

The Quest for Gravity

by James Stewart

*The Quest for Love*¹ published a year ago, is the best of the dozen books – of poetry, of criticism, of short stories, of works on teaching and of anthologies for teachers – that Mr David Holbrook has put out in the last five years. Something of his programme, and of a distinctive overtone that accompanies it, can be seen if we go back to his dispute with a *Times Literary Supplement* critic in 1962. Writing in reply to a fairly stinging review of *Llareggub Revisited*, his book on Dylan Thomas, Mr Holbrook affirmed (and that seems the right word for it): ‘It is true that I feel strongly that literature is of little value unless it brings us deeper perceptions and insights into our own nature, and the nature of our living conditions, in time and mortality. For this reason I seek to write with gravity . . .’

What he intended, he suggested, was ‘a quest for gravity, in the art of writing, and in personal living’. Yet there is a kind of quest for gravity, and a kind of quest for love, which makes us pause. To care so much is a great thing, to declare oneself openly is an honest act which we see too seldom, but aren’t the references to time and mortality uncomfortably over-large, embarrassingly imprecise? A quality of Puritanism, as Hooker knew, is to think too little of the multiple lesser needs and laws that govern our lives, to concede a kind of hypertrophy to the greatest and (at worst) to dismiss with rancour those who cultivate the less. Can all literature be conscripted into a single campaign for health? This is the debate that Mr Holbrook has opened, and *The Quest for Love* is a notable, brave and often brilliant contribution to the debate.

It is a book which attracts by its energy, its ardour, and its readiness to risk self-exposure; its readiness too, to reflect on human goodness and generosity. But it has also to be read as a spectacle of how often you can take away with the one hand what you have given with the other: so intent on our experience of deepest reality, but so hasty and sweeping about the texture of actual things; so full of honour for the themes of courtesy and loving confidence in Chaucer and Shakespeare, but so ready to savage an opponent.

The *Quest for Love*, then, is to be read as literary criticism, with valuable things to say; as a thesis about the discovery of love, ‘this tender and continually mysterious quest’; and, unavoidably, as a ‘case’, which is instructive if grasped, and which needs to be grasped. A celebrated case, certainly; Mr Holbrook in the last five years has

¹by David Holbrook; Methuen 36s.

raised a record number of hackles, which by itself might suggest that there is a point of pressure worth attending to. His reviewers have often been waspish and unfair, but who can blame them when they are so often (as Mr Holbrook tells them) infected with infantilism, narcissism, and hatred of life? All the same, he cares for the good, and has a programme to offer, and must welcome debate.

The book is devoted mainly to a study of love in the marriage debate of the *Canterbury Tales*, in *The Winter's Tale*, and in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Behind this venture lies an intense evangelical seriousness of aim: to find ways of wakening in men attitudes of simple generous good. But that good seems to Mr Holbrook to spring most of all from a free flow of natural feeling. Where to D. H. Lawrence's logic the sympathy of love and the sympathy of hate were equal forces of attraction and repulsion, and tenderness only precariously won, to Mr Holbrook hate is simple negation, a cramped restrictive thing, the failure of true flow of feeling.

In his first long chapter, Mr Holbrook finds support for his view in the psychoanalytic theories of Suttie, Winnicott and Melanie Klein. Through the power of fantasy, imagination and art, men build the constructive, outgoing and loving elements in their nature, and this indeed is the use of art. As a result, Mr Holbrook's whole sweeping educational and redemptive programme, and his estimate of literature, is poised on a very slight, narrow, and, I suspect, confused thesis; that our true task is to re-awaken the imagination and the starved intuitive self. What a history lies behind this assertion – a romantic version of neo-Platonic myth, now dressed up in modern scientific garb. All the stirrings of true fantasy are good, because they open us outwards; we are naturally altruistic and capable of love; fantasy breaks up the frozen log-jam of introversion and narcissism and opens us to their objects, to seeing the other as an object in his own right. One sees a pleasant consequence of this war-cry, 'set the imagination free' in Mr Holbrook's excellent anthology of poetry for schools, *Iron, Honey, Gold*, which is so much less polite and restrictive than most school anthologies, so much more ready to include the strange or disturbing. But this view becomes a kind of dogma, with its own limitations. The body, it seems, can give a kind of grace. Every positive experience of love and touch, and every enrichment of bodily life adds to one's capacities to *enjoy* other people, and to give richness and satisfaction to others.

