

J.B. Harmer, Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917. London: Secker & Warburg, 1975.

Ellen Williams, Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of "Poetry," 1912-22. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977. \$10.95.

Edmund S. de Chasca, John Gould Fletcher and Imagism. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978.

Joseph Killorin, editor. Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. \$15.00.

When I was in my early teens, just beginning to read poetry for myself, one of my most valued books was an old anthology of American literature from a college course that someone in the family had taken years before. In it I read "Trees, like great jade elephants, / Chained, stamp and shake 'neath the gadflies of the breeze"--that was what poetry sounded like! I returned to the selections from John Gould Fletcher again and again. And to Amy Lowell, with her "Patterns" and her "Lilacs." And to Sandburg, and Masters. Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo" was a favorite (who would dare print that in a textbook now?). Ezra Pound was also represented, but I cannot remember which poems. From the editor's notes, I gathered that these poets were "experimental" or "modernistic," which made them all the more attractive (though I was some thirty or forty years out of date). Nevertheless, there they were, accepting their places alongside the classics.

Where is the undergraduate now who can identify John Gould Fletcher? That whole group of poets has now sunk. To confirm my suspicions, I consulted the Norton American Tradition in Literature, which currently defines the outer limits of American poetry; Fletcher finds no room in its four thousand pages, nor does Amy Lowell, nor Masters, nor Lindsay. Sandburg is still there with a few soft imagistic pieces, though I sadly note the omission of "Hog butcher for the world!" And although selections from Pound are ample, they include nothing from the imagist phase.

The Imagist Movement has quietly subsided into literary history. Or has it? Looking through anthologies covering the past half century, one reads hundreds of poems in short lines of vers libre often distinguishable from the work of the originals only by their greater flatness. (This is so true that it has for years been impossible to interest students in prosody.) For better or worse, the poets that first attracted attention were destroyed by their own success, attracting hundreds of imitators as well--not direct imitators, perhaps, but creators in a mode that the original group made possible. No one now considers that history has done Amy Lowell injustice in her tussle with Pound; but the early vers libristas created the taste that eventually learned to assimilate the more irregular poetic personalities of Pound and Williams.

Of all the post mortems that have yet appeared, however, none has yet accomplished the task of defining the real poetic achievement, if any,

of the early movements. This is true also of the books under review. Conveniently, three of these cover the three major areas of activity: J.B. Harmer deals mainly with the English branch of imagism, Edmund S. de Chasca with the American branch (the Amygists), and Ellen Williams includes the closely related poets of the "Chicago Renaissance;" Conrad Aiken is a curious maverick whose early history was entangled with these groups. While the Aiken volume is an edition of letters, Williams and de Chasca too offer chiefly paraphrase and quotation from files of correspondence. Only Harmer makes any pretense of critical analysis.

Unfortunately, Harmer's Victory in Limbo is the least satisfactory of the lot. His book covers the most familiar territory, the group that gathered around Pound, plus the "pre-imagist group" (Hulme, Storer, Campbell), and the Amygists. His approach, attempting to be historical, theoretical, and critical all at once, ends up being none of them, nothing more than a collection of catalogues. Chapter 1 catalogues the bad poets writing just after 1900, English and American. Chapter 2 catalogues the members of the Hulme-Storer group. Chapter 3 catalogues Harmer's casual opinions of some eleven different poets, including Pound and D.H. Lawrence (in 54 pages). Chapter 4 catalogues influences by language groups--French, Japanese, etc. Chapter 5 catalogues "isms"---impressionism, symbolism, imagism, etc. Chapter 6 catalogues poets influenced by imagism since 1917 (in 10 pages). All of this is achieved in less than two hundred pages, the whole ending on an incredibly banal citation from the pop lyrics of "The Doors." Furthermore, Harmer's air-tight categories obscure the complex internal relationships, not to mention the continuity between the imagists and the Nineties poets.

