

The Place of Imagism

IS there no end to the pretensions of the imagists? Mr. Ezra Pound we have become gradually accustomed to; but when Mr. Richard Aldington takes to extolling in *The Little Review* the work of his wife, and Mr. John Gould Fletcher to eulogizing in *Poetry* Miss Amy Lowell, and to patronizing, in a preface, Masefield and everybody else who, writing modern poetry, dares to employ rhyme or rhythm; when, indeed, the imagists have become nothing but a very loud-voiced little mutual-admiration society, surely the time has arrived when they should be adjusted to their places. They may do themselves, and possibly other poets, great harm.

We must realize that the fad of *vers libre*, or imagism, as in its later and acuter phase it is called, is not the panacea for poetic ills we had hoped it might be. We must learn to laugh, if we can, when solemn Mr. Fletcher informs us that even Vachel Lindsay cannot so hammer and twist old rhymes and rhythms as to revive them into poetry; that it is the imagists—among them J. G. Fletcher—who are the chosen of God to perform the miracle; and that Miss Amy Lowell's work is as important an event in the world of poetry as the European war is in the world of politics.

Let me confess at once my admiration for some of the works of Messrs. Pound, Flint, Aldington, and, in particular, of Mr. Fletcher. Mr. Pound, it is true, has lately become too much theory-ridden, and the good work of any of the others is astonishingly limited. But at its best, and I am inclined to think it is at its best in Mr. Fletcher's "Irradiations," it is often charming. Charming—that is at once the merit and the blemish of these poems. It should be observed that the reader who enjoys imagistic verse will always say of it that it is "interesting," "delightful," "charming"; never that it has stirred him. The reason, of course, is that in none of the work of this group of writers is there any emotional force.

Suppose we examine the theory of such work more closely. The imagists themselves do not know their aims too well. Mr. Pound told me that the great thing was "precision," and he added that "poetry should be at least as well written as prose"—no inversions, crampings, elisions, none of the process of tautening of speech by which poets have gained their effects in the past, no decorative element—merely the "image" desired. Rhythm or music in language Mr. Pound appeared not to comprehend, nor to be greatly concerned about. All this sort of thing was out of date and artificial.

Mr. Fletcher is perhaps not quite so extreme. Unfortunately, Mr. Fletcher has a good sense of rhythm, and knows also how to use rhyme, though sometimes rather feebly—characteristics which are a little awkward in an imagist. The result of this unfortunate endowment is that Mr. Fletcher, in the somewhat pompous pronouncement that heads his volume, is at times inconsistent. He is sufficiently in accord with Mr. Pound to declare stoutly that the decorative in poetry must be killed; he cheerily flings overboard Masefield ("and worse"), and all other "doggerel scribblers" and writers of "monotonous rag-time." But then, hedging a little, he admits that rhyme and measure are permissible if they add to the richness of the effect. What on earth, Mr. Fletcher, one is moved to ask, is richness so achieved if not decorative, and the very negation of your platform?

As a matter of fact, the supreme characteristic of Mr. Fletcher's work, as of Mr. Aldington's, Mr. Flint's, Mr. Pound's in its lucid moments, and Miss Lowell's, is that

it is unmixedly decorative; precisely the thing they pretend to wage war on. The writers tell us they are going back to essentials, that they will strip poetry of artifice, that they will speak to us in a simple direct speech which is human and natural; with no fripperies about it, no pretentiousness; clear outlines, the exact word, few adjectives. And having thus misled us into expecting arrows in the heart, they shoot pretty darts at the more sophisticated brain. They give us frail pictures—whiffs of windy beaches, marshes, meadows, city streets, dissheveled leaves; pictures pleasant and suggestive enough. But seldom is any of them more than a nice description, coolly sensuous, a rustle to the ear, a ripple to the eye. Of organic movement there is practically none.

