

Book Review

Nature and Language: A semiotic study of cucurbits in literature, by Ralf Norrman and Jon Haarberg, Routledge & Kegan Paul, xiii + 232 pp., £ 10.00

The title and subtitle of this book fill one with unease and apprehension. Yet another semiotic study making large generalizations about language on the basis of idiosyncratic examples! For the study of "the semiotic role of cucurbits in literature" (p.1) which this book offers, is not undertaken merely because of its intrinsic interest, but also because it illustrates and reinforces what the authors take to be a general truth about the relationship between literature and nature: "In their symbolic use in literature the various plants and animals are ... often given their semiotic role because of intrinsic suitability for it" (p. 7). The thesis is that plants and animals have a set of associations attached to them constituting their symbolic potential or "semiotic matrix," which they have in virtue of their nature. The book falls in two parts. Part one is a catalogue of examples aimed at establishing the "semiotic matrix" of cucurbits as literary symbols. The authors construct this catalogue by taking as their point of departure what they see as the salient properties of cucurbits and digging up examples, literary and non-literary, which are supposed to display connotations or associations "motivated" by these properties. Thus they "prove" their general thesis. The blurb claims that this analysis "has revolutionary implications for our understanding of the most persistent and difficult questions of literary and linguistic theory." And these theoretical questions are discussed in the second part.

Unfortunately, the authors' treatment of their subject does nothing to allay the unease caused by the title. The analysis of the examples is philosophically and critically naive. Norrman and Haarberg completely ignore the fundamental problem posed for their general thesis by the fact that nature, when it appears in literature, is always described nature. This description is always the author's creation and it is the description, and not the thing itself, which possesses powers to call up associations. In the theoretical part of the book the authors show themselves as having rather odd ideas about what constitutes the "most persistent and difficult questions in literary and linguistic theory." And in the discussion of the one truly important problem they take up, the problem of metaphor, they manage to ignore almost completely the discussion of metaphor which has taken place the last twenty-five years. On the whole, their knowledge of theories of literature and language seems patchy and this causes them to argue against positions of only marginal interest. The authors seem to be aware of some of these weaknesses themselves for the book is full of defensive remarks aimed at silencing criticism without argument (see e.g. "Introduction", p. 78, p. 87, p. 131). The strongest aspect of the book is the catalogue of examples itself. The

authors have done some solid work in their attempt to establish the existence of what they call "the cucurbitic tradition" in Western literature. And though the literary analysis may be idiosyncratic and often simplistic, many of the examples are well described and interesting on their own account. So for those interested in where to find pumpkins, melons, cucumbers and their relations in literature this book may be a find. For those interested in literary theory or nature and language, however, it has less to offer.

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