

The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud. By RICHARD KELLER SIMON. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press. 1985. xii + 260 pp. \$27.95.

The Critic Agonistes: Psychology, Myth, and the Art of Fiction. By DANIEL WEISS. Edited by ERIC SOLOMON and STEPHEN ARKIN. Foreword by RICHARD ELLMANN. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. 1985. xii + 270 pp. \$25.00.

The Bergsonian title of the first book reminds us that the problem of the comic remains topical for psychology, physiology, and philosophy as well as for literary theory. Richard Simon considers that the study of the different aspects of the comic 'has been almost completely fragmented' (p. 2). In this book he makes an attempt to overcome such fragmentariness and provides a fresh view of the old problem.

Having determined the chronological limits of the explored material (from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century), Dr Simon writes about some prominent figures in the theory and practice of the comic: Fielding, Kierkegaard, Thackeray, Meredith, Spencer, and Freud. Of course, the list is not complete; there are obvious omissions in it. Sometimes the author realizes this, and the scope of his research widens; so an interesting chapter on Kierkegaard is enriched by a short historical survey of studies on the nature of the comic in German philosophy from Kant to Marx. In Chapter 7, an analysis of the development of the theory of the comic in Anglo-American psychology, there is again no single hero. The chapter is informative, though, except for some parallels between the psychologists' concepts and George Meredith's works, it is the least original. Dr Simon penetrates deeper into his matter, as a historian of aesthetics and, although he introduces his work as an interdisciplinary one, he is *par excellence* a literary critic. Therefore, the most interesting chapters are those on English comic fiction.

Two of these are devoted to Henry Fielding's 'comic epic poems' and the evolution of the novelist's satirical craft. The essay on *Tom Jones* is of particular value. Dr Simon considers the book to be both a comic novel and a novel about the comic. Most penetrating are the remarks on the chronology of styles in the central 'hexateuch' of the novel, where different episodes are told in different manners, each derived from different literary sources. The author is particularly concerned not only with the description of Fielding's laughter as it is but with its role in the novel's structure. Special attention is paid to the narrator's functions: the narrator as mocker and the narrator as controller of the current of laughter.

The tradition of Fielding's comic novel is carefully traced in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. The choice is not fortuitous: each of the two novelists was not only a humorist but also a theoretician of the comic. Richard Simon uses their essays to demonstrate the close connexions between comic fiction and the theory of the comic. Here, as elsewhere, Dr Simon's insight into the poetics of the novel is very valuable. He finds in Becky Sharp's fate a depiction of the genealogy of English comedy, and he interprets *Vanity Fair* as comedy of history and at the same time as history of comedy. The correspondence in the plot and characters of this novel between *Tom Jones* on the one hand and Meredith's novel on the other is masterfully traced.

The last chapter is characteristic of the whole book. Here Dr Simon not only examines Freud's views on the comic but analyses his essay 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' as a work of art. Discovering the synthetic character of this work, Simon offers an original investigation into Freud's tribute to comic literature and to literature on the comic.

The second book under review starts from the point where Simon stops, that is from the Freudian trend in literary criticism. The volume is a collection of the late Daniel Weiss's essays which are devoted to the problems of the methodology of literary criticism and to the analysis of the works of some European and American writers.

In two introductory essays Weiss defines his theoretical position, declaring his adherence to Freudianism, a term he interprets quite widely, including Jung and Jungians within it. The author considers himself to be a Freudian, but with reservations: he does not want to be 'an autobiographical critic'. Calling Freudian criticism 'an empirical discipline' that has its base both in psychology and in aesthetics, Weiss does not define its principal task, whether it be the investigation of the phenomena of literature or the description of the inner world of the writer. However, he realizes 'that *Hamlet* survives as poetry more readily than it will survive as an Oedipal problem play' (p. 32).

In the essay 'The Black Art of Psychoanalytical Criticism' Weiss discusses the genesis of the psychoanalytical trend in literary history, beginning with Plato and ending with William James. Concerning the closest predecessors of Freud as a critic, David Weiss's picture is far from being complete: not a word is said about the works of Hennequin, Wundt, Potebnya, or the Russian psychological school. This silence can probably be explained by the author's exceptional attention to the synchronic aspect of Freudian criticism.

However questions arise at once about those essays where Weiss aims to be a consistent Freudian; in the essay 'D. H. Lawrence: The Forms of Sexual Hunger', for example, the limitations of the technique of subtextual reading which leads to substitution of the subject of research are especially noticeable. But, as Richard Ellmann justly remarks in the foreword, Weiss was a Freudian only up to a point. His rich critical intuition often helped him out of the limits of psychoanalytical methodology. It is difficult for example, to notice any signs of Freudian method in two essays on Faulkner. Here Weiss is guided by the principles of 'myth-ritual' criticism. Analysing *The Hamlet* he tries to interpret monosemantically every episode and character (except Ratliff), and thus exposes new shades of meaning. In 'William Faulkner and the Runaway Slave' the author makes an attempt to comprehend all the complexity of Faulkner's treatment of the racial problem, and here the 'myth-ritual' approach is found to be unproductive. Weiss's various studies prove *a contrario* that in literary criticism the choice of method ought to be determined by the material under investigation.

In this connexion the essay on Dostoyevsky is of particular interest. There are some inaccuracies in it (for example, the famous critic Bielinsky is called 'Dostoyevsky's friend' and 'an ardent socialist' (p. 235)), and the critical apparatus is poor. But there are in the essay an original comparison between *Notes from Underground* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, an interesting interpretation of Naphta as a Dostoyevskian character, and traces of deep interest in the reception of Dostoyevsky's works in the West. The quotation from Freud in this article looks like a mere illustration: here methodology has nothing in common either with the Freudian School or with the 'myth-ritual' school.

The editors of this volume were, to my mind, quite right to conclude it with the essay on Frank O'Connor, which contains a very important thought: 'Psychoanalysis must be used with some caution . . . in order, not to preserve the work of art, which is after all in no danger, but to preserve the critic' (p. 246). The methodological merits as well as deadlocks of such a gifted critic as Daniel Weiss are equally instructive, which is why the book under review is of real use and interest for literary scholars.