

Reviews

Simon Reynolds, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon*. Stroud, Glos.: Catalpa Press, 1984. 183 pp, 80 plates. £ 20.*

Solomon. A Family of Painters. Catalogue of the Exhibition in the Geffrye Museum, London and Birmingham City Museums and Art Gallery, November-March 1985-1986. 87 pp, c. 100 plates.

Simeon Solomon was influenced by both D.G. Rossetti and Swinburne, the former turning him toward Dante, the Romantic poets, and Old Testament themes, the latter inspiring *Sappho and Erinna in the Garden*, *Mytilene* (watercolor, 1864) and *Heliogabalus*, *High Priest of the Sun*, *Atalanta*, and *Damon and Aglae* (all painted in 1866). In addition, Walter Pater's curiously personal and melancholic attitude toward classical antiquity combined with the teachings of Oscar Browning led Solomon to the composition of his memorable prose poem *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (written in Rome, 1869, privately published, 1871). In my view, *A Vision* is a Symbolist masterpiece, with Jewish, classical, and private imagery intertwined within the frame of an allegorical pilgrimage. However, since purification is not meant to occur through Divine Love but through healing Sleep, the oft-repeated criticism arises that *A Vision* is vague and inconsistent. The true significance of the absorption into vision becomes clear when one compares *A Vision* with another Symbolist masterpiece, Pierre Louÿs' *Aphrodite* (1892), where sexual love in a reverie is preferred to reality.

Both solid biographical information and critical discussion of Solomon's work came to an abrupt halt with the strange *urinoir* incident of 1873. Retrospective exhibitions in 1906 could not save Solomon's reputation from the salacious pen of the journalist Bernard Falk, whose sensational lines remain our chief source of knowledge about Solomon's last years. Solomon's American devotee Julia Ellsworth Ford gives us glimpses, in a sympathetic interview, of Solomon's ritualism and love for visionary poetry, which played so important a part in his friendship

with the weird Count Eric Stenbock around 1866. Solomon's works of the 80's and 90's are full of his highly personal iconography, mingled with Catholic and Buddhist images.

Mr. Reynold's book should help to define Solomon's place in the post-Pre-Raphaelite world of art by "fitting the prose poem in the correct context in Solomon's lifestory and into the spectrum of his visual creative work" (Preface i). The 80 plates greatly illuminate Solomon's art; for example, Plate 53, *Toilet of a Roman Lady*, reminiscent of *The Beloved* (1865-7), sustains the impression of Rossetti's magnetic influence. If the beautiful watercolor *Girl at a Fountain* (1865), located in The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, had been added, the effect would have been even more striking. Although Mr. Reynolds confines the range of Solomon's work to "pagan and classical themes" (p. 23) and treats the prose poem as a summary instead of a new beginning, it should be kept in mind that Solomon created his own mythology after deliberately freeing himself from his Jewish upbringing and discovering the antique world as a source of "indecent" themes.

Two characteristics of the painter's late works, often seen as frail and weak repetitions, are directly related to *A Vision*: 1) the aim of pilgrimage is to reach a higher, more ethereal level of consciousness, with Sleep as the real guide, and pictures showing figures from the story have the same tendency; and 2) the astonishing fact that the artist stuck to his own imagery for more than thirty years may be explained as a deliberate attempt to defend his artistic autonomy. Thus the late works acquire a new significance. Chalks, pencil, and watercolor are excellently suited for ethereal representations; the painter had little need for oils. *Amoris Sacramentum* (1868) is not deified youth, as Mr. Reynolds claims, but the subject of Plate 50 is Love as high priest, as in the earlier drawings based on the *Song of Songs*. Nor does *Night and her child Sleep* (Plate 78) represent Mother Earth and Human Love but exactly what the title states. And the *Angel* (Plate 70) is clearly