Bertie Greathead, William Parsons, and Mrs. Hester Piozzi published a volume of verse together in 1785.

During the following years, Mrs. Hannah Cowley, Mrs. Mary Robinson, Edward Jerningham, and others became associated with them. Lyrics appeared in print signed with characteristic pseudonyms: for example, Merry was "Della Crusca", Greatheed was "Arno", Mrs. Cowley was "Anna Matilda", and Mrs. Robinson was "Laura Maria". An affectation of sensibility runs through these effusions. The egregious "Della Crusca" actually conducted a highfaluting poetical courtship of "Anna Matilda", whom he knew only from her writings, until they met face to face and he found she was a married woman appreciably older than himself.

No conservative man of letters and devoted admirer of Alexander Pope could fail to be irritated by the posturing and sentimentalism of these namby-pamby pre-Romantics. Moreover, certain of them compounded the offence by welcoming the French Revolution. Merry was one of these. Two years after his crucial interview with "Anna Matilda", he married Ann Brunton, the actress for whom he wrote his unsuccessful tragedy, *Lorenzo*. He and his wife spent a year or two in Paris around the time when the youthful William Wordsworth was in France hoping for the prompt realization of the millennium. Already, Merry's revolutionary "Laurel of Liberty" had evoked a verse tribute from Mrs. Robinson, and Jerningham had published a poem condemning Edmund Burke. Though such manifestations of radicalism must have vexed Gifford, his two chief satires are not primarily concerned with politics. In the "Introduction" to *The Baviad* (1791) he defines his purpose in terms that would be equally applicable to *The Maeviad* (1795):

to correct the growing depravity of the public taste, and check the inundation of absurdity now bursting upon us from a thousand springs.¹

Gifford was not an inventive writer. A scholar and a critic, he did his best creative work in translation or imitation of Latin originals. *The Baviad* is an imitation of the crabbed First Satire of Persius, *The Maeviad* of the polished Tenth Satire of the First Book of Horace. In each case, Gifford preserves the

¹ All quotations from Gifford's original satires come from *Gifford's Baviad and Maeviad . . . Epistle to Peter Pindar* (London, 1827).

general plan of the original. But contemporary British instances replace those introduced by the Latin poets, and discussion necessarily relates to these. Up to a point, Gifford's imitations resemble those of Pope.

Only up to a point, however. The comparison with Pope shows up Gifford's limitations in respect of fancy and imagination, of wit and humour, of sensitivity and subtlety. He lacks versatility. His sole mode of attack is by angry and scornful denunciation spiced with sarcastic quotation from his victims' more foolish utterances. Yet the resultant assaults have a directness and vigour that make them highly effective.

They are more devastating in the earlier than in the later of the two satires. Perhaps because an imitation of Horace calls for some attempt at urbanity, *The Maeviad* is distinctly less ferocious than *The Baviad*. Gifford reminisces in it about his own early poetry, quoting specimen lyrics in footnotes; and he pays tributes to individual friends. The opening pages are the most aggressive. In them, Gifford concerns himself mainly with contemporary drama, whereas his attention throughout *The Baviad* focuses upon contemporary, and chiefly Della Cruscan, poetry.

Early in *The Baviad* he describes a gathering at Mrs. Piozzi's. At this, Merry gives a reading of his "Laurel of Liberty", which Gifford, presumably for metrical purposes, calls "The Wreath of Liberty". Is Gifford here deriding him as, so to speak, the shadow Poet Laureate, the conservative interest having succeeded in the previous year in securing the official appointment for Henry James Pye?

