

Book Reviews

Soňa Šnircová.

Feminist Aspects of Angela Carter's Grotesque.

Košice: Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, 2012.

Robert Budde said that a poetry book review is the description of a relationship, much like one with a person: "The reading act is the kinetics of contact and influence as two language-worlds cohabitiate for a time" (108). I would say that reviewing a critical study on the one hand establishes a network of relationships between the reviewer and the text, since the reviewer has to cohabitiate with it very intensely, at close quarters, even if for a short while. On the other hand, this relationship is very complex, because one has to enter the conceptual world both of the critic and of the author, and not only the world of the critical text but the world of the original works as well. Reading *Feminist Aspects of Angela Carter's Grotesque*, one soon realizes the benefits of getting involved in this multiple relationship.

After the premature death of Angela Carter in 1992, interest in her creative output continued to grow, and now, twenty years later, it is still very strong – as proven by several new titles: *Angela Carter and Decadence: Critical Fictions/Fictional Critiques* by Maggie Tonkin (2012); *A Card From Angela Carter* by Susannah Clapp (2012); *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*, edited by Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips (2012). These recent contributions to the growing literature about Carter's work are further enriched by Soňa Šnircová, who took a particular angle on some of her novels closely linked by her focus on the grotesque. This is not the first time that Carter's provocative texts have inspired critical thought within the framework of the creative interplay between feminism and the grotesque (Russo 1995, Johnson 1994, McElroy 1989); however, Carter's feminist aspects of the grotesque surely have never before been approached in such a thorough and systematic way. Over one hundred pages of closely knit analysis revolve round these two notions, first constructing the theoretical background, and then examining the grotesque in Carter's novels from three different points of view: 1. Images of the female body; 2. Images of degradation; and 3. Motifs of the mask, the puppet and madness.

The first chapter of Šnircová's volume, "Theoretical Perspectives and Contexts," is grounded in close reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal study *Rabelais and His World*. Published in 1941, at the onset of another global carnage, Bakhtin's book draws attention to the body in the social and literary contexts by examining the institution of the carnival and its reflection in literary grotesque realism. Soňa Šnircová identifies Bakhtin's notion of the positive liberating effect of the carnivalesque grotesque characterizing the pre-Renaissance period, and differentiates it from the Romantic grotesque, which loses the elements of laughter and liberation, and gains terrifying aspects instead. She accepts his distinction between two types of grotesque, which she formulates as "the positive carnivalesque grotesque connected with the tradition of grotesque realist imagery of the folk culture of

humour whose effect is similar to the liberating effect of carnival, and the negative tragic/demonic grotesque, which, drawing on the tradition of Romanticism, puts emphasis on terror and disgust evoking aspects of grotesque imagery" (Šnircová 18). Šnircová concurs with Bakhtin that this shift from the positive to the negative pole is a consequence of the separation of grotesque imagery from the context of the folk culture of humour, which stresses the collective principle. The formation of the new type of post-Renaissance identity, isolated and alienated, is dependent on the suppression of the grotesque body or the internalization of the carnivalesque grotesque, with all the psychological side effects that are a burden to modern man.

Though brief, this chapter manifests Šnircová's deep knowledge of Bakhtin's theory, and her own ability to succinctly represent the carnivalesque grotesque as the aspect she finds most relevant in reading Angela Carter. Well-acquainted both with theory and Carter's work, Soňa Šnircová identifies a common point between Bakhtin and Carter – their interest in the interaction between the social and the literary. Though Carter may not have read Bakhtin before she wrote her novels, the presence of the body and the material bodily lower stratum in her texts as well as her critique of the patriarchal culture bring her closer to Bakhtin, even though her standpoint is basically feminist. Besides this insight, Šnircová also recognizes three chronological stages in Carter's literary career: from the initial emphasizing of the clearly negative, terrifying aspect of the grotesque, to the foregrounding of its ambivalent character, and finally to the highlighting of its comic, liberating effect. The three chapters that follow the terminological and conceptual issues discussed in the first chapter deal mainly with the six chosen novels that Šnircová finds especially illustrative of Carter's use of the carnivalesque grotesque. One chapter is devoted to the exploration of the female body, its innocence and whorishness, the maternal body, and the carnivalesque liberation of the body. The next one addresses images of degradation, especially the desecration of the crucifix, the patriarchal dehumanisation of the female body, and the carnivalesque uncrowning of the King of Reason. The last chapter falls into three parts: the first part analyses the alienating effect of the mask of femininity, feminine masquerade as a mask of nothing, and the limits of the liberating effect of the carnivalesque mask of femininity; the second part examines the patriarchal world as a puppet play where the puppeteer is terrifying and the dolls are tragic; and the third part identifies romantic and carnivalesque grotesque in an image of madness as a reaction to the 'mad' world as well as the notion of insanity as a carnivalesque negation of masculine rationality.

