

Dans le labyrinthe has any importance to the author). Many sentences are unclear and even confusing, for example: "The situation of Barthes' conception of literature (as of Kristeva's) . . . is that which serves as part of the impetus for Derrida's interrogation of the sign, and the practice of literature can be regarded as within the dramatization of that economy of distribution grasped by Derrida in the term *différance* [sic], as recognition of the work of the *signifiant*, of the materiality of its inscription" (pp. 203-04). Here we are excising somewhat unfairly, inasmuch as the new term *différance* has already been introduced, but notwithstanding that fact, the passage remains imprecise and unclear.

A work of undeniable erudition, Heath's book will no doubt appeal more to adherents of the socio-linguistic school

of criticism rather than to those of a more traditional literary stamp. The latter, while judging Robbe-Grillet and his work as representing a departure, or even a rupture, from traditional norms, still tend to view him in contrast with the French novelists who preceded him (Sartre, Camus, Malraux, etc.). Pierre de Boisdeffre is a critic typical of this traditionalist school. Heath's method, on the other hand, is to cite works in semiotics, such as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Russian Folk-Tale* (p. 211), as the basis for judgment on Robbe-Grillet's work. Finally, since as Heath explains on the last page, Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group feel that "the experience of limits cannot but be . . . political" (p. 242), the more traditional literary critics will conclude that this position of *Tel Quel* is a denigration of the role of literature, because it deprives literature of its independence.

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DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

On Joan Givner's Article "Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and *Ethan Brand*," *IFR*, 1 (1974), 32-37.

Professor Joan Givner takes an imaginative and perceptive leap to bring Hawthorne's Ethan Brand and the nameless heroine of Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft* together as perpetrators of unpardonable sins. In Ethan Brand's case this sin is his shameless pursuit of intellectual inquiry done at the expense of weakening his moral nature. The girl in *Theft* sins, according to Givner, in her inordinate pride which clouds her values so that she sees only magnanimity in her actions towards others, rather than the malevolence and gross evil that are actually present. Givner appears preoccupied with universal evil. She brings in yet another example by reference to Eudora Welty's *The Petrified Man* and its depiction of the sordid vulgarity of crude females venting their depraved frustrations on the whipping of an evil three-year-old boy. The main characters in Welty's story, as well as in *Ethan Brand* and *Theft*, are all evil because they are unable to love.

This omnipotence of evil works nicely for Ethan Brand's quest for the acme of sin, and for the insensitive creatures in *The Petrified Man*. However, Joan Givner will have to exclude her key entry *Theft* from these areas of evil if she follows the argument of my reading of the story.

The young aspiring writer's opening perceptive review of her previous day's encounters with three friends, when she still had the now missing purse, is subdued and genuine. She protects and aids each friend. Her purse, a symbol of her benevolence, intrudes at each meeting.

On leaving the cocktail party with Camilo, she checks her purse for adequate elevated fare and kindly and firmly refuses Camilo's gesture to pay for a cab. She feels the humiliation Camilo would have felt had he known she had unintentionally observed him in a dull and prosaic maneuver. Thereby she exposes an extreme refinement of good will. She does share a cab with Roger who happens by and to whom she gives ten cents from her purse to complete his share of the fare. The remembered cab conversation reveals the inequity of her genuine concern for the success of his art show and his lack of inquiry about her work. She displays no rancor but exhibits real goodness unmitigated by resentment. As she climbs her apartment stairs with her purse tucked under her arm, she is stopped by Bill whose apartment is below hers. His tale of monetary woe is of practical concern to her in that he owes her fifty dollars for her writing of a scene in his play that will not be produced after all. Her tact in refraining from nagging or castigation is a facet of her goodness.

The discovered theft of her purse catalyzes the girl into action for reclamation. She descends into the fiery hell of the furnace room where the suspect, the janitress, stokes the furnace. This coal dust-streaked thief, as Givner has mentioned elsewhere ("A Re-reading of Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft*," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6, Summer, 1969, 463), resembles the devil in a medieval play. She is at first defiant and then confesses her crime. The girl gives in to neither the defiance nor the confession. She is bolstered by remembrance of previous losses—the words she had not waited to hear, the unwillingness to explore the reasons for love's death, the journeys not taken—intangibles which fled from her because she had not given enough. She offers the purse as a gift to the janitress who devilishly makes claim for it on the basis of her niece's need and with equally devilish distortion refuses the offer. The girl's climb up the stairs symbolizes her climb back to her faith in herself which compels her to trust others, to refuse to lock doors in deference to her Christlike discomfort in ownership of things. She becomes the good angel of the medieval play who inspires sinners to repent. Here the sinner, the janitress, pushed by remorse and confusion, climbs part way up the stairs to return the purse.