At this point comes a most curious shift. If the fruit of imaginative life and fantasy is the good health and the constructive impulses which it promotes, surely (so Mr Holbrook's logic runs) the test of a literature which truly promotes a living flow is precisely that it does, as its actual demonstrable drive, celebrate the triumph of health, constructivity, and a good life. Rejoicing, affirmation, the dance, the brave pang in the face of loss, *confidence*, the vitality of a brave being-in-rhythm with the mystery of life – these are to be seen as the

notes of life in a work.

Unhappily, psychoanalytic theory, as Mr Holbrook uses it, enters to re-inforce these restrictive values. For he finds that psychoanalysis outlines in quite new and positive terms the processes that make for love and the processes that make for hate, and so it is able to give us (all too readily) new grounds for detecting the literature which is destructive of life. Great poems are healing things, restoring courage and brave awareness, and confronted by an opposing world of mockery and cold sterility.

Now, that all literature which is great (or true, or delightful through the illumination which it gives) has a value, a potent value for good, in the life of a culture, one would wish to assert. But there is a corollary. We are in real danger of losing that value if we see literature as something which can be *put to use* and which (it soon enough follows) must be usable. Yet this, despite occasional consciousness of its danger, Mr Holbrook does habitually hold and it is to his credit that the very unguardedness with which he goes on and on, allows his main emphases to expose themselves. True literature is seen as an almost direct prescription of how to live, a 'positive commendation of effective normality'. 'What we need now,' he says, and it is the head of his approach to life and criticism, 'are embodiments in imagination of the nature of love, concepts of what is worth striving for and waiting for, and adult satisfactions'. By contrast, the destructive work 'springs traps under moments of expected triumph'. Mr Holbrook means this as a hostile comment. His choice of texts for demonstration is, I suppose he would admit, loaded: the Wife of Bath, January and May, Averagus and Dorigen, are *exempla* at different levels of the triumph of life over unlife. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a plain case of the victory of fear and dominance. 'The falsifications in this book are such that if taken over in the sense that we might try to live by them, they might make life more difficult and insecure, and our attitudes more destructive.' *The Winter's Tale*, which he handles so well, is chosen because it is a romance and the fruitful rhythms are in the ascendancy.

In Mr Holbrook's view the *aim* is to restore adequate concepts in love, marriage, family life, parenthood, and child care, and the method, by which the adequacy of our literature and living is judged, is 'to keep "good" feelings flowing, and hope viable'. In elevating this strategy, as Mr Holbrook insistently does, to the one right way, he is led to depreciate and weaken the rest of the complex wholeness of life, so that even the good things he eloquently calls for (altruism, compassionate activity) begin to sound isolated and artificial; a little menacing.

The service that literature gives to life is not to be attained by a prescribed process of stirring vital feelings, nor by providing *exempla*, but by achieving its own kind of being, which certainly depends on forces of virtue and good, but not in ways that can be reduced to a

formula or predicted. In ordinary life, for that matter, we are reminded not to judge: grace and love aren't usually present in the most obvious places. So if I call Mr Holbrook's attitude *puritan*, I mean by that something wrongly simplistic, which elevates the one right way and gets this elevation by depressing and discountenancing whole other modes of being, so that the varied complex grain of human affairs seems to be elbowed out. The defenders of other principles, the practitioners of other kinds of education or forms of art, are worldly or wicked. And so we get the kind of folly shown in the measured contempt (in one of those footnotes) for C. S. Lewis's 'hate of life'.

This strain of indifference to the ordinary mixed stuff of human affairs (not that it is Mr Holbrook's *only* line) seems to lead to an astonishing feature of his work – a kind of pervading credulity, and chanciness of argument, of slipshod appeal to imprecise or conjectural fact, of sweeping conclusions from a chain of mere suppositions. One senses an almost moral pressure behind this mode. The truth is there, he feels, although hard to express, as when he alludes to 'a kind of psychosomatic philosophical breakdown, in felt and thought attitudes of life' and hard to prove – but should this deny it expression? There is something decidedly odd and disconcerting in the indifference to modest actuality, for the sake of some greater point. One wishes there were some of Wordsworth's masculine tactiturnity, and attention to detail. His rather frequent inaccuracy about quotations, his indifference to scholarly care, his whirling repetitions which do duty instead of precise formulations, his willingness to press on although he has left an unmopped-up confusion of propositions behind him, all belong together. What makes it strange is that this all sorts so ill with a critic who is capable of having a real solicitude for individual persons, since each is full of 'creativity and hope'.

