

Indeed, it would seem as if these positions were never fully resolved, for reasons that undoubtedly had much to do with Smith's ambivalent religious views: "Although not a religious poet as John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan were, Smith had a sense of their sense of the world, and this coexisted with his awareness of the modern foreclosure on the religious life. Smith lived between these two positions. He did not believe what they believed, but intellectually he explored it" (103). As Compton points out, this ambivalence marks not only the religious aspects of Smith's poetry but its erotic aspects as well. Smith's compelling fascination with, yet his simultaneous ironic distancing from, Eros and Thanatos alike is central to the metaphysical verse. Unlike the confessional voice characteristic of much seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, Smith's "I" is often difficult if not impossible to discern, having been obscured through increasingly refined imagery and syntax, a practice that has resulted in some seeing his work as too calculating and dispassionate. Yet, while Compton explores in some detail the possible reasons for Smith's "extreme positions," she could have significantly extended her analysis. A psychoanalytical approach, for example, might have proved quite useful at unlocking some of the doors of personal reticence in Smith's treatment of sex and death, might have given more insight into his often ironic mockeries of these perennial topics of fascination. Similarly, a fuller comparison of the methods of Smith with other modern metaphysicals (most notably Eliot, whom Compton does deal with, but not enough) would have gone a long way to further elucidating the peculiar position of twentieth-century metaphysical poetry. It is somewhat disappointing to be taken from the edge of Smith's most searching and intriguing eschatological explorations in the middle of the book to the admittedly insightful but less inspiring chapters on "Nature" and "Social Poetry" that follow.

These reservations aside, Compton's book is a valuable study of this influential Canadian man of letters, a man the greater part of whose legacy is a complex and intellectually challenging metaphysic that is not as easily dismissed as some would have it to be.

NEIL QUERENGESSER

NOTE

- ¹ See John Ferns's *A. J. M. Smith* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) for an earlier but primarily biographical book on Smith.



Michael Coyle. *Ezra Pound, Popular Genres, and the Discourse of Culture*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995. Pp. 264. \$37.50.

Why does the very form of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* remain so perplexing to so many readers? Michael Coyle's intriguing and well-researched ar-

gument suggests one major reason: Pound engages poorly with now-established modernist ideas about what it means to be literary. Our reading of the *Cantos* would be enriched if we could approach them with assumptions more attuned to those Pound possessed while writing them. Coyle illuminates these assumptions by exploring Pound's involvement with popular genres excluded from the modernist definition of the literary. Works in such popular genres include the Victorian "primers" of the sort that faded from public notice not long after Pound first attracted it. Anything called "An ABC of" or "An Alphabet of" might fit into this category, and Coyle provides many examples published between the 1870s and the 1930s. Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, for instance, fits into this tradition. Such writing is democratic but also didactic and utilitarian—"not much to do with poetry," we might well say. Yet Pound quixotically insisted on maintaining a radical coherence between this form of discourse and the poetry he provided in his *Cantos*.

Coyle argues that Pound did this in part because he had imbibed—initially from Victorian sources such as Ruskin, and later from A. R. Orage—a particular "discourse of culture." This discourse represents "culture" as a totalized organic entity in which everything connects with everything else in the most meaningful way. This view justifies and encourages the kind of eclecticism and genre mixing characteristic of Orage's *The New Age*. In this view, didacticism and utility are not separated from the aesthetic functions of poetry, any more than economic systems can be separated from verse or prose styles.

For some later Victorians this cultural totality served as an ideal. For Pound its real existence seems to have been an axiom that shaped his perceptions and arguments. "Pound simply assumes that economic conditions equate with moral horizons, and therefore determine stylistic possibilities for any given age," writes Coyle (28). Because this was so, Pound could not exile didactic discourses from his "poem including history," any more than he could forego including "whole slabs of the record" in ways that would allow readers to see, and be instructed by, profound historical patterns emerging from each fragment of past discourses that he embedded in his writing.

Pound's creation of a poetic method based on these ideas, Coyle argues, was an effort to "conserve that which was already lost" (41). In fact, the dream of creating or recovering a totalized culture eventually was displaced into the most pernicious forms imaginable, as "Ruskin's vision of cultural totality [became] Pound's 'totalitarian' vision, and what had begun as a call for moral regeneration had been appropriated by the most destructive forces in history" (51).

Coyle's early chapters examine T. S. Eliot's editorial work on Faber's *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* in 1938. While Pound had begun a still-largely unconscious struggle to preserve a vanishing vision of culture's wholeness—a vision in which poetry preserved a central, morally di-

dactic power—Eliot successfully affirmed more aesthetically elevated but generically circumscribed definitions of both literature and culture. The resulting idea of the literary is used to domesticate Pound in the Faber collection of his essays. The triumph of Eliot's vision and its continuing influence in academia helps to redefine Pound's difference as eccentricity or failure. In later chapters Coyle explores, in readings of specific sections of the *Cantos*, the implications of his view that we are still bound by discursive norms and expectations that place Pound's work "out of bounds" and thus often out of view. Coyle's reading of Pound as a poet who resists "a thin-blooded aloofness from events and a false circumscription of the poetic sphere" (115) contributes to the larger scholarly effort of loosening modernism's tenacious bonds upon our own thinking and reading, in a literary and political world that is less and less possible to read, or to write, in modernist terms.

HARRY VANDERVLIST



Andrew Swarbrick. *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. Pp. xii, 202. \$39.95.

Andrew Swarbrick's study of Philip Larkin shifts our attention in the direction of the poetry itself, after the negative effects on Larkin's reputation caused by Anthony Thwaite's edition of *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985* (1992) and Andrew Motion's biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993). Along with *Philip Larkin: A Concordance to the Poetry of Philip Larkin* (1995) by R. J. C. Watt and the recently launched newsletter of the Philip Larkin Society, *About Larkin*, Swarbrick's book represents the beginning of a post-biographical stage of response to Larkin's achievement.

Out of Reach is not centrally concerned with Larkin as the conservative, racist, and sexist figure highlighted in the letters and biography, and Swarbrick is aware of the impossibility of casting Larkin as a consistently generous writer, given what we now know of the more wretched details of his life. Yet, Swarbrick does attempt to retrieve the reputation somewhat, and to "rebut both the old charges of genteel parochialism and the new charges of ideological incorrectness" (ix). He is well informed about Larkin's failures, but he clearly appreciates the poetry and his writing is enlivened by his reading of it. This perspective gives a tonal evenness to his critical style, one which differentiates it from many of the more impatient commentaries on Larkin which have appeared over the past few years.

Out of Reach is now the most up-to-date general book available on Larkin. It engages in a study of Larkin's poetry volume by volume, and it often says precisely the right things about his development of craft, themes, and vision. It is an accomplished work of scholarship and criti-