

blows his materialism into pieces. None the less we are duly grateful to Mr. Cole for this work of research, a 'by-activity,' he tells us, of his other work.

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

THE STARLIT DOME. By G. Wilson Knight. (Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press; 16s.)

In this book Mr. Knight continues the researches into poetic symbolism which he began in his three works on Shakespeare and in *The Burning Oracle*. Here he turns to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, and proceeds directly to the poets' symbolism, without his usual prefatory remarks on his method of interpretation. This self-effacement on the part of the author gives the book an advantage over its predecessors in that the reader no longer has to be concerned with two things, the interpretation of what the poet was trying to say, and an interpretation of that interpretation. The subject therefore stands out more clearly.

The first essay, on *The Wordsworthian Profundity*, is of very great interest as showing a range of symbol which is strongly reminiscent of some basic imagery in the Bible, though there is a notable contrast in value. The author now and again remarks on the Hebraic atmosphere, but, as we think, with some misunderstanding. The most sincere and powerful Wordsworthian symbolism is in terms of darkness, gloom, and natural and moral horrors; it is to be seen chiefly in *The Prelude* and *The Borderers*. Wordsworth found it most congenial to resolve the struggles of the world and himself into a dark and formless void, reached through moral nihilism and an acceptance of evil as an absolute, expressed in a corresponding nature-imagery of night scenes, storms, ruins, torrents;

' it is

In darkness and in tempest that we seek

The majesty of Him who rules the world' (*Borderers* II, 614).

' You can fall back on dreadful imaginings, even crime, as a source somehow, of peace: a strange, but Wordsworthian doctrine' (p. 32). Tragic experience and crime are used 'to split open the two worlds of subject and object and show the subjective self in its dark abysmal nakedness,' to 'split open the daylight world and reveal the outer darkness, the eternal otherness' (pp. 13, 32, cf. 34). It is not surprising therefore to find *The Borderers* characterised as diabolic, and it is correspondingly odd to see Wordsworth attempting a more normal scale of symbolic values in the Odes and Sonnets. He fails, as Mr. Knight recognises; the symbols of sun and light and natural peace are there, but flat and devitalised, except in that one complete success, the Immortality Ode. What is the reason for this inconsistency? If we turn to the Bible we find from first to last a con-

sistent symbolism of sun, light, peaceful water, sacred structure, and childhood, all symbols of creation set over against darkness, the turbulence of the sea, floods, ruins, and other symbols of the chaotic negation of creation. Divinely used, these images correspond to normal human needs and usages. Here there is no 'failure to embody transcendence in human terms, with a corresponding surrender to paradisaical and architectural symbols' (p. 61) such as we find in Wordsworth. The Hebrew prophet might seek the Majesty of God in darkness and in tempest, but it was in the darkness of the Shekinah with glory in the midst of it, and a tempest from which lightning and bolts of fire flashed forth. In making the chaotic symbols ultimate and in equating the chaos of disturbed creation with the formless void over which the Spirit brooded in the beginning, Wordsworth shows a deep perversity, which Mr. Knight indeed recognises in his choice of erotic symbols. Such a 'failure to embody transcendence in human forms' is all too likely where there is not present a thorough awareness that the transcendent God has in fact embodied himself in a human nature. In the course of his revelation he has used paradisaical and architectural symbols not by way of weak surrender, but so as to transmute them into a picture of supernatural significance. Wordsworth failed to accept the concrete fact of creation, failed therefore in the balance of his imagery, failed of course to give concreteness and power even to his noblest doctrines (*vid.* pp. 81-2, *cf.* 21, 31). It is because in the Immortality Ode he 'faces the intoxication of a sunlight creation' and reverts to normality, that this poem is his most satisfying one.

Wordsworth was a confirmed moraliser; that is why it is easier to judge him with his own judgment than it is to judge the other poets dealt with here. They were content to blazon forth the world as they saw it and accepted it and accordingly are more liable to enrich our perception than challenge our agreement. Coleridge had a *penchant* for the dark and horrific forces within creation, Shelley a frenzied seeking for an ethereal eternity in which he never lost touch with the life-giving earth from which his spiral skylark ascent took its rise, Keats a sublime appreciation of the texture of the material world, saved from idolatry through his sense of the virtue of Religion. *The Priestlike Task: An Essay on Keats* shows in its packed richness of example just that pleasurable acceptance of the created world the lack of which is what makes the Wordsworthian Profundity into a bottomless pit. It should be remembered in reading these essays that Mr. Knight's purpose does not extend immediately to what is ordinarily thought of as literary evaluation, so that slight poems keep company with great poems and are unrebuked. One of his great contributions is the unearthing of poetic wealth from ground which ordinarily excites but little, sometimes too little, remark.