

Book Reviews / Boekresensies

An introduction to contemporary literary theory

Ryan, Rory; van Zyl, Susan (eds.). 1982

Johannesburg: Ad. Donker

Since the advent of the eighties students of literary theory and their teachers have been privileged by the publication of a small number of introductory surveys of the thriving contemporary literary theoretical scene. Introductions such as those of editors and co-authors Rory Ryan and Susan van Zyl (1982), Ann Jefferson and David Robey (1982) and sole agent Terry Eagleton (1983) all aim at a concise overview of the multiple, differing and often conflicting literary theories that have sprung up, in Europe mainly, since the sixties. They do, however, vary considerably regarding range, choices, approach, as well as degree and nature of preference. Such diversity should not be deplored. Without being overly optimistic, one may perhaps assume that it could well prod interested students into thinking about literary theoretical issues for themselves.

Ryan and van Zyl's contribution to the field distinguishes itself from the introductions mentioned above by its comprehensive nature and South African authorship. The extensive scope of this collection permits essays on thirteen theoretical schools. It commences with considerations of the twin fathers of modern literary theory, Russian Formalism and New Criticism. It moves on, in roughly chronological order, to other 'text' orientated theories, such as linguistic approaches, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, and subsequently turns to literary theories arising from a wider psychological, sociological and philosophical context.

In view of the impressive range of this collection, the ability of the ten contributors (Ryan, van Zyl and Visser each put in two appearances) and the vitality and/or influence of the theories defined, it would be petty to quibble about choices. The introduction to the collection intimates that 'justifiable convictions as to what is really important in the field at present' do exist. Is the inference that reception aesthetics - a striking omission - is not? (Iser, Holland and Bleich are touched upon in the essay on phenomenology, and Fish is not mentioned.) Comment in this regard would have been welcome, since the approach of the Konstanzer Schule does, at present, enjoy popularity among certain Afrikaans theorists.

By its refreshing lack of dogmatism, the introduction captures the basic mood of giving theories a fair hearing. This is revealed in particular by the open-minded handling of certain thorny questions arising from the nature of contemporary theory, such as the awkward gap that has opened up between literary theorists and critical practitioners.

On two theories within the same tradition, Russian Formalism and French structuralism, N.W. Visser writes with authority. (Unfortunately these essays,

JLS|TLW 1 (1), Jan. 1985

like a number of others, are plagued by small inaccuracies and/or misprints.)

In characterising Russian Formalism, Visser draws on René Wellek's useful division of the Formalist endeavour into three chronological stages. This distinction he wrongly attributes to Wellek's disappointing essay on the Prague School, while it is in fact made in his later, excellent essay on Russian Formalism (reprinted in Wellek's *An Attack on Literature*, 1982). This source, which is not mentioned in Visser's bibliography, deserves attention, since it supplements his essay by providing information on the ancestry of the Formalists and gives an assessment of the limitations of Formalist doctrines from a present-day perspective. The influence of Saussure's structural linguistics on Russian Formalism, about which some theorists seem uncertain, is correctly pointed out by Visser. The comparison between French structuralism and New Criticism is helpful, but surely the difference between them is not merely a matter of methodological preference? Perhaps it should be pointed out to newcomers that the radical divergence between the whole Anglo-American tradition, in which so many of our students were raised, and structuralism (as well as much modern European theory) turns on the fact that the former is humanistic and empiricist and the latter is most definitely not.

I, for one, welcome the crucial role granted to Anglo-American New Criticism as being (together with Russian Formalism) one of the beginnings of contemporary literary theory. This is particularly so, as a trend exists among prominent Dutch theorists to deny New Criticism the status of a theory and consequently to relegate it to the area of literary criticism.

Ivan Rabinowitz introduces the New Critical approach with clear and succinct statements on central focus, basic theoretical tenets, critical framework, method and terminology. An additional boon in this essay is a demonstration of the New Critical 'analytical method' in action, by means of a 'close reading' of two cleverly selected poems, a metaphysical text of the kind held dear by New Critics and Blake's pre-romantic 'London'. The second choice invites students to compare a New Critical analysis with Culler's well-known structuralist reading of the same poem which has, incidentally, found its way into the 1981 edition of that stronghold of conservatism, David Daiches' *Critical Approaches to Literature*, together with texts by Georg Lukács and Northrop Frye.

