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ROBERT MORRISON

Blackwood's Byron:

The Lakers, the Cockneys, and the 'throne of poetical supremacy'

Abstract:

Blackwood's in its earliest numbers was a staunch admirer of Lord Byron. But when he published *Beppo*, it damned him in a June 1818 review as a hypocrite and a reveller, and thereafter the magazine lurches between celebrating him for his genius and castigating him for his perversion of it. Byron objected to the uneven treatment he received at the hands of the *Blackwood's* critics, but in 'Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*' he echoes their views on several contemporary poets, and seems to reconcile himself to the exuberant unpredictability of the magazine.

Keywords: *Blackwood's Magazine*, Wilson, Lockhart, Byron, Lake School, Cockney School

As a key reviewer with both the *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine* and its successor, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, John Wilson wrote repeatedly of Lord Byron, drawn to him as a fellow Scot and an immensely successful poet whose work he revealingly contrasted with the 'Lake School' poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, and whose fascination with sublimity, rebelliousness, and the Gothic matched his own. J. G. Lockhart, Wilson's colleague on both versions of the magazine, also admired Byron, but unlike Wilson he had substantial reservations, especially concerning Byron's impiety and his

friendship with the King of the Cockneys, Leigh Hunt. The result is a keen critical opposition between *Blackwood's* two chief reviewers that produced a series of strikingly different assessments of Byron, who in October 1819 complained that *Blackwood's* commentators had been 'hyperbolic in their praise – and diabolical in their abuse'.¹ Byron took a more moderate stance in one of his longest prose works, 'Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*', where he finds himself in agreement with the magazine's critical pronouncements on poets such as Wordsworth and John Keats, and where in the end he responds generously to the critical volatility that has so often defined *Blackwood's*.

[Fig. 10 J. G. Lockhart's sketch of John Wilson. In the 'Chaldee Manuscript' of October 1817, Wilson is described as 'after the likeness of the beautiful leopard, from the valley of the palm trees, whose going forth was comely as the grey-hound, and his eyes like the lightning of fiery flame'. Reproduced from Mary Gordon, *Christopher North: A Memoir of John Wilson* (New York, 1863).]

Wilson saw Byron in many ways as a kindred spirit. The two were born just three years apart and both were raised in Scotland, Wilson in Paisley and Byron in Aberdeen. Both then went on to become undergraduates in England, Byron at Cambridge and Wilson at Oxford, though the latter's career was far more distinguished. In 1806 he won the first Newdigate Prize for a poem in which he championed his deep interest in Greek and Roman culture, while a year later he passed his BA examinations with such distinction that his committee was moved to 'the public expression of our approbation and thanks'.² It was at Oxford, too, that

Wilson ‘became in politics a Radical so flaming, that it is said he would not allow a servant to black his shoes’, an affiliation that unexpectedly links him to the Cockneys and reformers he later damned with such bellicosity in *Blackwood’s*.³ Further, Wilson’s university years – like Byron’s – consolidated his enduring admiration of Napoleon Bonaparte, ‘not merely in an intellectual point of view, but even with reference to his pretensions...to moral elevation and magnanimity’. Thomas Carlyle recognized the insurgent in Wilson. ‘His very *Toryism*...considerably dissatisfied me’, he declared, for ‘I perceived that, like myself, he was among the *born Radicals* of his generation’.⁴

Wilson’s career as a writer developed alongside Byron’s. In 1812, he published *The Isle of Palms and Other Poems*, which was praised in the *Edinburgh Review* by Francis Jeffrey, who for the same February 1812 issue also produced his celebrated assessment of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Four years later, Wilson published *The City of the Plague*, which again impressed Jeffrey, and which Byron himself thought ‘full of the best “*matériel*” for tragedy that has been seen since Horace Walpole’, whom he considered ‘worthy of a higher place than any living writer’.⁵ That same year, James Hogg published his *Poetic Mirror*, a volume in which he parodies the work of a number of leading contemporary poets, including the medievalism of Byron in ‘The Guerilla’ and the sentimentality of Wilson in ‘Hymn to the Moon’ and ‘The Stranded Ship’. In 1817, Wilson went to work for *Blackwood’s*, and played a central role in establishing it as a specialist in the publication of original terror fiction with tales such as ‘Remarkable Preservation from Death at Sea’ (December 1817), ‘Hospital Scene in Portugal’ (April 1818), and ‘Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary’ (August 1818), the most disturbing of all the early tales. Unsurprisingly, then, when Byron decided to publish his own tale of terror, ‘Augustus Darvell’, which he produced as his

