

## An Old Romantic? Thomas Love Peacock, Comedy and Nostalgia.

Thomas Love Peacock faces a curious rhetorical dilemma in his 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley,' published in *Fraser's Magazine* between 1858 and 1862. Peacock's love of comedy, and his commitment to dialogue and optimism, disallows him from writing in an overtly nostalgic way about his time with Shelley, which results in a comic portrayal that has been read as cold. But this is a mistake: Peacock's 'Memoirs' should be read as an effort to resist being what he calls '*laudator temporis acti*' (a praiser of times past), an effort not to let developments in the late nineteenth century defeat his love of comedy.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, however, he is defeated, by the prudish reaction of the Shelley estate to his affectionate portrayal of Harriet Shelley. This defeat is marked by the genuine nostalgia of the final installment of Peacock's 'Memoirs of Shelley,' and his essay 'The Last Day of Windsor Forest' (c.1862).

Thomas Love Peacock makes a compelling, if contradictory last man, as Edmund Gosse noted in 1875:

Many of the characteristics of a 'last man' clung about Mr. Peacock. He was suspicious, resentful, and dolorous in his aspect towards the world in general, hopeless for the future, regretful of the past, using satire as a punishment, not as correction, and saved only by his affectionate and generous inner nature from the moroseness of disappointment and despair.<sup>2</sup>

However, Gosse gets Peacock wrong in the first part of this passage. Nicholas Joukovsky has noted that, even at the end of his life, Peacock's 'negative stance was fundamentally an ironic pose.' Joukovsky quotes Robert Buchanan's view that 'to understand [Peacock's pessimism]

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Part II' in *Lives of the Great Romantics I: Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth* (3 vols, London, 1996), i, 356.

<sup>2</sup> E. W. Gosse, from 'Thomas Love Peacock' quoted in *Peacock: The Satirical Novels*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London, 1976), 89.

rightly we must remember it was purely *satiric* – that, in truth, Peacock abused human nature because he loved it.<sup>3</sup> Yet even Marilyn Butler, an extremely sympathetic reader of Peacock, found that after the death of his favourite daughter, Peacock ‘became virtually a recluse [...] a more miserable, and, perhaps, more embittered one – than the indulged old man of biographical mythmaking.’<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Gosse's idea that Peacock's tendency to ‘moroseness’ is redeemed by affection and generosity, as embodied in his enthusiasm for comedy, is one I will develop.

I want to show how in his ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley’ (1858-1862), Peacock makes several attempts to undercut his status of solitary survivor via the use of comedy. Peacock is a passionate believer in dialogue, and does not want the kind of distinction that being last implies. Butler's reference to Peacock as ‘this least egotistical of writers’ (271) is crucial to understanding his approach to nostalgia. The idea of being the sole survivor of the discursive group is anathema to him because it is anti-dialogic; a symbol of the end of discussion. Peacock's novels generally end with a party in full swing, not with the death and dispersal of the disputatious guests, the host abandoned to post-social isolation. Peacock's commitment to a classically-inflected ‘clash of mind on mind,’ and his aversion to scenarios that bring this to an end, is reflected in a letter to Lord Broughton of 1861:

The dialogues of Plato and Cicero are made up of discussions among persons who differed in opinion. Neither they nor their heroes would have been content to pass eternity in the company of persons who merely thought as they did. They were enquirers. They did not profess to have found truth.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas A. Joukovsky, ‘Peacock, Thomas Love (1785–1866)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/21681>> [accessed 22 May 2011]

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in His Context* (London, 1979), 10.

<sup>5</sup> *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by Nicholas Joukovsky, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2001), ii, 419.

Broughton was, of course, previously John Cam Hobhouse, another survivor of Romantic sociability. Buchanan, remarking on the friendship between Broughton and Peacock, noted their status as survivors and described them as follows:

Two antediluvian mammoths left stranded, and yet living after the Deluge – that Deluge being typified to them by the submersion of Whig and Tory into one wild wave of Progress, and the long career of Lord Brougham as a sort of political Noah. The old landmarks of society were obliterated. Lord Byron was a dim memory, and the stage-coach was a dream [...] Beards were worn. Rotten boroughs were no more.<sup>6</sup>

