
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Stein, beginning with the one letter in the collection, from Hutchins Hapgood in 1906, and ending with four hitherto unpublished essays, three of which were written specially for this volume.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

of Faulkner's greatest period, and he advances a theory about how Faulkner evolved these books. With *Flags in the Dust*, Parker argues, Faulkner recognized, with a sense of elation, that he had been trying to tell six novels in one all at the same time, resulting in, or at least threatening, a chaos of form. So in *The Sound and the Fury*, facing this chaos again, he developed two novel forms: on the one hand to concede chaos, making no pretense of continuity; and, in the exact opposite direction, "to turn the making no pretense of continuity into a mere pretense itself, for no one of [the four selections of *The Sound and the Fury*] can be understood alone" (p. 18). Parker continues, "These two principles, the one of conceding the discontinuity of chaotic material and the other of trying to stitch the discontinuities back together, are the two principles that separately direct nearly the whole scheme of Faulkner's remaining novels" (p. 19). He says that through *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* "Faulkner shapes his novels by . . . trying to construct a form that can weave that chaos into a continuous whole" (p. 19). In later work, nearly all the rest, he again assumed the chaos but also conceded the lack of unity by "dividing the novels . . . into strongly discontinuous parts" (p. 19). The former method, Parker contends, resulted in better novels.

The specific technique for welding unity out of the chaos of these early books was that of withholding information, sometimes merely tactically, as with the corn cob in *Sanctuary*, sometimes epistemologically, as with the whole mystery of the Bundrens' lives in *As I Lay Dying*, sometimes using both methods, as—triumphantly—in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where everything from the presence of Henry Sutpen in the house to the moral dilemma over racism with which the novel ends is withheld and misrepresented. In his careful and original analyses of the technique of withholding in these four books, Parker provides much fresh insight into Faulkner's methods and interests, insight buttressed by careful research.

What is puzzling about Parker's performance is why he or some good editor did not keep his argument always to expressed purpose. Frequently he abandons his analysis of Faulkner's technique to offer interesting but unfounded generalizations about the author or about some aspect of the book which has nothing to do with the technique of withholding or the "novelistic imagination." "Furthermore, Horace's link to Popeye and his mixture of attraction with revulsion also signal Faulkner's own involvement, through Horace, in Popeye and Popeye's crime. In fact, the relation of the novel to certain aspects of Faulkner's life suggests that *Sanctuary* is partly the vicarious representation—and perhaps exorcism—of Faulkner's own will to abuse and his despair at feeling abused himself, of Faulkner as victim and victimizer" (p. 75).

Following this statement are two pages of very reckless speculation about Faulkner's connection to Popeye and Horace Benbow and Faulkner's wife Estelle's to Temple Drake. Similarly there is a long discussion of the unprecedented strangeness of Anse Bundren; and, in the discussion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the "novelistic imagination" which Parker has posited is frequently lost sight of. It is as though he himself has attempted, not altogether successfully, to weld together the chaos of his interests in Faulkner and these novels by his thesis of a novelistic imagination.

Still, Parker does give the reader many new insights into the methods and structures of *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Probably this will be more satisfying to Faulkner specialists—and to novelists—than to readers in general.

Robert Secor and Debra Modellmog, Comps.
**JOSEPH CONRAD AND AMERICAN WRITERS: A
 BIBLIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF AFFINITIES,
 INFLUENCES, AND RELATIONS**
 Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985. Pp. 240

Arnold E. Davidson
**CONRAD'S ENDINGS: A STUDY OF THE FIVE MAJOR
 NOVELS**
 Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984. Pp. 124, \$27.95
 Reviewed by Camille R. LaBossière

This first volume is the bibliography of a book yet unwritten. Conrad, Robert Secor avers in his introduction, "has an essential and continuing presence in the American literary tradition" (vii). Extensive research confirms the fact of that presence. Its *why*, however, remains hidden in the lavish array of facts; and what suggestions Professor Secor makes regarding