Careful attention to the girl's acts of goodness throughout, to the symbol of the purse as a means of meager gifts compared to the priceless expenditures of her sympathy for the human condition, to the blatant hell-fire of the janitress's furnace and the steps down to this thief's den as well as the steps up from it, to the naturalness, beauty, unpretentious and unconscious generosity of her narration forces a positive evaluation on her final affirmation: "I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing."

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Professor Joan Givner answers:

My assumption that Katherine Anne Porter considers her protagonist guilty of the most dangerous and wicked activity is based on my study of *Theft* and on my familiarity with the author's moral views. Since my interpretation of the story has been presented fully in *Studies in Short Fiction* and in *The International Fiction Review*, I shall concern myself here with the unchanging moral philosophy which Katherine Anne Porter has expressed during her lifetime.

Her earliest statement of her moral position appears in a review which she wrote for *The Rocky Mountain News* in Denver (July 28th, 1919) when she was dramatic editor for that paper. She expressed a lifelong fascination with villainy and said she grudgingly admired villains because "it takes imagination and real nerve to be a real first class sinner."

The Denver statement has a special interest because of its similarity to a speech

made at a crucial point in *Ship of Fools*. Dr. Schumann says: "Most of us are too slack, half-hearted, or cowardly, luckily, I suppose. Our collusion with evil is only negative, consent by default, you might say. I suppose in our hearts our sympathies are with the criminal because he really commits the deeds we only dream of doing."¹

That Dr. Schumann's works represent the author's own opinion is evident from her description of the theme of *Ship of Fools* and of her lifelong preoccupation:

Of course there were all the good worthy people who didn't believe in the clowns, but then good worthy people still let the clowns commit all the crimes good worthy people would commit if only they had the nerve. How else to account for the collusion in evil that allows creatures like Mussolini, or Hitler, or Huey Long, or McCarthy—you can make your own list, petty and great—to gain hold of things? Who permits it? Oh, we're convinced *we're* not evil. We don't believe in that sort of thing, do we? And the strange thing is that if these agents of evil are all clowns, why do we put up with them? God knows, such men are evil, without sense—forces of pure ambition and will—but they enjoy our tacit consent. . . . So you see, the tragedy of our times is not an accident but a total consent.²

A few years later, when John Kennedy was shot, Katherine Anne Porter described the first dazed look on his wife's face as "being replaced by a full knowledge of the nature of Evil, its power and its bestial imbecility."³

Professor Murad says "Givner appears preoccupied with universal evil." My own preoccupations are not at issue here. I believe that Katherine Anne Porter is concerned with universal evil and that she would readily concur with my description of her philosophy. That Katherine Anne Porter sees *Evil* as a physical entity I consider her major weakness. It is a narrow, simplistic, melodramatic view which undermines her work. I think it greatly mars an ambitious novel like *Ship of Fools*, and to a lesser degree a modest short story like *Theft*.

¹Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston, 1962), p. 294.

²James Ruoff and Del Smith, "Katherine Anne Porter on *Ship of Fools*," *College English*, 24 (February, 1963), 397.

³Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 309.

Robbe-Grillet's "Microtexts"

For more than a decade critics have seemed determined to avoid any specific commentary on the ten short prose compositions which Robbe-Grillet wrote between 1954 and 1962 and published under the collective title *Instantanés (Snapshots)* in the latter year. Therefore, in a general way, we need to welcome two recently published essays which focus on "The Dressmaker's Dummy," the first selection in *Snapshots: Yves de la Quérière's* sometimes astute exegesis, "Robbe-Grillet dans le sens du texte: *Le Mannequin*" (*FR*, 46 [1973], 960-71); and Renée Riese Hubert's comparative study, "Microtexts: An Aspect of the Work of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute," which, of course, appeared in the distinguished inaugural issue of *IFR* (Jan. 1974, pp. 9-16). Insofar as space allows, however, I must question Professor Hubert's reading of "The Dressmaker's Dummy," and attempt to explain that her method of