After reading these chapters, it is clear that this book is a masterly work by a researcher who provides the reader with a thorough overview of the concepts of carnivalesque and the grotesque with methodological consistency. Soňa Šnircová gives her readers the terms, theoretical background, and tools to understand these complex notions, and recognize them in Carter's novels. This rigorously scholarly work reveals the disciplined, analytical, scholarly mind of its author as she discloses the world of the wild imagination of Angela Carter, whom Salman Rushdie called the high sorceress, the benevolent witch queen of English literature. Nevertheless, Šnircová's highlighting some of Carter's views shows her affinity with Carter's ideas. Carter employs carnivalesque grotesque imagery with the aim of liberating the reader from the traditional, patriarchal outlook on the world. She perceives gender identity as a cultural construct and warns against the patriarchal culture which creates it, emphasising the need for the unity of the masculine and the feminine. She

challenges the either/or logic of the patriarchal categorization of the feminine, which are all views so aptly outlined by Šnircová that there is an impression they are in fact shared. Carter's critique of patriarchy should not be seen as less relevant for being coloured by her feminist ideology, nor should it be limited to the sphere of Western civilization only. Šnircová wrote her book probably having in mind her Slovak university students at the doctoral level, who will definitely benefit from her clear, well-articulated style and her choice of a topic that had not previously been sufficiently researched. If there is anything to remark, then the size of the font and a certain repetitiveness could be mentioned, though this fine volume will inevitably soon receive the attention of the broader academic community.

Finally, assuming that the author had a say in the choice of the cover art, it should be noted that this is a well-designed cover for a volume with the title *Feminist Aspects of Angela Carter's Grotesque*. The female face with grotesque eyelashes putting on strong lipstick is an adequate allusion to the content. Soňa Šnircová did a very good job from the dust cover to the extensive Bibliography. Getting involved in this multiple relationship with Angela Carter and Soňa Šnircová through their works proved a demanding but more than rewarding experience.

Bibliography

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Vesna Lopičić
University of Niš
Serbia

Ed. Marianna Gulla, et al.

The Binding Strength of Irish Studies

(*Festschrift in Honor of Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse*).

Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2011.

With Irish studies and literature having gained prominence in Britain after devolution, many monographs and conference proceedings testify to the growing popularity of this field of research – *The Binding Strength of Irish Studies* being one of them. The volume is aptly subtitled a “Festschrift”, since its double objective is to celebrate outstanding achievements in this field of research in Hungary and beyond, as well as praising two distinguished academics, Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse, who have made propagating the Irish cause their lifetime’s quest.

The volume aims to reflect the richness of topics within the field and to further enhance the development of Irish Studies on an international level. Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse’s work inspired twenty-six European, American, and Australian academics from distinguished universities and research centers to contribute to this collection in their honor – something that would serve as a tangible demonstration of their younger colleagues’ praise and admiration.

The first section of *The Binding Strength of Irish Studies* investigates the Irish tradition of drama and theater. The second thematic group is dedicated to James Joyce and Irish fiction in general; the third part focuses on poetry; and the final section discusses notions of cross-cultural studies.

The remarkable variety within the field – reflected in the articles, the number of different points of view represented by contemporary scholarship, and also the scholarly intent of the individual researchers – is striking, even intimidating. Most of the papers published in the volume deserve praise for their rigorous scrutiny of their own particular niche within the context of Irish studies. Even to list all the scholars and the titles of their articles would cover more space than any reviewer is supposed to fill.

Despite the plethora of valuable, interesting, well-researched articles representing Irish studies, *The Binding Strength of Irish Studies* may not become the most obvious reading choice of a lay person interested in the field. First of all, the reader may find themselves in the position of Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, tumbling down the rabbit hole of interpretations with nothing to sustain her. The book seems to be lacking a common denominator, an introductory section constituting a conceptual and theoretical framework for the following sections. There is none, since the somewhat problematic genre of “Festschrift” apparently does not require such an introduction.

Unfortunately, the four categories into which the individual contributions are divided fail to provide perspective or guidance, as they are broad and all-encompassing.

