the shift he documents needs to be theorized more explicitly in the context of a renewed interest in and commitment to ethically-inflected models of literary and critical practice. Perhaps, that is, contemporary historical novels from the last decade remain dissatisfied with postmodernist skepticism, and they want instead to insist, as writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Shyam Selvadurai have done, that we aren't entirely prepared to give up on truth. Now Wyile, by his own admission, opts not to include consideration of Canadian writers who, like Mistry and Selvadurai, write about the histories of other nations. Their example, however, seems germane here not only because their novels have the capacity to augment the reach of Wyile's arguments about Canadian nation-building, but also because their accounts of atrocities and suffering provide an altered sense of just what's at stake, ethically, in the writing of historical fiction.

Ajay Heble University of Guelph

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John G. Peters. *Conrad and Impressionism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. £45.00; U.S. \$54.95.

Each generation of scholars remakes Conrad in its own image. In place of the Conrad riven with contradictions beloved of postcolonial and post-structuralist scholars, John G. Peters in his study of Conrad and impressionism presents us with a more unified novelist. Peters gives us almost a communitarian Conrad, always conscious of the limits of instrumental rationality, nationalism, and imperialism, and above all concerned with community and humanity in an uncertain world.

In ordering his discussion, Peters chooses to examine Conrad's texts synchronically rather than diachronically. A general introductory chapter on literary impressionism produces a consciously limited working definition. Central to Peters' argument is that connections between impressionism in the visual arts and in literature are best made through exploring how

philosophical commonalities influence technique, rather than beginning with superficial technical parallels. Succeeding chapters exemplify this approach through their focus on epistemological questions in Conrad's fiction: objectivity, subjectivity, the apprehension of time, and finally the possibility of ethical action when faced with an absence of moral absolutes. In order to extend his analysis, Peters makes further use of smaller-scale taxonomies in each chapter, and then shows how elements within these taxonomies interact through specific fictional techniques. The chapter on temporality, for instance, begins with a description of "human time, mechanical time, and narrative time" as "three different temporal representations" in Conrad's fiction (86), and the remainder of the chapter explores the manner in which Conrad's achronological narrative technique and use of multiple narrators make connections, contrasts, and disjunctions between these three aspects of time. This is in turn tied to the epistemological concern of Conrad's privileging of individual apprehension over "artificially imposed systems" of thought.

The carefully subdivided grid of analysis that Conrad and Impressionism places over Conrad's oeuvre has some advantages. While arbitrary, the divisions Peters chooses are never unreasonable, and indeed allow fine discriminations in reading which sharpen our understanding of Conrad's texts. The author's creative adaptation of Jules Laforgue's notion of "primitive perception," for example, enables him to produce a reading of a key passage of Heart of Darkness which improves upon Ian Watt's influential concept of "delayed decoding." When Marlow initially apprehends the arrows in the attack on the steamboat as sticks, Peters notes, this is not so much a perceptual mistake, as Watt would argue, but rather a separation of a normally naturalized series of steps in the process of apprehension. Conrad's use of this technique hints at a larger epistemological argument—that meaning does not inhere in an object but rather is constructed through a complex, culturally mediated process of reception. In addition, Peters' clear focus avoids the compulsion to reference every single work of criticism which frequently mars monographs which are, like this one, derived from a doctoral dissertation. Conrad and Impressionism proceeds smoothly about its task, and the reader never needs to engage with dense theoretical discussion.

Peters' decisions in framing the study, however, perhaps ultimately sacrifice more than they gain. While an analytical grid at times produces genuine insights, at others it seems merely to be an exercise in the repackaging of ideas already thoroughly picked over elsewhere. The connection between elements of narrative discourse and a late nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century European world view in Conrad's fiction is scarcely a new topic, and at times *Conrad and Impressionism*'s summary of successive generations of Conrad criticism crowds out original analysis. Conrad's own references to impressionism are already well enough known, and while Peters has the honesty to admit that Conrad would probably not have described himself as an impressionist, he has not consulted manuscript materials and thus can add little that is new in discussion of Conrad's own comments on his literary technique.