Given the scope, it is idle to complain of critical shortcomings. But the scope itself is foolish; the catalogue approach is a defense against useful critical examination. Thus there is little point in agreeing with his estimates or not. Harmer shows perspicuity, perhaps, in isolating the worst poem in "The Shropshire Lad" to illustrate Housman's weaknesses (p. 4). But Housman's shortcomings are a pretty tired subject nowadays, and they might be more usefully and fairly illustrated (where relevant) through examination of his better poetry. Such a task requires articulate discriminations, however, and the plain truth is that Harmer is that irritating kind of writer who smugly assumes his reader's opinions to be identical with his own. He offers nothing for argument, but instead adopts the mincing judicious tone of the average week-end reviewer.

Yet most week-end reviewers are far better writers than J.B. Harmer. Housman's popularity, he declares, "did not make his a model for other poets" (4). (The context suggests that Harmer meant to say "a good model."). Of. H.D.: "In even the best of her early poems there is more intensity than substance" (66). (What substance is contained in, say, Pound's "Liu Ch'e" that is missing from "Oread"?) Amy Lowell's "In the Stadium" "is not one of her most successful poems, but it has a poignant theme" (94). Her Chinese translations fall short of Pound's because "there was an insufficiency of creative power" (94). Harmer often falls back on the elegant tautology: "This initial subjection to France links

the Imagists with their contemporaries on the Continent" (105). The wandering paragraph that precedes this sentence could only have been composed by an inattentive mind. Harmer elsewhere utters himself in sentence fragments of the kind discouraged in undergraduate essays. I only hope that the existence of this book will not prevent someone else from writing a proper history of the movement all over again--soon.

Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance is, on the other hand, more important than its narrow title suggests; for by assuming the vantage of Poetry magazine, Ellen Williams has written the history of modern American poetry from behind the scenes in its formative years. Aware of activity in England, aware of magazine verse in America, and aware of parallel developments in the Little Review and Dial, she has traced year by year (almost month by month) how the imagists, the Chicago poets, Eliot, Williams, Stevens and others came to be discovered and received.

Drawing largely upon Harriet Monroe's personal papers, Ellen Williams unfolds the history not simply (an impossibility) but painstakingly and justly. Without taking any credit from Pound, she fills in the other side of the correspondence: "You speak of having often been irritated during the past year," wrote Harriet to Ezra. "I might say, so have I. Irritation is inevitable in any enterprise big enough to include more than one person" (79). By carefully not giving Harriet Monroe an ounce of credit undeserved, Ellen Williams allows the much-belittled editor to emerge on her own power as the gutsy lady she was. Harriet Monroe, by being simply true to her own fallible judgment and at the same time placing the cause of art before her personal grievances, managed to rise above the Byzantine conspiracies that converged upon her and carve a place for poetry in the middle of the American continent. I am only sorry that Pound's obituary tribute is not included in the book: "Measuring by space and time, the elasticity of her perceptions and the freshness of her interest were those of a great editor, and as no one more acrimoniously differed from her in point of view than I did, so, I think, no one is better able to testify to her unflinching sincerity, to the unflinching purity of her intentions."¹

This volume throws new light on several important developments of the period. We learn that before Amy Lowell, "there is ground for believing that the Imagists campaign in Poetry was a complete failure" (41). We see how vigorous a defender of modernism Harriet Monroe really was, and how much of its values she absorbed from Pound and others. We hear of the response to Eliot's "Prufrock" from a new standpoint. We discover the importance, previously unsuspected, of Pound's "To a Friend Writing on Cabaret Dancers." We find clues to the failure of poets like Lindsay and Sandburg to develop. We see how not only Pound but also Aiken, Fletcher, Amy Lowell, and a horde of poetasters tried to bend Poetry to their own purposes. We learn the reasons, internal and external, for Poetry's decline after 1917. And we gain a clear view of poetic finances.

If Ellen Williams everywhere strives for balance, she sometimes leans too far. Trying to put the controversy over Pound's Propertius into historical perspective, she herself gives in too easily to the scoffers (and makes no reference to J.P. Sullivan's definitive study²). And while she refreshingly gives the lesser lights like Lindsay and Sandburg and even

Sara Teasdale their due, she seems reluctant to challenge critical consensus. One wishes that she might retrieve a forgotten lyric or two from the files--like those of Alice Corbin Henderson. And one desires, in the short discussion of Harriet Monroe's own verse, a few samples. But these are minor flaws in an authoritative, readable, indeed essential history of the period.