The concluding section on cross-cultural studies, which is the most opaque by definition, even contains contributions that can only be published in an Irish volume with some sleight of hand, since their merit lies mostly elsewhere (Zsuzsa Csikai’s “A Complex Relationship: Chekhov and Irish Author-Translators”, to name but one). Alternatively, the pedigree of a character or author (e.g. Oscar Wilde or Laurence Sterne), whether relevant to their respective oeuvres or not, comes to be utilized as a springboard to research that is not quite relevant to the field of Irish Studies as it is generally perceived today.

On the other hand, the articles provided in the initial section on drama and theater rank among the highlights of the volume, resonating with the best efforts in the academic field of Irish Studies. Without any doubt, the articles on Conor McPherson (Christopher Murray's "The Supernatural in Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* and *The Birds*" and Ondřej Pilný's "Mercy on the Misfit: Continuity and Transformation in the Plays of Conor McPherson") deserve accolades.

If a book aims to cover "all things Irish" in one volume, allowances need to be made, since it is unthinkable to provide the academic community with analyses of the full spectrum of Irish Studies. Despite some questionable choices of articles in the final section, this body of recent studies does show the complexity and potential of Irish Studies, and it truly does "enhance the development of Irish Studies in Hungary and worldwide", as was Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse's wish.

Ema Jelínková
Palacký University in Olomouc

Mark Yarm.

Everybody Loves Our Town: an Oral History of Grunge.
New York: Crown Archetype, 2011.

The grunge era is the most recent distinguishable movement in rock music to date. Bands from the Northwest of the United States became enormously popular in the late 1980s and gained worldwide fame with the success of Nirvana's album *Nevermind* in 1991. The book *Everybody Loves Our Town: an Oral History of Grunge* tells a story of a music scene that in a short period of time reached its peak in popularity but subsequently hit the bottom as its biggest personalities fell victims to drug abuse and died.

Written by Mark Yarm, an American journalist, the book explores the entire history of the grunge era from the very beginning to the end, marked by the death of Alice in Chains' singer Layne Staley in 2002. What is rare about the book is the fact that it is an *oral history* – that means that it is made up entirely of quotes.

Although there have been several attempts at writing the story of the grunge scene in the past, Yarm's book can be considered the essential one. He manages to capture the spirit of the entire era by putting together quotes of "musicians, producers, managers, record executives, video directors, photographers, journalists, publicists, club owners, roadies, and hangers on" (547). All the people whose quotes appear in the book were interviewed by Yarm for the purposes of the book. His aim is to tell the story of a generation of musicians, so the quotes serve the purpose and contribute to a comprehensive retelling the entire history of grunge.

The reason why the book is unique and more complete than for instance Kyle Anderson's book *Accidental Revolution: the Story of Grunge*, or Greg Prato's *Grunge is Dead*, is that it includes not only voices of the famous bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, and Mother Love Bone, but also voices of lesser-known but no less important bands, such as the U-Men, Green River, 7 Year Bitch and many others. The inclusion of the bands that paved the way for the later success of Nirvana and Pearl Jam is of paramount importance because it enables the author to picture the so-called Seattle scene in all its complexity. Moreover, it makes the book even more authentic and insightful.

The two above-mentioned books can create an impression that every person in Seattle and its surroundings was a depressed drug user. Although almost everyone in the grunge scene was a drug addict at some point, Yarm's book contains stories that show the grunge musicians having fun and enjoying their lives. They just happened to be in the right place at the right time and did not know how to cope with success and the fame that came with it. The book also shows how close to each other the people in the grunge community were.

When reading Yarm's book, one can feel a part of the community. Some of the stories are so touching that it makes the reader feel sympathy for the people and what they went through. Another contribution of the book is that it portrays the rock stars in a humane way. One can relate to their lives and problems because they are no different than the lives of people who are not constantly in the spotlight.

After reading this book one can say that one has learned a lot about grunge and all its personalities. As has been mentioned above, there are not many books that provide a complete picture of a certain period of time with all its important moments from the very beginning to the very end. For all the above-mentioned reasons it is safe to say that Mark Yarm's *Everybody Loves Our Town: an Oral History of Grunge* is one of the best books about the grunge era.

Stanislav Potoczek
undergraduate student
University of Ostrava

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Vojtěch Lindaur.

Neznámé slasti: příběhy rockových revolucí 1972–2012.

Praha: Plus, 2012.