contribution to the famous 1816 ghost story competition, *Blackwood's* seemed to him the best option. 'If you choose to publish it in the Edinburgh Magazine (*Wilson's & Blackwoods*) you may', he instructed his London publisher John Murray, '– stating why, & with such explanatory proem as you please'. Much to Byron's irritation, though, Murray disregarded his preference for Wilson and *Blackwood's* and instead tacked 'Augustus Darvell' to the end of *Mazeppa* (1819) 'without a word of explanation and be damned to you' (*BLJ*, vi. 126; vii. 58; Byron's italics).

Wilson referred to Byron in more than a dozen early *Blackwood's* essays ostensibly concerned with other subjects, while during his first year with the magazine he wrote three reviews devoted exclusively to Byron's poetry. His assessment of *Manfred*, published in the *Edinburgh Monthly* in June 1817, criticized Byron sharply for his 'many violations of the plainest rules of blank verse', and for the character of the chamois hunter, 'a heavy, stupid, elderly man, without any conversational talents'. But Byron's strengths easily outweighed these faults. *Manfred*, asserted Wilson, 'unquestionably exhibits many noble delineations of mountain scenery, – many impressive and terrible pictures of passion, – and many wild and awful visions of imaginary horror' (*EMM*, 1 (1817), 295, 293, 290). For Byron, the review 'had all the air of being a poet's, & was a very good one' (*BLJ*, v. 269). The following year, Walter Scott generously reviewed the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* in the *Quarterly*, while – remarkably – Wilson reviewed it in both *Blackwood's* (May 1818) and the *Edinburgh Review* (June 1818), a further indication of the malleability of his political opinions. Declared Wilson in his *Blackwood's* review: 'Having in himself deep sense of beauty – deeper passions than probably any other great poet ever had – and aspiring conceptions of power, the poetry in which he expresses himself must be full of vivid portraiture of beauty, deep spirit of passion,

and daring suggestions of power' (*BEM*, 3 (1818), 216). Murray was anxious to know Byron's reaction to his two critics. 'Scott's is the review of one poet on another – his friend', replied Byron; 'and Wilson's the review of a poet, too, on another – his *idol*; for he likes me better than he chooses to avow to the public, with all his eulogy'. Wilson's enthusiasm, though, did not blind Byron to his merits as a critic: 'I like & admire Wilson', he wrote to Murray in 1819 (*BLJ*, vi. 84, 257; Byron's italics).

The feeling was mutual. Byron was, for Wilson, the greatest living poet – 'elected by acclamation to the throne of poetical supremacy', as he puts it in his review of *Manfred* (*EMM*, 1 (1817), 289). He has rivals, of course, but he bests them, in Wilson's view, not because he is different from them, but because he exploits shared material to far greater effect. Egoism, for example, is a central feature in the work of both Coleridge and Byron, but in the former it is risible whereas in the latter it is sublime. Writing with memorable truculence, Wilson rounds on his Coleridge in his October 1817 review of *Biographia Literaria*, declaring that 'he seems to consider the mighty universe itself as nothing better than a mirror, in which, with a grinning and idiot self-complacency, he may contemplate the Physiognomy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge'. Byron, too, Wilson acknowledges, 'speaks of himself often', but it is with an intense otherworldliness that Coleridge cannot reach, and that takes his readers both beyond and within themselves. 'His is like the voice of an angel heard crying in the storm or the whirlwind', Wilson asserts; 'and we listen with a kind of mysterious dread to the tones of a Being whom we scarcely believe to be kindred to ourselves, while he sounds the depths of our nature, and illuminates them with the lightnings of his genius' (*BEM*, 2 (1817), 5, 7).

