Lord Byron Self-Revealed.*

Whatever one's individual judgment may be concerning Lord Byron, there is no blinking the fact that no poet was ever in his own lifetime so swiftly, so tremendously popular. And not only in his own country, but throughout the world; for the first time an English poet attracted a contemporary European audience, for the first time France and Germany and Italy recognized the literature of England. But also there is no blinking the other fact that when the centenary of this idol of his times came around (1888) his reputation had faded to such a degree that scarcely any note was taken of it, and his poetry seemed to have sunk into that 'half-life' which, in sincerity or not, he had himself prophesied for it.

The Day of Judgment set by Matthew Arnold has now come, yet who recognizes the fulfillment of the critic's prophesy: 'When the year 1900 is turned, and our nation comes to recall her poetic glories in the century which has then just ended, the first names with her will be these — Wordsworth and Byron.' From time to time, indeed, a Byron revival has seemed imminent, and even has been loudly proclaimed. It was looked for last year, with the completion of John Murray's definitive edition in thirteen volumes, which had been several years in the making; while at the same time the late W. E. Henley was preparing a rival edition for Mr. Heinemann. There has just been published a complete edition of Byron's poems and dramas in the scholarly 'Cambridge' series edited by Mr. Bliss Perry; and now we have a book called 'Confessions of Lord Byron,' containing no new matter, but consisting of classified excerpts from his letters and journals, taken from the voluminous Murray edition.

Although it cannot be said that any or all of these books have created the expected 'Byron revival,' yet they do furnish the material for a better understanding of a very contradictory character as a man, and incidentally some explanation of the vicissitudes of his reputation as a poet. The editor of these 'Confessions' is Mr. W. A. Lewis Bettany. The fact that he has previously edited in similar fashion the 'Table-Talk' of Dr. Johnson plainly serves to account for the somewhat surprising subject of his introduction, 'On Byron's Obligation to Johnson' — an obligation which, after all, is too casual to receive the prominence here given to it. The selections are classified under six heads, and deal with Byron's reflections on himself, on contemporary English poets, on his friends; also with his religious views, his opinions concerning the drama, and the literary life in general. Arranged chronologically, and covering a period of over twenty years, they serve also to show the changes of mental attitude which the progress of the years developed in Byron, as they do in all men of thought and experience. Alas that these revelations of his most intimate opinions estrange rather than endear us to the man! Gladly would we feel toward Byron as we do toward Shelley, Scott, and Leigh Hunt, and love the man even as we admire the poet. On the contrary, we are impressed by his essential unlovableness. Before he had reached the age of twenty, he wrote:

'Nature stampt me in the Die of Indifference. I consider myself as destined never to be happy, although in some instances fortunate. I am an isolated Being on the Earth, without a Tie to attach me to life, except a few School-fellows, and a *score of females*. Let me but "hear my fame on the winds," and the song of the Bards in my Norman house, I ask no more, and don't expect so much. Of Religion I know nothing, at least in its *favour*. We have *fools* in all sects and Imposters in most. . . I am surrounded here by parsons and methodists, but, as you will see, not infected with the mania. I have lived a *Deist;* what I shall die I know not; however, come what may, *ridens moriar.*'

That Byron had a most injudicious mother, is beyond question; that her ungovernable temper, cruel taunts, and unsympathetic attitude toward the physical deformity of her brilliant offspring, embittered his whole life is also doubtless true. Yet withal she had a fierce and spasmodic affection for him which ought to have shielded her from his habitual reference to her as 'Clytemnestra,' or from such a letter as this, written after months of separation and from a far-distant land:

* The Confessions of Lord Byron. Arranged by W. A. Lewis Bettany. London: John Murray. Imported by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

'I trust you like Newstead and agree with your neighbors; but you know *you* are a *vixen*—is not that a dutiful appellation? Pray, take care of my books and several boxes of papers in the hands of Joseph; and pray leave me a few bottles of champagne to drink, for I am very thirsty;—but I do not insist on the last article without you like it. I suppose you have your house full of silly women, prating scandalous things.'

The only relative that Byron ever really loved was his half-sister Augusta. In his letters to her, or in the journal which he kept for her during his foreign travels, he is to be seen at his gentlest and best, although seldom even there free from his gloomy and continual self-consciousness. After a tour of thirteen days among the Swiss Alps, he writes:

'I am a lover of Nature and an admirer of Beauty. I can bear fatigue and welcome privation, and have seen some of the noblest views in the world. But in all this—the recollections of bitterness, and more especially of recent and more home desolation which must accompany me through life, have preyed upon me here; and neither the music of the Shepherd, the crashing of the Avalanche, nor the torrent, the mountain, the Glacier, the Forest, nor the Cloud have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart, nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty, and the power and the Glory, around above and beneath me. I am past reproaches; and there is a time for all things. . . . . *To* you, dearest Augusta I send and *for* you I have kept this record of what I have seen and felt. Love me, as you are beloved by me.'

Another fact which must always weigh against Byron is his *falseness*. He was absolutely without loyalty, either in love or friendship. Professing great attachment to Shelley, he yet listened to damaging stories which he knew to be untrue and then failed to fulfill his promise to exhibit the evidence which would have fully exculpated the accused. Byron, and Byron only, had it in his power to reverse one of the most cruel of all charges against Shelley; yet the letter which would have accomplished this, which he had promised to deliver and was under every obligation of honor to deliver, was found still among his papers after his death. He was false also to Leigh Hunt in the matter of 'The Liberal,' although later he made some show of generosity. The 'Confessions' show other, though less flagrant instances; in one letter there is an acknowledgement of his own limitations in loyalty.

'As to friendship, it is a propensity in which my genius is very limited. I do not know the *male* human being, except Lord Clare, the friend of my infancy, for whom I feel anything that deserves the name. All of my others are men-of-the-world friendships. I did not feel it even for Shelley, however much I admired and esteemed him; so that you see not even vanity could bribe me into it, for, of all men, Shelley thought highest of my talents,—and perhaps of my disposition.'

Byron's delight in posing, in giving a theatrical air to everything he said or did, captivated his contemporaries. It threw a certain glamour over his personality, which shows up a bit dingy under our modern electric light. He loves to tell that his 'Lara' was written 'while undressing after coming home from balls and masquerades in the year of revelry 1814'; he protested that he liked *living* romances better than writing them, and that he preferred the society of gentlemen to that of literary men; he indulged in alternate abstinence and voracity in the use of food and drink; he professed an indifference verging on hostility to some things which commonly delight mankind, such as music and pictures. Of his love affairs he is never tired of making scenes and sensations. Writing in maturity of his first love affair (at the age of eight) he says:

'My misery, my love for that girl, were so violent that I sometimes doubt if I have ever been really attached since. Be that as it may, hearing of her marriage several years after was like a thunder-stroke—it nearly choked me—to the horror of my mother and the astonishment and almost incredulity of everybody.'

His first dash into poetry was with his second love-affair—at the age of twelve.

On the principal question, why Byron's poetry fails to please to-day as it pleased our grandfathers and grandmothers, we do not get much light, nor could it be expected, from this book of 'Confessions.' The answer is to be sought rather in a consideration of a somewhat new demand now made upon poetry, as a revelation of truth and a spiritual and moral insight. But on the secondary question, why even when admired as poet he is still not beloved as man, there is much illumination. The answer is,—because he was personally self-absorbed and untender, because he was false as a friend, and because the theatrical air which was so taking in his time now fails to charm a more practical and more cynical age.

ANNA B. MCMAHAN.