

BYRON'S *VISION OF JUDGMENT*¹

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IN 1817 the Tory Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, was embarrassed by the unauthorized publication of a short drama, *Wat Tyler*, which he had written twenty-three years earlier while still a fervent supporter of the French Revolution. Byron heard of this while on a visit to Rome and wrote to his publisher, John Murray :

Southey's *Wat Tyler* is rather awkward ; but the Goddess Nemesis has done well. He is—I will not say what, but I wish he was something else. I hate all intolerance, but most the intolerance of Apostacy. . . . It is no disgrace to Mr. Southey to have written *Wat Tyler*, and afterwards to have written his birthday or Victory odes (I speak only of their *politics*), but it is something, for which I have no words, for this man to have endeavoured to bring to the stake (for such would he do) men who think as he thought, and for no reason but because they think so still, when he has found it convenient to think otherwise (9 May 1817).²

Eight years earlier, Byron had giped at Southey in *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers* for writing "too often and too long" (line 226).³ Since then, they had met at Holland House "with all becoming courtesy on both sides". Each had admired the other's looks on this occasion, though neither liked the other's poetry.⁴ But Byron's reaction to the issuing of *Wat Tyler* shows that he not only considered Southey an uneven and over-prolific poet,⁵ but also disliked him as a renegade who was

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 17th of January 1968.

² Quotations from Byron's prose are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from *The Works of Lord Byron : Letters and Journals*, ed. R. E. Prothero, 6 vols., London, 1898-1901, letters being identified, as here, simply by their dates, and other prose works being given their titles. The word *Correspondence* preceding a date indicates that the letter in question occurs in *Lord Byron's Correspondence*, ed. John Murray, 2 vols., London, 1922.

³ Quotations from Byron's poetry are taken from *The Works of Lord Byron : Poetry*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 7 vols., London, 1898-1904.

⁴ 27 September 1813 ; and *New Letters of Robert Southey* (ed. K. Curry, 2 vols., New York and London, 1965), ii. 77 (28 September 1813).

⁵ "Journal", 22 November 1813.

ready to persecute those who had remained true to the liberal cause.

Before long, a suspected personal grievance reinforced his literary and political objections to the Laureate. In 1818 someone told him that Southey had been saying, after a visit to Switzerland in 1817, that Byron and Shelley had lived there with two sisters in "a League of Incest".¹ There was in fact no blood relationship between the two young women in question, one of them being William Godwin's daughter by his first marriage, the other his second wife's daughter by a previous marriage; and, while the one was Shelley's mistress, later to become his wife, and the other Byron's mistress, there was no basis for the accusation of promiscuous intercourse. Byron's indignation was natural, though his belief that Southey was the slanderer appears to have been ill-founded.

Resentment, which he was never slow to feel, seems at once to have inspired his "Dedication" of *Don Juan* to Southey "in good, simple, savage verse, upon the Laureat's politics, and the way he got them" (19 September 1818). The decision to publish the first two cantos of *Don Juan* anonymously caused him to withhold this "Dedication": "I won't attack the dog so fiercely without putting my name" (6 May 1819). But Southey had already got wind of it. "If it should sufficiently provoke me", he wrote to a friend, "you may be assured that I will treat him with due severity, as he deserves to be treated, and lay him open, in a live dissection."²

Six months later, the death of George III imposed an official duty upon the Laureate which he discharged in April 1821 by publishing *A Vision of Judgement*. In his "Preface" to this funeral ode, he attacked "the Satanic school" of poetry in terms which made it clear that Byron was in his mind:

... Men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society, and hating that revealed religion which, with all their efforts and bravadoes, they are unable entirely to disbelieve, labour to make others as miserable as themselves, by infecting them with a moral virus that

¹ *Correspondence*, 11 November 1818.

² *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey* (ed. J. W. Warter, 4 vols., London, 1856), iii. 137 (31 July 1819).

eats into the soul! The school which they have set up may properly be called the Satanic school; for though their productions breathe the spirit of Belial in their lascivious parts, and the spirit of Moloch in those loathsome images of atrocities and horrors which they delight to represent, they are more especially characterised by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied (pp. 205-6).¹

Byron retaliated in the "Appendix" to the first edition of *The Two Foscari* (1821). Southey had spoken of the unavailing "remorse of conscience" (p. 204) that might be felt by the author of a Satanic book when on his death-bed. Byron stigmatized this line of argument as cowardly, impudent, and blasphemous. He also alluded in general terms to the calumnies which he believed Southey to have uttered on his return from Switzerland.

