

REVIEW

Travelling Narratives

Mieke Bal: *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*.
Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2008. 250 pp.
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Reading the first pages of *Loving Yusuf* in which Mieke Bal refers to her childhood impressions of the power of the narrative and her infatuation with reading I am, in a passage of my own from present to past, reminded of one of her earliest books, *Narratologie* (1977), which I happened to review in *Orbis Litterarum* 35 in 1980. This book offers an analysis – with a formalist bend – of the strategies and techniques of literary narratives, in part taking issue with the conceptual cluster developed by Gérard Genette to account for narrative focalisation and, more importantly, based on a set of detailed and original close readings of texts from the great realist European tradition. The topic of subjectivity and narration is also debated in *Loving Yusuf*, but with important or rather – to remain in the narrative framework – telling differences, which in a sense also exemplify the movement from present to past alluded to in the subtitle of the book.

The material of the book, recurrently dealt with from new angles as we read through the chapters in a kind of accumulative, cognitive process, consists of selected stories and images of Joseph and Potiphar's wife: three textual versions from the Hebrew Bible, the *Qur'an* and Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder* respectively as well as three visual representations by Rembrandt. Still important to the Bal of the present is, on the one hand, the insistent and persistent interest in narrative processes, not as a formal exercise, but as a cultural device for locating subjects in a culturally invested context in space and time and thus a device for the production as well as for the understanding of the dynamics of identity formation. On the other hand, the scholarly respect and fascination for the concrete workings of the cultural material – objects, events, texts, images – continues to serve as the basis of Bal's solid argument.

But if differences between present and past are telling, they tell of something. Of course, they tell about the development of Mieke Bal's own interests, when she refers to her childhood experiences with the story about Joseph and to her life as a travelling scholar and also provides

us with numerous – too numerous for my taste – references to what she has presented in greater detail in earlier writings. Of course, the context of biblical and religious studies in which this book is published (the book series *Afterlives of the Bible*) allows for repetitions, but at times the reader gets the feeling that she or he is reading what could just as well have been read elsewhere in Bal's work. This effect is, however, effectively counter-balanced by the readings of texts and images: the freshness and seemingly instantaneous nature of the observations, and Bal's reflections on them, keep the reader's nose and eyes in the book.

The book may be read, maybe best read even, as a narrative of the reading process, told by Bal in a way that calls for the broader contexts in which she, as part of that story, places her observations. It exemplifies the ideas that readings and narratives *do* something with the reader; that they are performative and interactive. In this case, they make us interact with a traditionally given gendered subject position, located in one culture, by confronting it with the ambiguities of one of the stories that support this position: the sinfulness of the body and the negative role of women. It does so by expanding the cultural, historical, and media contexts of the story, and by demonstrating how an open and interactive engagement with the texts and the images allows the reader to negotiate subject positions across such contexts. The main point is not that the ambiguity of the relation between Joseph and his wife, that is to say an ambiguity on both the male and female part, relativizes values and attitudes as an anything-goes type of thinking; instead, it makes concrete the participation and decision by the reader on values and attitudes as the core of the practice of reading.

The theoretical underpinning of the book is presented in the same discursive mode as the readings and therefore embedded in the accounts of her reading, either as quotations, with Derrida as an important source of inspiration, or as accounts of the reading process invested in the theoretical texts, which then really becomes *her* readings. The broader context of the concepts inside or outside the theoretical texts, where they are developed, tends to be absent or to hide in the shadows among Jan Asmann's notion of memory; only those features which Bal can use are selected; Charles Peirce's semiotics is presented in the same way: a story of her readings alone; the dialogical theory of readings, as it is practiced throughout the book and discussed in principle, has hints and indirect references to phenomenology and to Wolfgang Iser, but it offers no broader theoretical discussions with these or other references. The advantage of this strategy is obvious: the book acquires a homogeneous

discursive flow with a clearly identifiable subject position we as readers can relate to, whether we are dealing with theory or the material. The disadvantages are equally evident: the conceptual analysis *stricto sensu* that would more easily allow readers to transfer the insights gained from readings contained in this book to other fields, other texts or other readings, is hampered.

