

COLERIDGE AS A DUAL PERSONALITY

COLERIDGE AND S.T.C., by Stephen Potter (Cape, 8/6).

It seems to be generally agreed that we have only recently begun to appreciate Coleridge's genius at its true value, and that in spite of the opium his positive achievement extends further than most people realize. There is unfortunately much less agreement as to where exactly the emphasis should fall, and no one has yet given an adequate account of the work in which his genius found its most fruitful field—his literary criticism. Mr. Potter has not attempted to supply this deficiency: his interests are biographical, psychological and philosophical, but only incidentally literary. *Coleridge and S.T.C.* is an account in Jekyll and Hyde terms: 'S.T.C.' stands for the fixed character with its failings and conventionalities, 'Coleridge' for the ever-developing personality whose real depths were often obscured by the petty faults of 'S.T.C.' This division is ascribed to some failure on Coleridge's part to accept life after his unhappy marriage, and the rest of his life is seen not as decay, but rather as a continual extension of self-awareness in an effort—partially successful—to heal the breach. I am not sure how far this conception is valid, considered as more than a biographical convenience: it certainly involves a great deal of discussion of the less important aspects of Coleridge. Mr. Potter uses it as a kind of scale to evaluate Coleridge's various activities; thus he finds 'esteceanism' in his personal relations, his poetry and criticism, his religion and philosophy, alongside of the genuine 'Coleridge' elements.

It is to his estimate of these more important aspects that we naturally look for Mr. Potter's chief contribution to the subject, and it turns out to be woefully inadequate. He is aware of the subtlety and profundity of Coleridge's thought in general, but he shows no appreciation whatever of the fineness of his intelligence when it was directed upon poetry. Indeed, the chapter 'Joint Authorship,' dealing with the poetry and criticism, is probably the worst in the book. In his eagerness to trace 'esteceanism' in the *Biographia* Mr. Potter finds personal animosity in the unfavourable criticisms of Wordsworth (especially, of course, in the

condemnation of the 'Mighty Prophet, Seer blest' passage), and describes the prevailing tone of the praise of Wordsworth as 'mental bombast.' After which it is not altogether surprising to find that 'Coleridge's Hamlet epitomizes the value of Coleridge as a critic,' and that the Shakespeare criticism in general is the most important. The context leaves no doubt that this means chiefly the character-analysis, in which Coleridge's psychological bent hindered his response to the poetry actually before him. 'The Shakespeare of our generation,' says Mr. Potter, 'is, to a measurable extent, Shakespeare plus Coleridge,' and he is apparently quite willing that it should be so. And what are we to make of this, on the poetry?—'Coleridge knew persons, and could honour persons, a rarer and better gift even than the power of fascinating the world with word-music.'

Though the chapter on philosophy includes much abstract discussion of the difference between Reason and Understanding, there is very little mention of the Imagination-Fancy distinction. The concluding chapter on 'Anticipation and Prophecy' is an attempt to discover Coleridge's 'message' for the present day; and it enables the reader to identify a certain flavour that has been evident throughout the book: the comparison with Goethe reminds us unmistakably of Mr. Middleton Murry and his prophet-heroes.

Mr. Potter has added an appendix on Dr. Richards' *Coleridge on the Imagination*, which he considers 'perhaps the best book on Coleridge which has yet appeared,' though he objects to the author's general materialist standpoint. One would hardly expect any radical criticism, for *Coleridge and S.T.C.* is after all even less concerned with literature than *Coleridge on the Imagination*. Mr. Potter gives no evidence that he appreciates the importance of, say, the later chapters of the *Biographia* or the essays on *Shakespeare as a Poet Generally*, and *Shakespeare's Judgment equal to his Genius*. Here Coleridge's psychological profundity and his concern for essential principles are seen to be inseparable from his immediate particular perceptions. A full consideration of the chapter 'On the specific symptoms of poetic power elucidated in a critical analysis of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*,' besides demonstrating this point in itself, would show how Coleridge anticipated many of the most important doctrines of modern critics, including the impersonality preached

by Flaubert and Henry James, Dr. Richards' theory of rhythm, and Mr. Eliot's description of the Metaphysical sensibility. And no book written on Coleridge has given a really adequate account of his profound understanding of the organic nature of poetry. This, ultimately, is the importance of the definition of Imagination ('The poet . . . brings the whole soul of man into activity'): it also enabled him to settle once and for all the question of Form and Content ('No work of true genius dares want its appropriate form, neither indeed is there any danger of this.'). That this and similar questions should still be such a fruitful source of critical fallacies only shows that the vague respect accorded to the greatest English critic seldom involves any real appreciation of his achievement. We still need a book that will treat Coleridge neither as semasiologist nor as an explorer of the self, but primarily as a literary critic.

R. G. Cox.

THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT, by Stephen Spender (Cape, 8/6).

This collection of short studies of some important modern writers shows the author in a sympathetic light. Not that it contains anything surprisingly original or profound but because the author has taken pains to make his own all the best work that has already been done on these writers. Every page is stamped with a pleasing sincerity and strength of purpose. He is not directly concerned with criticizing his authors so much as to discover what they are writing about. This he finds to be the moral and political life of the times. All his authors are aware of the chaos which has come upon both these subjects and adopt various expedients in front of this chaos. This conclusion is not unfamiliar to readers of this review and no harm is done by repetition. But despite the author's intention to avoid criticism the book contains a great number of irrelevant critical remarks. The value of these, and indeed of the whole book, lies in their relation to Mr. Spender's verse. One could confirm one's judgment of the *Poems* by reference to his opinions of, say, Eliot and Lawrence.