What movement an imagist poem appears to have, indeed, is largely imposed by an arbitrary chopping into lines. Printed as prose, rhythm other than prose rhythm does not disclose itself. Mr. Fletcher alone, as I have already said, betrays a feeling for movement, for flow and balance. Precisely on that account he gains by comparison with his more music-deaf commensals, and his poems, while deficient in emotion—bits of cool synaesthesia—sometimes have a well-defined musical progression, suspense climbing to resolution, like certain little gavottes by Bach, artificial and Watteau-like. But Mr. Fletcher is the exception. Recently a weekly paper printed, as if by inadvertence, a poem of Miss Lowell's backwards. It was excellent criticism of the art of the imagists. The poem flowed quite as well backwards as forwards, and, alas, made quite as good sense.

The trouble with all this movement is that there has arisen a false sense of its proportion. We take the imagists too seriously, or rather, they take themselves too seriously. They are not doing anything new nor anything great. At its best their work is a gentle preciousness of sound and color which may please the jaded connoisseur. It is often unreal, often remote, almost always thin; to a great extent it is enjoyable only in proportion as one is hyperaesthetic, or so oversophisticated as to delight in delicate fractures of the conventional. It is like poetic prose which lacks the emotional force to lift it into poetry. Far from enlarging the scope of poetry, the imagists restrict it. Witness the significantly limited range of subjects which they can handle, the astonishing amount of echo and similarity even within that range. The imagists are endeavoring to make a poetry out of a finely sensory world which really would better serve as a background for poetry, as it has served in the work of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Keats; otherwise the result is a setting without a play. And in a kind of despair to substitute some sort of action for the lacking emotional dominant, they force themselves to a morbid hyperaesthesia, a violent preciousness of the fancy, which results in such cold and heavy conceptions as that of a naked body "crashing" through light (the light, no doubt, coiling and eddying behind), or a wind ploughing the heat and turning it to right and left, or the leaves on a tree clashing one against another; to the imagist mind even a postage-stamp does not flutter to the floor, it crashes.

It is a singular obsession of these writers that any poetic form which involves regularity is of necessity cramping, barbaric, and factitious. It seems hardly necessary to point out that the genius of the true poet is that he can work marvelous harmonic and rhythmic modulations within just such restrictions, and moreover, that these restrictions are always imposed by the poet himself, for aesthetic value received. If the author voluntarily foregoes such reward, sidestepping the labor involved, it is probably because

what he has to say would appear meagre in full regalia; instinct tells him that a plain face looks plainer in a rich dress.

There is, however, a function for the forms the imagists are trying, and a very useful one—the exploitation of that sphere of experience which is half emotional, half sensuous, the world of shadowy velleities, semi-conscious inhibitions and regrets, evanescent impressions; a psychological world which, while it would be too tediously subtle in prose, yet lacks also the intensity of poetry; in a word, the semi-precious in experience. By all means let the imagists go to work on this, which is admirably adapted to their cooler talents.

CONRAD AIKEN.

Arnold Bennett's Fantasia

The City of Pleasure, by Arnold Bennett. New York: George H. Doran Company. 50 cents net.

LIKE nearly all other stories by the same author, "The City of Pleasure," written seven or eight years ago and now published for the first time in the United States, is a collaboration by Arnold Bennett and Arnold Bennett.

In the first place, we have Mr. Bennett the observer. He has walked this world with his eyes open. He has looked at it partly because he finds the process great fun, and partly because he takes, as he has himself said, "a malicious and frigid pleasure" in seeing and "setting down facts which are opposed to accepted sentimental falsities." One stimulus to observing and recording has been his delight in verifying, time after time, his belief that life is not like what you have been told about it and not like what you would expect.

This belief he takes with him into details. See, for example, his treatment of the City of Pleasure itself—the many-acred resort devised by Mr. Charles Carpentaria and financed by Mr. Josephus Ilam. Mr. Bennett is telling us where the gate receipts and all the other receipts are housed. This temporary storeroom "was not located, perhaps, exactly where you might have expected it to be." In this fact Mr. Bennett rejoices robustly. His chapter called "The Heart of the City" is almost a piece of self-portraiture. It reveals his joy in the defeat of expectation by life. It reveals that busy interest in the concrete working of things which is one with his busy interest in the concrete working of men's and women's heads and hearts.

