



Brink, André. *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 373 pp.

Brink's book focuses on fifteen novels from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. It begins with Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* and continues with two eighteenth-century

works, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*. Three novels of the nineteenth century follow: Jane Austen's *Emma*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It ends with eight twentieth-century works: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

The wide-ranging temporal barriers and linguistic and cultural distances are crossed by means of a two-fold unifying premise, that what has been traditionally "regarded as prerogatives of the Modern and Postmodern novel . . . [the] exploitation of the storytelling properties of language, *has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception*" (7: emphasis his); and, alternatively, that so-called postmodernist novels, far from being experimental, are actually conventional, given the precedent of their early forbears.

The argument is not new. It has been raised, with variations, by such critics as Ann Jefferson (in *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction*, 1980), who posits that all novels, experimental and traditional, can be read "as a laboratory of narrative" (17), and more obliquely by Gerald Graff who asserts that literary fiction reveals truth because it discloses the unreality of both literature and reality. Literature thereby "holds the mirror up to unreality (*Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, 1979: 179). Brink is different, however, in the wide sampling of the novels he analyzes, in his close reading of them, and, most impressively, in his grasp of the languages in which the texts were written. His pointing out the inadequacy of particular translations is never pedantic but is, instead, in the service of a better understanding of the original.

This is an ambitious project. It seems initially contradictory. Its premise, that the novel has foregrounded since its inception what we now call a modern or "post-modern" self-conscious use of language, seems antithetical to the basic postmodernist dictum that totalizing and unifying arguments of this kind can no longer be tenable. Yet, given minor failures in Brink's attempt to fit some of the novels within this apparently circumscribed argument, he nevertheless succeeds. Some of the "postmodernist" techniques upon which he focuses in analyzing the earlier novels include their foregrounding of narrative as story, their arbitrary re-telling of different versions of the same events, their highlighting the indeterminacy of all truth claims, their challenge to the logocentrism Derrida describes as prevalent from Plato onward in Western modes of thinking about reality, their focus on language as a random system of culturally—and socially—specific signs, and their positing of language as self-referential.

Primarily Bakhtinian in his emphasis on the novel as "a multi-linguaged consciousness," Brink nevertheless expands the Russian theorist's view to incorporate Derridean, Barthesian, and Lacanian views, especially, in his analysis of the inter-textuality of word and world in each novel. Whether we label these narratives "classical," "traditional," or "realistic," for Brink each foregrounds the unreliability of language as always already "other," as resistant to notions of originality and authorial authority.

"The narrativation of language" (17), as Brink puts it, fashions the twentieth century novels; language is therefore conceived as "translation" in *Don Quixote*, "as a web of social deceit" in *La Princesse de Clèves*, as "gender trap" in *Moll Flanders*, as "dialogic tension" in *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, as "a parlour game" in *Emma*, as "scandal" in *Madame Bovary*, as a "system of quotations" in *Middlemarch*.

Since the twentieth-century novels with which the book ends naturally lend themselves easily to an analysis of the self-conscious use of language, the present review will focus primarily, though not exclusively, on how Brink applies his argument to the earlier novels. That is, the argument that the modern and postmodern emphasis on the self-referentiality of language is indicative of the novel since its inception, as is the notion of language as polyvalent, unreliable, and ludic.

In the discussion of *Don Quixote*, Brink focuses on Cervantes's use of floating signifiers. "It is in the *naming* of reality that Don Quixote transforms what is not into what *may be*" (21: emphasis his), thereby making of both fiction and reality mere linguistic constructs always already predetermined by the chivalric word/world of an earlier era. The problem of what constitutes original and what copy is exemplified in the fact that *Don Quixote* is supposedly a translation from an "original" Arabic, and that the original itself stems from the lying pen of a Moor who himself questions the veracity of his narrative, as in the adventure in the cave of Montesinos (and, as all *Cervantistas* know, throughout Part II as Cide Hamete marvels at what Sancho and Don Quixote are now made to say and do). Brink sees the notion of language further complicated in II:xliv when the translator admits he has left gaps by refraining from translating what he read in the original Arabic manuscript.

In Part II both authorial authority and reality itself are seen as unreliable in the ludic episode with the Duke and Duchess. Reality is what playacting constructs the real to be; language is constitutive of word and world in *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote himself has no *personal* experiences. Conflated into chivalric discourse, all his experiences are articulated in the form of "language experienced as *translation*, as *alien*, as *the language of others*" (31: emphasis his). For Brink, both the author and the seventeenth-century reader of *Don Quixote* simply share an old Spanish narrative tradition of "era y non era," itself already a translation from the Arabic narrative formula of "kan ya makan."

In *La Princesse de Clèves*, Brink focuses on the inadequacy of language. Since the norm of language here is deceit, the reader needs to turn to other sign-systems for truth claims. But all sign-systems are shown to be unreliable. In what is familiar from Jakobson's model of sender/message/receiver, Brink focuses here on the arbitrariness of reception once a code has been transmitted. Consequently, Madame de Lafayette's renunciation of the court and her withdrawal into the convent is posited not only as ambiguous (as has traditionally been done), but as a Derridean "combination of *absence* and *distance*" (60: emphasis his).