Within a month, Southey retorted. In a letter to the *Courier*, dated 5 January 1822, he denied that he had uttered any such calumnies. He also pointed out that Byron had not answered his charges against "the Satanic school". Evidently feeling that the debate was going in his favour, he offered his opponent a piece of advice: "When he attacks me again, let it be in rhyme. For one who has so little command of himself, it will be a great advantage that his temper should be obliged to *keep tune*."

In saying this, Southey was ignoring a few passing gibes at himself occurring in the first four cantos of *Don Juan*, as well as the still unreleased "Dedication". He was sarcastically inviting a verse attack more sustained than any of these. Unknown to him, Byron had already acted in accordance with his recommendation. He had completed *The Vision of Judgment*, his devastating travesty of Southey's funeral ode, three months earlier and had sent it to Murray on 4 October 1821. After Southey's letter to the *Courier*, he was eager for its appearance in print. But his business relations with Murray had deteriorated by this time. So it was John Hunt who published it, as the opening item in the first number of the *Liberal*, on 15 October 1822.

In prose, Southey had had the advantage. Shortly after their only recorded meeting, his opponent had described his

¹ Quotations from *A Vision of Judgment* are taken from *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (10 vols., London, 1843-6), x. 189-264.

prose as "perfect".¹ Moreover, his confidence in his own righteousness made him a formidable antagonist.

In verse, however, things were to go very differently. Even among the official utterances of our Laureates, *A Vision of Judgement* deservedly occupies a bad eminence. Its metre is singularly ill-chosen. Southey devotes most of the "Preface" in which he denounces "the Satanic school" to a description and justification of the unrhymed accentual hexameters which he employs. A. H. Clough's *Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1848) and *Amours de Voyage* (1858) demonstrate the suitability of English hexameters for certain kinds of serio-comic writing, but none of our poets has yet used them with success in a serious long poem. Southey's seriousness is immaculate, and his hexameters proceed with a kind of stately limp that justifies Byron's description of them as "spavined dactyls".²

A Vision of Judgement consists of twelve short parts. In the first of these, "The Trance", a supernatural Voice summons the poet, like Dante, to view the secrets of the grave; and in the next two, "The Vault" and "The Awakening", he passes beyond death:

Then I beheld the King. From a cloud which cover'd the pavement
His reverend form arose: heavenward his face was directed,
Heavenward his eyes were raised, and heavenward his arms were extended
(p. 218).

The spirit of Spencer Perceval, the reactionary Prime Minister who had been assassinated in 1812 shortly after George III became permanently insane, greets his monarch, assures him that his son has ruled wisely and firmly as Prince Regent, and informs him of the defeat of Napoleon. The king asks whether the subversive spirit of Jacobinism has yet been quelled.

Still is that fierce and restless spirit at work, was the answer;
Still it deceiveth the weak, and inflameth the rash and the desperate.
Even now, I ween, some dreadful deed is preparing (p. 220).

In the fourth part, "The Gate of Heaven", the king reaches the place of judgement.

¹ "Journal", 22 November 1813.

² *The Vision of Judgment*, xci.

O'er the adamantine gates an Angel stood on the summit.
 Ho! he exclaim'd, King George of England cometh to judgement!
 Hear Heaven! Ye Angels hear! Souls of the Good and the Wicked
 Whom it concerns, attend! Thou, Hell, bring forth his accusers! (p. 221).

The "Spirit by which his righteous reign had been troubled" (p. 223), the Fiend of revolution, produces two of these in the fifth part, "The Accusers". John Wilkes, the agitator, is one of them:

Him by the cast of his eye oblique, I knew as the firebrand
 Whom the unthinking populace held for their idol and hero,
 Lord of Misrule in his day (p. 224).

The unidentified political journalist "Junius" is the other:

Mask'd had he been in his life, and now a visor of iron
 Rivetted round his head, had abolish'd his features for ever (p. 225).

"Wretched and guilty souls" (p. 224), they dare not accuse the king they have injured, so the Fiend hurls them back into hell. The sixth part, "The Absolvers", shows how some of those who had wronged George III during their lives are now ready to admit their fault. George Washington is prominent among them, and he and the king praise each other's integrity.

Since the remainder of Southey's poem has no close parallel in Byron's, I may review it more briefly. The titles of the parts indicate its course. In "The Beatification", the king drinks of the Well of Life and rises "in a glorified body . . . to bliss everlasting appointed" (p. 231). In the last five parts, he is welcomed by successive groups of beatified spirits. There are "The Sovereigns", "The Elder Worthies", "The Worthies of the Georgian Age", and "The Young Spirits". Finally, in "The Meeting", he is reunited with his own family.