Sprinkled over this book are bits of Mr. Bennett's sharp amused observation—the second balloonist who gives superfluous information because he was "anxious to prove to himself that he also had the right to converse with the mighty Carpentaria"; the young woman "whom any praise, save of her personal appearance, made extremely uncomfortable"; the young man "who, having been let into one of the director's secrets, expected, with the confidence of youth, to be let into all of them." It is years since novel readers discovered that Mr. Bennett could teach them how to enjoy their own peculiarities and their neighbors'.

Mr. Bennett's high spirits are diffused through this book. They "make gay" his attitude, as he might himself say, though his gallicisms are few, toward the City of Pleasure itself, so solidly built. High spirits paint his portrait of Carpentaria, the bandmaster and composer who invented the city and who happens on one occasion to be conducting "God Save the King": "Moreover, he showed a certain reserve in handling it. He merely conducted it

as though in conducting it he himself were literally saving the King. That was all." When Carpentaria's conducting has been interrupted by news that his partner has been abducted and perhaps murdered, his artistic soul sighs out these words: "Everybody in this City runs to me when the slightest thing goes wrong." When Carpentaria is in love, the artist and the lover express themselves simultaneously: "I am a great man, but I have done nothing, absolutely nothing, to deserve her goodness."

High spirits and observation are not alone in this book. An ingenious plot, one of Mr. Bennett's most ingenious, keeps them company. The story is exciting until almost the end of the book. For a plot this is high praise. Either every book with this kind of plot has a law of its own, in obedience to which writer and reader tire at the same moment, or else the explanation is simpler—the reader tires merely because the writer was tired. In which case the remedy would be easy—cut off the last tenth, or ninth, or whatever, and substitute the shortest possible chapter of solution. Toward the end Mr. Bennett's plot nearly effaces his characters.

In the making of the plot one finds only two oversights. In the first chapter Mr. Ilam hates his partner. In the last chapters this hatred has faded, one doesn't know why. And in Chapter XXVI Mr. Jetsam makes an unexplained trip to the top story of Mr. Ilam's house. The explanation is plain enough later—Mr. Bennett wanted Mr. Jetsam out of the way. This is the only bit of cheating by the plot-maker. The fadeaway of Mr. Ilam's hatred was probably mere forgetfulness.

A more serious reproach is Mr. Bennett's old paralytic lady. She is too much with us. Not since "Thérèse Raquin" was put on the stage has paralysis caused more restlessness and impatience among readers or spectators. Is this a charge that Mr. Bennett has been "disagreeable" again? Not quite. Merely a charge that what is disagreeable to him is more disagreeable than he thinks. "Grimness" is a good thing, but the same "grimness" over and over again, remorseless, unsurprising, may produce a state that is neither an acute attack of nerves nor boredom, but something between the two, and a good deal like both. Paralysis and high spirits may be associated too closely.

However, neither the old paralytic lady nor the longnesses near the end can keep the book from being both exciting and good fun. And of one Arnold Bennett, of the one whose perceptiveness is to insight as prose is to poetry, "The City of Pleasure" is a most entertaining example.

Our Share of Canal Trade

The Panama Canal and International Trade Competition, by Lincoln Hutchinson. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$1.75 net.

IN the years that have passed since the United States undertook the labor of joining the oceans at Panama, much of our initial enthusiasm has ebbed away. It was a magnificent work, to be sure; man never would have been contented with commerce beating vainly against the thin barrier of the Isthmus. But now we ask, will it pay? And above all, will its fruits come to us, or have we executed, at our expense, a work that will benefit chiefly our commercial rivals? To answer these questions involves a vast deal of tedious calculation on the cost of shipment of goods by the several ocean routes, the importance, actual and potential, of the markets lying within the sphere of