The ambivalence about progress that Buchanan claims for Peacock is explored by Peacock himself in his 1836 essay ‘The Épicier,’ as well as his manuscript essay (probably written in 1862) ‘The Last Day of Windsor Forest,’ and I will discuss both of these. These are works that reflect on contemporary developments in society that Peacock does not endorse. ‘The Last Day of Windsor Forest,’ laments the enclosure acts. ‘The Épicier’ argues that the July Revolution in France has replaced old hierarchies with new hierarchies, in which the most petty, grasping, near-sighted, money-motivated ‘hucksters’ rise to the top. ‘The Épicier’ is a version, perhaps, of the argument, also put forward by Chartists after the Reform Act of 1832, that ‘all the moneyed interest wanted was to be placed on an equality with the landed interest.’<sup>7</sup> The result is not greater equality, but more business. Both ‘The Épicier’ and ‘Windsor Forest’ evince a palpable and anxious nostalgia which will contribute, in the end, to Peacock’s embrace of solitude in the final installment of his ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Buchanan, from ‘Thomas Love Peacock: A Personal Reminiscence’, quoted in *Peacock: The Satirical Novels*, 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), 239.

Shelley.’ But this admission, that he *is* the only remaining authority on the old, collaborative group, comes at the cost of the abandonment of comedy. This marks Peacock as defeated – both personally and in principle – by his changed times.

Another letter to Lord Broughton finds Peacock observing: ‘the abomination I entertain for gas and tobacco prevent my taking up my quarters [in London] even for a night. Science has greatly multiplied the old metropolitan horrors’ (*Letters*, ii, 437). Although Peacock was never an uncritical optimist, the recurrence of observations like this in his later letters and works marks a disillusion with the development of modern society that he had previously tried to keep at bay via self-protective jocularly. Remarks Peacock made in his 1836 essay ‘The *Épicier*’ – more than twenty years before his ‘Memoirs of Shelley’ – regarding the death of the French reformer Benjamin Constant, read, in the light of his letters and the end of his ‘Memoirs’ (almost the last thing he published), as prophetic of Peacock’s own declining years:

Benjamin Constant died sad and disenchanted, as every body knows [...] Benjamin Constant had died simultaneously with his last cherished illusion. He had dreamed of popular power – great, majestic, beneficent: he had seen it little, abject, ridiculous, selfish. The reality stared him in the face: he closed his eyes, and died. He who has lost his last illusion, who has used up his ideality, has nothing to do but die.<sup>8</sup>

The failure of comedy to triumph against the language and idea of solitary survival, marks in Peacock the loss of his ‘last illusion.’

‘The *Épicier*,’ is, ostensibly, a sequel to Peacock’s slightly earlier essay, ‘French

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, ‘The *Épicier*,’ in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (10 vols, London, 1924-1934), ix, 306.

Comic Romances' (1835), which looks at traditions of comic writing in France, and draws a comparison between the comic fictions of Pigault le Brun, and those of Paul de Kock, whom Peacock calls 'the legitimate successor' to le Brun.<sup>9</sup> The principal difference between the two writers, for Peacock, is as follows: 'Pigault le Brun began as a writer with the beginning of the French revolution: his successive works are impressed with the political changes of the day: they carry their era in their incidents' (*FCR*, 255). Meanwhile, 'In the writings of Paul de Kock, a theological opinion is here and there slightly indicated, but a political opinion never; the era of his narratives is marked by manners only, not by political events and opinions' (*FCR*, 256). The drive behind 'French Comic Romances' is to make clear Peacock's preference for Paul de Kock – as Butler puts it, Peacock thinks 'that the past has been a critical age, but that, he believes, is its glory' (225). Peacock distinguishes between old and new schools of comedy. He does make clear, however, that in his conception, and regardless of any legislative changes that go by the name of 'reform,' comedy – or at least the old school of comedy – has a crucial role in the world of moral reform; though the moral reforms that Peacock has in mind are also political. In 'French Comic Romances' Peacock declares 'that among the most illustrious authors of comic fiction are some of the most illustrious specimens of political honesty and heroic self-devotion,' adding that 'authors of the highest order of comic fiction' apply themselves to 'the exposure of abuses, to turning up into full daylight their intrinsic absurdities' (*FCR*, 261). Finally, he extols comedy with the assertion: 'an intense love of truth, and a clear apprehension of truth, are both essential to comic writing of the first class' (*FCR*, 262). Peacock would rather be associated with 'the highest order of comic fiction' and 'comic writing of the first class,' than with the comedy of 'the épiciier,' which he links to Paul de Kock and explores in the follow-up to 'French Comic

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, 'French Comic Romances,' in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (10 vols, London, 1924-1934), ix, 255.

Romances.’