Wordsworth, another poetic rival, similarly shares with Byron a preoccupation with ‘external nature’, as seen especially in the third canto of *Childe Harold*, where Byron puts himself ‘into competition with Wordsworth upon his own ground, and with his own weapons’. The outcome, Wilson argues, is decisively in Byron’s favour. ‘His description of the stormy night among the Alps – of the blending – the mingling – the fusion of his own soul, with the raging elements around him, – is alone worth all the dull metaphysics of the *Excursion*’, for in the third canto Byron illustrates how ‘he might enlarge the limits of human consciousness regarding the operations of matter upon mind’ (*EMM*, 1 (1817), 289).

Intriguingly, though, when Wilson reviews the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, he revises his opinion and contends for a much closer relationship between the two poets. ‘Byron seems to have roamed through the Alps with the spirit of Wordsworth often at his side’, he asserts; ‘ – and his soul was elevated by the communion’ (*BEM*, 3 (1818), 218).

Wilson also aligned Byron with a number of other contemporary poets, but perhaps nowhere as suggestively as in his November 1817 assessment of ‘The Late John Finlay’, the Glaswegian poet who is best known for his *Scottish Historical and Romantic Ballads* (1808), and who died in 1810 within days of his twenty-eighth birthday. Wilson, who had studied with Finlay at the University of Glasgow, uses the essay to consider the vagaries of literary reputation, and the state of Scottish poetry over the past century. ‘Distinguished as Scotland now is for poetical genius’, he observes, ‘we know not, if before the days of Campbell, Scott, Byron and Baillie, she had much to boast of in her modern Poets’ (*BEM*, 2 (1817), 187). In grouping Byron with Thomas Campbell, Walter Scott, and Joanna Baillie, Wilson is perhaps the very first critic to locate the English bard within a distinctly Scottish, rather than an English, literary tradition, and he does so one hundred and twenty years before T. S. Eliot

made his case for ‘considering Byron as a Scottish poet’.⁶ The identification, of course, deepens Wilson’s connection to Byron, for they are not just fellow poets, but fellow *Scottish* poets. More revealingly, by taking the most famous poet of the day and inserting him within a Scottish poetic tradition, Wilson exploits one of *Blackwood’s* central commitments, which is the celebration of Scotland’s cultural and intellectual achievements within a broader political narrative that is vigorously pro-Unionist, and that sees the Scottish nation at the heart of the Anglo-British empire.⁷

[Fig. 11 J. G. Lockhart’s sketch of himself. In the ‘Chaldee Manuscript’ of October 1817, Lockhart is described as ‘the scorpion, which delighteth to sting the faces of men’. Reproduced from Mary Gordon, *Christopher North’: A Memoir of John Wilson* (New York, 1863).

Lockhart took a decidedly different approach to Byron, though his opinion of him as a poet was as high as Wilson’s. Byron, he declared in his first assault on the ‘Cockney School of Poetry’, is ‘one of the first geniuses whom the world ever produced’, while a month later in the second attack he describes him as ‘the first of all living poets’. In both articles, moreover, Lockhart flails Leigh Hunt, ‘the ideal of a Cockney Poet’, by contrasting him with Byron, ‘one of the most nobly-born of English Patricians’. ‘All the great poets of our country have been men of some rank in society, and there is no vulgarity in any of their writings’, Lockhart declares, bristling with the snobbery that so often defined *Blackwood’s*, and with Byron clearly in mind; ‘but Mr Hunt cannot utter a dedication, or even a note, without betraying the *Shibboleth* of low birth and low habits’ (*BEM*, 2 (1817), 41, 195, 39; Lockhart’s italics).

