

Werfeldämmerung

TWILIGHT OF A WORLD. By Franz Werfel. Translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter. New York: The Viking Press. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by ISAAC GOLDBERG

EIGHT stories, some of them long enough to qualify as short novels, make up this interesting collection. They are preceded by "An Essay upon the Meaning of Imperial Austria," in which the author seeks to provide a background that shall unify the tales and suggest a basis of interpretation. In addition, each tale carries its own preface; the author, it would seem, was doubly under some compulsion of exegesis.

Franz Werfel, indeed, is one of the most restless spirits of our age. Like so many of his literary generation—one has but to think back some fifteen years, when the expressionist school was at its height—he has been ridden by a sense of universal guilt in which oppressor and victim become so confused as even to change places. The full title of the last and most effective of the tales in this book is "Not the Murderer but the Murdered Is the Guilty One." It is almost a motto. It represents just such a symbolic conflict between father and son as Walter Hasenclever portrayed in his drama, "Der Sohn"—just such a questioning of the sources of guilt as was to be found in the plays of Georg Kaiser and more than one of his confrères.

Werfel is haunted by the ghost of Freudian Œdipus. He is himself the Spiegelmensch, the Mirror-Man, of his early play bearing that title. "The Art of Life," declaims the terrorist Beschitzer in "Not the Murderer," "for the true genius, is the greatest power to doubt combined with the greatest power to dream. The power to cherish a great illusion witnesses a large heart, the capacity to doubt is proof of a strong head." Werfel has the power to doubt and the

power to dream; he has cherished illusions; he has, indeed, seemed to seek them as part of a life-program. He has been not only Mirror-Man but also the mirror of man, thus making of a passive receptivity a dynamic, all-embracing humanitarianism.

If one uses such language as this in discussing Werfel it is because Werfel himself gives the cue. His opening essay is a compound of nostalgia, sentimentalism, and spiritual democracy garbed in the raiment of monarchy; it is, in itself, well worth reading, but I do not see that it throws much light upon the stories. The spectre of Franz Joseph may have presided over Werfel's imagination, but the tales themselves transcend their historical origins. This twilight is not the twilight of the Austrian world; it is not the twilight of the European world; it is the dusk in which Werfel himself has dwelt from the beginning—what might be called a *Werfeldämmerung*.

"Does man's securest possession," he asks at the end of his Essay, "abide in that which he no longer has?" The question may suggest the renunciatory core of his mysticism; an excellent pun for this sort of thing was invented in the expressionist era: *Nirvanitas nirvanitatum*. It well applies to Werfel who, as mirror-man, has known allegiance to Buddha, to Rome, to Moses.

The people of these tales are rarely what we call normal. Seeking to cheat death they cheat life; seeking to impose blame they discover their own guilt; they sow vice and reap virtue; they find death in life and life in death. They are, in a word, human paradoxes, lost—and found—in Werfel's own twilight. They have been touched by madness. Yet in them, uneasily, we recognize a certain kinship to our unacknowledged selves.

Werfel's success in the tales is uneven; his pseudo-profundities become irritating. Yet in this twilight much is to be seen that eludes the glare of merely skillful writing.

Ford Madox Ford's Writing Friends

PORTRAITS FROM LIFE. By Ford Madox Ford. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER COWIE

THE writer of literary reminiscence inhabits a delightful domain lying between criticism and biography. He has visas for both adjacent realms but takes out final papers in neither. Exempt, therefore, from serious obligations, he lives on the fat of both lands and pays his way (if at all) by his gift for table talk. Among this privileged class of writers one of the most welcome is Ford Madox Ford. His newest book, "Portraits From Life," carries the subtitle "memories and criticisms." The memories tend to overrun the criticisms. Although Mr. Ford says that he has a "passion for not knowing anything about the private lives of [his] friends—particularly if they are writers," it is obvious that his passion has been a hopeless one. No writer who shrinks from intimacies need devote a whole page to Turgeniev's use of smelling salts and two pages to Henry James's servant problems. Yet it often happens, as in the vivid instance of D. H. Lawrence's first visit to Mr. Ford, that personal data lead naturally into literary criticism.

Most of the articles of Mr. Ford's critical faith are implicit in the austere creed of the late-nineteenth-century Impressionists (among them Hueffer), who believed that it was the function of the novelist to provide the reader with "vicarious experience." Shunning the slothful technique of the Victorians, the artist must search unremittingly for the precise word, practise the most rigorous "self-effacement," and eschew all program of morality or reform. Mr. Ford's laurels naturally go to those writers, impressionists and their kin, who have kept the faith: James, Crane, Hudson, Conrad, Turgeniev, and Lawrence. None of the writers portrayed is summarily condemned except Swinburne, but some exhibit serious defects. Hardy's technique as a novelist is generally so bad that Mr. Ford prefers to cite him as a poet. Galsworthy is represented as a writer of original integrity who was seduced by a desire to reform society.

Thus Mr. Ford. He shuttles amiably back and forth between memories and criticisms, discoursing the while in language that is a skillful blend of yesterday's florid prose and the colloquial idiom of today. Some readers may be irritated by his persistently patronizing treatment of Conrad. Others may murmur, half-amused, at his proneness to underline his own role in the discovery of genius. All must agree that here is a very readable volume that will add to the appreciation of a distinguished gallery of writers.



