

Inger Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction*. Universitetsforlaget, Bergen, Norway, 1981. 175 pp.

Metafiction is by any measure one of the "big" topics in novel criticism these days. Having led a quiet, largely unnoticed life among the eccentricities of the novel for two or three centuries (at least back to Cervantes) while its bullying cousin Realism stole the limelight, it has recently come very much to the fore through the joint mediation of American post-modernism and French deconstructionism. The former, led particularly by such writers as Borges, Nabokov, and Barth, has sought to redefine the tradition of the novel by giving metafiction pride of place and reducing the stature of realism to something not really real, but simply one rather restricted form of artifice. And the latter, headed by Jacques Derrida, has for a decade and a half trained us all to see metafiction *everywhere*; all writing, for the Derrideans, is inadvertent metafiction, for, at the practiced critic's touch, the very patterns of language reveal their own inadequacies and dissolve into their component parts.

There are many, however, who resist this tendency. Particularly those who grew up with such modernist mentors as Kafka and Musil – and even more so those for whom the entire modernist period was an aberration that soon enough passed, restoring us to good old realism – the mention of metafiction is anathema. Among these critics, the prevailing notion of metafiction is that it is simply a technical device for destroying the illusion of reality in a novel (which, for the realistically minded critic, is a perverse enough thing to want to do), and therefore an entirely negative phenomenon: tearing down the substance of literature (i.e., "reality") and leaving mere technique in its place. Even sympathetic critics of metafiction, such as John Stark in *The Literature of Exhaustion*, too often propagate this unfortunate notion: Stark's book, which deals with Borges, Nabokov, and Earth, is little more than a grammar of anti-illusionistic devices, giving the distinct impression that in the end these important writers are no more than technical tricksters.

It is to this state of affairs, then, that Inger Christensen addresses herself in her recent book, which is appropriately titled "The Meaning of Metafiction": not the form, or technique, but meaning. While she does account for its formal features, discovering metafictional aspects in the relations between narrator, narrative, and narratee, therefore, she is mainly concerned with the vision of experience metafictionists convey through (not despite) their metafiction. Her study focuses on seven novels by four such metafictionists: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, and Beckett's trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. In each she analyses the formal aspects of the narratorial situation and, by treating this situation as an allegory of the writer's vision of experience, finds in each novel a symbolically expressed "message." In this way she is able to ask a good number of questions that previous critics have failed to raise, and has consequently produced a few valid and even exciting insights into her material.

Welcome as such a critical endeavor unquestionably is (especially in Scandinavia, where the study of metafiction is still in its infancy), however, one might wish that Christensen had taken her investigation farther than she in fact did. In a number of ways, for example, her study hovers timidly about the tired clichés of metafictional criticism as it has been developed over the

past decade and a half. This is nowhere more obvious than in her choice of writers; only Borges is missing from the standard canon. It might have been more useful to the study of metafiction as a whole had she chosen less traveled ground: among the more obvious examples, one might suggest Gass, Barthelme, Pynchon, Coover, Vonnegut, Sukenick, Federman, O'Brien, Spark, Fowles, Grass, Calvino . . . The list goes on and on. Christensen excludes Pynchon as unmetafictional; apparently she has not read Maureen Quilligan's *The Language of Allegory*. The nineteenth century is also explicitly ruled out, on the grounds that the *Künstlerroman* (as in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*) is not metafictional; recommended reading would include Hawthorne's "Alice Doane's Appeal" and "Main Street" and Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as well as such a locus classicus as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and poststructuralist studies on the order of John Irwin's excellent *American Hieroglyphics*. Even within the oeuvres of the writers she discusses, interesting alternatives present themselves: why not *Pale Fire* instead of (or in addition to) *Ada*, or Barth's pointedly metafictional *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Chimera*, or *Letters* (which last, judging by its absence from her Barth bibliography, Christensen has apparently never heard of) instead of the marginally metafictional *Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*?

