

beast as a working member of the caravan of progress. But there can be no doubt that this work has cleared the air of a stultifying ideological controversy, and paved the way for further advance in the understanding of the workings of a monetary economy.

Auden's Longer Poems

Collected Longer Poems. By W. H. AUDEN.
Faber and Faber, 45s.

ONE BEGINS to wonder whether long poems are called for more often by critics than by poetry readers generally. Certainly lament for the death of the long poem has become a favourite critical theme. But while the old adage that long poems are written by poets who cannot write short ones remains largely true, it may be argued that the most influential poems of this century have in fact been long. *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* have been as influential as any shorter work; and Pound's *Cantos*, Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and Ginsberg's *Howl* have all had—for better or for worse, and often for disaster—their varying degrees of influence. Ask any young poet from Greenwich Village or Liverpool to name the most important poem in *his* life and it is likely that he will point to *Howl*. A young poet from Oxford might well pick one of the others, or turn elsewhere, but I would be surprised if the choice fell on any of the six works in W. H. Auden's *Collected Longer Poems*.

Yet, Leavis apart, the majority of critics would seem to grant Auden his just place as the most accomplished and versatile of living poets, and one who has been, and who remains, exceptionally influential. Clearly, he dominated the generation of the 1930s with a power and range that few could approach. Master of an impressive number of forms, from the Ballad to the Blues, he was all the more able to contain the see-sawing beliefs and passions of the time. Committed, yet distanced, his poetry was remarkable for its surface calm, the pincers moving obliquely but firmly over their subject. The tension could be riveting, especially where the aural matrix was based on popular tradition, as in *Refugee Blues*:

*Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where
shall we go to-day?*

*Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and
said:*

*"If we let them in, they will steal our daily
bread";*

*He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was
talking of you and me....*

The influence of music on Auden's verse, apparent in this poem and throughout the longer works, has always been salient: even his worst lines often "sound" impressive. Indeed the poems on which his reputation will finally come to rest may well be the magnificent early lyrics—far away from the world of Spain and Fascism against which he cried out so forcefully in much-quoted poems he no longer favours.

With his move to America in 1938, Auden's area of interest and commitment changed visibly. By 1940 the Auden conception of love had moved away from an ideal union of man and woman, or of a brotherhood of man ("we must love one another or die") to a Christian ideal, making one aware of what Spender has called "the odd impersonality" of Auden. Coated more with the philosopher's semantics, the four long poems of this later period (*New Year Letter*, *For the Time Being*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, *The Age of Anxiety*) are in the main colder, more distant, more cerebral than any of Auden's previous work; they contrast strikingly with the earliest of the longer poems included in this Collection, *Paid on Both Sides* (published 1930) and *Letter to Lord Byron* (published 1937)—the first a rather earnest, at times muddled, verse play concerning a blood feud (or is it school-gang rivalry, or both?), the second a rollicking, deliberately chatty "long" poem full of the dry self-aware wit of which Auden is master.

Letter to Lord Byron is an inventive, technically dazzling piece of writing, a triumph of taste. It sets a tone and, for all its length, rarely slips from it. As befits its subject the poem is self-mocking, but it mocks also many sacred establishment shrines. To read it is to eavesdrop on witty gossip about the age and its values and to learn something also about the author's own life and tastes, for it contains a vivid section of autobiography. The poem is a lap of honour taken at high speed. "I like your verse because she's gay and witty" writes Auden to Byron, and here one might pay the same compliment to Auden.

The outward setting of Auden's *New Year Letter* (January 1, 1940) is his newly-adopted America. Already the change in tone from the only slightly earlier *September 1, 1939* is

dramatic. The personal anguish that reached its climax in the (now discarded) lines, "*All I have is a voice/ to undo the folded lie,*" has distanced to, "*Art is not life and cannot be/a midwife to society.*" The attempt in *New Year Letter* to relate art, religion, and society within an agreed Kierkegaardian design seems far removed from the ragings of Europe which remain the poem's inevitable backcloth and its point of departure. The guns are distant:

*The cities we abandon fall
To nothing primitive at all;
This lust in action to destroy
Is not the pure instinctive joy
Of animals, but the refined
Creation of machines and mind....*

Such questions of How, Why, and What, indeed the whole gamut of Existentialist Choice which *New Year Letter* raises, are as relevant to Western society now as they were to Auden then. Whether or not they are organic to the poetry as a whole is another matter. For all the range and muscle of the verse, the refined hypnotic couplets falling just so, the ideas appear to be somehow removed from the poetry in a way they rarely are in either the earlier or later short poems. There are marvellous sections, to be sure, whole passages (short poems almost) where the verse opens out suddenly from close arguing into poetry of great dignity; but these are often linked to memories, or are lyrical asides touching the "real" world, and as such are only incidentally related to the poem's high theme and dialectics:

*Delighted with their takings, bars
Are closing under fading stars;
The revellers go home to change
Back into something far more strange,
The tightened self in which they may
Walk safely through their bothered day....*

In the two long poems published in 1944, *For the Time Being* (a Christmas Oratorio) and *The Sea and the Mirror* (a "commentary" on *The Tempest*), Auden's apparent ability to command almost any verse form is given full rein. The former is often deemed a high-water mark in the poet's achievement. It seems to me, however, an unhappy amalgam of two styles—the rhetorical/pontifical, and the colloquial. On the deeper level, Auden has edged here into Eliot territory without ever really inhabiting it; even some of the familiar symbolism appears (the garden, the rose). The lighter, colloquial interpolations, superb in themselves, only serve to highlight the surrounding rhetoric. Admittedly, as Richard M. Ohmann maintains in *Auden's*

Sacred Awe (1963) "the real world is for Auden an allegorical text, and the intellectual contrasts that can be placed upon it are paramount...." Nevertheless, a great deal of the "real" is present, many wholly-realised passages touching the lives of ordinary people (The Wise Men, The Shepherds) sitting unhappily beside the more abstract, clinical versifying.

