

¶ Monika Zagar. *Ideological Clown. Dag Solstad - From Modernism to Politics*. Wien: Edition Praesens 2002 [=Wiener Studien zur Skandinavistik, edited by Robert Nedoma and Sven Hakon Rossel, band 5] Pp. 203. ISBN 3-7069-0115-3

Monika Zagar's book, *Ideological Clowns. Dag Solstad Between Modernism and Politics*, is mainly focused on Dag Solstad's short story collection and first book *Spiraler* (1965) and his novel *Arild Asnes, 1970* (1971), but *Svingstol* (1967), a collection of short texts, and the novel *Irr! Grønt!* are also referred to, though less extensively. Zagar is primarily interested in the early Dag Solstad, although she at certain points comments on his later writing in order to show developing lines in his literary work.

After a well-written introduction, where Zagar presents Solstad's role in the *Profil* group of the mid-sixties, and presents the hypothesis of the monograph, the first chapter, called 'Dag Solstad's clowns of modernity', deals with the book *Spiraler*. While this chapter reads the book in a general modernist context, chapter 2, 'The Norwegian modernist gesamtkunstwerk', makes a link between the political dogmatism on the left wing with Russian avant-garde and Stalinist art. Zagar also investigates the Marxist party AKP(m-l)'s cultural politics. This leads to a thorough investigation of *Arild Asnes, 1970* (chapter 3), before she in the fourth and last chapter discusses the shift in language from the existentialist-orientated *Spiraler* to the anti-symbolic *Svingstol* and finally the political dogma of the *Arild Asnes, 1970*.

Monika Zagar has a quite personal starting point for her study:

My own questions regarding the late sixties and the seventies in Norway have always been flavored with wonder and curiosity: why have dogmatic Marxism and Maoism been so favorably accepted among some Norwegian intellectuals? [...] Having grown up in Yugoslavia (now Slovenia), one of the

more benevolent East-European regimes, my purpose was to find a reasonable explanation for the *Profil* circle's political dogmatism and for their sudden disavowal of experimental modernist writing. (p. 12)

This personal motivation turns out to give her study a temperature and a seriousness that is appealing. Zagar's East-European background gives both an interesting perspective on and possible correction to the romanticism of the Norwegian writers' communist dreams. To a certain extent the *Profil* group's members have been writing their own history (for instance Jan Thon's book from 1995), and Zagar, after her own studies in the field, is able to present new viewpoints.

Zagar's other main task is to shed light on Solstad's – and the *Profil* movement's – fear of the feminisation of society. This has led them, in Zagar's word, to “a bizarre worship of male dicators” (p. 30). Zagar here bases her arguments on the fact that women hardly appear in *Arild Asnes*, when they do it is only in rhetorical formulas, such as “men and women” or “brothers and sisters”, or they are workers' wives, occupied with cleaning and vacuuming. Zagar shows convincingly how the class issue is given priority to the gender issue in *Arild Asnes*, while the traditional relations between women and men remain unexplored.

In connection with these questions Zagar's discussion on Solstad's negative review of Bjørg Vik's collection of short stories, *Nødrop fra en myk sofa* (1966), is of particular interest. According to Zagar, Solstad equates popular mass culture with negative feminization. Zagar's theory that the figure Bendikte Vik in Solstad's novel *Irr! Grønt!* is a transformation of or an answer to the real Bjørg Vik, is also new and inspiring.

In chapter one Zagar uses the “clown” as a figure of modernism. The Solstadian Clown, who is constantly asking “What is happening”, is in this reading a figure not complacent about the absurdity of the situation. The clown represents a mixture of the

comic and the tragic, a combination of exposure and masking and – most interesting in the survey's perspective – a mixture of sexes. Solstad's clowns, that is his male protagonists, often occupy both gender positions, according to Zagar. Unfortunately this interesting perspective is not followed up.

On the other hand, the fear-of-woman perspective is pursued; one of the chapters in the book is a close reading of the short story 'Invaliden' ('The invalid') from *Spiraler*, where Zagar uses the theories of Melanie Klein to get a grip on the protagonist's fear and hatred of his mother. This is a very enlightening perspective that gives a new meaning to this important early Solstad text. Still one could argue that when Zagar retells the story, she is actually giving a certain interpretation that effectively shuts out other perspectives. "At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, a young man, lies helpless in bed. In order to keep his mother from approaching, he tells her that he has decided to study for his examen in bed" (p. 55). One could retell the story in other ways, because the reader does not really know what the 'actual' situation is. It could be seen as a weakness that Zagar leaves out the ambiguities of the text.

Compared to the reading of 'Invaliden' Zagar's reading of the short prose text 'Katastrofe' ('Catastrophe') from *Svingstol* is of great subtlety. Zagar's hypothesis is that the underlying psychoanalytical premise for the protagonist Agnar Berger – a man driving at high speed in his car – is that there is no ego which could hold his body together, no coherent body image to which the notion of subjectivity is linked. This Zagar links to the theories of Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, and comes up with an original and inspiring reading of this rather neglected text.

The image of the clown is also drawn into the reading of *Arild Asnes*. In Zagar's understanding, the party AKP is a solution for the Solstadian protagonist, a way to become a decent person and not a clown. Against readings that claim that *Arild Asnes* is a modernist, ironic text and therefore has little to do with politics, Zagar conse-

quently posits the opposite. In her reading Asnes accepts, in the end of the novel, all the premises of a loyal Stalinist, he becomes a decent person and escapes being a clown. One could here argue that the text opens other possible positions than these listed by Zagar – Asnes as an inauthentic clown or Asnes as a loyal Stalinist. Zagar argues that one “cannot be a member of a political party ironically” (p. 117). That might be right, but does Zagar mean that a member of a party (or a church) cannot express strong doubts? Is ambivalence and seriousness necessarily opposites?

In some respects Zagar’s view on Solstad’s politics differs from my own; where I would like to see Solstad’s – and his protagonist’s – political commitment as a kind of existentialist project, and/or would stress the fundamental ambivalence of his texts, Zagar takes him on his word and investigates the background and the consequences of the political utterances. This is a challenge to and a correction of readings that turn Solstad into a master of irony. Especially interesting is the chapter ‘The logic of Stalinist discourse’ which sheds new light on left wing rhetorics. Even though I do not follow Zagar’s arguments all the way, her conclusions are undoubtedly thoughtprovoking. And when it comes to *Arild Asnes* she no doubt gives us a richer understanding of the young Solstad’s important novel.

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