Perhaps the most debilitating weakness in Christensen's study, however, is its lack of an adequate conceptual framework for her analyses. She defines metafiction as "fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making," but then takes this definition no further. In what way must self-reflexivity be the novelist's "primary concern"? Christensen tends to assume, in fact, that it is her writers' *only* concern, so that in *Ada* and *Giles Goat-Boy* the love story and the hero myth are entirely subordinated to visions of art – treated simply as allegorical vehicles rather than as significant thematically in their own right (and, as a result, she concludes with the common and totally untrue remark that "*Ada* is lacking in warmth"). If metafiction is *not* the novelist's sole concern, how does it relate to other aspects of a novel? What is a "vision of experience"? Metaphysics? I don't see why not; but Christensen is usually satisfied with the obvious answer, a vision of art, which many critics have noted earlier. What is the "process of its own making" a fiction written *generally* about the writing of fiction, or specifically about itself? Metafiction is usually taken in the latter sense, and Christensen defines it in the same way in her Introduction; but in order to be able to allegorize her novels later, she has to expand this notion so that metafiction becomes *any* consideration of literary creation – so that one wonders why a *Künstlerroman* has to be excluded. All these are crucial questions that Christensen moots; it is as if she were working within an already established critical framework which she had only to apply. Such, unfortunately, is not the case.

A second conceptual problem in Christensen's study is that, if she fails adequately to define metafiction, she also fails to redefine the novel *as* metafictional. This leads to a highly questionable form of tunnel vision, in which the seven novels she discusses exist in a theoretical and historical vacuum, and are treated with a would-be New-Critical induction that is nevertheless undermined by the purposiveness of her approach. She is looking for metafiction, and finds it by choosing novels traditionally considered metafiction; and this implicit critical consensus allows her to ignore the need for a historical and theoretical context. In her Preface, for example, she records her surprise at discovering

that "Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, written some two hundred years earlier, contained even more 'modern' narrative devices than Barth's book." The two crucial issues raised here, however – how novels two centuries apart can be so similar, and what it means to be "more 'modern' " – are never again confronted in the book. Christensen also notes a similarity between Beckett's novels and contemporary art; but, lacking the historical context that would allow her to discuss the central artistic problems being explored by all artists in the mid-twentieth century, she has to put this similarity down to influence. The rather significant differences between the nihilistic irony of Beckett's metafiction and the aesthetic delight of Sterne's, Nabokov's, and Barth's is also missed; because Christensen asks a very limited set of questions of each novel, all seven come to seem very unremarkably alike.

What is needed, then, is clearly a theory and a history of the novel that establishes an alternative tradition to that teleological realistic one which elevates Richardson, Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens the reformer, Hardy, Flaubert, Tolstoi, Zola, Henry James, Norris, Dreiser, and Bellow, and treats any novel that diverges from this tradition as an aberration. Such a tradition is, of course, only a critical construct, lent force by cultural acceptance; and if we wish to understand metafiction, it seems to me, we need to *reconstruct* the tradition, isolating not the above names but Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding, Swift, Sterne, Hawthorne, Thackeray, Dickens the comic story-teller, the late Joyce, and so on. An alternative theory of the novel as metafictional might draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion in "Epic and Novel" (collected in *The Dialogic Imagination*); an adequate theory of literary history might be that offered by Bakhtin's contemporaries and theoretical rivals, the Russian formalists, whose notion of continuous overuse and self-conscious parody, overfamiliarization and defamiliarization Leslie Fiedler aptly sums up aphoristically by saying that "The novel has always been dying." The novel has by its very nature been parodic, metafictional, "antinovelistic" from the start. Realism has been the aberration.

My quarrels with Christensen's book have thus far concerned its theoretical orientation, or rather its lack of one; what remains is to examine some of her practical analytical strategies and their relative success or failure. I personally find her decision to apply narratological tools to the study of metafiction highly interesting; too often metafiction is seen as simply a matter of the author destroying his illusion of reality, without a close consideration of the means by which he does it. In narratology, it seems, she has clearly found a productive tool for metafictional study.

