Adrian J. Wallbank, *Dialogue, Didacticism and the Genres of Dispute: Literary Dialogues in an Age of Revolution*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. Pp. 287. £95. ISBN 9781848932791.

The dialogue, as a literary form, is inherently an act of bad faith: it presents polemic under the guise of debate. Adrian J. Wallbank's collection of close readings attempts to analyse how dialogists dealt with an audience increasingly aware of this fact.

Wallbank presents a progression of texts from quasi-catechetical conservative political dialogues written for the newly-literate non-landowning classes in an attempt to prevent them from having their heads turned by *The Rights of Man* to what he categorises as genuine attempts to present a variety of contradictory positions to the reader without coercion in the works of Thomas Love Peacock and Walter Savage Landor. He admits that these texts are highly selective, and that dialogues of the more didactic sort were still being written in the 1820s and beyond, but his selection does provide an interesting and, on the whole, persuasive narrative of the evolving priorities of dialogue writers and readers over the decades following the French Revolution.

Wallbank is very good at unearthing the complexities and paradoxes inherent to the form. For instance, conservative dialogues aimed at convincing the non-landowning classes that they should have no involvement in politics were, by their nature, self-negating; on the other hand, radicals found it difficult to employ the dialogue form for their own ends because of its coercive nature. On a more formal level, a recurring question in the book is that of the most effective way to write a dialogue. While the traditional two straw men against a blank background may appear unappealing, novelistic attempts to render the disputants fully-rounded characters may backfire: the writer does not want the reader to identify with the 'wrong' protagonist.

The relationship of the reader to the text is something that I would have liked Wallbank to have gone into a little more. For most of the texts examined in the first half of the book, aimed primarily at lower or rural middle class readers, there is no way to find out how effective they were in achieving their goals as the evidence simply doesn't exist. However, in Chapter 2, Wallbank mentions in an aside that some religious dialogues primarily aimed at the working class reader were also popular among the middle classes. Wallbank has characterised the reader as identifying with the 'protégé' figure in these dialogues, rather than the 'mentor', ideally undergoing a process of 'conversion' parallel to that of the protégé in the text. It seems likely, though, that middle class readers would, instead, identify with the mentor, and would likely enjoy these texts as confirmations of their existing prejudices and practices, rather than in their 'intended' manner.

The issue of audience also muddies Wallbank's narrative arc, somewhat. The book is presented as a story of ever-increasing textual ambiguity and sophistication over the 30–40 year period covered, but most chapters are distinct in subject and the texts analysed therein are clearly aimed at different readerships: the examples in later chapters are more complex than those in the earlier chapters, but they are also clearly aimed at a more highly educated readership.

The idea of progression from blunt-object coercion to even-handed presentation is also problematic. Wallbank's reading of Peacock as an anarchic force inviting the reader to question both conservative and liberal assumptions – not because he does not believe in anything himself, but because his broadly progressive agenda is best served by inculcating a spirit of non-acquiescence in his readers – is stimulating and, to my mind, convincing. His similar comments on Landor are intriguing but feel rather tacked on. However, the suggestion that Richard Phillips is somehow less coercive because he argues *against* a position rather than for one is questionable – the clear implication in Phillips's *Dialogues* is that the reader,

should they find the doubts raised convincing, can seek for answers in Phillips's other work. The discussion of Southey's *Colloquies* as a genuine dialogue between two facets of an author divided against himself is more convincing, but it should be remembered that Southey's contemporaries, and Southey himself, in his recorded sentiments, were clear as to which 'self' had come out on top.

Wallbank occasionally seems to have contracted a certain circularity of style from his sources and the book could have done with being proof-read: there are a distracting number of typos and occasional grammatical errors (*philosophes* is rendered '*philosophés*' throughout, voracious at one point becomes 'veracious', there is the odd phantom apostrophe, and so on). None of this is seriously detrimental to the work, but if academic publishers are going to charge exorbitant prices for their books, we might expect such errors to be eliminated.

That said, this is an engaging examination of a neglected form, shedding light on lesser-known texts and usefully re-examining better-known ones, and, as such, it should be of use to historians and literary scholars alike.

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