

for those who have read *Politicians and the War* and *Politicians and the Press*. I cannot but think that in his hostility to his subject, Mr. Driberg has erred in not presenting more fully the serious arguments for Lloyd George's accession to power in 1916. If the war was lost without Lloyd George, all the intrigues were justified; if not, then the picture of politicians jockeying for power while millions were killed at the Front is revolting. It is also surely unjust to Lord Beaverbrook to make so little mention of the unpopular rôle he assumed in persuading his Conservative readers to accept the necessity of the Irish treaty.

Whatever the rights or wrongs, Beaverbrook played a vital part in the political events of 1911-18. He paid the price of his intrigue in general mistrust and in naïvely allowing his political future to be forever blasted by accepting a peerage. One is reminded of Lord Shelburne, whose brilliant intrigues were equally rewarded by mistrust and political impotence.

**B**Y CONTRAST the third phase of Beaverbrook's life from 1918 to 1940 when, as a newspaper proprietor, he tried to wield political power by indirect means is one of almost farcical pretence. It is true that in Baldwin he met an extraordinarily astute opponent. Nevertheless the gap between his aims and his achievements was vast. There has surely been no more absurd fantasy in English politics than the Empire Free Trade

Campaign. It is surprising that Mr. Driberg, who is so adept and subtle in his sharp and sudden scratches, has not used his gift for irony more in this section. He does, however, give us many fascinating stories of newspaper life.

The last phase of Aircraft Production, Mission to Stalin, and Second Front Campaign is too close to us to be satisfactory material for biography. Mr. Driberg provides some curious peeps into the odd relationship of Churchill and Beaverbrook. It is clear, however, that his sympathy is not engaged with either man. Indeed this is one of the faults of the whole book. Beaverbrook's major fights were with Conservative or Liberal politicians with whom Mr. Driberg is only slightly more, if at all, in sympathy than he is with Beaverbrook himself. The result is a biography that is at once too partisan and yet not partisan enough.

Nevertheless he does succeed in giving a very lively picture of Beaverbrook as a man, largely in the quite brilliant sections of the book in which he describes the daily routine of a Press Lord's life. It is sad but hardly surprising that he has not brought the same life to Beaverbrook's public career. To write a largely hostile life of a living public man is an original feat, but originality is not quite enough. It has only been achieved at the cost of scrappiness, repetition, and lack of co-ordination. The book does, however, whet the appetite for the biography that can one day be written.

*Angus Wilson*

## A RING OF ROSES

**M**R. W. H. AUDEN has more than once suggested that there are elements common to the writing of a poem and the playing of a game. The greatest of modern philosophers, however, spent a good deal of his life in attempting to find out what constitutes our idea of a game. He was not very successful. If it is as difficult to say what a game is as to define the nature of poetry, then it would

seem that Mr. Auden's observation can be of little help when it comes to deciding what constitutes our idea of a poem.

Nevertheless, in the course of his researches, Wittgenstein did make a few experiments and observations which might, like a meagre lantern, illuminate some of our premisses. In a footnote he observes that a parent, on leaving him alone in a room with the children,

asked him to teach them a game. Wittgenstein proceeded to teach them stud poker. With what degree of alarm we will never know, but, on returning, the parent did remark: "That is not what I meant." This implies that there are certain games which just aren't funny in inappropriate situations, an implication which might well serve as a kind of inverted pedestal for an initial survey of Mr. Auden's new book of poems.\*

Like practically everything else of any importance, it is divided into three sub-equal parts. In the first of these, called "Bucolics," we are treated to a fine display of that grand old game: *Think of a subject and I'll make it my own*. "Horae Canonicae," which constitutes the last section, treats the times of the day in a similar, though somewhat more weighty, manner. It is an example of *One over the clock* or *The mystic's steeplechase*. But Mr. Auden has reserved for the centre-piece of his volume the full vigour and virtuosity of his invention, the final brilliance of both his sportsmanship and his gamesmanship. It is called "In Sunshine and in Shade," and in it the author's talents are being perpetually shuffled about from the brightest of the one to the most gloomy of the other. In it he goes through a repertoire of games too numerous to mention. Of all he is a master, but some are so silly or so contrived that they not only cannot be enjoyed by a stranger but they even tend to spoil his pleasure in the other pastimes which their creator has devised.