‘The *Épicier*’ is an exercise in radical nostalgia. An era of ideals is celebrated in contrast to an era of calculation:

Pigault le Brun lived in the days of the Rights of Man, Political Justice, and Moral and Intellectual Perfectibility. Paul de Kock lives in the days of the march of mechanics, in the days of political economy, in the days of prices-current and percentages, in the days when even to dream like a democrat of the Constituent Assembly, would be held to qualify the dreamer for Bedlam; in short, in the days of the *épicier*. (*Épicier*, 295)

Peacock explains his usage of this term further: ‘*Épicier* means, as all the world doth know, grocer; but the Parisian is not exactly a counterpart of the London grocer; he is more like what, in an English country town, would be called, saving his presence, a huckster’ (*Épicier*, 296-97). For Peacock, this is not about snobbery, but a general decline in idealism. Butler speculated, regarding Peacock's attitude to Godwin, ‘Perhaps he never admired him much, even as the uncompromised anarchist of the period of *Political Justice*’ (122), but the passage on ‘the days of [...] Political Justice’ from ‘The *Épicier*’ argues against this. From Peacock's perspective, as he considers France in 1836, *Political Justice* (1793), Paine and perfectibility all belong to a less cynical era. Peacock, paraphrasing a French article from 1833, considers France under Louis Philippe to be without principle: ‘in the whole world of French political power – deputies, counsellors, ministers and king – there was but one spirit, the spirit of buying and selling [...] within the circle of the *épicier's* dealings and opinions were comprised all the aims, views, tendencies, and aspirations of the citizen-monarchy’ (*Épicier*, 307).

‘The *Épicier*’ is not just about France, nor solely about Peacock's conservative recoil from modernity. It is, specifically, about the universal obsession with profit that Peacock

identifies with France after 1830, and, as his novels make clear, with England after 1832. In ‘The Épicier,’ the objections to a new era in comic writing, and the corresponding objections to a new era in French politics, are not merely mulish responses to the new, but rather frustrated observations on the way progress – not in itself a bad thing – has panned out. In ‘French Comic Romances’ Peacock gives a curious expression to this idea when he says that ‘Louis Philippe and an assemblage of vapouring deputies’ gave ‘a false direction to the tail of the whirlwind’ (*FCR*, 287). The problem is not that France has had another revolution, but that it has had another revolution not to achieve its stated aims. It is another item to be added to what Peacock calls, in ‘French Comic Romances’: ‘the regular succession of disappointments which have been inflicted on the friends of liberty’ (*FCR*, 257). That progress should be interpreted in terms of trade and not social melioration is part of this disappointment. Peacock, as I hope to show in my discussion of his ‘Memoirs of Shelley,’ worries that nostalgic identification as a solitary survivor – as a manifestation of the spread of cynical self-interest – is the portion of the *épicier*, the huckster threatening to become the new everyman.

Like his overview of revolutions in France, Peacock's discussion of scientific progress in novels such as *Gryll Grange* (1860) is not for the sake of reprobating all developments of this kind. As Butler pointed out, ‘there is plenty of biographical evidence that Peacock felt no animus against science in general, or steam in particular [...] he took the leading part in the [East India] Company's early commitment to steamships. He personally superintended the building and trials of the steamships *Pluto* and *Proserpina*’ (242).<sup>10</sup> Peacock's problem lies, once again, not with innovation and manufacturing in themselves, but

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<sup>10</sup> For a more disturbing interpretation of Peacock's involvement with steamships, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (New York, 1990) 26: ‘[Peacock] was the designer of the first armored steamboats employed by the Royal navy. These were used on the Irrawaddy in the First Burmese War (1824-26) [...] and again on the Yangtze during the First Opium War (1840-42). Peacock, lover and satirist of the intellectual foibles of his age, was thus a pioneer of gunboat diplomacy [...] Peacock clearly takes pride in British hegemony in India and around the globe.’

with these things in the hands of ‘hucksters.’ In *Gryll Grange*, this view is expressed by the Reverend Doctor Opimian:

High-pressure steam boilers would not scatter death and destruction around them, if the dishonesty of avarice did not tempt their employment, where the more costly low pressure would ensure absolute safety. Honestly built houses would not come suddenly down and crush their occupants. Ships, faithfully built and efficiently manned, would not so readily strike on a lee shore, nor go instantly to pieces on the first touch of the ground. Honestly made sweetmeats would not poison children; honestly compounded drugs would not poison patients. In short, the larger portion of what we call accidents are crimes.<sup>11</sup>

It is rather surprising, after this tirade against the corner-cutting tendencies of capitalism, to find Opimian concluding: ‘On the whole, I agree in opinion with Theseus, that there is more good than evil in the world’ (135), and the sentiment repeated four chapters later: ‘there is much good in the world; more good than evil, I have always maintained’ (152). We can read this as Peacock relying on ‘his affectionate and generous inner nature’ to save him ‘from the moroseness of disappointment and despair’ (Gosse, 89).