Writing of *A Vision of Judgement*, Southey's own son, a clergyman, solemnly conceded "that to speculate upon the condition of the departed, especially when under the influence of strong political feelings, is a bold, if not a presumptuous undertaking".¹ Southey seems to have confused membership of the heavenly host with membership of the Tory party. At the same time, he must have suspected that others would find the identification

¹ *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* (ed. C. C. Southey, 6 vols., London, 1849-50), v. 67.

irreverent, or absurd. So he invests the persons and situations in his poem with a Miltonic vagueness; he makes them ideal manifestations of good and evil (or Toryism and Jacobinism) rather than clearly imagined people and places. But, whereas the power and the compact allusiveness of Milton's writing make his generalized presentations immensely suggestive, Southey lacks the literary resources to make his anything of the kind. His writing is flat and conventional; his "spavined dactyls" jog us from cliché to cliché; he strives for dignity, and he achieves pomposity.

Byron seems to have objected to *A Vision of Judgement* on three counts. Firstly, it was a presumptuous poem. Secondly, it was a Tory poem—and, what was more, the work of a bigoted renegade. Thirdly, it was a bad poem, inflated, tame, stilted, and preposterous.

The Rev. C. C. Southey, the poet's son, has already come near to acknowledging for us the force of the first objection. Byron, while still very young, had felt that the anticipation of the Last Judgement by another poet, George Townsend, was "a little too daring: at least, it looks like telling the Lord what he is to do" (27 August 1811). So perhaps we ought not to feel surprise when he denounces *A Vision of Judgement* as "Southey's impudent anticipation of the Apotheosis of George the Third" (6 October 1821). At the same time, it may be asked on what grounds a man who professed a kind of eighteenth-century deism could make this objection. In reply, having recalled Byron's notorious self-contradictions, we may argue that along with the deist there persisted in him enough of the Calvinist for the objection to spring naturally to his mind. Alternatively, we may take the view that, apart from all theological considerations, Byron would instinctively resist any attempt to formulate a total and final judgement of a human life. But, whether his objection was Christian or humanist, it was sincere and strong and left him thinking *A Vision of Judgement* an impudent poem.

The Toryism of the work was equally offensive to him. He detested the Tory policies of the reign which had just ended: the attempt to bully the American colonies, the failure to remove

the legal disabilities imposed on the Roman Catholics, the hostility towards the French Revolution, and the repressive measures adopted in the face of social unrest at home. He could not respect a king who lent his authority to such purposes. Even less could he respect a sycophantic Poet Laureate who complacently celebrated the reception into eternal bliss of a monarch who, whatever his domestic virtues, had in Byron's eyes been politically disastrous. In his "Preface" to *The Vision of Judgment*, he declared, "The gross flattery, the dull impudence, the renegado intolerance, and impious cant, of the poem by the author of 'Wat Tyler,' are something so stupendous as to form the sublime of himself—containing the quintessence of his own attributes."

Southey's poetic failure constituted a warning against the use of hexameters. But Byron is unlikely to have needed it. For his counterblast, he naturally resorted to *ottava rima*, the form which by now had become his settled favourite, the form in which he could

rattle on exactly as I'd talk
With any body in a ride or walk (*Don Juan*, XV. xix)

and in which the very relaxedness of his manner enabled him to spring the deadlier surprises on his readers.

He sets his poem where much of Southey's is set, just outside the gate of heaven; but, instead of generalizing his setting and his characters, he renders them in the most familiar and prosaic of particular terms. This furthers his humorous and satirical purposes. The lock is "dull", the keys "rusty", and Saint Peter a cantankerous janitor. Just as, in life, the saint cut off the right ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, in an attempt to rescue Jesus (John xviii. 10), so in his present state he employs force in an attempt to exclude Louis XVI from unmerited bliss; since he was the first pope, he protests vehemently against the beatification of such an enemy of Catholic Emancipation as George III; and as one of the original twelve disciples he exhibits a snobbish hostility to a latecomer, "That fellow Paul—the parvenù!" (xx). Socially, he evidently ranks below the archangel Michael and Satan, the spokesmen of heaven and hell in the debate for the soul of the dead George III. Michael can

address him patronizingly as " Good Saint ! " and apologize to Satan for the intemperate " warmth of his expression " (li). But the superior breeding of Michael and Satan is shown most convincingly at their first encounter :

though they did not kiss,
Yet still between his Darkness and his Brightness
There passed a mutual glance of great politeness (xxxv).