At this point, the industrious critic may relax from his argument and join the master at his poetry board. There he will find Mr. Auden crouching over the exigent subtleties of "The Truest Poetry is the most Feigning." "Ah," he will murmur, "someone as hard-working as myself." With that approving word still hot in the air, the poet jumps up and hits the critic over the head with "A Sanguine Thought," follows it up with a swift kick on the "Permanent Way," and then, to the surprise of everyone, the poet performs a deft *Barcarolle* and sings a couple of *Nocturnes* over his prostrate adversary. All that is strange, and everything alive is strange, seems to be happening continually, yet, when the least sensitive of readers lets

the pages slip back to the title poem of the whole book, even he will recognise that something even stranger, stranger perhaps because in spite of its strangeness it is more normal, something very queer indeed is going on from page 35 to page 37. On these pages lies one of the finest English poems of the present century.

It is when we contemplate such a poem that the analogy with a game finally falls through. There is indeed a game in progress, but it is a simple one of juxtaposition, dream against reality, desire against fulfilment, as simple as *Pop goes the Weasel* or *Ring-a-ring of Roses*. To say that this game is being played is to do nothing whatever to explain how such lines as the following ever got written:

*The mass and majesty of this world, all  
That carries weight and always weighs  
the same  
Lay in the hands of others; they were small  
And could not hope for help and no help  
came:  
What their foes liked to do was done,  
their shame  
Was all the worst could wish; they lost  
their pride  
And died as men before their bodies died.*

To say all this about "The Shield of Achilles" is not to suggest that it is *technically* more interesting than the other poems in the same volume. In fact, it is not; except in so far as it again proves what Pope stated more than two hundred years ago, that the greatest poems are not those which make the greatest technical advances but those which best, and most simply, use the language that they find about them. There are many of Mr. Auden's new poems which do open up new alleyways into speech but until he has broadened them to allow for a greater weight of traffic they will not be able to support the weight of such statements as are found in this one poem.

It is interesting that Mr. Auden should appear to be concentrating so much attention on the evolution of a satisfactory poetic period (as opposed to a sentence) so shortly after Mr. Eliot's exhortation to all poets to take another look at Milton. In almost all of the "Bucolics" and in many of the other poems he keeps hard at the task of creating a grammatical unit which will spill over the

\* *The Shield of Achilles*. By W. H. AUDEN. Faber. 10s. 6d.

brim of a short stanza or which will itself fashion a longer one. It must be confessed that he is not uniformly successful. At times, indeed, one is reminded of Pound's adage that poetry should be at least as well written as prose. His long sentences tend to degenerate into a string of tedious or amusing postures, each isolated in the cubicle of a clause. But the attempt remains admirable; for, even where one most laments the results, as in the clumsy "Ode to Gaea," one has a duty to praise those who get up and try to do what almost everybody admits must soon be done and what most of us therefore shy clear of. And there are poems, like "Winds," with which the book opens, where Mr. Auden, almost without mishap, succeeds in breaking through the ten-line barrier.

As for faults, he is content to stick to the old ones while refreshing us with the continually changing range of virtues. He still seems almost incapable of keeping his noun-adjective relationship above the level of a simple syzygy and, though he is able to get more life out of adjectives than any man alive, there remains a thrifless plethora of adjectival nuances. He retains too the techniques of a cataloguer, labelling our desires and deceits with that assiduous vehemence which wearies rather than reforms us. And he is still, as has already been hinted, capable of a thoroughly bad poem. And long may it all continue. The poet who is consistent is usually consistently bad.

IF ONE or two of Mr. Auden's poems appear to be games, and rather cheap games, played at the expense of the reader, there can be no such objection to the latest collection of the verse of Sir Herbert Read.\* Whatever strictures one may level against Sir Herbert, it cannot be said that he is not serious. He approaches the task of communicating with his fellow men in a mood of almost devotional sincerity. He will never belong to that reprobate band who fiddled with words while their souls burned eternally away.