In *Moll Flanders*, the "floating signifiers" in *Don Quixote* become "vanished signifieds" (83). The same instability of meaning, this time of language as rhetoric, "as an instrument . . . of domination and persuasion" (82), is focused

upon in Defoe's novel. Once again Jakobson serves Brink well. This time it is in Moll's privileging of the speech act over its content, in her constructing both reality and her survival through language. Michel de Certeau's distinction between the "strategies" of the strong and the "tactics" of the powerless would have made Brink's argument in this context even more convincing.

Studying *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, Brink foregrounds the use of metanarratives and of intertextuality in Diderot's interrogation of reason, and of the notion of destiny (his "Great Scroll of Destiny") and free will, of what is "real," and what "fictitious," of what is precise and what intermediate. Brink shows how Diderot subverts the essentialism of these binaries, pinpointing them as *produced* "through [the] infinitely variable and unstable processes of dialogic interaction" (102).

In *Emma*, Brink focuses again on gaps and absences as he has in *La Princesse de Clèves*. This time the emphasis takes the form of what is not said in the novel. Since language is part of a hypocritical society that playacts, the unsaid in *Emma* becomes important. This is especially so in the gypsy scene which critics have always pointed out as strange and out-of-place. For Brink, however, it is purposeful. It serves his argument that language, though revealed as play and devised to create charades and pretenses, is foregrounded as hiding another reality, a potent absence hinted at precisely in the gypsy scene. It is the reality of "another system of meanings behind the [linguistic] façade" (115).

The focus in the analysis of *Madame Bovary* is on the inadequacy of language as already devaluated by others. Language is seen as a social force, already corrupted when used for private expression and destructive to those who attempt to deviate from the social definitional norm it expresses (135).

In *Middlemarch*, observations are highlighted as simply translated views proffered as truth claims. But the novel's multiplicity of viewpoints makes it, instead, an accretion of quotations and linguistic claims which come "from elsewhere, point elsewhere, refer to a source located elsewhere" (150). *Middlemarch* is therefore seen to embody the Derridean *iterable*, a repetitive narrative in which nothing is said and in which no story is original.

With *Death in Venice*, feminist discourse enables Brink's analysis. Aschenbach's obsession is seen as both the repression of the feminine and its return full-force in the person of the feminized Tadzio. The bookish Aschenbach, from this perspective, reads the body of "the beautiful girlish boy of flesh" intertextually, as a Hyacinthus, a Narcissus, a Hermes. Tadzio becomes an impossible copy of the always already, a mere pastiche of Aschenbach's literary models.

Beginning with Kafka's *The Trial*, we enter precisely that world of modernist and postmodernist characteristics upon which Brink bases his argument. Whereas the earlier novels have been seen as presenting an incipient exploitation of language as ludic, deceptive, polyvalent, inadequate, etc., with Kafka and the novels that follow, we are shown how the full-fledged characteristics we attribute to the modern and postmodern novel were already present in varying degrees in the previous narratives. In *The Trial*, the focus is on "its inability to communicate sense" (195: emphasis his), on the randomness of its events, the absence

of points of reference, of cause and effect, and, above all, on its meaninglessness. In Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, it is the dissolution of language that is foregrounded. Binaries coexist unproblematically: an elitist aestheticism is juxtaposed to the illusory "urge to democratise the novel" (207); a non-existent relation between signifier and signified is emphasized; and futile attempts at epistemological solutions and at language as meaning-producing are highlighted. In Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is upon the testing of the validity and limits of language as writing that Brink focuses in discussing the author's creating and undoing, his "[h]acer para dehacer" (sic 235, 238, 252) of his narrative world.

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, a feminist position is once again adopted as Brink focuses on the "otherness" of "another's" language for the female in the narrative, "specifically [on] a woman's experience of (male) language" (253: emphasis his). The Lacanian distinction between the maternal Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Law of the Father serves his re-interpretation of the argument that *Surfacing* signifies that women have no other language but the "other's." For Brink, additionally, the distinction is used to show how Atwood transcends essentialist binarisms in *Surfacing*.

Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, with its insistence on the Nietzschean notion of "eternal recurrence," of "*Einmal ist keinmal*," lends itself to Brink's emphasis on postmodern non-linearity. The notion of recurrence also works in A.S. Byatt's twentieth-century fictional scholars' attempt to reconstruct the lives of two equally fictitious Victorian poets in *Possession*. Both novels highlight the notion of origin as illusory, of historical truth as culturally-specific. In Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, the existence of a master narrative is seen as no longer possible. The reader becomes complicit in the process of writing a text whose very *modus operandi* emphasizes that there are no beginnings or ends in narrative, that all texts come from other texts, that all words come from other words. Unlike previous critics who have highlighted Calvino's novel as the immemorial pursuit of the female as prey, Brink plays it instead for laughs. He sees it as a book "looking at itself in the process of emergence" (324), a book that eludes any definitive meaning, provoking "the reader into revolt against phallogocentric textual authority or finality" (329).

Brink has created his analytic model, as all literary criticism inevitably does. And, as Ihab Hassan points out in the *Right Promethean Fire* (1980), as critics we then proceed "to 'discover' the affinities of various authors and different moments with [our constructed] model" (108). The book does not escape this sense of constructedness, but in the process of producing the affinities between modern and postmodern novels and their predecessors, Brink nevertheless combines an impressive knowledge of critical theory and of the target languages of the novels he analyzes, with close and convincing readings of the texts themselves. All this in a highly readable and unpretentious manner.

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