THE SHIFT IN SENSIBILITY

From Sensibility to Romanticism. Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle. Edited by F. W. HILLES and H. BLOOM. Oxford University Press. 68s.

To begin at the very beginning. The cover of this critical symposium tells us that "the emphasis is on the transition to Romantic poetry through an examination of its immediate heritage"; the introduction adds that the essays aim to cover the "shift in sensibility" which took place during the half-century following the death of Pope (who is included as a beginning and a background to the transitionary period). There are twenty-six essays, arranged chronologically: they include three each on Pope, Gray and Wordsworth, two-and-a-half on Blake, two on Johnson and Byron, and one each on Collins, Burns, Shelley, and Keats. Interspersed are five essays on more general topics connected with eighteenth-century literature: the theme of local attachment and cosmopolitanism, the revival of Scottish vernacular poetry, the expression of the picturesque, the metrical conventions (with particular reference to Blake, hence the "half" above), and the structure and style of what M. H. Abrams calls the

"greater Romantic lyric." All this, with a selected bibliography of F. A. Pottle *and* fourteen full-page plates to boot, makes good value for money at just over half-a-crown an article.

It might be deduced from this that the book is little more than a critical kaleidoscope; but in fact by a careful selection of contributions, their judicious arrangement, and a fairly large coincidence of contributors' opinions and method, the editors have succeeded in producing an important, deeper thematic coherence. G. M. Ridenour, at the beginning of his essay on Byron, sums up an attitude which many of the other contributors share: "It is only lately that we have learned to trace an unbroken movement from the thought of the eighteenth century to that of what used to be called the romantic revolt. We have learned that, insofar as a revolt in fact took place, its program and its weapons were in large part gifts of the period under attack. And certainly some of the problems faced by the English romantic poets and some of their ways of handling them have developed from contradictions implicit in attitudes characteristic of the eighteenth century" (453).

This awareness of continuity and the relevance of perspective does not seem to be something casual or superficial: there is more to it than an end-in-itself listing of sources, or a general, Willeyan background of ideas. This is a serious attempt to see the major poets in relation to their own age, an aim particularly evident in Ridenour on Byron (455) and Bloom on Keats. Awareness of the contemporary literary and linguistic scene is of fundamental importance for realistic historical appreciation, and there are many illuminating comments throughout the book which stem from this, e.g. Ryskamp's discussion of what "lyrical ballads" must have meant to readers at the end of the eighteenth century (358, ff.), or Abrams' remarks (528-9, 535) about the choice of poetic types around this period. Useful reference is made to the way authors departed from a traditional or contemporary norm of expression, e.g. 161, 164-5 (re the language of Gray's *Elegy*), 155, 306 (Blake's use of the unrhymed fourteener); the importance of verbal and situational contexts in assessing a (part of a) poem is frequently (if sporadically) stressed, e.g. 32, 34, 68, 72, 162...; and less well-known influences on major poets are discussed and quoted at length, e.g. Quarles (426), Bowles (541). As a result of this approach, the oft-quoted uniformity of the literary conventions assumed to be characteristic of "Augustan poetry" is readily demonstrated as largely mythical, e.g. by D. J. Greene, who "wonders how the legend grew up that the eighteenth century was impersonal, objective, dispassionate" (37), and others (46, 73, 172 . . .). This is a healthy approach to traditional generalisation, and much of the book bears witness to it.

Of course, in a compendium of this kind, one may equally well make scattered adverse criticisms. I suppose one expects a certain amount of vacuous statement, for example, the meaningless comparison (42, top), or the comment that in the *Elegy* "structure (the relation of parts to parts or parts to whole) largely determines meaning" (177,187), which is trivial, as it applies to all language use. The sensitive reader, however, is likely to be more disturbed by the unexpectedly large amount of vague terminological usage and undefined subjective comment, which contributes little, if anything, to understanding, e.g. "the somewhat clumsy, muffled texture of vowel and consonant sound" (31-2), "language that is properly elevated" (69), Dryden's "racy" style (75), the strange reference to "significant" adverbs (169), the unexplained distinction between grammar and syntax (239, 252), "pure English" (239), "smooths out the syntax" (253), and so on. I would have liked more discussion of the meaning of "incantatory effect" (40), of the different types and functions (unreferred to) of chiasmus (71), of the useful distinction be-

tween the aesthetic and structural elements of poetic language (293), and of the idiosyncratic use of " dramatic " which seems to be the only justification of the argument " all literature is dramatic " (49). These points, of course, are quite distinct from arguments of a more general literary and evaluative nature, which there is no space to deal with here.

Such sporadic comments, however, while emphasising the need for a critical reading of this critical symposium, should not obscure the book's overall value. One could equally well go through picking on particularly useful points, e.g. the relevance of " empathetic reading " (37, 51), Ian Jack's discussion of poetic types (139, ff.), Hartman's clarification of the nature-inscription as used by Wordsworth (e.g. 399), etc. It is perhaps impossible to suggest the " best " essays. Personally, I was most impressed by Greene on Pope, Hollander's general essay on metre and Blake, Ryskamp on Wordsworth, Abrams' general essay, and the triad on Gray, which provided a useful spectrum of opinion. But to dip haphazardly into this book is to miss its main lesson: the continuity of the literary tradition in the eighteenth century is the important theme, and this can only be satisfactorily appreciated by a chronological reading.

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