The bulk of his new book is taken up with the script of a radio play in which he displays

\* *Moon's Farm*. By HERBERT READ. Faber. 10s. 6d.

a desperate anxiety about the state of his own and other people's souls. It is often moving and occasionally illuminating but the reader may tend to feel that he is being got at, that he is being proselytised by a somewhat fanatical evangelist of a not very convincing religious dogmatism. The language is simple to the point of being stilted, as simple as any man could wish, and the critic who comes to it fresh from a perusal of Mr. Auden may feel a momentary gratitude for this virtue. But soon he will become aware that it is not simplicity, after all, which makes a good poem. Nothing, in fact, that is even as simple as verbal complication will do. A poem must have complexity, but that must be achieved by methods that are linguistic in a much wider and deeper sense than the most adroit of verbal manipulations. They must be social, psychological, religious, and capable of expressing those subtleties in human and mystical relationships which are inaccessible to any direct statement or questioning of their existence.

It is because Sir Herbert interprets too literally the injunctions of his Muse to say something important that he often fails to convince us of the truth of what he is saying. There is a sense in which the amorous exaggerations of the cavalier poets are more true than these desperate and despairing testimonies; and that sense is the strictly poetic one. When, as in some of the shorter poems like "Lu Yun's Lament" and "Death of a Greek Mercenary," he keeps at a greater distance from his subject, he is much more convincing than when he forces on us the harassed intensities to which his metaphysical experiences have brought him. It is perhaps appropriate that an anarchistic individual should have just these vices and virtues: perhaps it is good for all of us that somebody should dare to have them: but even the wildest of anarchists would do well to remember the following lines in which Mr. Auden defines our human state in so far as it is reflected in our ability to communicate with one another:

*What but tall tales, the luck of verbal  
playing,*

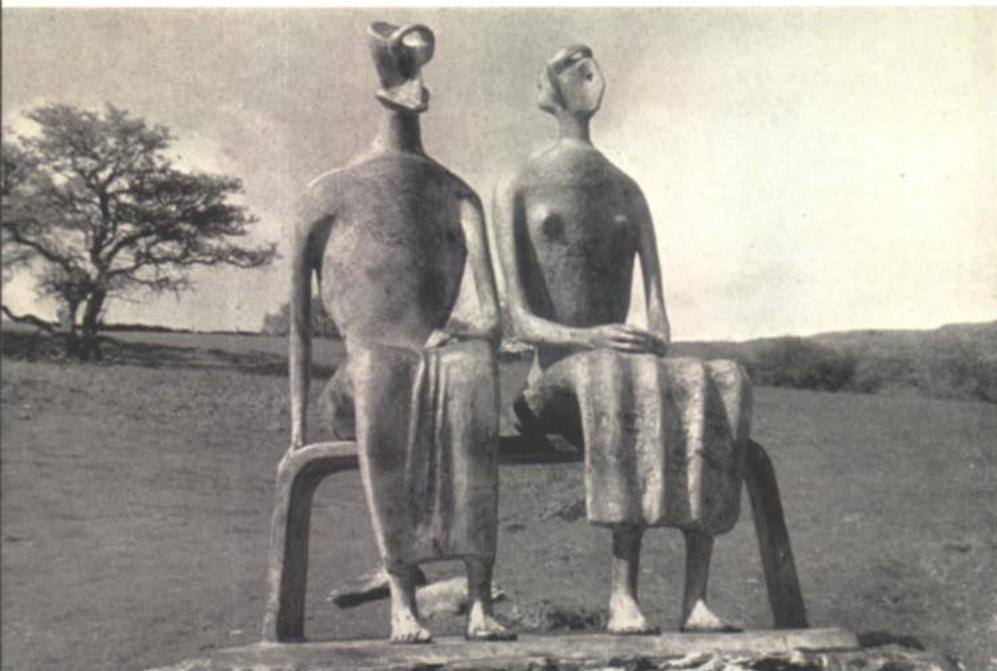
*Can trick his lying nature into saying  
That love, or truth in any serious sense,  
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.*

