

LLAREGGUB REVISITED: DYLAN THOMAS AND THE STATE OF MODERN POETRY,
by David Holbrook, Bowes and Bowes; 21s.

The first third of this book is concerned with the establishment of the thesis that 'lack of compassionate impulse is at the root of the absence of metaphorical responsibility in modern poetry'. The thesis is applied to poems by Betjeman, Amis, Wain, and others, to indict their 'self-protective lack of sympathy', and its converse is seen as the vindication of folk-song.

To have compassion is to enter and share the predicament of others, to feel with them, identify oneself with them. Metaphor is to carry over one category of experience and mingle it with another, to establish a sympathy between two identities. Metaphor is thus an articulation of compassion, and compassion is an impulse to metaphor. Some such reasoning I take to underly Mr Holbrook's position, but I think he should have provided it himself.

The remaining two-thirds of the book are concerned with the Downing of Dylan Thomas (for Mr Holbrook too derives from that abrasive College). Thomas is held up to our pity and contempt as superlatively defective not only in metaphor and compassion but as a human being. He is made a metaphor for all that the author abhors. The tone passes rapidly from sneering and patronage to impertinence and effrontery. In short, the book becomes irresponsible and uncompassionate.

That Dylan Thomas's poetry has provoked eulogy or invective instead of literary criticism is a measure of its catalytic vigour. Treece, Olson, Stanford, Holbrook, Grigson, Erberhart, Shapiro, and Dame Edith Sitwell too, shed more light upon themselves than upon these ninety-odd poems which agitate them so variously. Nine years (and some six books) after the poet's death, sober exegesis is sadly overdue.

Mr Holbrook says that 'much of Dylan Thomas is meaningless': I feel the same about Eliot and Yeats. The thing to do, then, is to begin to establish the content of the poet's experience, in the light of which meanings and metaphors can be explored. For example, a Benedictine acquaintance of Thomas once wrote to me that 'there was little need to explain ordinary Catholic practice to him, he had a more than ordinary awareness of our belief and delighted in arguments upon it'. This means that one is justified in taking the apparently Catholic iconography (the Sacred Heart, for instance) of '*Vision and Prayer*' at its face value.

This poem, like may others, shows King James's Bible as a primary source, together with Milton. Other poems relate clearly to passages in Pascal and Leonardo da Vinci's *Notebooks*. The exploration of the west Wales topography of the poems is also rewarding. In such directions lies the work of responsible critics.

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