A number of theorists, notably J.M. Coetzee, Johan Muller and the two editors seem to have had daunting tasks of varying nature and degree in terms of this assignment.

Coetzee must cope with a ragbag of modern linguistic theories that have yielded some theoretical and practical results for the study of literature, such as Chomskyan transformational-generative grammar, the structural linguistics of Roman Jakobson, text grammars and the Speech Act theory of Austin and Searle, to which van Zyl devotes an informed essay. (My severely limited space

permits no further comment on this contribution by van Zyl or on Debbie Posel's exemplary introduction to Marxist theories.) A last thought on Coetzee: he does assess the results of applying linguistics to literature in a candid fashion, but one wonders what Coetzee *the novelist* really thinks of Jacobson's influential notion of the poetic function. (Another gifted novelist, W.F. Hermans, has suggested that only *bad* readers of prose become aware of the linguistic medium, since they resemble a cat, that never looks at the object to which one points, but rather at the pointing finger.)

Writing about psychological approaches from the viewpoint of a literary person, Muller is obliged to acknowledge certain serious reservations concerning such approaches, and ultimately their lack of interest in literature *qua* literature.

The editors both have to face up to the problem of intractable material in their separate essays on semio-structuralism (van Zyl) and Derridean deconstruction (Ryan), although both contributions are written *con amore*.

Van Zyl outlines some of the problems facing the theorist who attempts to define semiotics. These are indeed considerable for, quite apart from the enormous and growing domain of semiotic studies, the young discipline of literary semiotics is characterised by variety rather than unity of method. Van Zyl renders this 'alarmingly abstract' approach less so by focusing on methodology and basing her comment on representative works by major figures from the international community of literary semioticians. Her account of the classical semiotics of Eco, the socio-cultural Soviet semiotics of Lotman, Barthes' new semiotics of the subject and contributions from the field of psychoanalysis by Lacan and Kristeva, gives some idea of the variety of and liberties taken with this approach.

I have no intention of attempting a deconstruction of Ryan's deconstruction of Derrida here. Suffice to say that Ryan is a cogent, erudite and acute guide to Derrida's philosophy and theory of signification and the 'grammatical convolutions' of deconstruction. His essay will do much to correct popular misconceptions concerning the intention, implications and contributions of the Derridean project. One hopes that his timely warning against the dangerous misinterpretation of deconstruction by institutionalisation in a tamed form is taken to heart by those critics and academicians who, in their eagerness to break new ground, 'apply' Derrida's assumptions and terminology without sufficient insight.

A number of surprising inclusions concern literary hermeneutics, the phenomenological perspective, the Geneva School and feminist literary criticism. Whether one thinks of these approaches as clearly defined literary theories or not, or believes that some of them (hermeneutics, feminist criticism) are capable of developing into autonomous theories, their inclusion is nonetheless welcome, since they are neglected in other recent introductions. Regrettably, only the briefest of comment is allowable here.

Although literary hermeneutics is as yet incapable of producing an interpretative methodology, Reingard Nethersole's scholarly essay provides readers with fascinating insights into their own understanding and interpretations of texts. (It appears that the concepts 'texts' and 'works' as used in the discussion on page 151 should be reversed.)

Tony Bijker, who introduces the phenomenological approach via Roman Ingarden, clarifies this view with greater success than that which he refers to as 'the short and oblique chapter' in Wellek and Warren's widely known *Theory of Literature* (i.e. 'The mode of existence of a literary work of art').

In his treatment of Genevan critical theory Ryan shows determination to give this theory a fair hearing. Although he raises many extremely serious and valid objections to Genevan thinking, he does at times come uncomfortably close to the very thing he wishes to avoid, a defence of this criticism. For this I feel inclined to thank him. Surely some theorists must be tempted to reject outright a theory that is based on the questionable assumptions 'that the retrieval of authorial consciousness is desirable and paramount and that this critical act involves self-immolation'. This, one believes, must be - to use Wellek's rather crabbed blanket condemnation of post-structuralist trends - 'apocalyptic irrationalism'. And yet Ryan's 'objective' treatment of the Geneva School effort yields one major corrective insight: individual works of criticism may be evaluated (and I believe valued) quite apart from their theoretical coherence.

