

BYRON

I

THE Bibliography which Professor Chew has appended to his laborious account of Byron's "fame and after-fame" fills no less than fifty-four rather closely-printed pages. This may serve to indicate the extent of the literature which has grown up around the name of Lord Byron. Its scale and variety attest the persistently alluring interest of the man, the range of his appeal, and the versatility of his genius. Moreover there is no reason for thinking that the magnetism of Byron is exhausted. The centenary of his death has occasioned a fresh output of articles, speeches, essays, appreciations, lectures, and even substantial volumes, which will add considerably to the mass of Byronic literature.

When the Vice-Chancellor honoured me with an invitation to deliver the

[6]

“Rede” lecture it seemed to me evidently suitable that I should choose as my theme the poet of world-resounding fame, whose name has its place in the great record of Cambridge, and whose death in Greece a hundred years ago in tragic circumstances thrilled Europe with compassionate and mournful homage.

Not indeed that I can add anything to the knowledge of his life, or to the understanding of his character. Everything worth knowing of the first is almost certainly known: every conceivable estimate of the last has most probably been presented. All I can hope to do is to direct attention to some aspects of both, and to add yet one more personal appreciation to the accumulated mass.

Lord Ernle, better known in the world of literature as Mr R. E. Prothero, the editor of the standard edition of Byron's *Letters and Journals*, has warned us against an impressionist treatment of the poet's career. That career, he says with truth, “lends itself only too easily to that method of treatment, which dashes off a likeness by vigorous strokes with a full

[7]

brush, seizing with false emphasis on some salient feature, and revelling in striking contrasts of light and shade.” He claims that in his letters Byron has painted his own portrait, and suggests that we may accept that portrait as a trustworthy presentation of the original:

“With slow, laborious touches, with delicate gradation of colour, sometimes with almost tedious minuteness and iteration, the gradual growth of a strangely composite character is presented, surrounded by the influences which controlled or moulded its development, and traced through all the varieties of its rapidly changing moods. Written, as Byron wrote, with habitual exaggeration, and on the impulse of the moment, his letters correct one another, and, from this point of view, every letter adds something to the truth and completeness of the portrait¹.”

Without dissenting from this estimate of the value of these fascinating compositions—they are confessedly among the best Letters in the language—it must be remembered that Byron was so impulsive and *impish* that it is never quite easy to determine how far his intentions or serious beliefs can be inferred from his

¹ v. *The Works of Lord Byron*, Vol. 1. “Letters and Journals,” ed. R. E. Prothero. 1922. Preface, p. viii.

[8]

words. He set down “anything that came uppermost,” and was quite consciously whimsical and self-contradictory:

“This Journal is a relief”—he wrote in 1813¹—“When I am tired—as I generally am—out comes this, and down goes everything. But I can’t read it over; and God knows what contradictions it may contain. If I am sincere with myself (but I fear one lies more to one’s self than to any one else), every page should confute, refute, and utterly abjure its predecessor.”

A little later he gives this account of his political opinions, which is worth keeping in mind when his violent denunciations of particular politicians are considered:

“As for me, by the blessing of indifference, I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments; and, as it is the shortest and most agreeable and summary feeling imaginable, the first moment of an universal republic would convert me into an advocate for single and uncontradicted despotism. The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better nor worse for a *people* than another. I shall adhere to my party, because it would not be honourable to act otherwise; but as to *opinions*, I don’t

¹ v. *Letters*, II. 366.

[9]

think politics *worth* an *opinion*. *Conduct* is another thing:—if you begin with a party, go on with them. I have no consistency, except in politics: and *that* probably arises from my indifference on the subject altogether¹.”

Moreover there is no reason for thinking that Byron himself was not fully conscious of the literary charm of his letters. He could not be ignorant of the general interest which his biography would command, and he took some steps to facilitate its production by preparing the *Memoirs*, which were unfortunately destroyed after his death, and by indicating the sources from which his letters could be recovered². It is not wholly easy to decide how far the careless ease and reckless self-disclosure of the letters indicate the frankness of unconsidering sincerity, and how far they may express a deliberate literary purpose. Nevertheless, when every allowance has been made, and every caution taken, I must needs hold with Lord Ernle that the *Letters and Journals*, read as a whole,

¹ v. *Letters*, II. 381.

² v. Letter to Murray, Sept. 28, 1821. (*Works, Letters and Journals*, ed. Prothero, Vol. v. p. 378.)