Yet as Lockhart also realized, Byron and Hunt had a good deal in common. Political solidarity led Byron to visit Hunt several times during his two-year imprisonment for libelling the Prince Regent, and when Hunt began to write his finest poem, *The Story of Rimini*, Byron helped him by bringing books to his prison cell, carefully reviewing different sections of the poem as Hunt completed them, and successfully recommending *Rimini* to his own publisher, Murray, all of which led Hunt to dedicate *Rimini* to ‘my dear Byron’, and publicly to stand by him when his marriage collapsed and he was hooted out of England: ‘And so adieu, dear Byron, – dear to me / For many a cause, disinterestedly’.⁸ Lockhart was horrified at the familiarity with which Hunt addressed Byron, and it caused Byron himself some disquiet. But Hunt’s various tributes acknowledge how much they shared, as friends and as fellow poets. In the first ‘Cockney School’ onslaught, Lockhart damned Hunt for impiety (‘his religion is a poor tame dilution of the blasphemies of the *Encyclopaedie*’) and for disloyalty (‘his patriotism [is] a crude, vague, ineffectual, and sour Jacobinism’) (*BEM*, 2 (1817), 39). How, though, to explain similar convictions in his lordship? Leaving aside the widely-publicized immoralities of his private life, how to explain the irreligion of *Manfred*, the admiration of Napoleon, the support of the Luddites, the denunciation of George III and the Prince Regent, the close association with the Whigs of Holland House, and so on.

Goaded though Lockhart undoubtedly was, for the moment he said little, except on one pressing similarity that it was simply not possible for him to ignore: incest. He had lashed Hunt for writing of it in *Rimini*, yet Byron had taken the same subject in *Parisina*, and both poets were indebted in different ways to Dante’s tale of Paolo and Francesca. But, Lockhart writes reassuringly, he welcomes the comparison, for it is the ‘very circumstance of likeness which brings before us, in the strongest colours, the difference’. Byron in his poem is

dignified. Not only has he ‘avoided all the details of this unhallowed love’, but he has ‘also contrived to mingle in the very incest which he condemns the idea of retribution’. Indeed, Lockhart knows of ‘no great poem, turning on such a subject, which does not contain within it some marks of the contrition of the author’. When, however, Hunt discusses incest, he is cheerily inappropriate, a tasteless fop beside a solemn nobleman. He divests the topic of its ‘hereditary horror’, and makes the theme of ‘unholy love the vehicle of trim and light-hearted descriptions’. *Rimini* is a ‘genteel comedy of incest’, and reading it is like listening ‘to a merry tune played immediately before an execution’. No gentleman could possibly approve of it, while ‘we never yet saw a lady lift it up, who did not immediately throw it down again in disgust’, Lockhart sneers. ‘What a contrast is the opening of *Parisina*! What a breathing of melancholy! What a foretaste of pity!’ (*BEM*, 2 (1817), 196, 194, 197, 201).

After positive coverage in both the *Edinburgh Monthly* and the opening issues of *Blackwood’s*, however, the magazine’s response to Byron shifted decisively, as Wilson and Lockhart parted company in their critical assessments. Wilson reviewed the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* in May 1818, and expressed misgivings about the ‘sameness’ in Byron’s writings, and about his inability to see beyond himself. ‘He has celebrated no mighty exploit, or event, or revolution in the destinies of mankind’, Wilson states, and as a consequence has not yet ‘created a great Poem’. Nevertheless, among contemporary poets and audiences, he remains without rival. ‘It would be worse than idle to endeavour to shadow out the lineaments of that Mind, which, exhibiting itself in dark and perturbed grandeur, has established a stronger and wider sway over the passions of men, than any other poetical Intellect of modern times’. What is more, in Wilson’s judgement, Byron continues to reach new creative heights.

The fourth is ‘perhaps the finest canto of Childe Harold, the finest, beyond all comparison, of Byron’s poems’ (*BEM*, 3 (1818), 217, 216, 219).