The differences between past and present in Bal's focus of interests also tells the story of the changes of literary studies and the Humanities in general since the early 1980s. From a monodisciplinary literary study with a strong theoretical and often formalist focus to a broader interdisciplinarity with a growing emphasis on cultural history and on other art forms; from a Eurocentric perspective to a broader intercultural if not global perspective; from a focus on the object as such and its various structures and mechanisms to a profound interest in cultural processes that transgress boundaries and how such processes are articulated in and through the material under scrutiny – the dynamics between readers and texts, between media, between art forms, between cultures, between theories, between types of discourses, between positions of subjectivity, etc. Travelling or travel is the general term used by Bal to capture such processes, both in the subtitle here and in a recent book, *Travelling Concepts* (2002). One may say that her lifelong interest in narratives has been expanded and generalized to a focus on processes in a broader sense.

In this book, the Joseph material is travelling across time, space and media. (1) It contains the two ancient versions in *Genesis* and in the *Qur'an* and (2) three different visual representations by Rembrandt – an etching of Joseph's ambiguous moving away from the half-naked wife of Potiphar in the bed, and two paintings, one in Berlin, the other in Washington DC, which shows the wife telling Potiphar about the event with Joseph listening on the other side of the bed, but with different visual interpretations of the scene. The three scenes are condensed and slightly different narratives of the biblical story, represented in a mixture of 17th century furniture, dresses and postures but with oriental details. (3) Finally, Mann's retelling of the story, in the quote mainly based on sura 12 in the *Qur'an*. Mann adds a name to the wife, Mut, which Bal also uses together with the Qur'anic spelling of Yusuf.

From the entire Joseph story, Bal selects the part with Potiphar's wife. In *Genesis* as a whole, the emphasis is rather on Joseph's organizational skills in Egypt, based on his divinely inspired power to interpret dreams, and on the re-establishing of his family ties (giving even more emphasis to the interpretation of the meaning of the house in Bal's reading). The

seduction is an incident, an important incident, but an incident nonetheless. The *Qur'an* is shorter and places the seduction at the center, but still emphasizing that Joseph is selected by God to have special skills. Mann's huge novel draws on all sources, but in the seduction scene mainly on the *Qur'an*, whereas Rembrandt focuses on the seduction as told in *Genesis*.

Although different, the two ancient versions use the same narrative device to put the seduction in perspective: repetition. When Joseph is maltreated and sold by his brothers it is the workings of a lie, his shirt is torn, there is blood involved (as in the *Qur'an* version), and Joseph is presented as the favorite of God or of his father, or rather of both. It is a power struggle about being most loved and being truly recognized, and about the authority involved in this struggle. These elements and this logic are repeated as elements in the seduction scene in Potiphar's house, and this repetition might have served as a key to the detailed and sophisticated readings of the ambiguities of love, power and the body, already integrated in the textual sources and further pointing to the conflation of the role of Potiphar as a father, parallel to Jakob, and as a husband to his wife, a point also made by Bal in one of the last chapters.

Although with an extraordinary perspicacity when unfolding the minute details of texts and images, Bal does not – if I am not overlooking some details – comment on the positions of the legs in the images, but focuses on hands and other body postures, and on the eyes in particular. In the etching, Joseph's legs are placed in a position close to the traditional *crux scenica* marking how a character enters the stage and marks his position as a well-balanced, reliable person, without moving but still marking a participation in the acting. His legs are set apart, but as if still bound to that position. This detail adds to the ambiguous postures of both Joseph and the wife: he is fleeing, thrown off balance, but is also showing his wish to remain; she is tempting him to stay but also just lying there, exposed to us, the viewers.

