Kilve Study Weekend, September 2006

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AS WE WERE GREETED by Shirley Watters in the entrance hall of Kilve Court on Friday afternoon there was a feeling that the weekend was going to be rather special. The meeting, entitled "Coleridge and the Drama" focussed on Coleridge's interest in drama, with particular reference to his own plays and his translation of Schiller's plays. This also provided the opportunity to study the dramatic in his work and also his life drama, which had enough plot in it to create a portfolio of plays from tragedy to comedy. The subject had not been considered in such detail before at Kilve and it was with some excitement that we gathered on the Friday evening, having been welcomed at the bar and well dined, for a performance by the Blake players. They had performed a comedy by Lamb very successfully at a previous Kilve weekend and this time they acted extracts from the plays to be discussed. This set the scene for the weekend, giving us a taste of the poetry and the drama of the plays, which we do not see performed today.

A beautiful dawn greeted the early morning walkers on Saturday as Peter Larkin led the way down to Kilve beach, along the shore line and then cutting in land and back via St Mary's Church. This dates back to the 14th century and looks fit for the new century following considerable recent restoration.

Chris Murray, whose opening talk on Saturday morning was a masterly exposition on "Coleridge and the Tragic", had prepared a very helpful summary of the plays we were considering over the weekend. *The Fall of Robespierre*, apparently written in haste in 1794 was a joint effort between Coleridge, who wrote the first act and Southey, who wrote acts two and three. *Piccolomini* and *Wallenstein* are plays translated by Coleridge from Schiller's German manuscript in1800 and are epic in proportion, charting the conflict of loyalties and betrayal in the decline and fall of Wallenstein the Duke of Friedland during the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Coleridge wrote *Osorio* in 1797 but Sheridan and Kemble at Drury Lane turned it down and it wasn't until January 1813 that the revised play, now named *Remorse*, had its premiere to "unexampled applause" at the Theatre Royal. The melodramatic theme of *Osorio* is of fraternal rivalry for the same beautiful woman. The plot around this neurotic love-triangle is one of betrayal and guilt with ample use of theatrical devices, involving ghosts, poisoned goblets, prisons, caves and chasms and a subplot of Moorish persecution. Fifteen years later tastes had changed and the Drury Lane Committee fully appreciated the play's gothic potential. Samuel Arnold, the actor manager, asked Coleridge to make cuts and dramatic simplifications and also to provide more external colour. This he did, renaming the play and the main characters, earning himself a reputation as the "amenable author" for cutting and rewriting right up to the first performance.

Coleridge's play *Zapolya* (1817) was a "verse entertainment" and chivalric

romance, which included several short songs. He encouraged Byron to read it and to consider it for production at Drury Lane however this did not come about.

Our second speaker of the morning was Reg Foakes who gave a fascinating talk on "Coleridge and Dramatic Illusion" giving his view on the importance of the imagination of the individual in interpreting the play. There is the risk that scenic effects may interfere with this process. However with the development of scenery and complex visual effects, the theatre of the ear was changing to the theatre of the eye with new ideas on presentation. In *Remorse* the stage equipment was used to full effect in creating exciting scenic illusions. Coleridge was enchanted by this paraphernalia, which could create, with much creaking and hissing, a stormy seashore, an echoing cavern, mountains by moonlight, a dungeon or a fire lit chamber.

On Saturday afternoon the Quantocks' scenery was no illusion and appeared with no noises off and beautifully lit by the warm September sunshine as many delegates strolled over the hills and through the combes. Others toured by bus to visit East Quantoxhead, then on to the fishing village of Watchet with the magnificent bronze Ancient Mariner and finally Cleeve Abbey.

"Are Coleridge's Plays worth the Candle?"—is the question Jim Mays asked and answered on Saturday evening. He suggested that we cannot study Coleridge's work and his quick silver mind with out exploring his plays and following a lucid and extremely well argued lecture we were happy and relieved to learn his plays certainly were worth the candle.

After supper animated discussion continued late into the night to such an extent that only three early Sunday morning walkers, led by our intrepid Peter Larkin climbed up past Alfoxden, presently closed as a hotel, to see the golden dawn over the gorse and heather at the top.

Joyce Crick as a leading authority on Coleridge's translations of Schiller, shed clear light on Schiller's work and the part he played in attempting to unify German Literature at a time when the country was recovering from a decline of literary culture following the 30 years war. This decline however was not mirrored in musical culture. The Wallenstein trilogy is Schiller's attempt to remodel German classical drama along Shakespearean lines and the free translation by Coleridge into blank verse was a significant achievement. He had a deep regard for Schiller and years later described him as the master of the diffused drama of history and that Wallenstein was the greatest of his works.

The last lecture of the weekend was by John Beer but sadly he was unable to attend the Kilve meeting and Peter Larkin read his piece The Dramatic Element in Coleridge's Poetic Imagination. This proved to be a succinct and fascinating presentation, which led neatly into a lively discussion covering all areas of the study weekend on Coleridge and the Drama.

All agreed that to focus on this subject was a challenge yet with the brilliant support of our authoritative speakers it proved to be a stimulating and

memorable weekend at Kilve. One came away with a sneaking feeling that with the help of an imaginative and daring producer Coleridge's name may once again be seen up in lights at Drury Lane.

There were fond farewells as the bus set off for the station leaving the few to take the final afternoon walk of the weekend returning in time for a sumptuous cream tea and lively discussion on the correct way to apply cream and jam to a scone.

It had been a splendid weekend with the added bonus of welcoming a new generation of Coleridge scholars to take part with the help of the Friends bursary fund.

Thanks to Peter Larkin, Shirley Watters and all the committee, Coleridge and the Drama, enhanced by the beautiful scenery, had been, in this critic's view, a triumph.