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R E V I E W

Warren Stevenson, *The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry*

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Warren Stevenson. *The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry, Romantic Reassessment*, 109, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg Studies in English Literature). Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981. iv + 109 pp.

Reviewed by V. A. De Luca

This slender book, really a pamphlet, is as diffuse as it is brief. Large as the subject announced in its title may seem, Warren Stevenson's treatment widens the focus. What he has produced is not an essay on the Romantic revival of a specific classical topos but rather six thumbnail synopses of the high points in the poetic careers of the six major Romantic poets, considered seriatim. Since none of these chapters runs longer than twenty pages, the commentaries on individual works tend to be emaciated, and Stevenson has room for the Golden Age only *en passant*.

As one might expect from the author of an earlier book largely about Blake (*Divine Analogy*, Salzburg 1972), Stevenson makes Blake the cornerstone of what thematic structure the book has, and it begins appropriately enough with the central statement: "The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call'd the Golden Age." But Stevenson never quite explains what precisely Blake is saying here or how he is reading the Ancients. As a result no firm idea of the Golden Age ever emerges in the book, although as he skims from poet to poet and work to work Stevenson keeps an eye out for anything salvational, anything numinous, anything pastoral, anything apocalyptic, anything agreeable, anything specially labeled "Edenic" or "golden." There are nonetheless some astounding omissions: no mention, for instance, of Wordsworth's "Prospectus" and the famous lines, "Paradise and groves / Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old / Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be / A history of departed things, / Or a mere fiction of what never was?"—the most germane lines to Stevenson's subject in all of Romantic poetry. At the same time there is room for such things as a five-page treatment of "Christabel," where the Golden Age comes in only twice—Christabel's bedchamber is a "mini-Golgonooza," and "Christabel's paradigmatic rela-

tion to the theme of the Golden Age is that of a spiritual transformer embodying the concept of vicarious atonement" (49). These instances give some notion of the prose style in the book, the sponginess of the ideas, the hollow use of Blake as touchstone.

On the whole, however, *The Myth of the Golden Age* strays only rarely into fantastical interpretations. For the most part, Stevenson's observations are inoffensive and unarguable, like those in headnote comments in undergraduate anthologies. Although there is nothing in this book that a scholar or critic will find valuable, it might usefully serve students as a light introduction to the romantic quest for bliss. It is a pity that its Salzburg venue makes it unlikely that the book will be sold in those outlets where undergraduates purchase their study guides.

Geoffrey Keynes, Kt., and Peter Davidson, eds. *A Watch of Nightingales*. London: The Stourton Press, 1981. xii + 48 pp. Four hundred copies printed.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Sir Geoffrey Keynes and Professor Peter Davidson have collected "nearly fifty poems" (p. [xii]), or rather twenty-seven poems and twelve fragments (some of them in prose), addressed or referring to the "Most musical" of birds, as Milton called the nightingale. Isaac Walton says that the man who hears at midnight

the clear aires, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, Lord, what Musick hast thou provided for the Saints in Heaven, when thou affordest bad men such musick on earth!

The title derives from the technical term for a group of nightingales, as in an exaltation of larks and a charm of goldfinches, also derived from Dame Julia Berners's *Boke of Hawkyng, Huntynge, and Fysshynge* (1486).

The poets are, of course, concerned with the birdsong rather than the songbird, for the bird itself is negligible in appearance and usually invisible. Some try to imitate the sound of the song, as in Skelton and Coleridge's "jug jug" and Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, "Wine!