The wife's crossed and covered legs in the Berlin painting shows her at rest, comfortably sitting there and telling her story, with the crossed legs as kind of transformed *crux scenica* marker. That's how you sit during a relaxed conversation. In the Washington version, her legs are also covered, and set slightly apart as if she has just left the bed and jumped into the chair. The scene is more calculated in the Berlin painting, hence Joseph's protesting gesture, but, as Bal convincingly shows, also more ambiguous when it comes to the roles of Potiphar and Joseph. The Washington painting has a more marked scenic presence, but therefore also an ambiguity in the characters not yet brought into their final positions,

their *crux scenica* positions so to speak (we do not see Joseph's legs in the two paintings, only his upright body).

I will keep these observations in mind in my discussion of a few selected topics in the book. The first is the conceptual differentiations introduced in the beginning and used throughout. One concerns the types of readings: the fundamentalist one, bound to a religious context in particular, claiming that all questions and answers are inherent in the text. It is all in there. In contrast, there is the literalist reading which is advocated by Bal and which, although in sharp opposition to the fundamentalist approach, is not a free subjective *hineininterpretieren*. It holds that all questions addressed by the text are addressed through a reading, referring to the facts of the texts, but also, and emphatically so, to the selective observation of those facts, and the questions they contain are contextualized by theoretical lenses and cultural framings.

Karl Bühler's abstractive relevance comes into mind: we select, but do not invent details that are relevant to a given context of meaning production. The same does the notion of affordances in James Gibson's quasi-phenomenological theory of visual perception: objects of sense experiences, texts included, have affordances, but to be receptive to them and to interpret them is the result of an interaction between viewer and object, never just impressions left by the object in the viewer. In this perspective, new questions inevitably emerge in new contexts, often through rewritings as in the case of Mann and the other text and images taken into account here. Also, new theoretical positions allow for new angles, as in this case theories on text and body, and on the meaning of seeing, on dialogical reading etc.

The literalist approach is practiced by Bal on three levels, more or less clearly distinguishable throughout the book: semiotics, aesthetics and religion. As far as semiotics is concerned, we are working on the level of the signs produced in and by the texts and the sign processes they generate, as for example lying, seducing and interpretations of dreams. When it comes to aesthetics – the most prominent part – we are dealing with the relationship between humans and the material world of sensual experience. Here the role of the body and subjectivity is at stake, embedded in the structures of cultural power and values. Finally, religion is relevant, partly because of the corpus selected, but otherwise mostly as a social and institutional framework for the definition of values and textual canons.

From the readings, two broader issues of relevance for both aesthetic and religious studies emerge: that of the truth values of texts or images

and that of canonization. Bal's take on truth is neither religious, that is to say in line with the fundamentalist approach to reading as she has characterized it, nor philosophical *stricto sensu*, that is to say in line with one or other particular philosophical schools (referential, pragmatic or otherwise). Her term is truth speak. With this term she wants to say that before anything else, truth is determined by a speech act that states or claims what the truth in a concrete case is, and it is to be judged as such an act. The act nature is not removed by evidential proof. Therefore, truth speak may also turn out to be a lie. Hence, truth speak is an invitation to the reader to actively negotiate what can be regarded as truth in relation to the context and the medium of the truth speak. We are in the realm of semiotic processes with a view to the authority to define the frames of the processes. On the one hand, this conception leads to the conclusion that truth speak entails a constant rewriting of the texts to investigate the nature of the framing or tradition that conditions the truth claim.

On the other hand, the notion of truth as truth speak calls for an investigation of the authority framing the textual readings, that is to say to canon formation, which she sees as a collectively and culturally institutionalized truth speak providing texts with a literary or visual identity. She revisits a number of earlier positions she has taken on this issue, but the core problem for her is that canonization interrelates ethical and aesthetic merits. Separation of the two may mean an ethical indifference, a synthesis may mean a moralistic over-determination of aesthetics as Bal has encountered it – as a reluctant witness as she says – in the way the seductive and lying wife was presented to her in her own childhood. She sits uncomfortably with both positions, but only points to the fact that literary identity, and hence canon formation, works along three lines: literature as institution, as agency and as frame. Paying attention to these three factors not only leads to a historically conditioned understanding of canon formation, but also indicate "the conditions of possibility to think canons differently" (227). The book may be seen as an attempt to realize such conditions.

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