War, Literature, and the Arts

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The Grotesque Depiction of War and the Military in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction, by David McNeil. Newark: Associated University Presses, 1990. Pp. 229. $37.50.

by Thomas W. Krise

When live television news reports poured into our living rooms from the war in the Persian Gulf, we had the opportunity to experience war in a way unknown to earlier generations. Although the images we saw were immediate and often disturbing, we were also aware we were not directly threatened by the images. This distance—literal and aesthetic—between us and the images offered us the chance to back away from them emotionally and to see, at once, the farcical, the horrible, and the bombastic sides of warfare. David McNeil describes this phenomenon as the understanding that "while the external trappings of military pomposity are ludicrous, the grim reality of war remains fearful" (173-4).

The grotesque is the aesthetic experience in which the reader or observer feels both repelled by and attracted to a description or an image. For McNeil, the grotesque embodies three principal ideas: 1) the ludicrous-fearful duality, or the fine line that divides the humorous and the horrific; 2) the spectacle of war and the military, or the panoply and orderliness which accentuate the "play" aspect of war; and 3) the cyclical theory of war, or the idea that "war begets poverty, poverty peace, peace begets prosperity, prosperity envy, and envy leads back to war" (157).

The Grotesque Depiction of War examines the grotesque aspects of the works of four disparate eighteenth-century writers: Jonathan Swift, Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding,

and Laurence Sterne. McNeil places the grotesque examples of these authors' works both within the context of the history of the literature of war as well as within the sociopolitical context of the works and writers themselves. The chief works examined are Swift's *Gulliver's Travels, The Battle of the Books,* and his anti-Marlborough tracts; *Smollett's Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle,* and *Ferdinand Count Fathom;* Fielding's *Amelia, Tom Jones,* and *Joseph Andrews;* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey.*

McNeil introduces his study with an intriguing vignette about the Battle of Fontenoy (May 11, 1745), during the War of the Austrian Succession, in which toasts were exchanged between Anglo-Hanoverian and French lines of infantry just prior to a face-to-face slaughter. He argues that this episode is a quintessential example of the ludicrous-fearful duality we associate with the experience of the grotesque. Using many such examples from history and literature, McNeil offers both a practicable guide to the literature of war (ranging from Homer to the present) as well as a handbook for the use of the literary grotesque for scholarly or classroom purposes. His approach is historicist, using the theories of John Ruskin, Wolfgang Kayser, and Mikhail Bakhtin to give his selected works coherence. But, McNeil argues that "applicability must remain the first and foremost criterion for any theory" (172). He acknowledges that although the grotesque has fallen from favor in recent years as a theoretical construct, it remains "a valuable generic category with no mean background" (172).

In the opening chapter, McNeil places his four authors in literary-historical context by defining grotesque and by identifying important examples of it from Homer to Samuel Johnson. Thus armed, we proceed to examine the four writers, each of whom illuminates a different aspect of the grotesque. Although McNeil uses other chapter headings

and subheadings, it may be helpful here to think of the four authors as subjects under the following headings: "Spectacle and Satire" for Swift, "Spectacle and the Picaresque" for Smollett, "Spectacle and Unruliness" for Fielding, and "Spectacle and the Quixotic" for Sterne.

The chapter devoted to Swift colorfully demonstrates how certain types of satire represent a major category of the grotesque, provided satirists maintain a suitable distance from their subjects. In contrast to Swift's bitingly satiric attacks on Field Marshal the Duke of Marlborough, in which Swift "did not have any distance from his subject," McNeil points to *Gulliver's Travels* as Swift's most successful foray into the grotesque because Swift was more detached and "was able to reverse the emphasis from the political 'agon' of satire to a metapolitical statement on the human condition" (64-65).

Taking Gulliver's detailed description of European warfare to the Houyhnhnms as a starting point, McNeil includes a fairly detailed comparison of satiric battle descriptions to the military paintings of Louis Laguerre and Charles LeBrun, in Marlborough House and Versailles, and the tapestries of Judocus de Vos at Blenheim Palace. McNeil points out how the idea of spectacle is enhanced when one considers the way these artists represent warfare. The highly organized display of armies, coupled with the occasional stripped corpse or terrorized soldier, help to excite the feeling we associate with the grotesque: we are attracted by the martial pageantry but repelled by the horror of the "real" battlefield. McNeil's explication of these tableaux is sure and informed; the reader might wish, however, for more and larger plates.

McNeil closes his chapter on Swift by touching on the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke, particularly the links between the grotesque and the sublime. McNeil argues that Burke's notion of the "artificial sublime" can apply to

ranks of uniformed soldiers, and can thus contribute to the fearful sensation common to both the sublime and grotesque aesthetic experiences. While this link receives only limited attention, McNeil does provide superb notes and bibliography to enable readers to explore fully the place of the grotesque in the larger field of aesthetic theory.

In the contentious debate over "whether or not Smollett is a writer of the picaresque," McNeil argues the side of the picaresque, and he uses this picaresqueness of Smollett to demonstrate another aspect of the grotesque. McNeil makes his case for the grotesqueness of the picaresque in interpretations of episodes from Homer, Hesiod, Ovid and others. Thanks to Smollett's detailed descriptions of battles, this chapter offers the most vivid examples of grotesque episodes in the book. In Roderick Random's particularly gruesome endurance of a sea-battle while chained to a ship's deck,

> Smollett touches a primitive nerve by bringing together the grotesque horror of human carnage and the more mundane, yet delirious, feeling of not being able to wipe a foul substance from one's face. (94)

McNeil makes his strongest case for the critical usefulness of historical knowledge in his discussion of *Roderick Random*. He thoroughly examines a variety of historical aspects that make an impact on Smollett's novels, including publishing practices, the purchasing of commissions, recruiting methods, the billeting of soldiers, and international politics. Even apart from the investigation of the grotesque, these informative and provocative passages make *The Grotesque Depiction of War* worth reading.