Unfortunately, her application of that tool is highly inconsistent, and therefore rather misleading. In her Introduction, she defines metafiction in the usual sense as relying on a fictional author: "the author places himself inside the fictional world and figures as a structural element in the novel." Metafiction is, then, in narratological terms, a form of direct communication between implied author and implied reader; and the effect of metafiction can best be studied in the conflict between this communication and that between character and character or between narrator and narratee: the narrator or a character makes a statement which the fictional author directly contradicts, or unrealistically places himself on a par with the author, revealing authorial interference in his speech. In the text, however, Christensen slides from this initial rigor to an almost complete breakdown of distinctions among author, narrator, and character, so

that "narrator" comes to mean any speaker who discourses on artistic creation. Granted that it is difficult to make a distinction hold between a speaker who speaks "authorially" and one who speaks entirely within the world of the novel, it is no solution simply to collapse all distinctions. J.B. in *Giles Goat-Boy* is clearly metafictional; Tristram, Van, and Ada are defensibly (but not self-evidently) so; George Giles is probably not metafictional; and Ebenezer Cooke is definitely not. Somewhere between J.B. and Ebenezer Cooke, clearly, a distinction must be made, and Christensen fails to make it – or even to raise the problem. The route to making such a distinction, I would guess, would lie through something like Bakhtin's dictional analysis of double-voicing, which allows one to demonstrate the extent to which authorial ("intentional") and characterial ("objectified") voices mix in a given speech.

The reason behind Christensen's insistence on making every speaker a spokesman for the author is, as I have indicated, that she wants to take the narratorial situation as symbolic of the author's vision. This is, it seems to me, the weakest aspect of the study. One cannot help, at this point, but be reminded of undergraduate literary analyses which discover a few facile "symbols" and then earnestly transform them into the author's "message" – the precise word Christensen uses for what she is most interested in. A "message," of course, implies a neat, simplistic homily about the world, like "Do good to other people" or "Man is alone." If one wished, one might reduce every novel to some such platitude about the world; but to claim that this is what is most important in a work is critical naivete of the most embarrassing sort. Christensen is at some pains to give each character in her novels a simplistic allegorical value, which guides the reader to an understanding of the novel's message: Uncle Toby, Trim, Ada, Eben Cooke, and George Giles are all reduced, for example, to various allegorical statements of a "realistic" position, while Walter Shandy, Van, Henry Burlingame, and Harold Bray "represent" a nominalist view. Whether through synthesis of these views or a valorization of one position, then, each novel is said to "advocate" a certain vision of the poet – the legal ("advocate") and ethical ("message") terminology revealing Christensen's true underlying analytical model.

Now, my discomfort with Christensen's conclusions should not be taken to undermine her approach altogether; I think one of the interesting questions one might ask about these novels is precisely what thematic vision of art they convey through their fictions. What I find most objectionable is her blithe reductionism: her willingness to reduce extremely complex novels by authors all too aware of the epistemological difficulties involved in knowing or expressing the truth at all, much less in fiction – to simple, pat "messages." *Giles Goat-Boy* is much more than "an allegory of the origin and development of fiction"; everything else, however, is naively subsumed into the symbolic vehicle, so that all that Christensen finds least interesting becomes the overburdened signifier for a rather paltry signified.

If I have gone on at some length about Christensen's book, it is because I feel the publication of her study (and its financing by a grant from the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities) is a signal event in Scandinavian studies in contemporary fiction – one which, one hopes, will provoke other critics to pick up where she left off. My discussion of the weaknesses of her analyses, then, is directed less at the book itself (which is, after all, already

written and published, and therefore beyond modification) but towards those critics who feel an interest in metafiction and would like to pursue it further – particularly in regard to Scandinavian metafiction (of which I know none – does it exist? why not? or why do I not know about it?). Christensen's study tacitly points to a good many questions that it never attempts to answer; but the inadequacy of previous answers is always the best springboard for further inquiry.

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