These fairly remarkable questions come up with force when we read Mr Holbrook's literary criticism in this book. It is as if he himself were still painfully struggling towards that object-relationship, that respect towards the object out there, which is one of the concerns of his psychoanalytic passages.

Consider on the one hand the work on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. How badly this begins! There could not be a worse crime against honest reading, and fairness, than to begin by setting out the clumsy predictable syndromes of disease, borrowed from psychoanalytic theory, which one is thereafter to identify by moving here and there in the text. This is not to deny the usefulness of psychoanalytic commentary, or of many things that Holbrook does see. There is evidence enough in the text that Connie is (besides a good deal else) a narcissistic projection of Mellors' and Lawrence's needs, and offers no opposition, no resistance, of the kind that Ursula gave to Birkin, to their hunger for domination. But his method doesn't respect the object;


it neglects the pressure of the text. Holbrook proceeds by finding confirmation in the tale of the various facets of his psychoanalytic diagram, drawing up his picture indifferently from shaky biography and bits of quotation. A good deal that is valuable comes up this way, under Holbrook's vigorous assault, including points which Middleton Murray made thirty years ago, but Holbrook's *explanation*, like Murray's, is not to be trusted. It forgets Lawrence's courage, and critical control, and his philosophy of life; it forgets that the same man wrote *The Rainbow* and in 1916, after the most acute pressures, *Women in Love*.

To say what went wrong with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* needs a far more patient respect for the qualities of the tale, and for the record of Lawrence's life and writing; the right kind of discipline of relevance is absent. We aren't sufficiently discussing the actual tale that is there.

People must be rescued, cultures must be remade, the truth must be told, we must love one another or die. But it is doubtful whether this can be done, with permanence, without a more steady respect for the whole needs of the persons and things one is working with, or if literature can be pressed into service without recognising the way in which, as well as being 'moral', it is autonomous. The most impressive and hopeful feature of Mr Holbrook is that his own innate response to a great work seems to have a real sensitivity to its autonomy, to this separate being with its unknown modes. so that when led on and governed by a positive text, as in his pieces on Chaucer and *The Winter's Tale*, he seems to abandon his expectations and to draw out, with impressive intelligence, a good deal that is there. On Chaucer, for example, his use of psychanalytic phrases and categories is reversed. There is still the slightly narrowing concern – what is healthy, what is not? – but now the categories and terminology *serve* as a genuinely useful new idiom for drawing out, for example, the frictional sensuality of January, with its deathly and pitiful straining. How good he is, too, on the 'curtesy' which emerges in the Franklin's tale, on mutual regard, and the honour due to others in their own being. A different firmness and specificity seems to enter his writing; a complete honesty, in fact.

On *The Winter's Tale* he is good on Leontes and on the darkening downward structure of the play, good on Hermione, and on the shoots of new life that seem to rise with natural vigour, and good on the search for reparation and continuity in the play. Here Mr Holbrook seems his own most impressive exemplar of that healing power of art to which he appeals. He has a capacity for moving fineness, as a critic, in the values which he brings out, so that interpreting also becomes (as it should) a creation of value. This is so in his reflections on the permanence of the 'tender evanescent' values of 'curtesy'. It is so in his rejection of Mellors's 'awful sensuality', in his pleas for love and true relationship, for in love 'the

gustation belongs to mortality, death and time: what triumphs is relationship'. Curiously this whole paragraph could have been written by C. S. Lewis. It is a point which might lead Mr Holbrook to further reflection (has he read *A Grief Observed*?) Should not the things he says on Chaucer's daisy ('This fresshe flour I grette Knelying alwey, til it unclosed was') be pressed further: 'Only because of such regard does Love come to him, "walking in the mede"'. It is a profound psychological observation, that only by such humility, such tender respect and reverence for Nature and human nature can we arrive at love'. These are good and healing words, and they have a relevance to criticism, and to the ways one goes about education and controversy. Things deserve respect for the patient modes of their own life. To stick to the point of literary criticism, poems and novels also deserve tender respect as individuals. Every time we try to *use* them, as if our whole approach were to isolate and extract normative precepts, or dreadful warnings of aridity – we lose the thing itself, it no longer comes to us 'walking in the mede'. And then how likely it is that whole areas or hidden strands of good, coming out of unrecognized places, in the grips of darkness or terror or evil or decay, or even of irony, not bearing the certificated glow of health and triumph, will be missed.



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