

Book Reviews

Jeffrey J. Folks

In A Time of Disorder: Form and Meaning in Southern Fiction from Poe to O'Connor

New York: Peter Lang, 2003. Pp. 146. \$22.95

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Coming to terms with modernity was the central cultural challenge for the American South after the Civil War. Rebuilding the South physically and economically took several decades, but eventually it was accomplished. The cultural consequences of the destruction of the society's ethical and philosophical roots proved to be so complex that they have been the subject of numerous studies for decades.

Critic Jeffrey J. Folks has added another book to the long list of titles that discuss the problem of cultural reorientation in the form documented in Southern literature. In his collection *In A Time of Disorder*, Folks collected nine essays on texts by authors not only from the South but also "self-consciously 'provincial'" (3). One essay each is devoted to works by Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, William Styron, James Agee, and Flannery O'Connor.

What these authors share is not only a common geographical and cultural origin but also a typical reaction to modernity. According to Folks, modernity is associated in the South with a "sense of moral and religious decline" and "moral anarchy" accompanied by "a secular ethos of individualism and materialism" (5). Folks selected the nine authors because he saw them representing the "three characteristic modes of response: that of resistance, transcendence, or acceptance" (5). These writers are presented as responding to a modernity that is seen as the equivalent of "the dominance of nihilism in modern culture" (6).

It turns out, however, that this philosophical concept forms only a very loose bracket to hold together a variety of very different essays. The common geographical origin of the authors forms more or less the only central theme in the collection. While Poe—writing in premodern times—is presented as seeking to construct order in a world characterized by ever-present doom, Twain appears to find Huck Finn's lighting out for the territory the only acceptable response to the constrictions imposed by the modern demand for efficiency.

The best essays in the collection focus on the most central Southern authors, William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. Folks presents a convincing discussion of *The Sound and the Fury* by placing the novel in the context of Faulkner's biography during the composition of the book. He sees the novel shaped by the author's "awareness of the absence of a framework of traditional belief within which one's personal ambition of artistic fame or romantic fulfillment might be tempered by the certainty of one's role within a particular community or a historical culture" (39). Welty's story "The Wide Net" serves Folks to demonstrate that "a paradise of contentment within a traditional order of existence" (69) is the only worthwhile goal of human enterprise.

Folks has greater difficulty fitting the works of the post-World War II authors into his overall frame. Novels such as Richard Wright's *The Outsider*, William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*, and James Agee's *A Death in the Family* as well as Flannery O'Connor's collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge* lend themselves quite easily as evidence to indict the shortcomings of a modern age characterized by destruction and meaninglessness, but like the authors and their characters, Folks can see "no workable alternative" (117).

In A Time of Disorder presents a number of essays that—taken individually—present some interesting readings and interpretations of texts from the American South. But what the book does not—and cannot—provide is the coherent reading of a segment of American literature that the introduction had raised hopes for.

Laurence M. Porter and Eugene F. Gray
Gustave Flaubert's "Madame Bovary." A Reference Guide
Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. Pp. 182 + xlii. \$54.95
Reviewed by Timothy Raser

To the Greenwood Guides to Fiction has been added a guide to *Madame Bovary* by Laurence Porter and Eugene Gray, and now the seminal work of modernism is represented in a series that provides "comprehensive introduction[s] to major works of fiction." Professors Porter and Gray have divided the task between themselves: to the book's seven chapters are added a bibliography and an index. This work strives to be comprehensive and balanced regarding *Madame Bovary*, which has elicited innumerable critical responses, and the division of labor between two very different scholars is an appropriate response to this task. The book supplies overviews and generalities, and does not explain or interpret as much as it refers readers to other works where more in-depth treatments are available. The authors refer to the excellent 1986 edition of the novel edited by Bernard Ajac; translations are the authors'. The choice of an inexpensive edition is commendable and, in my opinion, outweighs considerations of textual authority. In this instance, however, it is unfortunate, as