Lo, DELLA CRUSCA! In his closet pent,
 He toils to give the crude conception vent. 40
 Abortive thoughts, that right and wrong confound,
 Truth sacrificed to letters, sense to sound,
 False glare, incongruous images, combine;
 And noise and nonsense clatter through the line.
 'Tis done. Her house the generous Piozzi lends, 45
 And thither summons her blue-stocking friends;
 The summons her blue-stocking friends obey,
 Lured by the love of poetry—and Tea.
 The BARD steps forth, in birth-day splendour drest,
 His right hand graceful waving o'er his breast; 50

His left extending, so that all may see,
 A roll inscribed ' THE WREATH OF LIBERTY ' .
 So forth he steps, and with complacent air,
 Bows round the circle, and assumes the chair ;
 With lemonade he gargles next his throat, 55
 Then sweetly preludes to the liquid note :
 And now ' tis silence all. ' GENIUS OR MUSE ' 1—
 Thus while the flowery subject he pursues,
 A wild delirium round the assembly flies ;
 Unusual lustre shoots from Emma's eyes, 60
 Luxurious Arno drivels as he stands,
 And Anna frisks, and Laura claps her hands.
 O wretched man ! And dost thou toil to please,
 At this late hour, such prurient ears as these?
 Is thy poor pride contented to receive 65
 Such transitory fame as fools can give?
 Fools, who unconscious of the critics' laws,
 Rain in such show'rs their indistinct applause.
 That THOU, even THOU, who liv' st upon renown,
 And, with eternal puffs, insult' st the town, 70
 Art forced at length to check the idiot roar,
 And cry, ' For heav' n's sweet sake, no more, no more ! '

The zeugma in line 48 is the most conspicuous of several signs of Gifford's indebtedness to the author of *The Rape of the Lock*. Perhaps the recollection of Pope suggested to him the immediately following shift into an ironical mode. But Gifford has little skill as an ironist : " graceful " (line 50) and " sweetly " (line 56) are perfunctory, almost mechanical. He does very much better with the downright ridicule of the pointed line 44 and with the well-managed, straightforward climax on which the quotation ends.

The unfortunate Merry's tragedy, *Lorenzo*, turns up early in *The Maeviad*. Gifford exhorts the Della Crusicans :

Then let your style be brief, your meaning clear,
 Nor like Lorenzo, tire the labouring ear
 With a wild waste of words ; sound without sense,
 And all the florid glare of impotence.

¹ In a footnote, Gifford refers to " the commencement of the Wreath of Liberty " and quotes :

Genius or Muse, whoe'er thou art, whose thrill
 Exalts the fancy, and inflames the will,
 Bids o'er the heart sublime sensation roll,
 And wakes ecstatic fervour in the soul.

Still with your characters your language change,
 From grave to gay, as nature dictates, range ;
 Now droop in all the plaintiveness of woe,
 Now in glad numbers light and airy flow ;
 Now shake the stage with guilt's alarming tone,
 And make the aching bosom all your own ;
 Now—But I sing in vain ; from first to last,
 Your joy is fustian, and your grief bombast :
 Rhetoric has banish'd reason ; kings and queens,
 Vent in hyperboles their royal spleens ;
 Guardsmen in metaphors express their hopes,
 And ' maidens, in white linen ', howl in tropes.

(lines 73-88)

“ And all the florid glare of impotence ” is another successful, pointed line ; and the quotation ends with Gifford coming as near to humour as he ever does.

Fourteen years later, the twenty-one-year-old Byron, shortly before sailing on the Mediterranean tour that was to produce the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, revenged himself for Henry Brougham's scornful dismissal of his juvenilia in the *Edinburgh Review* by issuing *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). This satirical survey of the literary scene owes much to Pope's *The Dunciad* and to Gifford's *The Baviad* and *The Maeviad*. Byron admits that he is following “ The path which POPE and GIFFORD trod before ” (line 94) ; he would gladly relinquish to “ some Bard in virtue strong ”, such as Gifford, the task of correcting the vices of the age (lines 701-2) ; he rejoices at the annihilation of the Della Cruscans (lines 741-64) ; he ranks their destroyer higher than Robert Burns and Robert Bloomfield, recent poets who like him had raised themselves above “ the labours of a servile state ” (lines 777-81) ; and he appeals to Gifford, “ Satire's Bard ”, to return to the fray :

Arouse thee, GIFFORD ! be thy promise claimed,
 Make bad men better, or at least ashamed.