BELVEDERE CASTLE—Palace of the Archduke Ferdinand at Vienna.

EDEN

in

Easy Payments

BY LOVELL THOMPSON

THE SEARS ROEBUCK CATALOGUE:
SPRING AND SUMMER 1937. Chicago:
Sears Roebuck & Company. 1937.



"AMERICA LOOKS FORWARD WITH EVERY CONFIDENCE"
From the cover design of the new Sears Roebuck catalogue.

"THINGS really are better." That is how it begins. "This new catalogue is valuable . . . to those who use it as an index of what good merchandise should cost, even though they may never purchase from us. . . . We conceive of this company . . . as a great public institution. . . ."

But the Sears, Roebuck catalogue has another and not less important role; it is a guide to rural America. Here within its thousand-odd pages is the unrefined ore of much of current regionalism. Here is what Faulkner hopes to startle, and what Lewis once tried to awaken. The sophisticated seaboard laughs at it as a land of butter and eggs, but secretly envies its peaches and cream, its certainties, as of Eden before the fall.

Accordingly, out of this 1937 catalogue, you can buy everything you need for living in the garden of Eden—and nothing else. You can get shotguns and .22 rifles, but not a revolver. You can have whisks, brooms and whistling tea-kettles, but not whisky. You can have cocktail glasses, but not a shaker. There is no Last Supper in Sears': but "Last Lunch" makes rats die beyond Eden's gates. You can't grow old, because a transformation made of grey hair costs more than one made of black or brown hair. You can have a book on *The Rhythm*, maternity gowns, life insurance, but not a coffin. Sears says "America doesn't need any rear-view mirror—our eyes are on the road ahead. America looks forward with every confidence."

Sears' Eden is well fenced. There are seven pages of fences, so it follows that there need only be three pages of firearms and one of dogs' accoutrements. Within the sturdy fences that keep out rats and foxes, there is leisure and merry-making. There are ten pages of musical instruments, particularly accordions and harmonicas, and ten more of radios, plus

an inside back cover. Edeners buy kodaks, and their snapshots show them standing beside waterfalls and trout streams. There are camping outfits, fishing rods, canoes, tennis rackets, and baseball outfits, croquet sets, and rubber-tired lawn mowers, and American flags. But not much golf equipment. Eden is not troubled by riches.

Cheerful, energetic, thrifty and young, are the people who are silhouetted in the Sears catalogue, whose lives are implied by the things they buy. The photographs of models and the drawings are unanimous about this. The race is tall and cleanly built, but not lanky, and most are dolichocephalic. The man who tells you that "things are really better" looks a little like General Johnson, and, except for a "gracious lady" in an Irish lace collar and a hat with cornflowers, almost everybody else in Eden is young enough to be his son or daughter.

These young people are frilled and flounced and, in spite of boasts to the contrary, not much influenced by the most modern styles. Sears still offers them dust caps and night shirts. They are gadget mad, however. Their foundation garments have zipper seats, and they buy dresses with a built-in pocketbook called "Miss Miser" though they look more like "Mrs. Kangaroo." The women are more apt to grow fat than thin, for there are a score of pages of brassieres—(for what Sears calls their busts)—and scarcely disguised stays. Each Eve seems poured into her mould of comely uniformity—a mould a little too standardized, if Sears has his way, to be seductive.

The Adams are well shaved and are well lathered with brushes of genuine badger hair, one-half selected silver tip, and one-half "regular good quality badger." *Campus* is a word of praise, an unattainable standard, as are London and Paris for Sixth Avenue. They wear initials

on their trousers, because "College men who like . . . originality and pep in their clothes have helped to make these snappy slacks a favorite on campuses all over the country. Priced to fit into a young man's budget without crowding. Two nickel-plated rust-proof initials included."

Birth control is as advanced as backward laws will permit; Sears stands foursquare behind healthy sex, and offers Marie Stopes and various jellies, though with these of course there are no guarantees. Thus Sears' Eden achieves civilization without sophistication.

The grimness of RFD America does not show much in this cheerful '37 catalogue, but enough has slipped in to show that Uncle Sam is still a shrewd pessimist. The photograph of Mrs. Fred Sparrow who writes "I've used your blue-flame brooder for eight years" accompanies her signed statement. She is firm of mouth, a long-faced, long-headed Yankee, and not one of those round-limbed products of Sears' taxidermy. And Eden must be on its guard against Sam Slick: Sears pictures an egg basket full of eggs, but explains that the eggs are not included in the modest price. But not even Sam Slick needs to be told that you don't get the girls inside the bathing-suits.

Besides the raw material for novels, Sears offers free to American writers, "even though they may never purchase from us," a model of style. Sears is conscientious, frank, direct; it is hard to doubt the truth of what is said. When the right word is found, it is used wherever needed; there is no coyness about repetition. Good concrete words, lost to the working vocabulary of most men, give hard, well-trained precision. You can get Nation-alls of herring-bone "twill" and boat sail "drill." Sears knows the precise word when you don't. That is why you believe him. Dictionaries have two-tone "head-bands." Lipsticks are indelible