The manner in which the study is structured introduces a further failing: it cannot give any account of Conrad's development as a writer. In particular, Peters' concluding assumption that Conrad's "philosophical presuppositions and impressionism remained constant" throughout his career seems contentious (159), and is certainly not proven in the book, since the thematically-organized discussion in each chapter tends to flatten out any sense of the novelist's development. Given Peters stated aim to "limit comments ... to those that I believe to have been Conrad's own" (ix), an ability to plot the evolution of Conrad's artistic and philosophical concerns is surely important. This is especially important given that Conrad lived during a time of rapid change in the arts: the last impressionist exhibition was held in 1886, and indeed Roger Fry's post-impressionist exhibition of 1910 occurred approximately half way through Conrad's literary career.

Peters does give a historical context in his introductory chapter, when he examines impressionism as a reaction to scientific positivism, but again several opportunities are missed. Conrad and Impressionism makes no connection to larger movements such as modernism, and sidesteps any engagement with theoretical discussions of the manner in which narratives produce modernity. Given the excesses of dehistoricized postcolonial readings of Conrad's texts in the 1990s, we might be initially sympathetic to Peters' avowed refusal to "systematically apply the ideas of any specific philosophical school" to the author's works (2). Yet the solution surely is not to ignore the questions raised by postcolonial criticism, but to engage with them. Conrad's use of temporality, for instance, is more than merely an aesthetic or individual epistemological response. Benedict Anderson has famously demonstrated the importance of revised conceptions of narrative time in imagining modern communities such as the nation, and Conrad's manipulation of time is surely important in questioning these narratives. Similarly, Johannes Fabian's work has demonstrated how different levels of time in western narratives are complicit with colonial

and imperial projects, and such a realisation would provide a means of embedding Peters' discussion within a wider context.

I am conscious here of the temptation faced by a book reviewer to critique the text under review by proposing the book that he or she would want to write. A postcolonial studies context is not necessary to this study, but some kind of engagement with critical movements or contexts—rather than the many isolated observations by critics which pepper the text of Conrad and Impressionism—surely is. Without these contexts, Peters faces twin perils. The first is that the study becomes a checklist, finding elements of Conrad's texts which conform to a chosen definition of impressionism, and then analyzing them to confirm that definition. Yet this circular logic leaves no place for the simple observation that each of the technical elements Peters lists as characteristic of impressionism—commencing a narrative in medias res, for example—is found in a wide range of fictional texts that could never be called impressionist. It is surely the twin contexts of production and reception that make impressionism, and critical and theoretical movements enable exploration of these contexts. Secondly, while most readers would be sympathetic to Peters' attempts to reconstruct the complexity of Conrad's world-view as expressed in the texts, many might be more dubious about his claim, as a scholar, to be able to present this in an unmediated fashion to the reader. Concepts such as western civilization, the primitive, and indeed the humanity and community appealed to at the end of the study, have a very different valence now than they did in Conrad's time. To do the work of criticism, we surely need a vocabulary which is different from Conrad's own: a fact which Peters subconsciously acknowledges in his inconsistent surrounding of the adjective "primitive" with quotation marks.

Despite the shortcomings enumerated above, Peters' book does have the strength of clarity gained from a consciously limited perspective. It would be valuable to graduate students interested in connections between literary and visual arts. The overview it provides of the difficulty of defining literary impressionism might usefully provoke thought about connections between other artistic movements in different media. Whether Peters' vision of a "generally unified" Conrad will survive a larger critical debate, however, remains to be seen.

Philip HoldenNational University of Singapore

The overview Conrad and *Impressionism* provides of the difficulty of defining literary impressionism might usefully provoke thought about connections between other artistic movements in different media.