

THE ORATORS : AN ENGLISH STUDY by W. H. Auden (Faber and Faber, 6/-).

If *The Orators* is disappointing it is chiefly because one reads it as the successor to *Poems*. From the first book it was evident in the way in which he handled words, in his use of rhythm and imagery, that Mr. Auden was a poet of considerable technical ability; what he wrote was exciting, even when its significance was not clearly made out. One looked forward, therefore, to a work in which he would show a fuller control of his technique, in which his lyrical, merely poetic gifts, would be co-ordinated to a fuller purpose; but the most careful reading of *The Orators* fails to reveal such. One is faced, instead, by that obscurity to which his publishers, not without a certain smugness of inverted commas, draw our attention. The book, particularly in the opening prose section—the verse of the last, shows for the most part a falling off, a noticeable rhythmical weakening—is an interesting and moving experiment, which again emphasizes the fact that Auden's talent is specifically a poetic one (the distinction prose-poetry does not arise here), but it leaves the impression that it is as experiment rather than as achievement that it is remarkable. Or rather as a series of experiments, for the book has considerable technical variety. Throughout the first section one feels the influences—though they have been put to an exhilaratingly personal use—of Rimbaud and, more particularly, St. J. Perse, whose *Anabase* one would imagine Auden had been closely studying; just as in the last and perhaps most satisfactory of the Odes, there is a strong reminiscence of Emily Dickenson. Not that this supposition of influences, even if correct, is in itself in any way derogatory, but the fact that these two carefully stylized sections are divided by the naturalistically unorganized *Journal of an Airman* does give evidence of a lack of purposive organization which would account for one's disappointment.

It is probable that Auden had this criticism in mind when he was writing the opening sentences of the *Journal*: 'Organization,' he says, 'owes nothing to the surveyor. It is in no sense pre-arranged,' and though he does not state explicitly that this is intended as poetic theory, it would certainly seem to have an application to his method. And this impression is confirmed by the following phrases from a connected passage: 'while the fact that

a state of tension seeks to relieve itself, seems to us perfectly obvious, *an orderly arrangement, the natural result of such an effort. . . .* If this be intended as an account of the genesis of a poem (its similarity to the point of view of the *surréalistes* is striking) it would in large measure account for the obscurity of *The Orators*, for it amounts to proclaiming the absolute independence of the poetic impulse of any conscious intellectual direction. The poet's world, that is to say, is a system of arbitrary and private—Auden frequently insists upon privacy—values, to which the reader can only gain access by initiation. Failing that the poem must remain inchoate, to be enjoyed sporadically but not fully apprehended: but it should be emphasized that the resultant obscurity is different in kind and not merely in degree from the obscurity of *The Divine Comedy*, the 'great difficulty' of which Auden comments on, ostensibly to an audience of school-boys, but with one eye also, perhaps, on his readers.

DOUGLAS GARMAN.

MENCIUS ON THE MIND by I. A. Richards (Kegan Paul, International Library of Psychology, etc. Pp. xvi-132. Appendix Pp. 44. 10/6d.).

Dr. Richards continues in this book his study of the problems surrounding verbal communication. The first essential for accurate communication, one tends to suppose, is exact and unambiguous statement, but the central theme of this book is the necessity for flexible understanding and tolerant interpretation. Dr. Richards illustrates the principle in examining a passage of critical writing by Herbert Read, a passage whose meaning can be grasped from indirect clues although the wording will not stand ordinary critical inspection. Dr. Richards takes the keywords, Reasoning, Hypothesis, Fact, and Truth, and finds for these words senses that will render the whole passage self-consistent and acceptable in meaning. Reasoning for instance is to be taken 'not as inference from fixed explicit premises to a definite conclusion according to explicit rules; but as the placing of a number of observations in an intelligible order, a perceptible or rational structure.' The