Stylistically, *The Sea and the Mirror* is altogether surer; nowhere are form and metre more tactfully used to match character. Strangely, despite its necessary literary overtone, the world created in this poem is a tangible one. Prospero's opening speech, for instance, is that of a man of flesh and blood. His words to Ariel, as he leaves the island, are convincing:

*Over there, maybe, it won't seem quite so
dreadful
Not to be interesting any more, but an old man
Just like other old men, with eyes that water
Easily in the wind, and a head that nods in the
sunshine....*

The Master and Boatswain's rumbustious song, Miranda's beautiful villanelle, are Auden at his sophisticated best. Less happy is the closing piece of Jamesian pastiche (Caliban to the Audience) which, for all its virtuoso appeal, stands aloof from the poetry in a way that underscores Thomas Blackburn's contention (in *The Price of an Eye*) that too often in Auden "the voice of the poet is drowned by the chatter of the don."

PERHAPS THAT REMARK is more properly true of *The Age of Anxiety* (published 1947) which soon leaps, after its direct opening, into an area of metaphysical speculation. As in *For the Time Being*, Auden seems only too aware of the dramatic problems, introducing colloquialisms, echoes of popular songs, parody—all the tricks from his fertile hat—to modernise the tone and keep the action within the realm of theatricality. Repeatedly though, these props, which work so stunningly on their own terms in the shorter poems, remain contrivances here: the poetry and the subtle intellectualising, the man and the complicating mind, moving in a parallel direction, fusing only occasionally.

So, as elsewhere in the *Longer Poems*, there is the magician's display rather than the ignition, and one is left with memories of individual short poems—complex, dazzling, distinct, yet never forming quite the organic whole which makes, say, *The Waste Land*, not so much a long poem, but a poem which had to be its length.

Jeremy Robson

Marx: His Death & Resurrection

By Louis J. Halle

ALL GREAT MEN must be viewed in two distinct aspects. There is the limited aspect in which they are great, and there is the other aspect in which they are ordinary human beings like the rest of us. The greatness of most truly great men resides in some quality of vision that on occasion exalts them, and that exalts those to whom it is communicated. No great man, however, lives constantly on the level of his vision. Like the rest of us, in their daily lives all are largely preoccupied with petty concerns; they are prone to be moved by jealousy or bad temper, to say foolish things, to act meanly, and to behave inconsiderately toward those who are close to them.

Our need for heroes to worship, however, generally makes us disregard or deny what is ordinary in a great man. For the man as he was we substitute, sometimes while he is still alive, a legend. Even while Gandhi, for example, was still alive, there was a legendary Gandhi different from the real one: for the real Gandhi was an advocate of the use of violence when, as it seemed to him, the occasion allowed of no good alternative, while the legendary Gandhi is an absolute pacifist. The real Gandhi advocated economic policies or practices that had no relevance to the requirements of reality, or offered such impractical advice as that all the Jews under Hitler should commit suicide, while the legendary Gandhi is perfect in understanding and counsel.

The disparity between legend and reality seems to me greater in the case of Karl Marx than in that of any other modern figure. In legend he is an infallible prophet, basing his prophecies on an empirical science unknown before him. But one has only to read his writings to see for oneself that, in addition to being romantic rather than empirical or scientific, the whole body of prediction they contain was long ago proved wrong by the course history actually took. (I assume that fewer and fewer persons still believe that the Russian *coup d'état* of October 1917 bore any resemblance to the Revolution predicted in *The Communist Manifesto*, or that what followed was a "dictatorship

of the proletariat.") This presents a full contrast to the predictions of his contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville, which have in fact been borne out; yet de Tocqueville, who never acquired a legendary persona, has no reputation as a prophet remotely comparable to that of Marx.

For years I have had a frustrated curiosity about Karl Marx as a human being, a curiosity left totally unsatisfied by such biographies as that of Franz Mehring, which depict Marx as if he were God the Father, perfect in his wisdom, infallible in his utterance, but persecuted throughout his life on earth as God the Son had been persecuted. One finds nothing about his ordinary day-to-day life, since eating, sleeping, and the involvements of family living are not for gods.

At last, however, I have found a biography that deals with the human Marx and, in fact, goes to the other extreme from Mehring's. Robert Payne's *Marx*¹ concentrates on his daily life, with special emphasis on such activities as pub-crawling in London, drunken binges, and whatever else may serve to diminish the man and discredit the legend. It is a hostile biography, in some ways petty, meretricious, and unscholarly, but I found it satisfying in a way that I daresay Mr. Payne would not have expected. To the extent that it makes Marx human it provides grounds for viewing him with the compassion proper to all us pitiful mortals, caught up as we all are in the tragedy of life.

I ADMIT THAT my own attitude toward Marx, both as a person and as a writer, has always been hostile. I have credited him with an epic albeit fictional vision of history,² but I have always abhorred the style of writing that represents the main Marxist tradition and has its origin in Marx's own work: the *ex-cathedra* dogmatism, the overstatement, the crude vituperation, and the screaming hatred that dominates so much of it. Marx appears to have had no love for his fellow men, no compassion, no humanitarianism, and little concern for the sufferings of anyone but himself. Men did not exist for him as individual human beings of flesh and blood but as abstract social classes or statistics. His entire career was nominally dedicated to the working class, yet he showed no

¹ Robert Payne, *Marx* (W. H. Allen, 70s.).

² See my article, "Marx's Religious Drama" in *ENCOUNTER*, October 1965.