

Williams the Stylist

THE COMPLETE COLLECTED POEMS
OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:
1906-1938. Norfolk, Conn.: New Direc-
tions. 1938. \$3.

Reviewed by PAUL ROSENFELD

DR. WILLIAMS'S improvisations with free associations of ideas called "Kora in Hell" do not figure in this collection of his poems. The book none the less does not need them. Nearly every one of its three-hundred-odd pages suggests the reason why, even if "In the American Grain," "White Mule," and the rest of his frequently heroic prose did not exist, Williams would still have to be included in the group of five or six writers who justify the world's reference to a contemporary American literature of high quality. The reason is the intensely American character of the poetic experience upon these pages. The language not only is the vernacular. The very style of the verse corresponds to that of manifestations of American life. And both the manner and the phraseology reflect and communicate the inner forces and the ways of being of Americans.

Technically, as a poet Williams appears to stem from imagism. He has the nudity of vision, the strict, intense observation, the direct impressions of the poetic aspect of the object characteristic of the band headed by Pound; and its manner of seizing the image, the fusion of reality in the expression, with the most concise means of the language and, as it were, with but a single swoop. He shares these poets' almost deliberate non-melodiousness, indifference to the beauty of sound and periodic arrangement, preference for mute and verbal harmonies.

His cadences tend to be prose cadences; his line-lengths to be arbitrary. The cantilena and the singing voice infrequently sustain themselves in his poetry. The emotion too, while forceful, is often latent and dissimulated: from the first, Williams must have been among the least naive of men. Yet his sensibility differs from that of Pound, H. D., and other representative American imagists. It not only is more realistic and both more sardonic and warmer than theirs, and more acridly sensuous; it is deeply rooted in the soil. Both as a man and a poet Williams is more profoundly related to American life and limited and conditioned by it than are the wanderers.

The inner truth he most regularly comprehends and strives now lovingly, now humorously, now ironically to form, is that of the fierce, nervous, and emotional tension of American life: its fitfulness, spasmodic motion, "bursts of fragrance from black branches"—itself the consequence of the abruptness with which American earth passes from the bitterness of winter to the sweetness of spring and onwards again to the fierceness of summer: this, and its coldness, cruelty, and power of endurance. He recognizes their forces in the features of his own landscape, industrial northern New Jersey. The landscape mixing in his imagination with persons and his own inwardness gives his poetry its peculiarly regional quality. And he hears American life in the inflections of the American language. Since he is an intellectual poet, these essences embody themselves in the style, the way of motion of his verses. It is heightened, extremely energetic, with plenty of dynamic punch, ascending cadences, and irregular rhythms of short

and stabbing lines. It is swift, leaping from thought to thought, and of a javelin-like sharpness. And it has sardonic humor.

Perhaps not all this poetry is wholly satisfactory. Williams is not always touched in the depths and suffused with the feeling which gives scope and density to form. But the volume contains a number of lyrics, among them "Portrait of the Author," "Man in a Room," "A Good-night," "Eve," "Cyclamen," and others, which rank with the poetry of our time highest in quality. The whole of the poetry has worth. All has texture, truthfulness, subtle consciousness of life. Mr. Williams has a sovereign gift for animating his emotions.

Walpolean By-product

LETTERS TO AND FROM MADAME
DU DEFFAND AND JULIE DE LES-
PINASSE. Edited by Warren Hunting
Smith. New Haven: Yale University
Press. 1938. \$5.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

THIS slender and charmingly designed book is the fourteenth of the "Miscellaneous Antiquities," that series of gracefully learned volumes which Horace Walpole inaugurated at Strawberry Hill and which Mr. Wilmarth Lewis has devotedly continued a century and a half later on this side of the Atlantic. Each of Mr. Lewis's additions, of which this is the twelfth, has been a contribution to eighteenth century letters or history; and, moreover, each has contrived not only in its matter but also in its very form to recapture for the twentieth century something of the polish and the elegance which Walpole himself represented in his own time. This latest one is, as it were, a by-product of Mr. Lewis's great undertaking, the Yale Edition of Walpole's Correspondence.