This insight should be borne in mind when considering feminist literary criticism, the topic of Dorothy Driver's well-informed essay. Although one might be amused by feminist reasons for resisting a systematic theory, even detractors of such reactive sexual politics will probably concede that serious literary issues are addressed and considerable work has been done in important areas.

In a prescribed introduction of this nature the absence of an index to concepts and theorists is a serious omission. This may be indicative of another problem raised by this collection, namely, the lack of some kind of central focus or framework, with which to pinpoint significant literary theoretical issues and enable meaningful comparisons between theories.

In all, *An Introduction to Contemporary Literary Theory* provides valuable insights into a wide range of current theories and stimulates thought by not providing excessive evaluation while, at the same time, not leaving the reader floundering. It is stated in the introduction that 'collections... say some things just by being the way they are and not otherwise'. To me this collection suggests a truth about literary theory's very nature: it is not a corpus of teachable propositions to be mastered by a passive student, but rather an exciting and worthwhile form of philosophical inquiry.

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Letterkunde en leser: 'n inleiding tot lesergerigte literêre ondersoeke

Malan, Charles (red.). 1983

Durban/Pretoria: Butterworth (SENSAL-publikasies nr. 4)

Slegs twee jaar na die totstandkoming van SENSAL (Sentrum vir Suid-Afrikaanse Letterkundenavorsing, RGN) in 1981, en nadat met 'n navorsings-program oor die resepsie van literêre werke in die RSA begin is, verskyn *Letterkunde en leser*. Die redakteur en medewerkers verdien ongetwyfeld 'n pluimpie vir die samestelling en spoedige verskyning van hierdie boek. Dit is 'n publikasie wat om verskeie redes hier te lande verwelkom moet word. Naas Ryan en Van Zyl (1982) se Engelse inleiding tot kontemporêre literêre teorieë (kyk resensie hierbo) is dit die eerste belanghebbende Suid-Afrikaanse publikasie oor resente rigting(s) binne die literatuurwetenskap. As bekendstelling van veral die resepsie-estetika - waar juis hierdie teorie slegs sydelings aandag kry in Ryan en Van Zyl se hoofstuk oor fenomenologiese benaderings - asook van taalhandelings-teorieë in Afrikaans, verrig dit alreeds 'n belangrike funksie. Die groot waarde van hierdie boek binne 'n Suid-Afrikaanse situasie lê myns insiens egter in die feit dat dit méêr is as slegs 'n deeglike en interessante bekendstelling van resente buitelandse literêre teorieë. Dit is ook 'n illustrasie van en besinning oor die relevansie van dergelike teorieë vir sake soos die produksie en resepsie van literêre werke, literatuuronderrig oor etniese grense heen en probleme rondom sensuur binne 'n Suid-Afrikaanse bestel. Die balans tussen teorie en praktyk word trouens deurgaans gehandhaaf: enersyds in die afwisseling tussen suiwer teoretiese (1), teoretiese en praktiese (2, 3, 4 & 8) en analitiese (5, 6 & 7) hoofstukke; andersyds ook in die deureenvlegting van teorie en illustrasie in al die hoofstukke behalwe die eerste. In die eerste inleidende hoofstuk gee Jan Senekal 'n deeglike uiteensetting van aspekte van die resepsie-estetika. Direk in aansluiting hierby behandel Marianne de Jong in hoofstuk 2 die 'standverskille tussen teks en leser', soos ondervind in die literatuuronderrig deur Blankes aan Swartes. Charles Malan betrek in hoofstuk 3 nie slegs resepsie-estetiese nie, maar ook byvoorbeeld literatuursosiologiese, semiotiese, strukturele en post-strukturele aspekte en benaderings in sy bespreking van 'lesergerigte ondersoeke na Suid-Afrikaanse romans'. Na 'n algemene inleiding oor taalhandelinge, en 'n boeiende kyk op 'n bekende Van Wyk Louw-gedig as 'n 'resep vir 'n rusie' deur H.P. van Coller en M.C.J. van Rensburg in hoofstuk 4, bespreek H.P. van Coller in hoofstuk 5 ook taalhandelingsaspekte met betrekking tot 'n Nederlandse prosawerk. Ook hoofstuk 6 en 7 word gewy aan prosawerke: P.H. Roodt bespreek die 'driehoeksverhouding' van 'verteller-teks-leser' in Henriette Grové se *Jaarringe*; Henriette Roos beskou 'tradisie en vernuwing in epiek en kritiek' in Elsa Joubert se *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena*. Ten slotte bekyk P.P. van der

