

Because Moore rarely repeats himself from novel to novel, it is always a bit risky to try any kind of thematic linking of his works, so ultimately any selection to illustrate his changing vision is a subjective act. On the whole, O'Donoghue gives authoritative and convincing readings of Moore's works to justify her choices in the four sections of this study. She does not digress into theories of criticism and approaches that seem almost obligatory in literary discussions these days, and for some that will undoubtedly constitute a major weakness in her book. But it will satisfy those readers who look for sensitive, though at times controversial, readings of the primary texts, and in this respect O'Donoghue's study is a convincing introduction to the works of one of the more significant writers of our day.

HALLVARD DAHLIE

Barbara J. Eckstein. *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990. pp. ix, 210. \$13.95 pb.

The answer to that often asked or implied, ill-formed, and by now boring question — whether you are for or against deconstruction — puts you on either side of a barricade these days. If you are for deconstruction, you are presumably for, or at least associated with, such unappealing concepts as nihilism, amoralism, and incomprehensibility. If you are against deconstruction, it is assumed that you are either too old to bother with it or a member of the National Association of Scholars. That this polarization and labelling blocks dialogue and community building is obvious enough: Eckstein's book is a rigorous attempt to dismantle the barricade, to talk to and reach those who are not convinced that deconstruction *can* be a politically responsible, ethical theory.

Whereas Robert Boyers's book on political fiction, *Atrocity and Amnesia* (1985), was in part a re-vision of Irving Howe's *Politics and The Novel* (1957), Eckstein's is in part a response to Boyers's (which takes an emphatic stand "against" deconstruction). Just as Boyers refined Howe's definition of political fiction, so Eckstein sharpens Boyers's. She defines "good" contemporary political fiction "as that which exposes paradox inherent in political binary opposition" and describes it by its "effect of complicity" (35). If this definition does not seem sharp, it will once Eckstein turns to her texts.

Before doing so, she does all the right things in an erudite, dense, but clearly-organized introduction: she presents a brief background of the debate on the relationship between politics and literature, defines her terms, locates herself, identifies the historical context, and

establishes the parameters of her project. She is interested in how “white author confronts white reader” (38) and chooses texts by Milan Kundera, J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Grace Paley, John Hawkes, and the exception, Japanese writer Ibuse Masuji, as models for her method of reading politics.

The complexity of (and patience required for) rereading along the lines Eckstein proposes are evident in the chapter on Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. But so are the method’s rewards: the problematic “Mother” segment of *The Book* is brilliantly recreated and the idea of uncertainty, in whose democratic value both Eckstein and Kundera believe, is cogently championed. Coetzee, too, is on Eckstein’s side of the barricade, and her compelling readings of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* (the latter reading enhanced by her pairing of Michael with Melville’s Bartleby) should put to rest queries about Coetzee’s commitment as well as the opinion that deconstruction has to be a sterile critical practice.

Gordimer and Paley are paired in the next chapter to allow Eckstein to explore in their short fiction the pressures of what Edward Said calls “filiative” and “affiliative” (109) bonds. She reveals how the South African “ethos of separation,” which sees “sameness as difference,” and the American “ethos of assimilation,” which sees “difference as sameness” (116) are wrestled with and undone in the respective writers’ stories. Fittingly, novels of nuclearism or fictions of “the end” as she calls them — Hawkes’s *Travesty* and Ibuse’s *Black Rain* — comprise the final chapter, which reveals how both texts expose the differences within the final dichotomy, life and death.

Along with its critical acumen, *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain* is an intense, stimulating work because of its style. Excerpts from poems by Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, John Ashberry, and Thomas Gunn serve as poignant epigrams to the chapters. Also, Eckstein has a flair for writing compact summaries of the texts and doing scrupulously close readings; so even if the reader is not familiar with the texts, her discussions are still engaging.

The conclusion to her book is short and stirring. To the question of action, Eckstein answers that action begins with “a deconstructive analysis of systems, theories, texts.” She has chosen to analyze texts that “uncover complicity” because complicity, she urges, is what will get us beyond the politics of guilt and shame to some kind of action. And this is because “complicity cannot be purged.” While she admits that reading texts such as these “cannot make us act as responsible citizens” (181), they do enable our identification with victims and their pain and make clear our complicity with the victimizers. With this knowledge, Eckstein thinks, maybe we *will* do something.

Her argument is convincing. Deconstruction hardly seems the politically empty theory some make it out to be. In fact, in the hands of a practitioner as careful, subtle, and sensitive as Eckstein, deconstruction is pretty hard to resist.

KELLY HEWSON

Rowland Smith, ed. *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990. pp. 226. \$38.00.

Rowland Smith has gathered together in this volume sixteen essays that cover Gordimer's fiction from *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* to *A Sport of Nature*. His intention is to "present a historical survey of reviews or comment" (12) and in this he is successful: the essays range in date from 1953 to 1988. His second objective is to provide "coverage" of Gordimer's major work (18). The analysis in this coverage, however, varies in quality.

The emphasis in the collection is on Gordimer's novels.<sup>1</sup> While Smith decries the lack of space that forced him to leave out some "notable" (18) essays, he includes three essays that are chapters of other readily available books.<sup>2</sup> Much of his introduction is taken up with mapping the ill-informed ways that Gordimer has been viewed in South Africa, particularly in the popular press, by conservative and liberationist critics alike. In addition to providing a historical perspective, Smith's introductory overview serves to remind readers of the political caldron in which Gordimer lives and works, and why she is so readily and easily labelled a "political" writer.

Smith concludes his introduction with this observation: "The collection of essays that follows includes the best that has been written about her work since 1953, and . . . illustrates the breadth of interest in one of the major novelists . . . writing today" (19). This statement betrays the major weakness of the collection. While some of the "best" is included here, there is also a fair bit that is not particularly insightful or illuminating.

The collection does show the variety of ways Gordimer and her fiction are read. There is the annoying, condescending approach, particularly of the early criticism, that says she is a good writer but is cold and distant. (It is not always clear if such criticism refers to her style or her character or both.) For example, in an early comment on Gordimer and her writing, Anthony Delius observes:

There is here and there a slightly spurious sophistication, a tendency to functional monotony and lack of grace, a hint of barren nervousness, and a faint female smugness. But they are only the irritating by-products of her great virtues as a writer. . . . (24)