

touch the emotions, syllogisms that thrill the senses. No author ever invented titles that more exactly prefigure what is to follow them—"The Salad of Colonel Cray", "The Song of the Flying Fish", "The Point of a Pin", "The Wrong Shape", "The Absence of Mr Glass." There is a glint of alloy there among the pure metal, yet it seems to hold everything together in a way that nothing else could.

Now and again a solution is fudged, the criminal is unbelievably lucky, a witness is unbelievably unobservant, Father Brown sits on a clue. Now and again (a mannerism not uncommon in the other fiction) he pauses pregnantly and a feed-man obligingly throws up a "By which you mean . . .?" or a "But then you knew . . .?" so that Brown can drop his revelatory blockbuster

in a voice like the roll of a drum. I admit to surges of irritation at times like these; they soon die down.

OF Chesterton's seventeen volumes of fiction, seven or eight, with another half-book or so of odds and ends, are worth keeping and re-reading; not a bad score. Very well, he remains a minor master in the genre, but there he remains, in spite of the glaring fact that so much of what interested him was irrelevant or even directly inimical to fiction as we usually think of it. His reader can promise himself, at the lowest count, what Lucian Gregory promised Gabriel Syme near the beginning of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. And that is. . .? A very entertaining evening.

## A Rebuke to the Timid

### *Auden's Essays and Aphorisms—By PETER PORTER*

W. H. AUDEN'S DECISION to return to live in England for part of each year has been misrepresented in a way which has already earned some testy rebukes from the poet himself. The press and television journalists who have extended him their versions of the prodigal's welcome home have been reminded sharply enough that he thinks post-war England both vulgar and provincial. Some of its traditional virtues must be intact or he wouldn't have come back at all, whatever the chances of being mugged in New York; but he may well think of Christ Church, London and old friends as visible vestiges of the true England he has kept in his mind ever since leaving in 1938. Time after time, Auden gives us his view of family life—it is good to be born into a circle of love, to have good things to eat and to do, to learn manners and the rules of playing: but it is death, psychologically and artistically, to stay at home once one has grown up. He sees England and his own family as paradigmatic: they nourished him and loved him until he was strong enough to leave them.

In one particularly interesting foreword in this new collection, he writes, *à propos* eating habits and cooking, "what is the use of pretending one can treat the members of one's own family as

ordinary human beings." But as extraordinary human beings, they will never lose their power and importance, and *Forewords and Afterwords*<sup>1</sup> is, in at least half of its five hundred pages, a dissertation on the English, particularly in their attitudes to class and to literature—a dissertation prepared for Americans, which accounts for some explanatory passages which upset the tone of his writing for English readers. Perhaps the most fascinating of the pieces reprinted here is his review of the autobiographies of Leonard Woolf and Evelyn Waugh, interlarded with parallels from his own early life, which he contributed to the *New Yorker* in 1965. He points out that, in addition to sharing a middle-class professional background with them, he, like Waugh, subscribes to Christian theology, and, like Woolf, to liberal and democratic political ideals. Since there has always been a vein of doomed prophecy in his work, from the earliest poems to the present-day odes against the rapists of Dame Kind (as Cyril Connolly says, this lady is the least effective of his mannered personifications), it's important to acknowledge that Auden has never adopted fashionable extremes of reaction, either politically or artistically.

Introducing Sidney Smith, he writes,

"unattractive and shallow as one may feel so many liberals to be, how rarely on any concrete social issue does one find the liberal position the wrong

<sup>1</sup> *Forewords and Afterwords*. By W. H. AUDEN. Faber & Faber, £3.95.

one. Again, how often, alas, do those very philosophers and writers who have astounded us by their profound insights into the human heart, and human existence, dismay us by the folly and worse of their judgments on the issues of everyday life."

*Forewords and Afterwords*, which might be called Auden's Collected Shorter Criticism, charts this liberal heartland, an eccentric Anglican place far more dependent on the real and not very liberal power of the British navy and the City of London than Auden acknowledges, and regrettably no more today than a museum for Americans to admire. If Auden couldn't stand an England where everybody in the élite knew everybody else, he still took it with him as a touchstone to New York, and has been tireless in explaining it to the world ever since. History has not robbed England of all her liberalism, though there have been some nasty bruises in such parts as immigration and racial policy. But it has taken away her power, and liberalism without power is a pretty charade. So England, in Auden's sermon, is the land of Chesterton, Beerbohm, Wilde, Mayhew, Carroll and J. R. Ackerley. Pope and Tennyson are present too, but, in general, the lesson of short views and loyalty to locality is preached at a present-day super-power from a position which is itself nostalgic for an older super-power's good sense.