*Gryll Grange* registers Peacock's efforts not to lose his ‘last illusion,’ or ‘use up his ideality.’ To do so would mean, first, to allow a legitimate radical nostalgia to turn conservative, and it would also mean, paradoxically, to become, via a newly lowered opinion of humanity, the very type of commercial man being deplored – the *épicier*. Even in 1860, Peacock resists too great an urge towards nostalgia, for fear that it will make him, not a

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Gryll Grange* ed. by Michael Slater, in *Headlong Hall and Gryll Grange* (Oxford, 1987), 134.



genuine and unique sole survivor of older times and forms of sociability, but a typical modern man, commodifying his personal past for a price.

In 1830 Peacock wrote, for *The Westminster Review*, a scathing review of the first volume of Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1830). The review was so unfavourable that Moore complained to the editor, John Bowring, ensuring that Peacock's review of Moore's next volume was declined. The review that was published includes pedantic deconstructions of Moore's figurative language, designed to show the obfuscatory tendency of Moore's natural, sentimental metaphors. For instance, Peacock takes Moore's figurative description of Byron's deism – ‘the canker showed itself in the morn and dew of youth’ – and carefully reveals it to be nonsense, in spite of what he calls Moore's sole aim ‘to say fine and palatable things’:

‘The canker showed itself in the morn and dew of youth.’ What is a canker in the morn, or a canker in the dew? He means, we presume, a canker on the rosebud while the morning dew is upon it. Does the canker-worm begin its operations by showing itself? Does it come with the morning dew? Neither. There is a false metaphor to start with. ‘The canker showed itself in the morn and dew of youth,’ when the effect of such ‘blastments;’ – here the canker-worm is turned into a ‘blastment,’ a blastment coming with morning dew: let Mr. Moore watch his garden twelve months round, and if he find blight or blastment of any description coming with morning dew, let him publish the particulars of what will really be a great phytological and metereological discovery.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, ‘Moore's Letters and Journals of Lord Byron’, in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (10 vols, London, 1924-1934), ix, 116-17.

The drive behind Peacock's *reductio* of Moore's comments on Byron's deism seems to stem from Peacock's personal annoyance at Moore's intolerance of scepticism. But it is also notable that Peacock, writing for the utilitarian *Westminster Review*, makes his ridicule of Moore's language deliberately practical and science-based. Peacock's attack on Moore is a willfully utilitarian objection to the vagaries of sentiment. For Peacock, the showiness of sentiment can have just as much of a role in the creation of the *épicier* as calculation. Sentimentality is a concern with style over substance. Peacock's analysis, in 'French Comic Romances,' of French revolutionary history as a series of '*coups de théâtre*,' reveals his suspicion that appeals to the emotions have no foundation in public life:

Louis Philippe and Lafayette hugged each other in a balcony, the first crying – 'Henceforth the charter is a truth;' and the latter – 'This is the best of republics;' – there was the *coup de théâtre* [...] and the curtain fell on the beautiful group in the balcony, amidst the acclamations of a crowded audience, who very soon found that this same *coup de théâtre* was the be-all and the end-all of the fruit of their magnificent exploits. (*FCR*, 285-86)

Peacock's worry on the score of sentiment is also apparent in his approach to the sentimental nostalgia implied by the idea of solitary survival.

Nevertheless, Peacock's letters of the 1850s and '60s do reveal an increasing awareness of himself as someone who has survived most of his friends. It is clear that he finds the idea of outliving friendships, social practices and familiarities, particularly bothersome. A letter of 1859 notes, with regard to Peacock's friend Thomas Forster: 'Once, there were many who called me Tom. Of these he alone remains' (*Letters*, ii, 379). And in 1862 Peacock wrote: 'There is an often quoted saying of Doctor Johnson: 'If you do not go

on making new friends as old ones drop off, you will find yourself alone in the world' [...]

The Doctor spoke more to my mind, when he asked, 'What can replace a friend of twenty years standing?'" (*Letters*, ii, 438). It should be noted, however, that the 1862 letter was written after the death of Peacock's daughter Mary Ellen, and that this event – as Butler observed – seems to have transformed Peacock from a man with a comic resilience in the face of life's vicissitudes into someone who longed to die. He described himself at this period as labouring under 'a physical and mental depression' (*Letters*, ii, 434). Prior to Mary Ellen's death, a more playful response to the idea of lastness is expressed in one of Peacock's letters:

The last winter made fearful havoc among my few friends of my own generation, and among some of the generation below me. I am sorry to think, that you have had cause to say the same [...]

