

BOOK REVIEWS

Mark A. Wollaeger

Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990

Reviewed by William Bonney

Joseph Conrad's inclusive genius continues to provide literary scholars with opportunities to speculate about and elucidate various contexts for his fiction. This recent contribution focuses primarily upon "Conrad's epistemological and moral skepticism" (p. xiv), but the topic is defined in a manner that self-reflexively intensifies the early meaning of the Greek word *skepsis*, ("inquiry or examination"). Since Conrad's interrogation of human experience "derives simultaneously from the primacy of perception in the empirical tradition and the visionary response to the epistemological limitations of that tradition," Conrad "resists the insights proffered by his own skepticism" (p. xiv). By means of this prefatory theoretical formulation, a tension is defined which initiates Conrad's search for "a third term" (p. 15), his mediative fabrication of "the 'third voice'" that is part of the "dialogue of opposing attitudes" so characteristic of his works. Of equal note, though, is the word "dialogue," for once it gets inserted into the "Preface" a subsequent invocation of Bakhtin seems almost inevitable. And soon thereafter Wollaeger uses the Bakhtinian concept of the "dialogic" novel—a form wherein the "perspectives of individual characters remain fundamentally autonomous" (p. 22)—to illuminate a prominent textual feature of Conrad's inclusive skepticism which, "by refusing to foreclose on any line of inquiry, may resist the monologic by opposing other voices or perspectives to the potential dogmatism of a single point of view" (p. 33). That is, in Conrad's fiction "authorial intention can only be divided against itself in a network of dialogic tensions," and it is claimed such texts conform to Bakhtin's "poetics" in which "each character embodies an autonomous perspective that carries the same authority as the discourse of the author" (p. 131). For the purposes of a brief review, such theoretical issues perhaps can best be summarized and put aside.

The strengths of this book lie in the pages wherein are delineated various philosophical and generic contexts. Wollaeger provides informative descriptions of Cartesian skepticism. His summaries of perspectives subsequently articulated by Hume and Schopenhauer are useful, and his speculations about Schopenhauer's "irrationality of the metaphysical will" being a "melodramatic-philosophical ground" for what he calls the "Conradian Gothic" (p. 58) are innovative. Furthermore, he often provides stimulating general remarks concerning Conrad's use of certain tropes (e.g., "shelter"; pp. 1-7, 26-7, 107-19) and situations (e.g., "crises of identity are closely linked to struggles for personal autonomy"; p. 122). It is clear that this book is the result of a good bit of thought.

Nevertheless, the book's overall argument is seldom more than mediocre, largely because of Wollaeger's consistent failure to provide compelling analytic readings of individual texts. Granted, he talks at length about a variety of specific works, and even uses the phrase "detailed analyses" (p. 39), but typically does not generate the sort of evidence upon which persuasive discussions in matters of literary criticism depend. Too often plot summary, extended but unanalyzed quotation, or allusion to presumed authorial intention, take the place of the sort of rigorous discussion of text that finally must make or break an argument (see, e.g., pp. 39, 48-9, 139, 186). Moreover, the weakness of many of Wollaeger's readings is compounded by the inanity of his research into prior critical work on Conrad. He openly acknowledges that he prefers the perceptions of Conrad's work that he received from his mentors at Stanford (e.g., Ian Watt) to critical responses of the sort stimulated by the work of J. Hillis Miller. Fair enough. But preferences do not justify negligence, particularly when the material neglected frequently provides rigorously argued, alternate perspectives upon issues that Wollaeger himself apparently claims to resolve (i. e., the vexing questions of the genre of romance and the rhetoric of supernaturalism so prominent in Conrad's fiction).

It is to be regretted that so promising a book proves finally to be deficient in fundamentals of argument and scholarship. Readers seeking further to broaden their acquaintance with the philosophical contexts of skepticism may find this book rewarding. But readers looking for an argument presented within an inclusive, informed awareness of previous criticism, and founded upon illuminating textual analyses of Conrad's works, will probably be dissatisfied.

Charles Berryman

Decade of Novels: Fiction of the 1970s: Form and Challenge

Troy, NY: Whitston, 1990. Pp. 140. \$18.50

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

The title of Berryman's book makes the reader expect an account of the various forms of fiction that were published during a very productive decade. One then wonders how Berryman may have accomplished this feat on a mere 140 pages. Upon reading the book, one soon discovers that Berryman chose the wrong title. "Novels of a Decade: Some Selected Readings" would have been a more appropriate title and not led the reader to expect coherence. The ten chapters of the book examine ten different novels, and there is hardly any connection between the individual parts of the book.

Berryman works from the premise of "an intersection of history and fiction" (2) to which he wants to do justice by selecting one novel from each year of the 1970s and then discussing it in the contexts of the author's previous work, Shakespearean and modernist models and contemporary history. Berryman's approach raises a number of questions. The book is supposed to be a reply to a problem Berryman sees as a consequence of modern literary theory: "Reality