Auden's great gift for aphoristic writing should not blind the reader to the strong counter-currents in his work. The Max Beerbohm essay, called, appropriately enough, "One of the Family", is highly critical of English complacency and self-congratulation. "The English have a greater talent than any other people for creating an agreeable family life: that is why it is such a threat to their artistic and intellectual life", he writes; and again, "the great cultural danger for the English is . . . their tendency to judge the arts by the values appropriate to the conduct of family life." But what are the right values—not the pedantic ones he dislikes as much as Waugh did, and not the historically based shiftings of Modernism? The doctrine of the separation of powers applies to the arts also, so presumably Christian values will not do? I think it fair to say that Auden is a passionate moralist, but that his position is confused. In a poem, such confusion is subject to a creative process which imposes unity on it: in discursive prose it may well be masked by the sheer authority of the writer's mind. This happens often when reading Auden, most frequently when he is writing about Christianity. He is so good at explaining, say, what is moving and apposite about Kierkegaard, and then, in a later essay, formulating with enviable insight and succinctness all one's doubts of the position he had already established so brilliantly. Perhaps this is what Stravinsky meant by his description

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of Auden as the only moralist whose tone he could bear. Not only does Auden seem to be acquainted with sin and temptation (though not likely to yield to it much and therefore free of inverted pharisaism), but he revisits his oracles and gets new messages. Any reader who attempted to describe the beliefs of the author of these forewords and afterwords, gathered from thirty years' occasional journalism, would start out with several certainties and end up with only a tone of voice. It is that tone of voice which is needed so much in England today—enthusiastic, informed, not afraid to say what it knows, above all intuitive. Beneath our ironies and our scepticism, we are fearfully timid. Auden in New York has not been tempted to take refuge in this family timidity and he has earned the right to rebuke those who have.

**FOREWORDS AND AFTERWORDS** is garnered from Auden's smaller pieces and hasn't the scope and consequence of *The Dyer's Hand*. Nor is it his own selection, being made by Edward Mendelson, of Yale University. But it can be added to *A Certain World*, *Letter to Lord Byron* and some of the haiku-shaped pieces of his later years to swell the total of material useful to a biographer. For many years I was devoted to Auden's saying that poets don't write autobiographies, and it still seems an excellent commandment. But it fails to take into account the perspective of memory, the mind's tail-chasing which makes an ageing man's early days closer to him than the time of his first maturity. In this way, though certain never to undertake an autobiography as such, Auden has written a good deal over the past fifteen years about the world of his childhood, schooling and adolescence. Though never confessional (in the Rousseau, not the M. L. Rosenthal sense), he is not evasive on sexual, political and social issues. Where an attitude may contain an inference for his own life, he will let it stand, if it is important. More interestingly, he has taken to developing that fascination with his own family which was first revealed in *Letter to Lord Byron*. The Waugh/Woolf/Auden review should be read by anybody seeking insight into the enormously fruitful background of English middle-class writing of the first half of the twentieth century. Is it all due to coming from families where the children were loved? If so, what of the theory that such family life stifles intellectual effort? Or should we thank the middle-class habit of sending sons to public school for the necessary leaven of alienation which makes the artist? Again, what of American Auden declaring that he had to leave England to

learn the value of work? His output from 1930 to 1938 was at least as prodigious as anything later, and it was nearly all original, not editorial or commentary. But Auden's emphasis on the necessity for work is wholly admirable. Only once did I think he went too far, when, in his distaste for connoisseurship, he seemed to imply that one could appreciate art only if one made it. But Auden does not compose: would he therefore question the sincerity of his own love of music? He is forgetting the divine dispensation given to all consumers of art whose appetite is real. A connoisseur is a jaded snob, but a consumer is a child who must be fed. All artists know that there is no pleasure greater than learning that someone is enjoying the works they have made. It far surpasses learned exegesis or official recognition.

Unlike *The Dyer's Hand*, *Forewords and Afterwords* is not concerned continuously with poetry, or even with literature. Nor can it be kept as a reference-book of reminders of Auden's intellectual enthusiasms over the last three decades (the pieces are not printed in chronological order anyway). But, being effortlessly readable, it instructs by creating enthusiasm and arousing curiosity. If one doubts Goethe's greatness, as I hope all sane men do, then Auden will give one pause and send one to *The Italian Journey* for an experience of the sage's practical good sense. If one is priggish about cooking, religion and fairy tales, one will have to resist Auden's complex and informed insights into all three. Above all, the reader is exposed to an imagination incomparably superior to his own, but which is neither condescending nor infallible. It is a great joy to read someone who *knows*, and who takes real pleasure in expounding and categorising.

