

the carefully turned sonnets by which (*pace* the Blessed Damozel) Rossetti is chiefly remembered and the undisciplined outpourings of the Prophetic Books. The Blessed Damozel, for all its lovely imagery, is at the uttermost remove from Blake's description of even the lowest of his Heaven's, Beulah, the 'place where Contrarities are equally true.' Could any greater contrast be found between Blake's treatment of the Magdalen and Rossetti's Jenny, which the latter declared to be his favourite poem?

When writing on Blake, Mr. Preston shows great insight and sympathy. His first chapter is a really valuable summary of Blake's outlook. With regard to Rossetti he is unfortunately carried away by desire to prove his case into an unwarranted idealisation. This is a pity, for the book apart from several irritating and confusing asides is interesting and readable. Nevertheless, we must add that too much is made of the very doubtful conjecture as to Blake's disappointed hopes of fatherhood and that the naming of the great characters of the Prophetic Books is of far deeper significance than Mr. Preston imagines.

JANET CLEEVES.

WHAT IS A CLASSIC? By T. S. Eliot. (Faber; 3s. 6d.)

No one who reads this address given before the Virgil Society in October, 1944, will regret that Mr. T. S. Eliot has set himself to answer again the question which Sainte-Beuve might be thought to have closed.

The Essay of Sainte-Beuve was written in the heat of controversy, it is a work of polemic, and it is not free from the dust of strife. The approach of Mr. Eliot is more objective, and from a different angle. From the first he makes it clear that he is not concerned with controversy, that he has no verdict to deliver on the relative merits of Classical and Romantic literature. He addresses himself merely to answering the question 'What is a Classic?' objectively and absolutely.

The word 'Classic' has many meanings in as many different contexts, and all of them custom has made permissible. But in this address Mr. Eliot is occupied only with one meaning in one context. He is not concerned with defining the limits of Classical and Romantic literature, his purpose is only to define a Classic. In doing this he is careful to preserve for himself the right on other occasions to use the word 'Classic' in the less absolute sense which we use in speaking of 'Handley Cross' as a classic of the hunting field, or the authors of Greece and Rome as the classics.

In attempting to answer the question 'What is a Classic?' in the sense to which he has limited himself, Mr. Eliot has Virgil particularly in mind, for the very good reason that 'whatsoever solution we arrive at, it cannot be one which excludes Virgil--we may confidently say it must be one which will expressly reckon with him.'

'Les ouvrages anciens ne sont pas classiques parce qu'ils sont vieux, mais parce qu'ils sont énergiques, frais, et dispos,' Sainte-Beuve tells us. But Mr. Eliot, in defining a Classic with Virgil as his standard, is more exacting. The qualities he requires for a Classic are 'maturity of mind, maturity of manners, maturity of language, perfection of the common style, and comprehensiveness.' After surveying the great monuments of European literature, he finds them all defective in one or more of these qualities, and therefore concludes that the only Classical Poet, absolutely speaking, is the poet Virgil.

But, Mr. Eliot is careful to point out, to say that Virgil is the only absolutely Classical Poet, is not at all to say that he is the greatest poet that ever lived—a statement which, as he says, is really meaningless. Still less is it to say that, because Latin Literature produced the only Classical Poet, it is therefore greater than any other literature. Readers of this address will remember the saying of Remy de Gourmont that 'Classical Roman Literature died of Virgilian perfection,' and Mr. Eliot says much the same thing. Indeed, it is by no means an unqualified advantage for a language to culminate in a Classic, and whether it does so or not is largely, Mr. Eliot maintains, a matter of chance. But to say that Virgil is the only Classical Poet properly so called does mean that Virgil supplies a criterion and standard of criticism of which we must never lose sight. As Dr. Mackail has said so well in the masterly introduction to his text of the *Aeneid*: 'for the enormous and chaotic production of the present age, it is more than ever essential to have a standard of quality, to preserve and study the masterpieces. This standard Virgil gives' (Mackail, *Aeneid*, Intro. lxxv).

It is not for us to criticise the thesis we have tried to outline and, indeed, so fascinating, so lucid is the whole exposition that criticism is charmed and, almost in spite of itself, silenced. The importance of this address must not be judged by its length, for in a very small space Mr. Eliot has comprised a vast survey. He has argued his thesis so enchantingly and so clearly that it is hard not to believe that it will take its place among the few, very few, masterpieces of our time, to stand beside, if not to outlive, the *Essay of Sainte-Beuve*.

BRUNO S. JAMES.

DAFYDD AP GWILYM: Selected poems translated by Nigel Heseltine. (Dublin: The Cuala Press; 12s. 6d.)

THE GREAT HUNGER. By Patrick Kavanagh. (Dublin: The Cuala Press; 12s. 6d.)

Rarely nowadays can one want to begin a review with praise for the look of a book. The present examples of the work of the Cuala Press are a happy reminder of what good craftsmanship can do. They are not exotics: indeed they have the plain type, strong paper and simple binding of boards and linen which characterised the