

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES. By W. H. Auden. (Faber; 10s. 6d.)

A few years ago a critic remarked that what was interesting about Mr Auden's poetry was the 'gathering synthesis' of the various elements it had successively taken into itself—Marxism, Freudism, Existentialism and finally Christianity. The same critic noted that other Marxists, Freudians, etc., were often puzzled and sometimes annoyed by Mr Auden's acrobatics; but none denied that he had extraordinary gifts as well as a great deal of energy. And many would call him the most interesting English poet alive today. He is interesting because he has a passion for getting to the bottom of things, and because, as an artist, he has mastered an uncommonly wide range of verbal expression. There is no better craftsman in modern verse; and this technique serves a fine intelligence and a large and sane personality, at once contemplative and pugnacious, rational, humorous and religious. It is sometimes said, disparagingly, that his poetry lacks 'heart', and certainly much of it is just a witty expression of ideas—and not always so witty either. Auden is not afraid of the consequences of his own axiom:

Good poets have a weakness for bad puns.

But he is saved, it seems to me, from sterile showmanship by a deep interest in reality.

The present volume is uneven in quality: the writing is sometimes facile; but there is hardly a single poem that does not say something distinctly interesting, and say it with point and fervour and often too with the tang of real poetry. Of the two chief factors in poetry, intense apprehension and a free-ranging command of language, the second is the more evident in Auden. And yet this gay colloquial agility is anchored to real objects. His fun can flash with real insight:

When ladies ask, *How much do you love me?*

The Christian answer is *cost-cost*.

And the insight can be kindly as well as shrewd (perhaps the kindness is growing . . .) as in the crisp verses on the American sailors in the Mediterranean port, who

are not here because

But only just in case.

One notes in this book a side of Auden's sensibility which he has not usually troubled to express, preoccupied as he has been with politics and psychology and more recently with theology: I mean his delight in wild nature. The English countryside is always at the back of Auden's mind, along with those industrial areas of the north Midlands that it frames. One is reminded here of Lawrence. Ten years ago the magnificent Prologue to *Look Stranger!* revealed this theme rather suddenly. Here it reappears, more light-heartedly and mixed with other memories, in a sequence of 'Bucolics', and notably in the lovely piece

'Streams', with its echoes of Hopkins in the rhythm: 'Dear water, clear water, playful in all your streams'; and with its characteristic reflexions: 'And not even man can spoil you . . . innocent still is your outcry, water . . .'

And here, of course, theology emerges, in the contrast between nature's innocence and the 'soiled heart' of man: the poet's preoccupation with the evil state of man, with original sin in fact. For if Auden has been always and manifestly a satirist, that is a moral critic of society, it is (in theological terms) 'original' rather than 'actual' sin that he discerns most clearly and is more persistently concerned with: an effect doubtless of his Freudian formation, deflected towards Christianity through Kierkegaard. This goes with a constant suspicion of the will, of all manifestations of human power; and leads straight to the thought of the Crucifixion, the focus of the fine sequence, 'Horae Canonicae', with which this book ends. Innocence crucified displays what human life leads to: 'This mutilated flesh, our victim'; the phrase shows where the emphasis is explicitly laid—on man's guilt. The triumph of the Victim, the Redemption, is left implicit; yet one feels it increasingly in the final poems. It is implied discreetly by a return to the strong underlying theme of the innocence of the natural world outside the human will. After the deed done 'between noon and three', the climax of that corrupted will, there is an uncanny silence; then a searching reflexion on human guilt; and then most delicately, the suggestion that a bond has been restored and that man too can enter now into the harmony of innocent universal nature:

Nothing is with me now but a sound,  
 A heart's rhythm, a sense of stars  
 Leisurely walking around, and both  
 Talk a language of motion  
 I can measure but not read . . .

It is the setting for the conscious mind's final tired prayer before sleep, blessing the constellations that 'sing of some hilarity'; and for the waking next morning to the crow of the cock and the sound of 'the dripping mill-wheel again turning'. The wheel suggests Dante's cosmic symbol at the close of the *Paradiso*; and in general Dante's influence is visible in this volume (as in so much modern poetry), and especially *Purgatorio* XVII and XVIII.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.