But turning from sad to comic realities, I must tell you a good story.

(*Letters*, ii, 420-21)

The story that follows gives an account of Peacock's local parson paying 'two bargemen' 'five shillings and a bible' to go to church rather than work one Sunday. Later the parson sees them 'reeling away' from a 'public house,' 'flourishing their bibles with their disengaged hands, and singing at the tops of their voices, "The parson's a jolly good fellow"' (*Letters*, ii, 421). It is the kind of story that Peacock relishes, finding ecclesiastical authority undermined by what he might regard approvingly as a sort of 'Epicureanism,' and it resembles episodes that appear in his novels. Yet the important factor here is not the story itself, but Peacock's strategy in telling it. A part of a draft of this letter is included in Joukovsky's edition, and makes plain Peacock's instinct for turning from doleful to amusing subjects:

Yesterday you attended your old friend's funeral. Soldiers who 'Follow their dead comrade to the grave' march slowly to solemn music but they return in quick time to the liveliest measures the band can play. The last duty has been paid to the dead: what remains belongs to the living. Therefore turning from sad to comic realities I will tell you a good story. (*Letters*, ii, 422)

Peacock cultivates a deliberate bathos as a means of avoiding some of the worst effects of dwelling on 'sad realities.'

Among these effects is what Peacock called, when discussing Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1828), 'the eternal reference of every thing to self' (*MLJ*, 80). Peacock's 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley' take pains to avoid this, and, accordingly, uses comedy, bathos and misdirection to undercut moments that threaten to become self-pitying or mawkish with left-behind nostalgia. Works like Hunt's and Moore's Byron biographies, deplored by Peacock for their selfishness and their false sensibility, certainly inform Peacock's decisions in his 'Memoirs.' The rationale behind Peacock's foray into biography is given in a letter to Claire Clairmont of 1858:

My purpose in undertaking the article for Fraser, is: first, to protest against this system of biographical gossip: second: to present an outline, clear of all offence to the living: third: to correct errors, where they appear to me to occur in the narratives under review. (*Letters*, ii, 371)

'The narratives under review' are Trelawny's 1858 *Recollections*, Hogg's 1858 *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* and Charles S. Middleton's *Shelley and His Writings*. Peacock's contribution to Shelley biography began as a review of these three texts, and not as a standalone

production. Peacock's articles are especially pointed as a response to Hogg, whose *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* takes 'the eternal reference of everything to self' tactic to extremes that would have abashed even Hunt. Peacock noted of Hogg's work that 'More than half of the whole is about himself, or about matters which have not the remotest relation to Shelley' (*Letters*, ii, 371). But though Trelawny and Hogg (whom Peacock identifies, in his introductory remarks, as people 'I may call my friends') provide the major impetus behind his *Memoirs*, his protest against 'this system of biographical gossip' goes further back.<sup>13</sup> The letter to Clairmont also mentions Medwin, Hunt and Moore, and they too, are clearly implicated in the comment on 'this system of biographical gossip.' And in Peacock's first article itself, the use of a Godwinian phrase alerts us to the possibility that Peacock is objecting to memoirs of this type as initiated by Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). In direct contradiction to Godwin's contention that 'to give the public some account of the life of a person of eminent merit deceased, is a duty incumbent on survivors' Peacock states:<sup>14</sup>

Neither if there be in the life of the subject of the biography any event which he himself would willingly have blotted from the tablet of his own memory, can it possibly be the duty of a survivor to drag it into daylight. ('Memoirs,' 311)

Peacock has no sympathy with Godwin's transparency or sociability theories of biography, nor with the reasons Hunt, Medwin, Moore and the others might have for engaging in what he regards as 'gossip about notorieties' ('Memoirs,' 311). Instead, he regards this whole commodified approach to survival as characteristic of modern life, of what, in a previous

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley' in *Lives of the Great Romantics I: Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth* (3 vols, London, 1996), i, 312.

<sup>14</sup> William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, 1798), 1.

incarnation, he had regarded as the *épicier* instinct:

It is the old village scandal on a larger scale; and as in these days of universal locomotion people know nothing of their neighbours, they prefer tittle-tattle about notorieties to the retailing of whispers about the Jenkinsons and Tomkinsons of the vicinity.

