

'KUBLA KHAN' AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM. The Mythological school in Biblical criticism and secular literature, 1770-1880, by E. S. Shaffer, *Cambridge University Press*, 1975. 361 pp. £8.80.

If we can no longer simply accept the scriptures as a factual account, what can we believe about Christianity? We are driven to ask Blake's question: 'Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?' But can we be satisfied with his answer: 'All poets believe that it does'? The voices which haunt the religious questioner in the 19th century seem to give the same kind of answer:—'Esse is percipi: we half-create and half perceive: the imagination diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create'. And then, through the tumult, comes the saving voice of German theology: 'Erkennen ist mythologisieren'. To perceive is to mythologise. So—if Christianity has been successfully mythologised (which it has, by being accepted by so many nations), it is therefore true. But in what way; and what is the reality to which its mythological forms point? Was Jesus really the incarnate son of God? What actually happened at the crucial moment? These were the questions which prompted so many 19th century writers to produce their own Lives of Jesus. Even Coleridge toyed with the notion: 'I have since my twentieth year meditated on an heroic poem on the siege of Jerusalem by Titus—that is the pride and stronghold of my hope'. In the end, however, he came down on the side of traditional belief. Browning, on the other hand, concluded that St John invented facts he did not experience in order to encourage belief in the values Jesus stood for. Only through a false fact could posterity believe they saw the star John saw:

'—ye needs must apprehend what truth
I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
Diminished into clearness, proved a point
And far away. '

George Eliot, as if paraphrasing this passage, wrote:

It seems to me the soul of Christian-

ity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the meeting-point and the new starting point.

She, too, like Renan, must write a *Life of Jesus*—the novel *Daniel Deronda*. Like Jesus, Deronda is of legendary birth and secret parentage; but the novel exposes an irresolvable contradiction: its 'assumption of moral responsibility is a myth; (yet) belief in the myth is an unmitigated good'.

This is the kind of argument which can be extracted from Miss Shaffer's interesting book. Her claim is that we need a substantial acquaintance with the history of ideas in order to appreciate the writers she selects, and in particular Coleridge, Hölderlin, Browning and George Eliot. Sometimes, her learning crushes both author and reader; her criticism of Coleridge's poetry, for example, being ingenious rather than elucidatory. The chapter on Browning, however, is excellent, and helps to account for the exceptional reputation he had as the T. S. Eliot of his time. The chapters on George Eliot are intellectually rewarding but, as literary criticism, fail to convince us that Leavis's criticisms are answered. Faced with *Daniel Deronda* we have still to trust the tale (if we can), and not the author. Nietzsche's own comments on George Eliot are worth recalling:

'They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality. . . . In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. That is the *penance* one pays there'.

Miss Shaffer's book raises a large, but unanswered question: is the story of the Resurrection a saving lie, or a saving fact?

JOHN COULSON