

Maria Haar, *The Phenomenon Of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function*. Acta Universitatis Umensis (Umeå Studies in the Humanities, No. 51). Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell International. 1983. 221 pages, bibliography included.

Published as No. 51 in the series "Umeå Studies in the Humanities," Maria Haar's book is proof of abiding interest in Southern fiction in our part of the world. The study shows wide reading in the minor as well as the major Southern "moderns," and, with good reason, *short stories* figure prominently in the author's search for distinguishing characteristics of the Southern grotesque. The book's sub-title, "Some Aspects of Its Form and Function," indicates that theoretical discussions of the elusive term "grotesque" establish a framework within which individual manifestations of the phenomenon can be studied.

The introductory chapter gives an historical outline of the concept "grotesque," and, in addition, it speculates, rather disturbingly freely, on the reasons for the abundance of the grotesque in Southern letters. While this first chapter is historically focused, the second chapter attempts to give a survey of different critical approaches to the Southern grotesque. With the limited theoretical foundation from chapter one as its basis, the distinctive features of the Southern grotesque cannot possibly become clear or revealing. Most useful is, perhaps, the necessary and fine discussion of "the grotesque" versus "the Gothic": the grotesque is located within society, the Gothic outside, or, as Haar puts it, "The Gothic-hero scorns, the grotesque protagonist is scorned" (p. 34).

In these first two chapters Haar makes extensive use of two sources (I hesitate to use the word theories here): Philip Thomson's booklet in *The Critical Idiom* series and an essay by Alan Spiegel suggesting a theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction (from the *Georgia Review*. 1972). There is absolutely no reason why Wolfgang Kayser should not figure much more decisively than he does, nor do I understand why Bakhtin's Rabelais or Dostoevsky studies are not included in these chapters. Likewise, "grotesque" and "gothic" might well be seen against Todorov's theories about the fantastic, and concepts such as fantasy, fancy, imagination may have been helpful in providing an understanding of the term "grotesque" that could help the author in her interpretations of the texts. Instead she works systematically-in order to locate the many appearances of the Southern grotesque in the heterogeneous and ambivalent material defined by her as "modern Southern literature." and which she finds to be easily distinguishable from Northern literature of the same period.

The grotesque understood as character or seen in relation to character seems to inform all the following chapters in the dissertation: Chapters three through five deal with "The Macabre-Grotesque," "The Repulsive- and/or Frightening-Grotesque," and "The Comic-Grotesque." The chapter headings indicate the author's systematic attempt to bring some sort of organisation to a disparate material, and some sort of structure must of course be superimposed upon the many texts and authors discussed here.

With the high number of texts and writers Haar covers, superficial treatment must be the result. An example: although valid and sound in itself, the interpretation of the cow episode in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* must be seen in relation to the novel as a whole - its narrative method, point of view, voice, etc. Apart from these remarks: Haar deserves praise for her insightful and controlled, if

limited, reading of stories and books that are representative within the field she examines.

The concluding chapter presents a few new writers in the sixties, and seems already outdated. The brief list of new names that ends the dissertation shows clearly, as Haar maintains, that the grotesque is something familiar also to a new generation of Southern writers: Walker Percy, Anne Tyler, Lisa Alther, Jayne Anne Phillips. Perhaps, rightfully, a study of the *modern* Southern grotesque should have dealt with these, trying to ascertain whether they all had to crawl out from under Faulkner's shadow, or, with one of Barry Hannah's characters, literally piss on the lawn of Rowan Oak?

*The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction* is an honest and well-informed work in its analytical/critical sections, but more theory and more thought should have gone into the introductory chapters. There cannot be any doubt that easily available theory on the fantastic and the grotesque should have been used, with the possible result that the dissertation would have said something about the grotesque as a phenomenon, *and* about its function in modern Southern literature. The book is only partly successful in its treatment of the Southern grotesque, while it does even less to improve our understanding of the grotesque as a phenomenon. Trying to cover a wide variety of stories and books, some of which are of the highest complexity, the dissertation fails to give proper treatment to its main topic and remains superficial in its analytical chapters.

Scholarly books should not be published without an index.

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