

Book Review

DEFENDING ANCIENT SPRINGS.

By *Kathleen Raine.*

(Oxford University Press. 30s.).

Review by Philip Sherrard

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This book is a collection of essays either on poets—Edwin Muir, David Gascoyne, Vernon Watkins, Yeats, Shelley, St. John Perse—or on topics directly related to poetry—on myth and symbol, and the use of the beautiful. The link connecting the various essays is Miss Raine's own understanding of poetry and its function, for the individual poets she writes of all illustrate this in one way or another, and essential to it also is the traditional use of myth and symbol. Indeed, the springs that are being defended are the traditional springs and the poets who have had the insight to draw from them. From this point of view, all art—all true art—is always concerned with the expression of themes connected with the nature of the soul and what is beyond the soul, of the relationship between them, of man's death and rebirth, and the underlying pattern of his existence; and these themes have—or had—their corresponding language of myth and symbol, one resting upon an innate correspondence between the supernatural and the natural worlds and enshrined in the great religious traditions. Poets stand or fall according to their capacity to speak of these themes and to use this language. What goes by the name of poetry and yet ignores both the themes and language of tradition—and this includes the vast mass of modern poetry—is at best but versifying, at worst an insidious denigration of the poetic imagination itself.

Miss Raine is illuminating in each of her essays, particularly so when speaking of the "marvels" of St. John Perse's poetry or when on the more familiar ground of Blake and Yeats; and a glance at the index will indicate of the scope of her thought and reading. But what makes this book as a whole more than a work of literary criticism, however perceptive, is the continual probing of what is perhaps the central problem for a "traditional" artist living in our times—the problem of communication. For it is one thing to use the traditional language of myth and symbol when these are still wedded to the actual environment in which man is living; it is quite another to use it when this connection is broken, when, as Miss Raine puts it, the "reality of myth" and the "reality of fact" have no common meeting-point in the "objective" world. This is our situation today, and that is why the poetry of someone seeking to speak of traditional themes in our age may easily become no more than an academic and largely ineffectual word-spinning with an imagery that has lost the power to set up any vibration in soul or body. A particularly bad example of this is provided, for instance, by certain "mystical" Indian poets writing in English—Aurobindo is a case in point. Here, though the themes are traditional, the language fails to communicate in any living sense, and the reason for this would seem to be that, however traditional, it is not rooted in the immediate existential stuff, the *substantia rerum*, of the world we actually inhabit. One has only to compare this language with that of one of the poets

discussed by Miss Raine—David Gascoyne—to be made aware that a spiritual vision, however profound, cannot become poetry unless the poet himself is first able to reach out and embrace the most "non-poetical," "non-traditional" particulars of the world about him.

The problem of course is not confined to the artist: it affects directly everyone concerned with the viability of the great religious traditions in the modern world. The truth is that mind and imagination only too readily fossilize in what are now no more than conventional formulae preserved beyond their natural term by the self-interested bureaucracy of religious professionals; and since such fossilization spells the death of art, it is a process to which the artist must be particularly sensitive. Continuity in itself is not a criterion of anything, and the fact that something has endured for centuries may be due not to its perennial value but to man's spiritual impotence. Miss Raine doesn't provide any solution to this problem—there may be no solution; but what she has to say about the poet's predicament in a society whose forms, from the education provided for its children down to the bread its members eat, are specifically intended to seal the living springs of the imagination up for ever, is of a relevance that few if any of us can afford to ignore.