Michael bows " as to an equal, not too low, / But kindly " (xxxvi). Satan, though he has fallen from his high estate, is mindful of his seniority ; he meets

his ancient friend
With more hauteur, as might an old Castilian
Poor Noble meet a mushroom rich civilian (xxxvi).

In contrast with Michael, " A beautiful and mighty Thing of Light " (xxviii), and Satan, " Eternal wrath on his immortal face " (xxiv), Saint Peter is something of a buffoon. He is even subjected to the indignity of being prevented from dozing by a Cherub, who " flapped his right wing o'er his eyes " (xvii).

This Cherub announces to him the death of George III, who arrives at the celestial gate in stanza xxiii. Before this, however, Byron turns his eyes towards the earth and describes the burial of a king who had died old, mad, and blind. He starts cynically enough by representing it as " a sepulchral melodrame ", a " show " (x), in which the tears were " shed by collusion " and the elegies were " Bought also " (ix). Performers and spectators flocked to it, but no genuine mourners.

There throbbed not there a thought which pierced the pall ;
And when the gorgeous coffin was laid low,
It seemed the mockery of hell to fold
The rottenness of eighty years in gold (x).

The corpse, contrasted with its ostentatious setting, becomes the object not only of disgust but also of pity. When Henry Crabb Robinson read *The Vision of Judgment* to Goethe in August 1829, this stanza, and especially its final couplet, won the particular admiration of the eighty-year-old poet.¹

The almost Shandian mobility of Byron's temperament again

¹ *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* (ed. T. Sadler, 3 vols., London, 1869), ii. 436.

becomes apparent when he reflects upon the meaning of the loyal "God save the king!" He comments sarcastically,

It is a large economy
In God to save the like ; but if he will
Be saving. . .

if, that is, God is obstinately set upon saving even kings ("will" receives a telling emphasis), Byron is not going to exert himself in opposition. In fact, he can go further. He can allow that God's wish to save is

all the better ; for not one am I
Of those who think damnation better still (xiii).

Even if he is alone in doing so, he would like to oppose the cruel doctrine of eternal damnation.¹

At once, he pretends to feel that he has gone too far. In a series of apparently concessive statements introduced by "I know . . .", "I know . . .", "I know . . .", he reviews the arguments against such resistance to the doctrine of eternal punishment as he has just shown. But he does so with mounting irony. Acknowledging that he may be damned for his resistance, he makes it clear that in that case he will be damned for his charity ; admitting that "the best doctrines" are "crammed" into us "till we quite o'erflow", he lets the crude forcefulness of his language bring to our minds the revulsion that will naturally follow our compelled surfeit ; and, recognizing that "all save England's Church" have fallen into hopeless error, he permits himself a couplet which, with its colloquial emphasis on "*damned*" and its ludicrous feminine rhyme, rounds off the stanza with hearty, scornful laughter :

I know this is unpopular ; I know
'Tis blasphemous ; I know one may be damned
For hoping no one else may e'er be so ;
I know my catechism ; I know we're crammed
With the best doctrines till we quite o'erflow ;
I know that all save England's Church have shammed,
And that the other twice two hundred churches
And synagogues have made a *damned* bad purchase (xiv).

¹ Cf. "all punishment, which is to *revenge* rather than *correct*, must be *morally wrong*. And *when the World is at an end*, what moral or warning purpose *can* eternal tortures answer?" ("Detached Thoughts", 96).

“ God help us all ! God help me too ! ” (xv), he continues. He knows that he would be only too easy to damn, but he doubts whether he merits so much attention. On this rueful and self-depreciatory note, he concludes the only digression of any length in *The Vision of Judgment*.

Like the longer and more numerous digressions in *Don Juan*, this on eternal punishment helps to create in our minds an image of the narrator. In *The Vision of Judgment*, he is an aggressive but fundamentally kindly man ; he has a taste for mockery and can indulge it recklessly ; he does not exaggerate his own importance, however, and, though plain-spoken, he is abundantly good-natured.

George III having arrived, Satan and Michael come to claim him for hell and heaven respectively. Byron describes Satan in powerfully melodramatic terms ; but a moment later he is indulging his delight in absurdity by saying that the hatred in Satan's glance makes Saint Peter sweat “ through his Apostolic skin ” (xxv) and causes the Cherubs to form a protective circle around “ their poor old charge ”, the king,

for by many stories,
And true, we learn the Angels all are Tories (xxvi).

