

Kafka's work based on his immersion in and/or aversion to several aspects of the Jewish religion and the sociopolitical experiences of its adherents. Robertson's views have a secure scholarly foundation; his reading in the field of Jewish influences on Kafka has been almost all-encompassing. His research has been so thoroughgoing that he affords the reader at times an excess of material to consider. Robertson himself on one occasion has sensed the difficulties which arise in interpretation when he mentions that he has chosen to accept *Crime and Punishment* as a source for some motifs in *The Trial*, although "they could just as well have come from twenty different sources" (90). Other explanations of Kafka's fiction have not been vitiated by Robertson's book, but it dare not now be overlooked by students and critics of the Kafka canon. In regard to understanding Kafka's explication of his Jewish heritage it is indispensable.

Jan Baetens

AUX FRONTIÈRES DU RÉCIT: FABLE DE ROBERT PINGET COMME  
NOUVEAU NOUVEAU ROMAN

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Reviewed by Peter Broome

Why have the intricate patternings of Robert Pinget's verbal world evaded the critical attention accorded, say, to Robbe-Grillet or Claude Simon? Despite the accolade of two major literary prizes, the Femina and the Medis, and his position at the heart of the textual innovations of the *nouveau nouveau roman*, the author of *L'Inquisiteur*, *Passacaille*, and *Fable* is comparatively neglected in his own country, while the English-speaking public is being beckoned to trace more and more reading paths into this shifting, finely polarized, and self-contradictory linguistic territory, which is painfully aware of its own paradox.

Jan Baetens's study looks in two directions: outwards towards the evolution and changing definition of the French *nouveau roman* since the nineteen fifties, and inwards towards the most secret textual mutations of the one work, *Fable* (1971). The broad historical survey, despite its meticulous documentation and careful categorizations, is disappointingly flat. To see the three stages of development of the *nouveau roman* as the *phase molle*, the *phase ferme* and *réaction*, corresponding to the fifties, the seventies, and since; to characterize the "first manner" as a last manifestation of the epistemological novel, and its successor, the *nouveau nouveau roman*, as a subversive game of construction, a ludic exploitation of the textual act; and to outline the theoretical positions of a variety of critics loosely in the vicinity of Jean Ricardou only to show their limitations or irrelevance, proves to be a comparatively inconclusive exercise and leads one to suspect that the essence of the *nouveau roman* lies not in its history or its theory but in its individual examples and its practice. Indeed, it is as Baetens leaves behind the dutiful trek and ventures into the inner complexities of *Fable* that one responds to the fascination of its problematical movements of language and structure, and to the numerous complementary expressions of its fundamental duplicity. For the text of *Fable*

is a broken Narcissus, seeking, though blind and with no external guidance, to recompose and repossess its own image: a Narcissus caught between dispersion and the quest for unity, between language as wear and language as renewal, between annihilation by endless repetition and a furtive reseeded from rejected particles. Baetens delves into the intimate fabric of the in-fratexts, the dense formal networks that underlie the dilapidated and ruinous architecture of the narrative, not to convert them into patterns of hidden psychological significance which might redeem or recuperate the fiction in terms other than its own, but to show how doggedly they reflect themselves: the sub-text of the ambiguities of the textual. So we follow these precarious chains, sometimes no more than tenuous reverberations, energizing or draining the page at unpredictable intervals, the sketchings and erasures of a tormented linguistic mirage: "Narcisse" becomes "narre-scie-sse," both narrating the age-old commonplace and the agent of a rift or schism in the *récit*; the peripatetic "romanichel" is a verbal symptom of the wandering *roman*, trailing behind its own inverted "cliché"; the "réticule" or bag carried by the protagonist/writer, akin to his "musette" or "little muse," is a loosely strung diminutive "récit" made more of holes than of substance. And if Baetens steps to the very brink of barely supportable phonetic *réseaux*, balanced between aural intuition and (in Mallarmé's words) "inanité sonore," potential semantic music or a senseless hum, then his justification comes from words in the text: "Même langage. Onomatopées." So, the *ch* of "chier" pursues its underground activities to link with the "chut" of enforced silence (passing through the whisper of "chuchoter" to the linguistic fall from grace of "chute"), catching on its way the signals of verbal disintegration and wasteful expulsion in "rabâchage . . . bruits de bouches . . . récitant son chapelet de rimailles ainsi qu'une bique égrène ses crottes," these linking in turn with the murmurs of "déboucher . . . accoucheront," both forms of "issuing from a mouth." In the same way, implicit anagrams and *calembours* sketch out their existence, try out their virtualities, between composition and decomposition: "rédiger" and "digérer," "sacré" and "crasse." Mobile mirror images which make all the more plausible the reading of "Narcisse d'Epinal" as "Narcisse de la pine," especially when one meets elsewhere in *Fable* the reference to "Narcisse privé de son organe favori"; or of "Narcisse" as a synonym of "Sirancy" (itself a homonym of "si ranci" with its connotations of deterioration), the supposed place of composition of the text. And is Robert Pinget reflected, in his absence, in the "R.P." of "Révérend Père," just as in *Le Fiston* he almost acquires a literary identity, broken and reversed, in the names Bourget and Richepin whose works appear together in the library?

It is in minute and intricate studies such as these, tenuous and tentative as they must be, that Baetens's book assumes its importance. It is through them that one comes to acknowledge that it is the reader who is the hypothetical mirror image of the writer, sharing the same faults, ambiguities, and limitations of language, and living its multiple paradox: two faces which do not finally mock or frustrate each other, but join as each other's possible redemption, Narcissus reunited.