
BOOK REVIEWS

Michael J. Hoffman, ed.

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON GERTRUDE STEIN

Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986. Pp. 268

Reviewed by Ethel F. Cornwell

Michael Hoffman's collection of reviews and essays (forty in all) spans eighty years of critical commentary on Gertrude Stein, beginning with the one letter in the collection, from Hutchins Hapgood in 1906, and ending with four hitherto unpublished essays, three of which were written specially for this volume. The collection offers a broad range of critical opinion, from the unequivocal admiration of writers like Carl Van Vechten, who hailed Stein as "one of the supreme stylists" (p. 37), and Sherwood Anderson, who declared her writing "the most important pioneer work done in the field of letters in my time" (p. 40), to the negative reactions of writers like Edith Sitwell, who found in her "an almost insuperable amount of silliness" (p. 46), and Leon Katz, who saw a development in her writing which symbolizes "the capricious and irresponsible side of twentieth-century art" (p. 140). And then there are the unequivocal attackers like B.L. Reid, who said flatly, speaking of Stein's "art by subtraction," "This is not art; this is science" (p. 109).

The first part of the book offers reviews and essays written during and immediately after Stein's lifetime. The second part of the book is given to critical writings of the fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties which view Stein as deserving serious consideration. The big problem of all Stein critics has been how to approach her. As William Troy pointed out in his 1933 essay, "A Note on Gertrude Stein," "There have always been only two questions about Gertrude Stein: What, precisely, has she been trying to do these many years? What, if any, is the value of what she has done? . . . Most of the confusion in regard to Miss Stein's work has come from the attempt to answer the second question without adequately recognizing the difficulties of the first" (p. 63).

Stein's *Three Lives* was generally praised (especially her portrait of Melanctha) because, as Edmond Wilson noted, despite the monotonous repetitions, "one becomes aware of her masterly grasp of the organisms, contradictory and indissoluble, which human personalities are" (p. 59). And Carl Van Vechten could accept the monotonies because he felt that she had "turned language into music," making the sound more important than the sense (p. 34). But as Stein moved further and further away from the conventional use of language, critics struggled to understand what she was doing and why. Some saw her wordplay as an attempt to revitalize the language. Others saw it as a private code, while Michael Gold labeled it "literary insanity," "a deliberate insanity which arises out of a false conception of the nature of art and the function of language" (p. 77). And B.F. Skinner explained it as a continuation of her experiments with automatic handwriting. Later critics, like Wendy Steiner, looked to the influence of William James and his ideas to explain what Stein was attempting to do, and why—seeing in her work a reflection of Jamesian theories of time, language, and identity.

Overall, the very real contribution of this book, of value to Stein supporters and detractors alike, is that, taken together, the essays show where Stein was coming *from*, what she was working *toward*, and *why* she has been accorded critical attention over the years.

Robert Dale Parker

FAULKNER AND THE NOVELISTIC IMAGINATION

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

Pp. 168

Reviewed by Evans Harrington

As the title of this slender but densely packed book suggests, *Faulkner and the Novelistic Imagination* sets out to analyze Faulkner's techniques of novel writing. And to an impressive degree this task is accomplished. Though Parker selects a very few books to discuss—*As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*—he argues well that these are the fruits