Edmund S. de Chasca's John Gould Fletcher and Imagism, which draws on Fletcher's papers as well as on Ellen Williams' study, has the double purpose of retelling the history of imagism from a new angle and of detaching Fletcher's reputation as a poet from Amy Lowell's. Given the limitations of the subject, the study seems capable. But as a history of the movement, it adopts the vantage of Guildenstern.

A book about a poet so long out of print seems something of a luxury, and this is now the second.³ De Chasca makes his case for Fletcher's poetry at the end of the book; but by the time the reader gets there, he has found Fletcher such a disagreeable personality that he is likely to have little sympathy--a man suspicious of his benefactors, jealous of his friends, indecisive in his love affairs, and incapable of taking criticism. He seems ready to do anything to become not a good poet but a famous one. He came to a sad end, his reputation evaporating the moment he broke from Amy Lowell, and after a brief resurgence in 1938 with a Pulitzer Prize, he drowned himself in 1950 near his Arkansas home.

Nonetheless, Fletcher was a poet of genuine talent; but his lustre needed the lights of Pound or Amy Lowell nearby in order to shine at all. He was an imagist not by nature but by persuasion, and de Chasca is at his best in discriminating Fletcher's personal values from those partially assimilated from his mentors. He does not yield to an easy thesis--that Fletcher either was or was not a "true" imagist. On the other hand, he equates imagism too glibly with "the visual," and he oversimplifies Pound's famous Credo. The conventional call at the end of the book for a new consideration of Fletcher's poetry rings rather faintly, but perhaps the best of him, including "Irradiations" and the "Colour Symphonies," collected, truly "would reveal him to be a fresh and talented writer" (219). If de Chasca convinced a publisher to issue this study, perhaps he will follow with such a volume. I would buy it.

Conrad Aiken, "the buried giant of twentieth-century American writing" (Malcolm Cowley's phrase), belongs only loosely with the other poets here. Though friendly with Fletcher, he was antagonistic to imagism, and stood aloof from changing fashions. Isolated and neglected in his lifetime, he happily lived to see himself treated as a major author, with his Collected Poems, Criticism, Stories, Novels, and now posthumously, his Selected Letters, sumptuously printed, annotated, indexed, and cross-indexed to his writings.

But despite this abundance, Aiken scholars still remain about as plentiful as unicorns. These letters suggest reasons for Aiken's failure

to receive attention; he confesses, "I write these poems in a spirit of impatient amusement . . . but I cannot attach to them any such importance or seriousness as would warrant my taking greater pains with them The philosophy behind them is worth far more to me" (33). Where the great correspondences of Keats or Yeats or Pound are more concerned with craft than with subject, more with poetry than being a poet, the bulk of Aiken's letters, garrulous as his verse, deal with his complex personal affairs and endless self-analysis. Still, the fault may be the editor's, for he declares that "the principle of selection in this volume is not primarily what might serve the literary historian or critic" (xxiii) but more a kind of personal tribute. "The unity of this volume lies in the continuous arc . . . of Aiken's life Aiken's letters on literary theory and technique [to H.D. et al.] should later be gathered." Killorin's tribute may well have been a betrayal.

Aiken was too far from the centre of literary circles for his letters to be of great value as a source book. Though a class-mate of Eliot's at Harvard, Aiken was never a close friend. There is some matter of interest here, however, including a rare and hair-raising glimpse of Eliot's domestic arrangements with his first wife. And students of Malcolm Lowry will find Aiken's correspondence indispensable.

NOTES

¹ Ezra Pound, "Vale," Poetry, 49 (Dec. 1936), pp. 137-8.

² Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius (Austin: University of Texas, 1964).

³ Edna B. Stephens, John Gould Fletcher (New York: Twayne, 1967).

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Ronald Bush, The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos. Princeton and Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1976. Pp. 327. \$16.50.

George Bornstein, The Postromantic Consciousness of Ezra Pound. English Literary Studies Monograph Series, No. 8. Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1977. Pp. 84. \$4.00.

Were someone to bring out a variorum edition of Pound's Cantos we would find the bulk of the variants appended to the first ten or twelve, and of these the first three would probably outweigh the others. Pound, it seems, had considerable difficulty with the opening of his epic. Indeed, before the Cantos, there were Three Cantos - the Ur