(lines 819-30)

A poem owing so much to his example and voicing such admiration of himself could hardly fail to attract Gifford's attention ; and he certainly found *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers* a poem he could praise. In Augustan couplets, it

projects Byron as an exponent of common sense and an enemy of affectation and extravagance ; it expresses a high esteem for the traditionalist, Crabbe, " Though Nature's sternest Painter, yet the best " (line 858), and it derides the innovator, Wordsworth :

Next comes the dull disciple of thy [Southey's] school,
That mild apostate from poetic rule,
The simple WORDSWORTH, framer of a lay
As soft as evening in his favourite May,
Who warns his friend ' to shake off toil and trouble,
And quit his books, for fear of growing double ; '
Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose ;
Convincing all, by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane ;
And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme
Contain the essence of the true sublime.
Thus, when he tells the tale of Betty Foy,
The idiot mother of ' an idiot Boy ' ;
A moon-struck, silly lad, who lost his way,
And, like his bard, confounded night with day ;
So close on each pathetic part he dwells,
And each adventure so sublimely tells,
That all who view the ' idiot in his glory '
Conceive the Bard the hero of the story.

(lines 235-54)

Here scornful denunciation, spiced with sarcastic quotation from Wordsworth himself, culminates in the well-managed climax approached through the last eight lines. The method recalls Gifford's, but the passage has a humour, a reckless spirit of mischief, that the elder man rarely, if ever, displays. It gives notice of the arrival of a new satiric and comic voice in English poetry.

At first sight, Gifford's praise of the works which followed *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*—the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Turkish tales—is surprising. These are, after all, the poems which gave Byron his European reputation as, with Sir Walter Scott, one of the two great British Romantics. But even the critic who sought to be " reason's bard " (*The Maeviad*, line 168) could not be immune to the new trends of his time ; and Byron's conservatism in his handling of

language, even in his most Romantic poems, must have gratified him. Naturally, he would regret Byron's recurrent lapses into slipshod expression. On pages torn out of a copy of the first edition of *The Siege of Corinth*, he corrected or deleted a fair number of passages that he thought careless or in bad taste.¹ In this, however, he was acting as one orthodox stylist helping another.

Gifford rejoiced that Byron fully shared his reverence for the poetry of Pope (15 September 1817, and note). When Byron told Murray that he did not want any more current literature sent to him in Italy, he excepted ten authors. These did not include Wordsworth or Coleridge, but they did include Gifford (24 September 1821). Byron's affinity with his eighteenth-century predecessors became more and more marked as he matured. Increasingly, he based himself upon a hard-headed empiricism; increasingly, he scoffed at metaphysical and theological speculation. If Gifford and other conservatives had not found *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgment* offensive to their moral, political, and religious susceptibilities, they might have seen that, properly understood, these were poems after their own hearts. J. W. Croker was apparently almost alone in perceiving something of the kind (A. Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1970), pp. 161-2).

On 4 June 1817, in Venice, Byron met an Italian associate of the Della Cruscan and wrote at once to Murray :

To-day, Pindemonte, the celebrated poet of Verona, called on me ; he is a little thin man, with acute and pleasing features ; his address good and gentle ; his appearance altogether very philosophical ; his age about sixty, or more. He is one of their best going. . . . He enquired after his old Cruscan friends, Parsons, Greathead, Mrs. Piozzi, and Merry, all of whom he had known in his youth. I gave him as bad an account of them as I could, answering, as the false ' Solomon Lob ' does to ' Totterton ' in the farce [*Love Laughs at Locksmiths*, by George Colman the younger], that they were ' all gone dead ', and damned by a satire

¹ Was he perhaps acting on the " *Carte blanche* " Byron had given him (2 January 1817)? If so, it is surprising that his judicious suggestions were not adopted in subsequent editions. E. H. Coleridge records them in his notes to *The Siege of Corinth* (*The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry* (7 vols., London, 1898-1904), iii).

more than twenty years ago ; that the name of their extinguisher was Gifford ; that they were but a sad set of scribes after all, and no great things in any other way. He seemed, as was natural, very much pleased with this account of his old acquaintances, and went away greatly gratified. . . . After having been a little libertine in his youth, he is grown devout, and takes prayers, and talks to himself, to keep off the Devil ; but for all that, he is a very nice little old gentleman.