[10]

provide the best materials we possess for forming a trustworthy estimate of an enigmatic and fascinating personality.

In the long gallery of English poets the portrait of LORD BYRON is, perhaps, the most arresting. Every constituent of human interest met in his career: no element of moral paradox was lacking in his strangely mingled character. The violent oscillations of fortune which marked his life have been paralleled by the changing phases of his posthumous reputation. There have been those, the most eminent of his contemporaries, who held it not extravagant to set his poems beside the immortal productions of Shakespeare and Milton: there have been others, farther removed from the magic of his personality, who have challenged his right to be accounted a poet at all. The character of the man has been as hotly debated and as variously appraised as the quality of his work. Nothing has been normal, balanced, or discriminating where Byron has been concerned. Critics and admirers alike seem to lie under the necessity of speaking in superlatives. Of

[11]

no other poet can it be said that his life is the indispensable gloss on his verse. But Byron's poetry is never impersonal, for Byron was absorbingly interesting to himself. A monstrous and morbid egotism is the key to his life, and gives colour and passion to his poems.

The circumstances of his early life stimulated this unwholesome trait, while they deprived him of the disciplines which might have checked and restrained it. He was unhappy in both his parents. His father was a worthless and heartless rake: his mother one of the silliest of women. John Byron died, "possibly by his own hand," when his son was but little more than three years old, so that the task of the boy's upbringing fell to his silly mother. He was subjected to alternations of doting fondness, which fostered his vanity, and vulgar abuse, which moved his scorn. He was naturally an affectionate child, and would have responded to kindness, but his mother's folly was incredible. Her faults strengthened his. His personal vanity and absurd pride of ancestry were inherited from

[12]

her, as well as his violent temper and erratic moods.

The prospect of social greatness was soon upheld before the child's eager eyes. If he can hardly be said to have been "born in the purple," for he was six years old before his cousin's death in 1794 made him heir to a peerage, and his great-uncle, "the wicked Lord Byron," refused to interest himself in his heir-apparent, yet the pride which is one of the worst consequences of that condition was not lessened, perhaps it was increased, by his actual indigence. On May 19, 1798, the sinister old man died, and the boy of ten succeeded to the title and estates. The flattery of inferiors, and the deference everywhere at that time shown to an English peer, albeit youthful, or undistinguished, or even contemptible, assisted the ill-effect of his ill-ordered home, and even the club-foot, which he so deeply resented, told in the same direction. It kept his attention fastened on himself, developed a self-consciousness which was always excessive, and led him unconsciously to emphasize other

[13]

physical traits which were more agreeable to contemplate. The low tastes and fondness for the society of his inferiors which marked Byron in later years may have had their origin in, or at least have received disastrous encouragement from, the untoward circumstances of his boyhood. The well-known story of Byron, when no more than eleven years old, hurling a shell at Lord Portsmouth's head because he had playfully pinched his ear, and repudiating the suggestion that the missile was not intended for the head it had so narrowly missed—"But I *did* mean it! I will teach a fool of an earl to pinch another noble's ear"—carries its own suggestion of precocious self-importance, and lack of discipline. Then followed Harrow, where though his house-master complained of his "inattention to business, and his propensity to make others laugh and disregard their employments as much as himself," he made some lasting friendships, read widely, and developed rapidly. Writing in 1821, he dwells on the remarkable range of his reading:

[14]

“Till I was eighteen years old (odd as it may seem), I had never read a review. But, while at Harrow, my general information was so great on modern topics, as to induce a suspicion that I could only collect so much information from *reviews*, because I was never *seen* reading, but always idle and in mischief, or at play. The truth is that I read eating, read in bed, read when no one else reads; and had read all sorts of reading since I was five years old, and yet never *met* with a review, which is the only reason that I know of why I should not have read them. But it is true; for I remember when Hunter and Curzon, in 1804, told me this opinion at Harrow, I made them laugh by my ludicrous astonishment in asking them, ‘*what is a review?*’ To be sure, they were then less common. In three years more, I was better acquainted with that same, but the first I ever read was in 1806–7¹.”

Thus his neglect of his proper studies went along with an eager pursuit of the kind of knowledge he liked. “The moment I could read, my grand passion was *history*.” A keen interest in affairs and great practical ability marked him throughout his career. In this respect, and not in this only, he may be compared with an earlier poet, whose character had many points of likeness to his own. Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) shared with

¹ v. *Letters and Journals*, v. 452.