

Book Reviews

D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke. *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. pp. x, 208. \$39.95.

As its title suggests, this book implicitly seeks to counter the relativistic tendencies of contemporary "cultural studies," as well as of what continues to be called the "new historicism." In ways that may well strike some readers as discordant, it makes contextual references to propose the ultimate irrelevance of context. Indeed, *Beyond Culture and Background* argues that Conrad's work, as great art, transcends the limitations of both his personal background as well as of Western Culture. It defends the "authenticity" (43) of Conrad's representation of the lives and experience of "developing" peoples. "Masterpieces are," Goonetilleke somewhat self-consciously affirms, "essentially about permanent issues and what are known as eternal verities" (96).

However, this allusion to conventional wisdom ("what are known as") avoids the conspicuous vulnerability that would attend any attempt to spell out *veritas* only at the cost of neglecting distinctions that Conrad himself held dear. The "eternal verities" is just that kind of comfortable but meaningless reference against which Conrad, in his celebrated preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, struggled to define his purpose. Art is, Conrad declared, "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential. . . . [T]he artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom" (xxxix-xl). The artist makes this appeal, first and last, "to temperament." Conrad invokes "temperament" precisely to displace expectations about "truth" from what he experienced as the overbearingly rational and moral discourse of Victorian criticism. It is not necessarily wrong to associate his aims with a pursuit of the "eternal verities," but we might expect a critic of Goonetilleke's talent to proceed more carefully—and with a more historical perspective. Despite his characteristic sensitivity to textual matters, Goonetilleke's evident frus-

tration with the sometimes casual relativism of recent attempts to join literary to social criticism here disturbs his concentration.

This is a shame, since, having been writing about Conrad for nearly twenty years, Goonetilleke commands a complex understanding of his work. Conrad figured importantly in *Developing Countries in British Fiction* (1977), and the predominantly formalist techniques there developed came to inform the provocative *Images of the Raj: South Asia in the Literature of Empire* (1988). Like *Images of the Raj*, *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background* refuses to treat literary texts as sociological documents. On this point Goonetilleke is explicit. Quoting Milan Kundera's definition of the novel as "a necessary form of enquiry" (23), he seeks to illuminate the singular access to knowledge available to "artistic understanding" (130). Goonetilleke's work demonstrates that the project begun by the Russian formalists seventy-five years ago—the identification of those qualities peculiar to literature and no other discourse—is still very much with us. Indeed, Goonetilleke addresses the question of "literariness" rather matter-of-factly. It is for him less an argument than the basis for all subsequent argument. It is no less than the basis for his resistance to contemporary cultural studies. But this endeavor is, after all, entirely consonant with Conrad's own convictions (and with modernist-formalist critical credo in general). It leads him to distinctions missed by other critics caught in the rush to *idéologocritique*. For example, Goonetilleke defends Conrad from Chinua Achebe's charge of racism by demonstrating the difference between "the vague awe-creating literary prose" of Conrad the writer and "the conversational idiom" of Marlowe the narrator (86). This may be an old distinction, but Goonetilleke works conscientiously to establish its continuing relevance. He is right to do so; that critics continue to redefine the purpose of criticism does not necessarily imply the obsolescence of the sophisticated tools of formalist literary criticism.

Nevertheless, Goonetilleke himself is no longer prepared to champion the application of literary-critical techniques to extra-literary materials. Thus, in an unnecessary circumscription of criticism's proper subject, he cites Benita Parry's account of *The Rescue* as "an example of the kind of fallacious justification that besets the criticism of weak works" (39). In fact, Parry's concern was not with *The Rescue* as transcendent art, but rather with its signifying the "exhaustion of a genre" (59): the colonial romance. Moreover, like Goonetilleke himself, she was concerned that literature be "approached as an autonomous practice" (7). Her argument with Goonetilleke is not really about the claiming of artistic merit for artistically inferior works; it comes rather with her proposal that the recognition of literature as autonomous practice can be a first step towards *idéologocritique*. "If, however, literature is approached as an autonomous practice producing specifically fictional representations of what has through other means been construed as history, then criticism can elucidate the texts' eccentric perceptions of

the epistemological premises, ethical axioms and social goals proposed by the dominant ideology, and this study will attempt to discuss how the interlocution of narrative discourses in a set of Conrad's fictions transforms, subverts and rescues the established norms, values and myths of imperialist civilisation" (7). In a note, Parry characterizes Goonetilleke's earlier work on Conrad as claiming that the work merely "represents historical circumstances and reflects prevalent racial attitudes" (134). In *Joseph Conrad: Beyond Culture and Background*, however, Goonetilleke has altered his early position, and his differences with Parry now turn on the very central question of critical purpose. Here he cites period figures like Hugh Clifford only as a means of underscoring Conrad's artistic superiority (41-2); his purpose is to distinguish the artist from his culture and background, and not to locate the various premises that made his work possible.

This is an important argument, and it raises questions about the very purpose of literary study. Goonetilleke's own position is finally obscured by his opening thesis. True, he does not "provide a purely literary analysis" (1) of Conrad's fiction—in that he often discusses factors extrinsic to the text. But to take his thesis at face value would be to expect a book more like Parry's; Goonetilleke proposes "to see Conrad's work as art in the context of relevant historical, political and biographical facts" (1). The fact is that most criticism in our time is concerned to relate text and context. The quarrel continues about *how* that should be done and to what purpose. This book invokes culture and background to show how incompletely they account for what remains a century later an often startling achievement.

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WORKS CITED

- Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus: A Tale of the Sea*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984.
- Parry, Benita. *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Rob Nixon, *London Calling. V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. pp.229. \$49.00.

One day, in the late 1940s, O. K. Bouwsma, the philosopher from Nebraska, was walking with Wittgenstein in the countryside outside of Ithaca. Wittgenstein brought up the subject of Dostoevski's *Notes from Underground*. Bouwsma remembered the exchange in the following words: "he was puzzled that a man who could so clearly see and understand his own humiliation should not change. One could imagine a man who acted as he did, but who never reflected, should continue in the same old rut. But not him. Such a man would at least come to adjust himself, even by some sort of technique, to avoid such misuses" (O. K.