This appetite for gossip about notorieties being once created in the 'reading public,' there will be always found persons to minister to it; and among the volunteers of this service, those who are best informed and who most valued the departed will probably not be the foremost. ('Memoirs,' 311)

Although the driving purpose behind a passage like this is to indict both 'the reading public' and those who 'minister to it' as types of small-mindedness, Peacock is already performing some curious rhetorical manoeuvres. Rejecting the approach to survival that makes claims for its own prominence, Peacock nevertheless finds himself making such claims, albeit inadvertently. By referring to those who are 'best informed' and 'most valued' the departed, and in the next sentence, linking these to the production of 'a tardy and more authentic narrative,' Peacock is already staking his own claim to the authority of the survivor. As a belated contributor to the battles of biography, he makes a virtue of his belatedness – allowing his reluctance to vouch for the integrity of his intentions.

The whole of Peacock's 'Memoirs of Shelley' is marked by a pattern of earnest self-presentation followed by a puncturing effect of some kind. This proceeding has given rise to the view that Peacock, like Hogg before him, was engaged in a project intended to ridicule Shelley. Butler pointed out, regarding Peacock's 'Memoirs,' that 'What went on being noticed was Peacock's reductive, debunking tone: he was somehow anti-Shelleyan [...] More

than one modern commentator has suggested that Peacock measured himself against his friend, and envied Shelley his greater talents' (7). But it is certainly a mistake to consider Peacock in this light. In his articles for *Fraser's*, Peacock is not reducing and debunking Shelley, but himself, and his reluctant biographical endeavour. This is an essential distinction that the few critics who notice Peacock's 'Memoirs' have failed to emphasize. Any fun that Peacock does have with Shelley is not, as is the case with Hogg, in order to make Shelley appear foolish, but to show what good company Shelley was. Despite observing in his first installment for *Fraser's* that '[Shelley] had a prejudice against theatres which I took some pains to overcome,' and 'I tried in vain to reconcile him to comedy' ('Memoirs', 319), in the second of his *Fraser's* articles Peacock makes much of what he calls 'incidents of some drollery' concerning Shelley, and uses these to generate an argument about Shelley's good humour:<sup>15</sup>

Shelley, when he did laugh, laughed heartily, the more so as what he considered the perversions of comedy excited not his laughter but his indignation [...] The ludicrous, when it neither offended good feeling, nor perverted moral judgment, necessarily presented itself to him with greater force. ('Memoirs II,' 356)

In Peacock's scheme of things, testaments to Shelley's lively sense of the ridiculous are complimentary and affectionate. Peacock is not attempting to debunk his friend, but to demonstrate why he *was* his friend.

Appeals to friendship and to the farcical are Peacock's primary methods of undermining the encroachment of the nostalgic isolationism implied by the perspective of the

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Part II' in *Lives of the Great Romantics I: Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth* (3 vols, London, 1996), i, 355.

sole survivor. In the first of his articles, Peacock uses his eyewitness authority to make several statements in perfect seriousness, usually as a corrective to what he perceives as mistakes propagated by previous biographers. So he begins his discussion of Shelley's first marriage with the authoritative assertion: 'He often spoke to me of it' ('Memoirs,' 313). But in the next column we find one of the most characteristically Peacockian vignettes about Shelley, which Peacock presents as one of Shelley's own anecdotes. In it, Shelley and Harriet, just married in Edinburgh, find the landlord of their lodgings to be 'more obtrusive and officious than Shelley was disposed to tolerate':

In the evening Shelley and his bride were alone together, when the man tapped at their door. Shelley opened it, and the landlord said to him – "It is customary here at weddings for the guests to come in, in the middle of the night, and wash the bride with whisky." "I immediately," said Shelley, "caught up my brace of pistols, and pointing them both at him, said to him, – I have had enough of your impertinence; if you give me any more of it I will blow your brains out;" on which he ran, or rather tumbled down stairs, and I bolted the doors."

The custom of washing the bride with whisky is more likely to have been made so known to him than to have been imagined by him. ('Memoirs,' 313)

This story, like the assertion that Shelley 'often spoke' to Peacock of his marriage, is given the stamp of authenticity via Peacock's use of reported speech – part of the tale is told in Shelley's own voice. But the sense of superior access that Peacock creates, on the one hand, is compensated, or almost apologized for, by the content of the story. Peacock uses his special knowledge of Shelley's first marriage, not to impose his view of it on the reader (though he will be forced to do this in later articles), but to regale the audience with a knockabout story



which they will probably not be familiar with. While the episode may present a portrait of Shelley rather different to the more sanctified versions already proliferating by 1858, it is actually rather innocuous, or, to use another word that Peacock used to describe French comic fiction, ‘unpretending’ (*FCR*, 259). No grand claims are being made about Shelley's character or work, and Peacock as biographer is deflecting attention away from himself. This is one of many occasions where Peacock undermines the twin evils of nostalgia – egotism and wistfulness (both enjoined on him by the nature of the task he has reluctantly undertaken), with a comic diversion.