The forewords, being brief expositions of what Auden admires about an author or a subject, are more rewarding than the afterwords, reviews which can become merely chatty or simply peter out in instances. Auden is brilliant on the Protestant Mystics and on the Greeks—he even makes that utterly mysterious subject, Greek Drama, seem comparatively accessible. His peculiar view of love is expounded in several pieces, including a summary of Shakespeare's sonnets and a frank discussion of the difference between the two classes of homosexuals, "the orals who play Son-and/or-Mother, and the anals who play Wife-and/or-Husband." All abnormal sex acts, he says, are rites of ritual magic. After absorbing this, the reader is left wanting a typical Auden exegesis, complete with tabulation and aphoristic embroidery, of who does what and to whom and the significance of each action.

Every Auden book contains some new paradox which one was not prepared for. For me, this was

his explanation of the appropriateness of eating bread and drinking wine for the supreme sacrament of the church. For such a symbol, he writes,

“a sexual act would never do . . . it presupposes two different sexes, it divides as well as unites . . . it is not intrinsically selfish enough. Eating on the other hand is a pure act of taking. Only the absolutely necessary and the absolutely self-regarding can stand as a symbol of its opposite, the absolutely voluntary and self-forgetful.”

He might have added that, by corollary, if one is trying to imagine the ultimate in obscenity, one is thrown back on something to do with eating. From *The Bacchae* to Tennessee Williams, via Krafft-Ebing, there is plenty of evidence of this.

<sup>2</sup> “A Contemporary Epic” (February 1954), “Am I that I Am?” (April 1955).

PROFESSOR MENDELSON will, no doubt, have the best filing and bibliographical system America can provide. One’s own memory of Auden’s sporadic reviews and introductions is bound to be very incomplete. Yet one may still question Professor Mendelson’s choice—more for what is left out than what is put in. I remember interesting articles on *The Anathemata* and *Cards of Identity*, both of them in issues of ENCOUNTER.<sup>2</sup> But one piece I do regret particularly, especially as the book it introduced is out of print; Auden’s foreword to Corvo’s *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, which, in addition to talking more sense in a few hundred words about this flawed cult-figure than anyone else has done in a thousand pages, included a brilliant analysis of the behaviour of paranoiacs.

## German Protestant in Guru’s Clothing

*Thoughts on Hermann Hesse—By ALAN BROWNJOHN*

IN SOME “Notes on a Cure in Baden” towards the end of this volume of his *Autobiographical Writings*<sup>1</sup>, Hermann Hesse (who was in his early seventies at the time) gives an account of a brief yet depressing meeting with a young seeker after truth. This young man was no acolyte, and was far from being one of those “affirmative and enthusiastic readers” who, in some well-known later words of Hesse’s, had “violently misunderstood” the meaning of *Steppenwolf*. He was in fact a Taoist, zealously training himself to “remain open to all things”; but Hesse’s *A Guest at the Spa*, an autobiographical work of some twenty-five years earlier (also included here), had gravely tested his resolution. Hesse had shown, in this book, an egocentricity and arrogance which it was difficult for the young man to fit into the universal harmony. The famous writer was professing a puritan distaste for *kitsch* and sensuality, yet weakly submitting to such temptations. Above all, he was being insensitive and simplistic about “the Hindu conception of oneness.”

Hesse listened to these strictures, for the quarter of an hour which was all he could bear to grant to the young man. He was too weary of

such molestations, by either admirers or detractors, to expend energy on suggesting humorously that his complaints showed very little of the openness of the spirit to which he aspired. Hesse was feeling too tired to point out that

the important thing for us artists was whether, as a result of the intentions, meanings and thoughts of the author, a pattern woven of language stuff, of language yarn, emerged whose immeasurable worth stood far above the measurable worth of the content

—whatever this rather uncomfortable and unclear statement meant. At the end of the interview he went away deeply dispirited,

hurt to the heart that I had nothing to give or to show to this genuine seeker except the mask of weary age, which reduces to unimportance judgments about oneself and one’s books and even defence against such judgments.

It is only days later that he is finally able to console himself with the (quite un-ironical) reflection that when the young man turned back again to the Tao, he might find himself capable of meditating as fruitfully on Hesse’s “stiff silence and withdrawal” as on any other attitude the elderly author might have taken.

This incident serves to highlight several of the ambiguities and contradictions in Hesse’s curious achievement as a novelist and the reputation he has increasingly enjoyed, among the young in the United States particularly, since his death in 1962.

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiographical Writings*. By HERMANN HESSE. Edited and with an Introduction by THEODORE ZIOLKOWSKI. Translated by DENVER LINDLEY. Cape, £3.50.