The following month, though, and in a manoeuvre that typified the magazine’s early reaction to a number of contemporary writers, *Blackwood’s* reversed its field, and having lauded Byron for a year, it damned him in a review of *Beppo* that was signed ‘Presbyter Anglicanus’, and that was probably – but not certainly – by Lockhart. The reviewer begins, however, by taking aim, not at Byron’s poem but at his *Blackwood’s* critics, who have ‘on all occasions, expressed themselves concerning the poetry of Lord Byron’ with a ‘pardonable enthusiasm’ in favour of his ‘genius’. It has to stop, the reviewer argues. For the past five years, Byron has been ‘an immoral and an unchristian’ poet, but at least he has been a ‘serious’ one. And now, in *Beppo*, even that is gone. He again takes wickedness as his topic, though this time he writes of it, not with melancholy, but with an ‘ease, grace, and vivacity’ that renders the ‘baseness of his principles...not indeed more open, but, I doubt not, infinitely more dangerous, than before’. At the same time *Beppo*, too, makes it plain that Byron wrote disingenuously of the gloomy remorse of Childe Harold or Manfred. His light-hearted virtuosity in *Beppo* parts him ‘irretrievably with the majesty of their despair’, and reveals that at the crux of both Byron and his poetry is the same ‘scoffing and sardonic merriment’. ‘In an evil hour’, the reviewer concludes, ‘did you step from your vantage-ground, and teach us that Harold, Byron, and the Count of Beppo are the same’ (*BEM*, 3 (1818), 323, 329).

Blackwood’s reviewed Byron in back-to-back issues the following summer as well, and again it reached very different conclusions regarding his worth as a poet and as a man. In addition, Wilson and Lockhart seem once more to have led the opposing charges, for much of the magazine’s explosiveness in the early years derives from its policy of *debating* – rather

than simply reviewing – authors. ‘I wish my friends to follow the bent of their genius,’ declared William Blackwood looking back over the first three years of his editorship, ‘ – and the miscellaneous character of our work admits of every description’.⁹ Undeterred, then, and probably provoked by the punishment meted out to *Beppo* in June 1818, it was almost certainly Wilson who responded with a glowing assessment of *Mazeppa* in *Blackwood’s* for July 1819. *Blackwood’s* itself, so interested in popular appeal, remained fascinated by Byron’s unprecedented celebrity (and sales). ‘In truth the public admiration for this remarkable man has been carried to such an extreme, that to suspect the possibility of a failure in any thing he attempts, is a thing altogether out of the question’. *Mazeppa* was no exception. Its ‘strange and wild incidents’ were ‘in every way worthy of its author’, and the poem as a whole highlighted by the episode in which the eponymous hero, after being caught in an assignation with a married woman, is tied naked to a wild horse on the orders of her enraged husband. ‘It strikes us there is a much closer resemblance to the fiery flow of Walter Scott’s chivalrous narrative, than in any of Lord Byron’s former pieces’, the reviewer observes. ‘Nothing can be grander than the sweep and torrent of the horse’s speed, and the slow unwearied inflexible pursuit of the wolves’ (*BEM*, 5 (1819) 429-30).

The *Mazeppa* review had not yet made it to press, however, when the *Blackwood’s* offices were in receipt of Byron’s newest poem. There was not time for a second review in the same issue, but there was immediate dismay. *Don Juan*, it declared in a brief statement inserted after the close of the last article in the issue, is the ‘most flagitious Poem’, and it is ‘truly pitiable to think that one of the greatest Poets of the age’ should have written it (*BEM*, 5 (1819) 483). No respectable bookseller could possibly have published it, and Blackwood promptly sought to get rid of the twenty-five copies that Murray had sent to him to sell in his

bookshop. But he kept the review copy that he had received two days earlier, for he believed his magazine was obliged to examine *Don Juan* in its self-appointed role as a custodian of conservative values with burgeoning concerns about Byron and public morality.¹⁰ ‘A Work so atrocious must not be suffered to pass into oblivion without the infliction of that punishment on its guilty author due to such a wanton outrage on all most dear to human nature’, it asserted ominously (*BEM*, 5 (1819) 483). Lockhart, the son of a Presbyterian minister, then took off his gloves and went to work.