It is, however, harder for Peacock to subvert his own exercise in nostalgia in the second and third installments of his ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley.’ By 1860, when his second article appeared, Lady Jane Shelley had published her *Shelley Memorials* (1859), repeating the convenient story that Shelley had been separated from his first wife by the time of his meeting with Mary Godwin, and even implying that Harriet had killed herself before the meeting with Mary took place. Peacock's fondness for Harriet, and his desire to ‘correct errors’ in published accounts of Shelley's life, meant that in responding to the *Shelley Memorials*, he was unable to hedge his own authority and authentic status as survivor as he had attempted to do in 1858. By 1862, when Peacock published his ‘Supplementary Notice’ to his previous articles, the problem was more acute, since, at the Shelley family's behest, Richard Garnett had published an article with a personal attack on Peacock for his account of the separation. In these circumstances, and despite any residual belief in dialogue, Peacock is even less inclined to toy with his prerogatives as survivor than he had been in 1860. The 1862 ‘Notice’ is written in a factual and firm tone, and Peacock appeals to his own first-hand knowledge to establish the correctness of his, rather than anyone else's account – though he still acknowledges that this may not convince those who need convincing:

I know, by my subsequent conversation with Harriet, of which the substance was given in my article of January, 1860, that she was not a consenting party [to the separation]; but as I have only my own evidence to that conversation, Mr. Garnett may choose not to believe me.<sup>16</sup>

In the 'Supplementary Notice' of 1862, Peacock has totally abandoned the attempt to play with the perspective of the last man. Indeed, he is forced to make use of the authenticity that his survival gives to his account, because it is one of the advantages he has over his attackers, who, though they may have access to papers that he has not seen, do not have access to the memory of having experienced relationships with the parties in question. By 1862 Peacock is forced into defensive nostalgia. Peacock cannot give ground to his competitors, simply because they know less than him, and are, in important respects, wrong.

Nevertheless, though under considerable strain, Peacock's 1860 article does continue to resist troping solitary survival. This article does include strenuous assertions of Peacock's unique position as a survivor of the sociability of the 1810s, especially the statement: 'Few are now living who remember Harriet Shelley. I remember her well' ('Memoirs II,' 349). But this article also contains a great deal of the farcical reportage Peacock most enjoys. We can regard these as more instances of Peacock's desire to 'tell a good story' as a means of turning 'from sad to comic realities.' These include more accounts of Shelley's 'semi-delusions,' including an instance where he returns from a walk to tell Peacock that he has been warned to leave the country. Peacock challenges this belief by initiating the following exchange:

'What hat did you wear?' He said, 'This, to be sure.' I said 'I wish you would put it

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, 'Supplementary Notice', in *Lives of the Great Romantics I: Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth* (3 vols, London, 1996), i, 359.

on.’ He put it on, and it went over his face. I said, ‘You could not have walked to Egham in that hat.’ (‘Memoirs II,’ 351)

Elsewhere, Peacock recalls a case of mistaken identity, when a music-master, whose name resembles that of one of Shelley's bailiffs, is announced to Shelley:

Shelley, who caught the name as that of his *Monsieur Tonson*, exclaimed, ‘I would just as soon see the devil!’ sprang up from his chair, jumped out of the window, ran across the lawn, climbed over the garden-fence, and came round to me by a back path: when we entrenched ourselves for a day's siege. We often laughed afterwards at the thought of what must have been his man's astonishment at seeing his master, on the announcement of the musician, disappear so instantaneously through the window, with the exclamation, ‘I would just as soon see the devil!’ and in what way he could explain to the musician that his master was so suddenly ‘not at home.’ (‘Memoirs II,’ 355-56)

These are the types of stories Peacock wants to tell: ones in which the farcical content outweighs the sentimental, and the biographer's presence in the scene is minimal. Stories which do not implicate Peacock as a type of last man who is – by virtue of being shallow and selfish – also another version of the *épicier*.