Chief among these stories is presumably Southey's *Vision of Judgement*. At Michael's invitation, Satan states his case for the king's damnation.

He speaks eloquently and judiciously. He recognizes the king's “ tame virtues ” (xlvii) and admits that he was no more than “ a tool from first to last ” (xliv). These concessions give an additional persuasiveness to his charge that, as a tool, George III helped to make his own reign as bloody as any in history and “ ever warred with freedom and the free ” (xlv). Until almost the end of an oration that extends over more than ten stanzas, Byron avoids completely the feminine rhymes which are normally so prominent a feature of his writing in *ottava rima*. He evidently wished to avoid the levity which they tend to introduce. Satan's denunciation of the king is the serious political heart of the poem.

At its conclusion, we have another of Byron's sudden switches

from the elevated to the absurd. When Satan, using his first feminine rhyme, describes George III as

The foe to Catholic participation
In all the license of a Christian nation (xlvi),

Saint Peter flies into a rage, hoping that he may be damned himself if he ever opens the celestial gate to "this Guelph" (xlix). Michael restores order, however, and invites Satan to call his witnesses. He does so. They are beyond number, and Byron revels in the opportunity of evoking their multitudinousness. Michael, though a trifle disconcerted by it, makes his protest with aristocratic politeness and suggests that Satan should content himself with "two honest, clean, / True testimonies" (lxiii). Equally composed, Satan agrees.

Naturally, he summons the two who were prominent in Southey's *Vision of Judgement*, John Wilkes and "Junius". Wilkes, a "merry, cock-eyed, curious-looking Sprite" (lxvi), has a style of speech as distinctive as those of the comic gate-keeper and the two grandees. It is exuberant, racy, and irreverent, and Michael's more literary and dignified manner serves as an admirable foil to it. Wilkes thinks at first that an election meeting is in progress :

The Spirit looked around upon the crowds
Assembled, and exclaimed, " My friends of all
The spheres, we shall catch cold amongst these clouds ;
So let's to business : why this general call ?
If those are freeholders I see in shrouds,
And 'tis for an election that they bawl,
Behold a candidate with unturned coat !
Saint Peter, may I count upon your vote ? "

" Sir," replied Michael, " you mistake ; these things
Are of a former life, and what we do
Above is more august ; to judge of kings
Is the tribunal met : so now you know."

" Then I presume those gentlemen with wings,"
Said Wilkes, " are Cherubs ; and that soul below
Looks much like George the Third, but to my mind
A good deal older—bless me ! is he blind ? "

" He is what you behold him, and his doom
Depends upon his deeds," the Angel said ;
" If you have aught to arraign in him, the tomb
Gives license to the humblest beggar's head

To lift itself against the loftiest."—"Some,"
Said Wilkes, "don't wait to see them laid in lead,
For such a liberty—and I, for one,
Have told them what I thought beneath the sun."

"Above the sun repeat, then, what thou hast
To urge against him," said the Archangel. "Why,"
Replied the spirit, "since old scores are past,
Must I turn evidence? In faith, not I.
Besides, I beat him hollow at the last,
With all his Lords and Commons: in the sky
I don't like ripping up old stories, since
His conduct was but natural in a prince" (lxvii-lxx).

For all his scorn of the king, Wilkes is too little vindictive for his testimony to be of much use to Satan. His readiness to forgive contrasts pointedly with the mere shame that made Southey's Wilkes useless to Southey's Fiend. But the mysterious "Junius" is more helpful: "I loved my country, and I hated him" (lxxxiii). Satan is just suggesting that other witnesses should be called—including Washington, whom Southey had represented as one of "The Absolvers"—when there occurs a sudden interruption which leads to the comic climax of the poem.

The devil Asmodeus bears in the poet Southey, whom he has arrested in the act of framing

a libel—
No less on History—than the Holy Bible (lxxxvi).

Satan proposes, "since he's here, let's see what he has done".

"Done!" cried Asmodeus, "he anticipates
The very business you are now upon,
And scribbles as if head clerk to the Fates" (lxxxix).

A move by Southey to read aloud what he has been so presumptuously scribbling is halted by a general protest. Even the royal dotard comes to his senses sufficiently to utter his only speech in the poem. Mistaking Southey for the previous Laureate, the much-ridiculed H. J. Pye, he exclaims, with the repetitiousness that was habitual with him in life,

What! what!
Pye come again? No more—no more of that! (xcii)

Michael again restores order,

And now the Bard could plead his own bad cause,
With all the attitudes of self-applause.