Nejnovější kniha Vojtěcha Lindaura *Neznámé slasti: příběhy rockových revolucí 1972–2012* je na knižním trhu novinkou. A to nejen vzhledem ke skutečnosti, že byla vydána letos, ale také proto, že se u nás jedná o první pokus popsat spletitou cestu vývoje rockové hudby ve světě. *Neznámé slasti* zachycuje poslední zhruba pětatřicet let jejího vývoje. V úvodu autor zmiňuje, proč se rozhodl tuto knihu napsat. Během návštěvy jistého londýnského knihkupectví se zeptal prodavače, zdali je na trhu k dostání takovýto typ knihy. Jeho odpověď – „To byste ji nejdřív musel napsat sám“ (10) – vznik knihy podnítila.

Vojtěch Lindaur je známou osobností českého hudebního průmyslu. Od 80. let působí jako dramaturg, hudební publicista, producent, později také jako šéfredaktor známého hudebního periodika *Rock & Pop*. *Neznámé slasti* jsou výsledkem sedmnácti let práce, během kterých si chtěl sám utřídit, k čemu a proč na rockovém hudebním poli v posledních desetiletích došlo.

Neznámé slasti jsou jakýmsi průvodcem, představujícím a popisujícím jednotlivé rockové revoluce. První, o níž se čtenář dočte, je punk, který znamenal průlom ve vývoji hudby, napomohl koexistenci nejrůznějších subkulturních období unifikovaného hudebního vkusu. Sám autor říká, že k rozhodnutí začít právě punkem ho vedl fakt, že to byl punk a především žánry objevující se po něm, kterými se literatura nezabývá tolik jako předešlými obdobími. Dále popisuje jednotlivé žánry objevující se v průběhu dalších let, počínaje novou vlnou, přes nové romantiky a elektronické disco, temnou vlnu, futuristický rock, rap, grunge až po freak folk. Nesoustředí svou pozornost pouze na nejznámější představitele hudební scény, ale zmiňuje například i zástupce slavící úspěchy na tzv. indie scéně. Všechny žánry, kterými se Lindaur zabývá, zasazuje do žánrových souvislostí; věnuje se klíčovým okamžikům, které opravdu představovaly určitou revoluci. Neopomíná ani úlohu žen v hudebním průmyslu, jejichž postavení se od 60. let měnilo. Zpěvačky jako Joan Baezová, Janis Joplinová či Patti Smithová se z pouhých mužských ozdob staly silnými a nezávislými umělkyněmi.

Pozornému čtenáři nemůže uniknout autorův pocit nostalgie po starých časech, stejně jako nádech smutku a ironie vzhledem k hudební budoucnosti. Lindaur poukazuje na vliv současné uspěchané, povrchní doby, kdy jsme neustále zaplavováni spotřebním zbožím, aniž bychom cokoli skutečně prožívali. Dále zmiňuje vliv komerčializace, internetu a sociálních sítí, které považuje za příčinu úpadku zájmu o „klasická“ alba. Konstatuje také, jak krátkodobé jsou současné kapely a jakým směrem se jejich tvorba ubírá: „Nadějná nová tvorba, inspirující se eklekticky celou rockovou historií, stále víc připomíná nepřiznaný a vlastně už několikanásobný revival toho či onoho žánru“ (9).

Je třeba zmínit také skutečnost, že autor se nesnaží podat striktně chronologický přehled jednotlivých hudebních žánrů. Klade důraz spíše na žánrové, dobové a geografické souvislosti, které podnítily jejich vznik. Často tedy srovnává hudbu Spojených států a Evropy, především pak Velké Británie a Německa. Styl jednotlivých textů není jednotný. Některé jsou encyklopedického rázu, jiné jsou koncipovány jako vyprávění zachycující dobové pozadí a pocity. Jednotlivé kapitoly jsou uvedeny vzhledem do tématu, fotografiemi

nejznámějších interpretů a často také shrnutím dosud známých informací, čímž čtenáři usnadňují orientaci a napomáhají porozumění knihy jako celku.

Neznámé slasti jsou komplexním dílem, které nabízí čtenáři vhled do nejrůznějších směrů, jimiž se rocková hudba vydala, a které umožňuje získat celkový přehled o jejím vývoji v posledních desetiletích. Nicméně je třeba dodat, že se jedná o pouhý nástin, úvahu, ne podrobný výčet všech existujících žánrů a jednotlivých interpretů působících na hudební scéně.

Irena Petrášová
studentka
Ostravská univerzita

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