

completed this and much more, and proven himself one of America's few outstanding poets, is due less to his advocacy of objectivist theory than to his native poetic strength and realistic insight.

In his crusade for the true fact in poetry, Williams discarded sentimentality, which was unreal, for the "anti-poetic." He gained thereby a clear, precise image and a firm poetic line, but, in extreme reaction, he minimized the conceptual, imaginative role of the poet. In his search for truth about America, he sought a language that did not lie. But truth is not merely a linguistic problem but also an ontological one. Essential to an understanding of Williams's achievements, however, is that he looked for poetry in the "factual" word, and in this respect his words became alive and real.

Blending the haphazard notations typical of his former prose work with the precise, polished qualities of his poetry, he has in *White Mule* crystallized and developed a fluent diction which captures the bare movements of reality; he has fashioned a verbal tool, which dissects the object like a surgeon's scalpel, and created an original style of his own, and he has unhooked the grammatical apostrophes of literary dialogue and established more flexible conversational patterns, capturing individual forms of speech, contrasts in dialect, and the simultaneity of speech and movement.

White Mule describes the life of an ordinary man, his domestic and work-day affairs, and pictures it with understanding and almost clinical observation. The novel tests a common man in common crises. Williams makes no attempt to underscore situations. In keeping with his literary theories, Williams is content with limiting an ordinary event in precise and essential outlines. The novel grows out of a series of sketches of the domestic and industrial life of poor people; a baby's birth and illness, a visit to the doctor, infants at play, kitchen drudgery, work in a printing plant, a strike, the desultory conversation of visiting relatives, etc. Williams gives literary significance and stature to the simple, apparently trite and unimportant occurrence by properly selecting and presenting details which bring into vivid relief objects and movements in the drab, anti-poetic routine of daily life.

As one learns, in the daily orbit of living, through chance meetings, through snatches of gossip, and from rambling conversations among acquaintances, the story of a friend's life, so Williams, through sketches of Joe Stecher's humdrum existence, unfolds and reveals the story of *White Mule*. It is a familiar theme in American literature, the tale of a European with peasant antecedents, who attempts to adjust himself in a new world. Joe Stecher is an ambitious, skilled, hard worker, living in an America at the peak of economic expansion. He is imbued with love of his work for its own sake and the cardinal belief that men should work hard and honestly and be well paid for it. For Joe, seeking new roots for old, this must be America's meaning. Joe is

a figure, already outmoded in American life, of the pure and simple trade unionist.

For Williams, as he has stated elsewhere, America is essentially a land of labor, of the thrifty, honest, and industrious Poor Richard, colonial progenitor of the modern Yankee; and Joe, Williams's analogy, an honest, conservative unionist with vaguely defined democratic ideas, sees this tradition become emptied of meaning for him.

Joe is essentially a moral man in an unmoral society, who is confronted with the problem of living up to the standards he has set for himself. Professional pride in his work, his simple peasant-bred morality of honesty and hard work, alienate him from his fellow printers. A former co-worker of Gompers, he becomes disgusted with the corruptness of the union officialdom and scabs in a strike. He vacillates between his sympathies for labor, his contempt for trade-union bureaucrats and politics, and his hatred for the brigands of big business. As a result he becomes confused and disillusioned with America. His shrewd, aggressive wife prods his ambitions. Everybody's dishonest, it's the way to make money, that's all that counts, she argues, and Joe is led to accept this philosophy of success. He becomes involved in the financial schemes of his employers and eventually plans to betray them and set up a business of his own.

It is too early to hazard a final judgment concerning Joe's tenets; they are as yet unresolved and his story incomplete, for *White Mule* is only the first book of a series. The direction in which Joe travels depends upon Williams's own understanding and resolution of his theme.

However, in presenting his character as a figure out of America's past, I think Williams offers a clue to his own viewpoint. Joe's position as a skilled workman is analogous to Williams's place as a professional in society. Williams's very theory of objectivism is an outgrowth of this relationship. Objectivism is less a philosophy than a poet's adaptation of pragmatism, the ideological fortress of the American professional and middle-class groups. The detached, empirical outlook of the pragmatist is the typical *Weltanschauung* of the middle-class individual, trained to embrace an objective, impartial viewpoint concomitant with the liberal-democratic tradition. It is an attitude that has revealed considerable weak-

ness in the political and social conflicts of the past few years.

It is clear that Williams is attempting to reevaluate America and thereby determine his own viewpoint. The problems of Joe, the artisan, and Williams, the writer, are not problems of mechanics and literary craftsmanship, but problems of a particular way of life. Therefore, to define Williams's work as primarily that of a craftsman is to reduce his work to a technical exercise in wordsmanship and to minimize the nature and value of his contribution. Williams's very use of the word, his selection of the anti-poetic and commonplace as literary norms, is an attitude toward reality. In championing the objective word, Williams himself has consistently held the position of a writer devoted to his art as a means of grasping and conveying truths, as well as a source of aesthetic and creative pleasure. It appears then that, in seeking the truth of America in the commonplace, Williams hopes to find a new direction in the lower levels of American life. His original talent for vivifying these humbler experiences in *White Mule* marks the book as the most successful expression of his quest and as a contribution to our literature of a more valid portrait of everyday America.

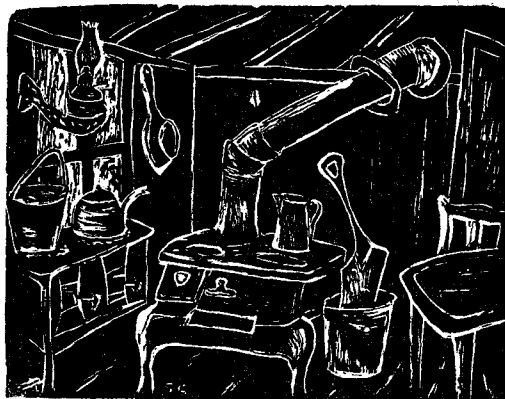
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- Ten Million Americans Have It*, by S. William Becker, M.D. Lippincott. \$1.35.
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