The result, in the August 1819 issue, is one of the most scathing reviews Byron received during his lifetime, and a harbinger of the storm of outraged disapproval that greeted *Don Juan* over the next several years. In the highly self-conscious and self-referential forum of *Blackwood’s*, reviewers frequently began their assessment of a new poem by surveying the magazine’s responses to previous works by the same poet, and it is clear that part of Lockhart’s indignation in his review of *Don Juan* stems from the fact that he had praised Byron in earlier Blackwoodian commentaries, only now to learn that the poet has been playing him – indeed, playing everyone – for a fool. ‘We look back’, Lockhart snarled, ‘with a mixture of wrath and scorn to the delight with which we suffered ourselves to be filled by one who, all the while he was furnishing us with delight, must, we cannot doubt it, have been mocking us with a cruel mockery’ (*BEM*, 5 (1819) 514). *Beppo* had signalled that the sublimity of *Manfred* and the ‘Oriental tales’ was spurious. *Don Juan* put the matter beyond dispute.

The brilliance of the poem only magnified the moral turpitude of the poet. ‘That Lord Byron has never written any thing more decisively and triumphantly expressive of the greatness of his genius, will be allowed by all who have read this poem’, Lockhart candidly

concedes, before going on to single out some of its ‘manifold beauties’. Donna Julia’s rant at her husband in canto one is given ‘in a style of volubility in which, it must be granted, there is abundance of the true *vis comica*’. The detection of Juan in her bed shortly after she finishes berating her husband ‘gives much additional absurdity to the amazing confidence of the lady’. Her affair with Juan disclosed, and from her virtual imprisonment in a convent, Julia bids him farewell in ‘a beautiful letter’ which Lockhart quotes at length. The account of the shipwreck in canto two ‘is as much superior as can be to every description of the kind – not even excepting that in the Aeneid – that ever was created’, Lockhart asserts. ‘In comparison with the fearful and intense reality of its horrors, every thing that any former poet had thrown together to depict the agonies of that awful scene, appears chill and tame’ (*BEM*, 5 (1819) 512, 515-18).

The problem is that Byron cannot seem to discuss these topics – or any topic – without weaving in cynicism and despair. Having previously been at pains to distinguish Byron from Hunt, Lockhart now finds that they have far too much in common. In *Rimini*, the King of the Cockneys had confirmed that the ‘two great elements of all dignified poetry, religious feeling, and patriotic feeling, have no place in his writings’ (*BEM*, 2 (1817) 39). His lordship does the same in *Don Juan*, where ‘patriotism’ and ‘religion’ are ‘mentioned only to be scoffed at and derided’. Byron, though, does not stop there. In his tale of Juan and Haidee, he assembles all the materials necessary ‘to render it a true romance’, and he might easily have kept the episode ‘free from any stain of pollution’. But no. Here, as elsewhere, he only creates beauty to give himself the pleasure of defacing it. For Lockhart, ‘this is really the very suicide of genius’. Byron is a terrible combination of ‘power and profligacy’, and while in earlier poems he had managed to strike some kind of balance between the two, in *Don Juan* he deliberately

tips the scales and slides downward into infamy. Less than two years earlier, Lockhart had regarded him as the finest poet of the day. Now, ‘the consciousness of the insulting deceit which has been practised upon us, mingles with the nobler pain arising from the contemplation of perverted and degraded genius – to make us wish that no such being as Byron ever had existed’ (*BEM*, 5 (1819), 513, 517, 512, 514-15).

Byron had been in this position before. In 1808, Henry Brougham mauled his *Hours of Idleness* in the *Edinburgh Review*. On that occasion, Byron hit back in his poetic satire, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). Trowned now by another high-profile ‘Scotch reviewer’, Byron chose again to respond, though this time in trenchant prose. As was the case to a lesser extent in *English Bards*, moreover, Byron’s strategy in ‘Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*’ is often self-defeating, for he deprecates a number of contemporary poets in a way that paradoxically allies him with the Edinburgh journal that he is ostensibly bent on condemning. For example, *Blackwood’s* in its inaugural issue declares that the ‘most miserable arrogance seems, in the present age, confined almost exclusively to the original members of the Lake School’ (*BEM*, 2 (1817) 6), and Byron follows suit in ‘Some Observations’ when he castigates the ‘notorious triumvirate known by the name of the “Lake Poets”’.¹¹ Similarly, Byron borrows directly from the *Blackwood’s* assault on the Cockneys when in ‘Some Observations’ he describes Keats as a member of ‘the new School’ and ‘a young disciple of Mr Leigh Hunt’, one of several Keats associates who ‘surely...must feel no little remorse in having so perverted the taste and feelings of this young man’ (*CMP*, 115-16).