Burns Singer



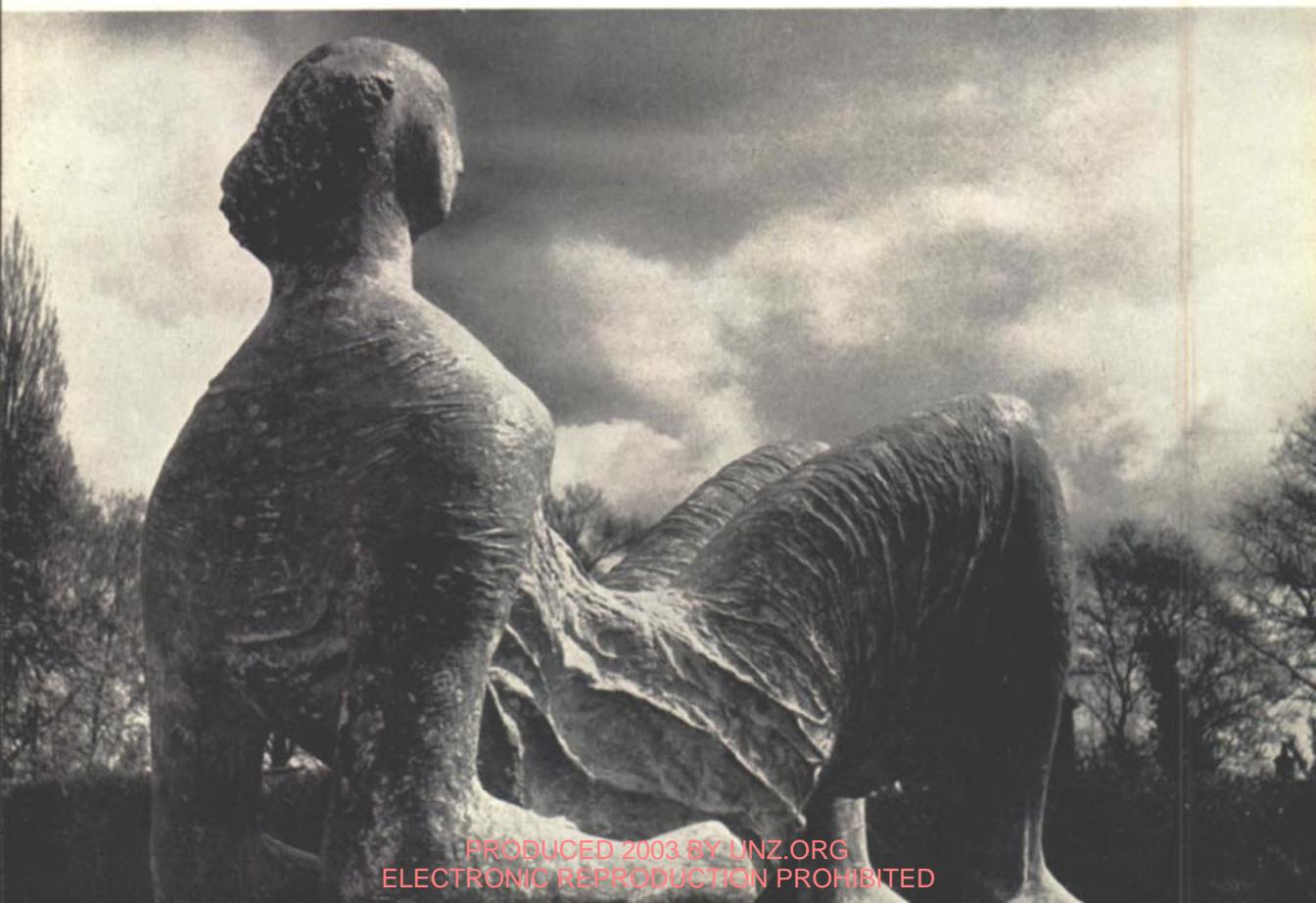
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