Merwe in hoofstuk 8 'leser, letterkunde en sensuur' met verwysing na Breytenbach en Leroux.

Wat die teoretiese beredenering van lesergerigte ondersoeke betref, is dit goeie beplanning dat Jan Senekal se terreinverkenning van resepsie-estetika die eerste hoofstuk in die boek is. Vir die student wat vir die eerste keer met resepsieteorie kennis maak, maar ook vir die leser met 'n redelike literêr-teoretiese toerusting, sal Senekal se stuk beslis waardevol wees. Die skrywer gee 'n deeglike en verteenwoordigende verslag van aspekte, ontwikkelinge en heersende standpuntinames binne die resepsieteorie. Hy verkies om nie 'n inleidende werk te skryf nie, ook nie om 'n verdieping of uitbreiding van enkele aspekte te gee nie, maar om eerder 'direk aan te knoop by bekende en belangrike literatuur' (p.1). Hierdie werkwyse het tot gevolg dat Senekal hom noodwendig moet verlaat op 'n hele arsenaal van aanhalings en selfs vertaalde aanhalings. Die voordeel hiervan is ongetwyfeld dat die leser gekonfronteer word met die uitsprake van 'n groot aantal teoretici. Die nadeel is dat die samehang en leesbaarheid van Senekal se bydrae ongelukkig nie daardeur verhoog word nie. In hierdie verband is die manier waarop Marianne de Jong in die eerste gedeelte van haar bydrae met die teorie omgaan, myns insiens 'n effektiewer manier van doen: die essensie van bepaalde aspekte word kernagtig gestel en problematiese standpuntinames word krities bekyk. Vir dié leser wat grondiger op bepaalde sake wil ingaan, is daar bowendien bykomende verwysings in informatiewe voetnote.

Ten spyte van kritiek teen die (on)leesbaarheid van Senekal se bydrae is die bekendstellings- en ekonomiseringsfunksies van só 'n informatiewe teoretiese inleiding nietemin voor die hand liggend. In die ander bydraes kan dan immers aangeknop word by die teoretiese hoofstuk sonder onnodige herhaling. Ten opsigte van die teoretiese versorging van die boek as geheel vind ek dit dan in hierdie verband 'n gróóte leemte dat slegs hier en daar (in die bydraes van De Jong en Malan byvoorbeeld) 'n poging aangewend is om d.m.v. kruisverwysings tussen voorafgaande en/of volgende hoofstukke, die leser se taak te vergemaklik om verskillende gesigspunte op deurlopende teoretiese vraagstukke soos byvoorbeeld meerduidigheid en teksbepaaldheid met mekaar te vergelyk. Alhoewel nuttig, kan die omskrywing van enkele terme wat deurlopende temas bellig in die redakteur se inleidende gedeelte ongelukkig nie vergoed vir die gebrek aan kruisverwysings binne die boek of vir die afwesigheid van 'n algemene register aan die einde van die boek nie. Hopelik word hierdie saak reggestel in 'n volgende uitgawe, aangesien die redakteur se inleiding - ten spyte van 'n oortuigende motivering vir die samestelling van die boek en 'n verhelderende uiteensetting van die onderskeie bydraes - begrypikerwys nie alle deurlopende teoretiese vraagstukke kan behandel nie.

