

FACT, FICTION AND FRENCH FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Michael Stubbs

Bill Nash is the author of a comic novel, a book on the language of humour, and a book on rhetoric (Nash 1982, 1989, 1992). I discuss some sources of humour in a book which I am sure he would have enjoyed: a comic novel whose zany plot involves the search for a manuscript which holds the secret of ultimate rhetorical power.

This article is a (slightly) satirical discussion of a (very) satirical novel, *La septième fonction du langage* by Laurent Binet (2015), henceforth *SFL*. A productive methodological strategy for investigating a topic is to use an extreme example as a case study, and *SFL* is extreme in several ways. First, since its pervasive mixture of fact and fiction has left some readers uncertain about which is which, it provides good material for a case study of fictional worlds. Second, since this pervasive mixture involves extravagant caricatures of a large number of famous French intellectuals, it illustrates ethical issues involved in parody and satire. Third, since these extravagant caricatures demand detailed knowledge of French cultural life in the 1970s and 1980s, it illustrates the perennial problem of how much general and specialized knowledge readers require in order to (fully?) understand texts.

Perhaps the simplest reason for discussing *SFL* is that it's a very funny and enjoyable novel: a *tour de force* of suspense and intellectual high jinks. But satire – along with caricatures and other forms of exaggeration – is a risky strategy. Authors can never be sure that readers will get the joke, since what is said is not what is meant. So, the novel illustrates many problems of textual interpretation.

There are useful attempts to disentangle “the logical status of fictional discourse” (such as Searle 1976), but they do not explain how readers distinguish fact from fiction, or indeed how far you can appropriately go with outrageous caricatures of living persons. The novel provides textual problems which have not been solved by either literary scholars or language philosophers (and they are not solved in this article, so don't get too excited).

Binet, L. 2015. *La septième fonction du langage*. Paris: Grasset. [Le Livre de Poche, 2016. Translated as *The Seventh Function of Language*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2017; *Die siebte Sprachfunktion*, Rowohlt, 2017.]

Nash, W. 1982. *Kettle of Roses*. London: Arrow.

Nash, W. 1989. *The Language of Humour*. London: Longman.

Nash, W. 1992. *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Searle, J. R. 1976. The logical status of fictional discourse. *New Literary History*, 12, 6(2): 319-32.