The chapter on Fielding focuses on the role of unruliness in depictions of the grotesque. Here, McNeil links

Fielding's *Amelia, Tom Jones*, and *Joseph Andrews* to five engravings by William Hogarth, T. Colley, and R. Athwold, all involving civil-military relations. This chapter is especially valuable for its literature-based examination of the English public's attitudes toward the standing army as well as the popular image of military training.

Using episodes from *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* and engravings of Hogarth to support the point, McNeil identifies the "great irony of the army" in the eighteenth century: while it was "established to quell civil disorder, the army itself is feared for exactly the same reason" (117). The English billeted their soldiers among the people because they feared barracked soldiers might be a source of tyranny. But, when billeted in homes and inns, soldiers "stole, assaulted men and women, plundered, raped and often refused to pay the whole or part of the bill for their billets" (qtd in McNeil 114). Such unruliness is the source for the grotesque scenes in Fielding, Hogarth, and others.

Most of McNeil's study of military training concentrates on the officer corps and especially on the counterproductivity of the practice of purchasing commissions and on the large number of "child-officers" which the purchase system created. His examples, culled from a variety of eighteenth-century sources, indicate that the harm done by the purchase system to the encouragement of merit in the officer ranks exacerbated the chaos that generally reigned in the military at home. The general result of the officer management system was to create an army "officered by gentlemen of anything but a studious turn of mind" (qtd in McNeil 134), who "were taught to please" and who thus "live only to please" (qtd in McNeil 135). The unruliness of an army under the command of untrained plutocrats was heightened by the long-term quartering of troops in public inns and private houses. The final military assault on domestic order was the wholesale disbanding of troops at the conclusion

of wars. The resulting bands of unemployed men added to the unruliness that provides Fielding and Hogarth with such fertile ground for depictions of the grotesque military. By focussing on the domestic side of the military grotesque, "Fielding allowed himself the opportunity to explore both the absurdities of human conflict and ultimately the grotesque nature of humankind's fascination with military grandeur" (143).

Fielding's image of the soldier as one of a mass of men discharged into the cities of Britain at the conclusion of a war provides a nice transition to the figure of Sterne's Uncle Toby, who "remains one of the most, if not the most, single quixotic figures in English literature . . ." (144). McNeil links the comic figure of Uncle Toby to the grotesque by way of Johnson's definition of grotesque as "Distorted of figure; unnatural; wildly formed" (qtd in McNeil 150). Uncle Toby fits this definition by being wounded both physically and mentally. His resultant antics in the veterans' home provide the material for McNeil's analysis of the carnivalesque nature of the grotesque. Uncle Toby's and Corporal Trim's impoverishment of the home to provide miniature materiel for their war games offers an aesthetically distanced caricature of the real-world War of the Spanish Succession (which takes place contemporaneously with the action in *Tristram Shandy*), and thus, it is fertile ground for the appreciation of the grotesque.

Having begun his discussion of the literary grotesque by considering the most bellicose literary form, satire, McNeil leads us through the less-obvious forms of grotesqueness—the picaresque, the unruly, and the quixotic—in an effort to demonstrate the broad applicability of this theoretical construct to eighteenth-century fiction. His concluding chapter balances the introductory chapter by contextualizing the grotesque in the aesthetic theory of the late eighteenth century and on down to our own time. McNeil here

reiterates the notion that the grotesque is linked to the ludicrous-fearful duality, the cyclical theory of war, and the spectacle of war and the military. McNeil sums up his argument by showing once again, in one of his final vignettes, how the grotesque may be applied. He quotes from James Boswell's German journal the passage describing his observation of King Frederick the Great:

> I then went to the Parade. I saw the King . . . As a loadstone moves needles, or a storm blows the lofty oaks, did Frederick the Great make the Prussian officers submissive bend as he walked majestic in the midst of them . . . I beheld the king who had astonished Europe by his warlike deeds. (qtd in McNeil 168)

McNeil points out that, for all its grandeur, this description has a "certain Lilliputian quality" to it "that strikes one as ludicrous" (168). He drives home the importance of aesthetic distance to the experience of the grotesque when he concludes with Boswell's witnessing of bombed-out Dresden three months after seeing Frederick on parade:

> I strolled about and viewed the city. It is finely built of freestone. It gave me great pain to see the ruins made by the Prussian bombardments. I hated the barbarous hero. He was under no necessity to bombard Dresden. It was from mere spite that he did it. (qtd in McNeil 173)

In this latter passage, Boswell is too close to experience the grotesque. As McNeil puts it, "the grotesque captures us in an intensely ambivalent aesthetic experience. We may inwardly laugh, but we then feel guilty for doing so" (169).

The twentieth century is at least as warlike as McNeil's eighteenth century, and we are the first generation to encounter war as a live, prime-time performance. The frequency and immediacy of war images on television may enhance our understanding of the grotesque experience, and we may become well-qualified to testify to McNeil's assertion that "the grotesque is a mainstay of the human imagination" (169). The on-and-off button on the television offers people the opportunity to test the aesthetic distance between actual war and themselves in a way earlier generations could only achieve by personally experiencing—and surviving—the effects of combat. The enhanced judgment of the ludicrous-fearful duality gained from this prime-time experience of war may make this and subsequent generations more sensitive to applications of the grotesque in literature. Students of the literature of war and scholars of the grotesque will find reading David McNeil's book a rewarding experience.

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