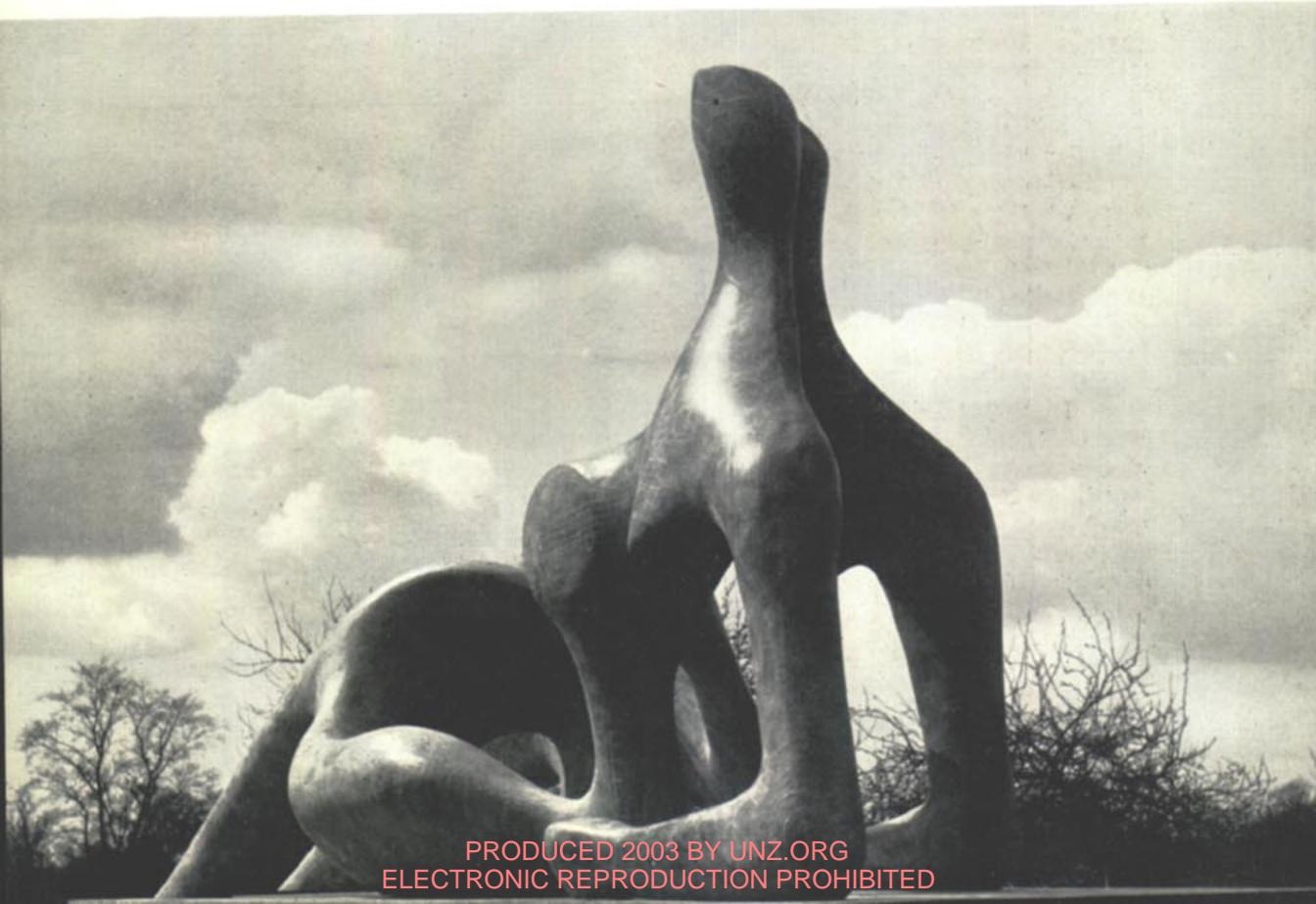
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