



The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions

John R. Clark

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Thomas Mann predicted that no manner or mode in literature would be so typical or so pervasive in the twentieth century as the grotesque. Assuredly he was correct. The subjects and methods of our comic literature (and much of our other literature) are regularly disturbing and often repulsive?no laughing matter.

In this ambitious study, John R. Clark seeks to elucidate the major tactics and topics deployed in modern literary dark humor. In Part I he explores the satiric strategies of authors of the grotesque, strategies that undercut conventional usage and form: the de-basement of heroes, the denigration of language and style, the disruption of normative narrative technique, and even the debunking of authors themselves. Part II surveys major recurrent themes of grotesquerie: tedium, scatology, cannibalism, dystopia, and Armageddon or the end of the world.

Clearly the literature of the grotesque is obtrusive and ugly, its effect morbid and disquieting?and deliberately meant to be so. Grotesque literature may be unpleasant, but it is patently insightful. Indeed, as Clark shows, all of the strategies and topics employed by this literature stem from age-old and spirited traditions.

Critics have complained about this grim satiric literature, asserting that it is dank, cheerless, unsavory, and negative. But such an interpretation is far too simplistic. On the contrary, as Clark demonstrates, such grotesque writing, in its power and its prevalence in the past and present, is in fact conventional, controlled, imaginative, and vigorous?no mean achievements for any body of art.

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