He said—(I only give the heads)—he said,

He meant no harm in scribbling ; 'twas his way
Upon all topics ; 'twas, besides, his bread,

Of which he buttered both sides ; 'twould delay
Too long the assembly (he was pleased to dread),

And take up rather more time than a day,
To name his works—he would but cite a few—

“ Wat Tyler ”—“ Rhymes on Blenheim ”—“ Waterloo ” (xcv-xcvi).

Since contradictory attitudes towards politics and war inspire these three works, Southey's defence naturally shifts to his many changes of opinion. He then tries to solicit an order for a new biography to be written by himself—the subject being apparently a matter of indifference—and finally he renews his attempt to read aloud *A Vision of Judgement*. His long speech demands quotation in full, for short extracts cannot possibly do justice to a writer as profuse and uninhibited as Byron.

He had written praises of a Regicide ;

He had written praises of all kings whatever ;

He had written for republics far and wide,

And then against them bitterer than ever ;

For pantisocracy he once had cried

Aloud, a scheme less moral than 'twas clever ;

Then grew a hearty anti-jacobin—

Had turned his coat—and would have turned his skin.

He had sung against all battles, and again

In their high praise and glory ; he had called

Reviewing “ the ungentle craft,” and then

Became as base a critic as e'er crawled—

Fed, paid, and pampered by the very men

By whom his muse and morals had been mauled :

He had written much blank verse, and blanker prose,

And more of both than any body knows.

He had written Wesley's life:—here turning round

To Satan, “ Sir, I'm ready to write yours,

In two octavo volumes, nicely bound,

With notes and preface, all that most allures

The pious purchaser ; and there's no ground

For fear, for I can choose my own reviewers :

So let me have the proper documents,

That I may add you to my other saints.”

Satan bowed, and was silent. " Well, if you,
 With amiable modesty, decline
 My offer, what says Michael? There are few
 Whose memoirs could be rendered more divine.
 Mine is a pen of all work; not so new
 As it was once, but I would make you shine
 Like your own trumpet. By the way, my own
 Has more of brass in it, and is as well blown.

" But talking about trumpets, here's my ' Vision !'
 Now you shall judge, all people—yes—you shall
 Judge with my judgment ! and by my decision
 Be guided who shall enter heaven or fall.
 I settle all these things by intuition,
 Times present, past, to come—Heaven—Hell—and all,
 Like King Alfonso. When I thus see double,
 I save the Deity some worlds of trouble " (xcvii-ci).

This pert and presumptuous turncoat has, of course, only a limited resemblance to Robert Southey. But, from what he supposed to be the truth about his opponent, Byron has created in his poem a conceited literary timeserver who interests us both for his own sake and because he exemplifies a recurrent pattern of political behaviour.

Southey's public reading does not get very far. Angels, devils, and ghosts take flight in consternation. Saint Peter, living up to his reputation for impetuosity, fells the poet with his keys. The confusion enables Byron to bring his poem to a hilariously satisfying close. He must have wondered what he was to do with the king at the end of it. To send him to hell would be pettily vindictive; to send him to heaven would be to endorse Southey's verdict; to send him to either would also look like " telling the Lord what he is to do." Byron's solution was to allow the feeble-minded old man to slip unnoticed into heaven,

And when the tumult dwindled to a calm,
 I left him practising the hundredth psalm (cvi).

In this way, good humour is maintained, and even charity, without any compromising of what would have been the just verdict on as bad a king as ever " left a realm undone " (viii).

Some readers prefer *The Vision of Judgment* even to *Don Juan* itself. They admire the compactness and economy which

result from Byron's concentration in it upon a clearly conceived purpose, and they note that even the one important digression from its plot is strictly relevant to its theme. Rendering the subject in more familiar and prosaic terms than those employed by Southey, Byron gives us varied and vital characters engaged in a lively action which develops unpredictably, even to the final stanza. His dialogue is excellent. If Satan's speech for the damnation of George III is the serious political centre of the poem, and Southey's personal appearance its comic climax, the work as a whole is remarkable for its controlled alternations of gravity and jest, of sardonic satire and nonsensical play. Our constant awareness of the humorous, relaxed narrator does much to prevent such variety from degenerating into mere miscellaneity. But the alternations of mood remain important. The highly dramatic patterning of light and shade, of cheerfulness and destructiveness, justifies Byron's own description of his poem as "in my finest, ferocious, Caravaggio style".¹

¹ *Correspondence*, 12 October 1821.