Byron began ‘Some Observations’ in high dudgeon, but as he wrote on his debts to *Blackwood’s* seem to have become much more evident to him, as did the irony of attacking

the magazine when he shared so many of its critical opinions. By the time he turned to his closing thoughts on the *Blackwood's* review of *Don Juan* he had, in Andrew Nicholson's words, 'written himself back into a good humour'.¹² Byron's equanimity, indeed, is especially noteworthy given that, to him, the review was both an attack and a betrayal, for he mistakenly believed that Wilson – not Lockhart – had written it, and that his staunchest advocate on *Blackwood's* had now become his fiercest critic. In response, Byron wisely determined not to take the Blackwoodian bait, and avoided engaging himself in a futile and possibly even dangerous war of words. But perhaps, too, he decided to rise above the fray because he understood that volatility and animus were part of *Blackwood's* stock in trade, and that solid critical merit lay beneath them, or would at least soon resurface. As 'a man of great powers and acquirements', Wilson has let himself down in his review of *Don Juan*, Byron implies, and has not 'in this instance treated me with candour or consideration'. But, he adds, 'I trust that the tone I have used in speaking of him personally – will prove that I bear him as little malice as I really believe at the *bottom* of his *heart*, he bears towards me' (*CMP*, 118-19; Byron's italics).

'Some Observations' was not published in Byron's lifetime and, even had Wilson and Lockhart seen it, it is unlikely they would have responded to Byron in kind. Both began writing for *Blackwood* as keen supporters of the poet. Wilson had a good deal in common with Byron, and found a great deal to praise, from Byron's Scottishness to his love of the Gothic and the sublime. Lockhart, too, had an initially favourable view, and promoted him most tellingly as foil to Hunt, but Byron's transgressions in *Beppo* and, more seriously, *Don Juan* turned Lockhart into a disappointed and vehement detractor. When Byron went to censure *Blackwood's*, though, it was soon clear to him how difficult it was to critique the

contemporary literary scene without following in the magazine's footsteps. Despite a demanding house style, a hands-on editor, a series of deep political and cultural allegiances, and a sometimes astonishing eagerness to incite disapproval among friends and enemies alike, *Blackwood's* reviewers remained remarkably independent and unconciliatory. The magazine's commitment to provocation, debate, and intellectual freedom produced infamous critical excesses, but these same qualities also meant that its exploration of Byron was bolder and more comprehensive than any of its rivals, as perhaps Byron himself acknowledges in the magnanimity of his conclusion to 'Some Observations'.

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NOTES

¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. L. A. Marchand (13 vols, London, 1973-1994), vi. 257.

Hereafter cited as *BLJ*.

² Elsie Swann, *Christopher North <John Wilson>* (Edinburgh, 1934), 28.

³ George Gilfillan, 'Professor Wilson' in *Third Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh, 1854), 434.

⁴ Thomas De Quincey, 'Sketch of Professor Wilson' in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey, Volume Seven*, ed. Robert Morrison (London, 2000), 24; Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. Kenneth Fielding and Ian Campbell (Oxford, 2000), 414 (Carlyle's italics).

⁵ *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (7 vols, Oxford, 1980-93), iv. 305 (Byron's italics).

⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Byron' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), 194.

⁷ Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, 2007), 16-18.

⁸ *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt: Poetical Works, 1801-21*, ed. John Strachan (London, 2003), 165, 132.

⁹ Irene Elizabeth Mannion, *Criticism 'Con Amore': A Study of Blackwood's Magazine 1817-1834* (unpub Ph.D., University of California at Los Angeles, 1984), 98-9.

¹⁰ *Blackwood's Magazine: Selected Criticism, 1817-19*, ed. Tom Mole (London, 2006), 311-13.

¹¹ *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford, 1991), 99. Hereafter cited as *CMP*.

¹² Andrew Nicholson, 'Byron's Prose' in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge, 2004), 204.