'n Saak wat ook dringend reggestel sal moet word in 'n volgende uitgawe, is die algemene versorging van bibliografiese gegewens. In sy inleiding verduidelik die

redakteur die twee soorte verwysings wat in die boek aangetref word: enersyds die uitgesoekte bibliografie aan die einde van die boek, wat saamgestel is 'met die oog op bekendstelling van die terrein'; andersyds die opgaaf van bronne wat slegs op 'n bepaalde hoofstuk betrekking het direk na die betrokke hoofstuk. Ek het geen beswaar teen hierdie werkwyse nie. Trouens, die bibliografie aan die einde van die boek is van onskatbare waarde vir die voornemende navorser oor lesergerigte teorieë soos die resepsie-estetika. Waarteen ek wel beswaar het, is die onvolledigheid van albei tipes bronverwysings ten opsigte van interne verwysings binne die onderskeie bydraes. Dit is seker darem 'n vanselfsprekende eis dat *alle* interne verwysings òf aan die einde van 'n hoofstuk, òf aan die einde van die boek in die bibliografie sal verskyn. Dit gebeur egter só dikwels dat tevergeefs gesoek word na 'n verwysing wat binne 'n bepaalde bydrae aangegee is, dat die vermoede ontstaan dat die opstellers van die bibliografie nie nagegaan het of die twee tipes bibliografieë en die interne verwysings mekaar wel dek nie.

Die keuse, rangskikking en gehalte van die onderskeie bydraes word gelukkig nie nadelig getref deur die bogenoemde besware nie. Die informatiewe teoretiese bydraes oor resepsie-estetika (Senekal en De Jong), taalhandelinge (Van Coller en Van Rensburg) en 'n integrasie van verskeie benaderings (Malan) word aangevul met ingeligte besprekings van verhalende tekste (Van Coller, Roodt en Roos). Hierdie laaste drie bydraes is binne die geheel van die boek gesien besonder effektief, aangesien die funksionaliteit van die teoretiese uitgangspunte wat in die vorige bydraes uitvoerig beredeneer is, oortuigend gedemonstreer word deur die enkelanalises. Veral ook omdat al drie hierdie bydraes die leemtes in vorige analises van die betrokke werke uitwys, word die noodsaaklikheid van 'lesergerigte ondersoeke', en dus die keuse vir 'n bepaalde teoretiese apparatuur, benadruk. In hierdie verband plaas die laaste bydrae oor sensuur (Van der Merwe) as 't ware die seël op die kernargument wat dwarsdeur die verskillende bydraes eksplisiet verantwoord word: die bestudering en inagnome van lesersrolle behoort 'n integrale deel te vorm van die domein(e) van literatuurondersoek. Gebeur dit nie, soos by die dikwels onoordeelkundige toepassing van sensuur hier te lande, kan die gevolge absurd en verlamrend wees vir die letterkunde en sy lesers.

Samevattend kan gestel word dat die punte van kritiek wat teen die boek ingebring kan word, gelukkig nie die positiewe bydrae van hierdie belangwekkende publikasie oorskadu nie. Vir die *literatuurwetenskap* is nie alleen die genoemde teoretiese uiteensettings van resepsieteorie en taalhandelinge van belang nie, maar veral ook die prikkelende teoretiese vraagstukke wat eksplisiet of implisiet aangesny word, verdien 'n plek in toekomstige literatuurteoretiese diskussies. Is die 'nodigheid dat die teks sentraal in die literêre ondersoek moet bly' (Malan, p. xvii) byvoorbeeld selfs in die RSA, met al die blootstelling aan dekonstruksiekritiek in vaktydskrifte en die resensiekolomme van dagblaaië,

vandag nog 'n onbetwisbare gegewe? Die feit dat ek persoonlik graag met so 'n standpunt sou wou saamstem, maak dit nie minder belangrik of prikkelend om tot die huidige debat toe te tree nie. Wel moet ek die redakteur gelyk gee dat die gehalte van die ontledings van bepaalde werke in die 'toepassings-hoofstukke' vertolk sou kon word as 'n voortreflike motivering vir die belangrikheid van tekstuele ondersoek. In hierdie opsig is Malan se *Letterkunde en leser* dan terselfdertyd 'n skitterende bydrae tot die Afrikaanse *kritiek* - die onderskeie analyses kan met véél vrug en véél plesier gelees word.

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