Madame du Deffand, whose wit and knowledge made her *salon* the most celebrated of Louis XV's Paris, was the victim in her old age of a hopelessly exalted passion for the much younger Horace Walpole. To him she bequeathed her manuscripts, among them thirty-one letters which involved, directly or indirectly, Julie de Lespinasse, whom she had brought from the provinces to be her companion and whose famous secession from the older woman's dominion is one of the most dramatic stories in the history of French literature. Walpole, who disliked Julie, did nothing with them. His secretary, Miss Berry, condescended to print eleven of them the year after the publication of Julie's letters to M. de Guibert had given her a posthumous fame which has never declined. The remainder of the thirty-one letters lay unread from that time until Mr. Lewis acquired them along with the rest of Mme. du Deffand's papers. Now they appear just as they were written, all that survives of that tragic relationship which existed for ten years between two very remarkable women.

The letters themselves are not remarkable. Those of Mme. du Deffand exhibit little of the wit and perspicacity which have made her letters to Voltaire, Hénault, and Walpole a memorable com-

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mentary upon her age. Those of Mlle. de Lespinasse have in them nothing of the romantic abandon which has made her later letters a monument to passion. They are, however, the documents in the case, and they explain, more fully and less conjecturally than has hitherto been possible, the beginning and the end of a chapter in the lives of two fascinating women. Mr. Smith has edited them with consummate skill, and has provided an introduction which is a model of succinct exposition.

Political Leader

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE: NATIONALIST DICTATOR. By James Michael Eagan. New York: Columbia University Press. 1938. \$2.75.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

MR. EAGAN'S sub-title is important. He has not written another life of Robespierre—there are plenty of them, and for all tastes—but a careful analysis, based on much original research, of what Robespierre did as a political leader, and how he did it. The book is an excellent example of the fruitful monograph.

Those who feel that in history comparisons are odious, may find that Mr. Eagan overdoes a bit his parallels with the contemporary world. Chapters headed "Towards the Totalitarian State" and "The Jacobin Blood-Purge" are perhaps a little too much like yesterday's newspaper headlines. Yet the facts as Mr. Eagan presents them are impressive. Robespierre was neither a Stalin nor a Hitler. For one thing, as Mr. Eagan points out, he never possessed the undivided leadership they seem to have attained. His aims and his speeches are, however, much like theirs, and his Jacobin "machine" presents all sorts of parallels with the Bolsheviks and the Nazis.

To separate the unique from the repeated event, the particular from the general, has always been a nice problem for the historian. Our immediate predecessors were perhaps a little too insistent on the unique. Mr. Eagan is only helping to redress the balance. If the present wave of dictatorship is regarded as quite without precedent we are bound to be helpless before it. Once we realize that there have been other blood-purges, other attempts to achieve the totalitarian state, we may be able to take an attitude at once more profitable and more comfortable than the forlorn yammering so common nowadays in democratic countries.

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Imperialism in Action

GERMANS IN THE CAMEROONS, 1884-1914. By Harry R. Rudin. Yale University Press. 1938. \$4.

Reviewed by JAMES FREDERICK GREEN

THE theory of Germany's "moral unfitness" to govern colonies served at Versailles—like the theory of "war guilt" underlying reparations—as a convenient justification for the transfer of African and Asiatic possessions to the Allies. Since this charge of moral incapacity is now revived as an argument to preclude restoration of the colonies to Nazi Germany, it deserves more scientific attention than it has thus far received. It remained for Professor Rudin, of the Yale history department, to investigate the alleged Hohenzollern misrule in terms of one specific colony. His brilliant study of the Cameroons, based upon both travel

and archival research, is a model analysis of imperialism in action.

Professor Rudin examines with great care the international rivalries in West Africa, the German penetration into the Cameroons, the control of policy in Berlin, and the task of administration in the colony. He concludes that German exploitation and management were quite similar to that of other European colonizers, that it was steadily improving in quality, and that its defects were excessively advertised by the opposition parties in the Reichstag. In effectively disposing of the Versailles canard, Professor Rudin contributes important chapters to the history of European imperial politics and to the story of African development. His account of the domestic pressures and propaganda which forced Bismarck and later chancellors ever further into colonial expansion is one of the most interesting features of an interesting book.

James F. Green is on the staff of the Foreign Policy Association.

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