The 1860 article also contains Peacock's most audacious evasion of personal nostalgia. A moment of high pathos, which begins as a uniquely earnest acknowledgment of his status as the sole survivor of the Shelley coterie, the last representative of the old, progressive mode of sociability, is turned bathetic by a masterful *non-sequitur*. It is a move that Richard Cronin describes as ‘an odd way to record his final farewell to his friend’:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature 1824-1840* (Basingstoke, 2002), 20.

I saw [Shelley] for the last time, on Tuesday the 10<sup>th</sup> of March [1818]. The evening was a remarkable one, as being that of the first performance of an opera of Rossini in England [...] I supped with Shelley and his travelling companions after the opera. They departed the next morning.

Thus two very dissimilar events form one epoch in my memory. In looking back to that long-past time, I call to mind how many friends, Shelley himself included, I saw around me in the old Italian Theatre, who have now all disappeared from the scene. I hope I am not unduly given to be *laudator temporis acti*, yet I cannot but think that the whole arrangement of the opera in England has changed for the worse. Two acts of opera, a divertissement, and a ballet, seem very ill replaced by four or five acts of opera, with little or no dancing. ('Memoirs II,' 356)

The moment that Peacock notes all his friends 'who have now disappeared from the scene' is the moment that Peacock acknowledges his situation of 'outliving [his] peers' his identity as the last of the coterie.<sup>18</sup> The wording even recalls that of 'Oft in the Stilly Night,' by Peacock's nemesis, Moore, and its lines: 'When I remember all / The friends so linked together / I've seen around me fall / Like leaves in wintry weather' – perhaps one of the quintessential lyrical expressions of surviving sociability, along with Lamb's 'The Old Familiar Faces'. But in Peacock this moment is not allowed to stand. Rather than bear the weight of the personal sadness and nostalgia that the reflection brings, Peacock turns, not exactly 'from sad to comic realities,' but from painfully personal to neutral, impersonal ones. In fact, the comments on 'the whole arrangement of opera in England' can be taken as Peacock's coded, figurative way of comparing present and past sociabilities, and finding the latter preferable, but it is a typically evasive means of doing so. Throughout his 'Memoirs,'

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<sup>18</sup> Fiona Stafford, *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford, 1994), 9.

Peacock uses comic strategies to put distance between himself and the idea of solitary survival, because he associates that idea with a whole range of unacceptable tendencies. For Peacock, solitary survival involves a maudlin solipsism which is also calculating and manipulative, and contains within it a denial of what ‘belongs to the living.’

So although Cronin finds Peacock's farewell to Shelley to be ‘odd,’ we should probably regard it as entirely characteristic of Peacock. Rather odder, in fact, is Peacock's manuscript essay, ‘The Last Day of Windsor Forest,’ supposed to be written in 1862, and therefore contemporaneous with the final installment of the ‘Memoirs of Shelley.’ The essay can be seen as a companion piece to the ‘Memoirs of Shelley,’ and does, indeed, include a Shelleyan reminiscence: ‘The dell itself remained some time unchanged: but I have not seen it since 1815, when I frequently visited it in company with Shelley.’<sup>19</sup> Like portions of the ‘Memoirs,’ the essay explores regret for the loss of friends via regret for some other loss with a public aspect, making the private sensation of isolated survival accessible. Where in the ‘Memoirs’ this sense of loss is mediated through observations on changes to the opera, in ‘Windsor Forest’ grief is registered through discussion of the enclosure acts. With the enclosure of Windsor Forest, Peacock observes that ‘the life of the old scenes was gone,’ and this ambiguous phrase captures the loss of the sociability that Peacock and Shelley enjoyed during the Bishopsgate period, as well as the loss of public access to newly privatized land. But ‘Windsor Forest’ is also unswervingly melancholy, concerned only with ‘sad realities,’ unable to look forward. The kind of backward-looking utterances that Peacock resists in his ‘Memoirs’ seem to have been displaced into this contiguous essay. He reflects, ostensibly regarding trees at Virginia Water: ‘Perhaps they were more beautiful in an earlier age than they are now: or I may so think and feel, through the general preference of the past to the

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, — *The Last Day of Windsor Forest*: <<http://www.thomaslovepeacock.net/winfor.html>> [accessed October 17 2010].

present, which seems inseparable from old age' (*WF*).

The absence of jokes in 'Windsor Forest' marks a turning point for Peacock. In his 'Memoirs of Shelley,' as well as in earlier essays and letters, comedy is a way, not of openly satirizing those who might use nostalgic tropes, but of effecting a disassociation from nostalgia. In 'Windsor Forest,' as well as in Peacock's 1862 correspondence, the distance comedy has kept up between Peacock and the idea of being last collapses.