

PEACOCK AND SHELLEY

THERE was another thing about Peacock which Shelley at that time doubtless found an attraction—he was said to be an atheist. In his letter to Thomas Hookham about the Meirion lines Shelley wrote :

I was speaking of Mr. Peacock to a lady who knew him during his residence in Wales. In many respects she is a woman of considerable merit ; and except in religious matters a model of toleration. " Ah ! " said she, " there Mr. Peacock lived in a cottage near Tan y bwlch, associating with no one, and hiding his head like a murderer ; but," she added, altering her voice to a tone of appropriate gravity, " he *was worse than that*, he was an *Atheist*." I exclaimed much against the intolerance of her remark, without producing the slightest effect.

How Peacock's " atheism " differed from his own, Shelley was yet to discover. In 1811 they met only for a short time in London, after which Shelley and his wife Harriet went back to live in Wales and take part in one of the poet's many quixotic and unfortunate enterprises—the reclaiming by a Mr. Madocks of a tract of country overrun by the sea. The whole episode, and Shelley's rapidly changing attitude towards Mr. Madocks and the scheme—described in passages of unwitting humour in letters of Harriet's and later probably related to Peacock—must have provided the latter with rich matter for amusement, an amusement which bubbled up many years later in *The Misfortunes of Elphin*.

In the autumn of 1813 Shelley was living at Bracknell in Berkshire and Peacock went to stay with him, later travelling

with him to Scotland. From that time the association between them was close, and indeed seldom interrupted for long till Shelley left England for Italy in 1818. They were extraordinarily different in character. Shelley who in 1813 was only twenty-one—seven years Peacock's junior—was at this time very restless, uncertain of himself and fickle in his personal relations ; his feelings for Peacock varied with his moods ; but there is no doubt that he greatly valued and benefited from the older man's trained and scholarly mind, and from the steadiness of his character. It was from Peacock that he sought advice and sympathy at some of the worst crises of his life. The longest and best of the letters he wrote from Italy were addressed to Peacock.

Shelley on his side was extremely useful and generous to Peacock. For some years, while he had no steady source of income, Shelley seems to have paid him £100 annually ; he made him his business man after he left for Italy, and in his will—which, however, was not implemented till the death of Shelley's father in 1844—he left him, as one of his executors, two thousand pounds.

It is never possible to say with certainty how much any two human beings have influenced one another ; what lies on the surface is not usually very important ; what is deeper is matter of conjecture. There are a good many reasons for thinking that Shelley and Peacock taught each other a great deal. It is unlikely that Peacock with his honest mind saw much of Shelley—without laughing at him and finding rich material for comedy, certainly, but also without saying to himself : if this fiery, tireless, tormented, fanatical creature is a poet, then I, Thomas Love Peacock, am not one. I am too cautious, too fond of peace and comfort, even, as they all say in this circle, in some ways too " cold." It is