

## Book Reviews / Boekresensies

### *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology: An Introduction to Some Current Issues in Literary Theory*

Christopher Butler. 1984  
Oxford: Clarendon Press

In *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*, Christopher Butler sets out to explore his own approach to literary analysis or evaluation through a review of several contemporary theories and their informing methodologies. His study investigates the fundamental conditions for textual coherence, and the function of metaphor in both ordinary language and literary works, while also discussing the insights which may be derived from linguistic, structuralist, deconstructive, or Marxist strategies. At the same time, Butler is explicit about his own aims and the projected scope of his commentary: 'I wish to ask . . . how far new theoretical models for criticism reflect the type of intellectual upheaval which occurs when the paradigms for common practices change, and how far the shifts of methodological allegiance amongst teachers and students may be directed to further pragmatic ends' (ix). Pragmatism, in fact, is the keynote of Butler's survey; philosophy is seen as a second order or meta-discipline, which clarifies the operation of other disciplines which, in turn, remain preoccupied with the problems of their own practical performance. And literary theory is effectively presented as a type of applied philosophy. Within this frame-work, Butler's treatment of his subject matter is astute, empirical, pluralistic. In his concluding remarks, he conscientiously identifies his mode of argument as 'radical-liberal' (136), although this pattern of thought is obviously sustained throughout the development of the enquiry. The preliminary synopsis assures the reader that it is not Butler's intention to define and claim a monopoly of textual 'truth'; instead, his pragmatic technique seeks constantly to elucidate the question, 'What language for interpretation am I using, and for what purposes?' (x).

In its steady impetus towards precision of formulation and balanced assessment, Butler's examination serves as a helpful introduction to modern theoretical approaches, like structuralism or Marxism. However, the account seems to hover uneasily between two formal possibilities. This is not a straightforward student set-work, attempting in a relatively neutral tone to sum up the strengths and shortcomings of various compatible or competing methodologies. Butler is also anxious to shape and test his own hypotheses regarding the purposes and achievements of critical discourse. This dual focus leads to a deliberate pre-selection or illustrative examples, while the original argument frequently lacks consistent expansion or conceptual refinement. Too many challenging questions are merged with connected uncertainties, or simply allowed to drop. A similar sense of disproportion is generated by Butler's treatment of individual literary texts. He is adept at condensing the innovative and illuminating readings of other critics, which encapsulate the

key characteristics of a particular theoretical orientation. His choice, for instance, of Barbara Johnson's deconstructive reading of Melville's 'Billy Budd' is most successful (73-75). Yet his own commentary on a poem by E. E. Cummings proves pedestrian, though solid; and his approach to Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' does little positively to recommend the combination of structural or linguistic analysis with broader contextual values. Admittedly, Butler is concerned with establishing certain minimal conditions for comprehensibility and viable interpretation; however, such skeletal readings are poor substitutes for a skilled and lively application of method.

*Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology* is carefully divided into short, independent chapters, each of which builds upon and elaborates the concepts handled in the preceding section. This design can, on occasion, encourage diffuseness of argument, but it is generally informative and effective. Butler begins by considering the notion of textual implication: that is, the manner in which interpretation 'goes beyond' what the text 'simply seems to say' (1). A basic, yet helpful, discussion of the application of logical processes and a general knowledge of 'the world' in mobilizing a text's meaning leads on to Butler's rather dry account of the translation of metaphor into everyday speech. But the study really begins to gather momentum, once he probes the old philosophical problem of the metaphors which seem to lie at the origin of all language. Derrida's despair of the literal, as well as his acute awareness of historical genesis in linguistic forms, is set against Ricoeur's contention that 'words which had an original basis in metaphor become "lexicalized"' (21), or regain their literal force in common usage. Butler might profitably have pursued this debate, since it exposes fundamentally different presuppositions about the nature and prospects of hermeneutic activity. Nonetheless, he avoids a sequence of close comparisons and contrasts; Ricoeur's thought is barely mentioned again, and the dilemma about metaphor is held in abeyance until he is ready to provide a detailed analysis of deconstruction.

From his anatomy of metaphor, Butler proceeds to an examination of the relevance of linguistics for literary research. He argues persuasively that linguistic models cannot be simply and directly translated into a system for 'poetics', as the decidedly technical conclusions of M.A.K. Halliday's analysis of 'Leda and the Swan' show. Butler acknowledges that Halliday has chosen to restrict the functioning of linguistics in certain types of stylistic examination; yet he is also dubious of the more ambitious projects and constructs of Roman Jakobson. While he incisively questions Jakobson's claims for a scientifically accurate method, he might have given him greater credit for theoretical flexibility and ingenuity. He ignores, for instance, Jakobson's notion of a 'poetry of grammar' (as apposed to the 'grammar of poetry'), although this seems to me a sharp and potentially productive critical tool.

While Butler's study of linguistics and structuralism is uneven, and sometimes disappointing, his handling of the vexed question of the 'referentiality' of language is lucid and impressive. Without resorting to a naïve defence of mimesis, he examines the ways in which the reader's ordinary experience of 'the world' may become implicated with his efforts towards textual explica-

tion. He convincingly takes issue with Riffaterre's interpretation of Wordsworth's 'Yew Trees' (48–52), praising the account for its subtlety and consistency, yet exposing the conceptual difficulties inherent in the repeated and self-enclosed convolutions of language upon meta-language. Butler's comments on Roland Barthes's deployment of a 'referential code' in *S/Z* are equally cogent (54–56). Once again, he shows both author and reader hovering on a knife-edge between text and world, while the 'referential code' comes to function as an extremely sophisticated structural or narrative device.

This high standard of theoretical exposition is retained in Butler's assessment of deconstruction, although (as he half admits) Derrida is slightly reconstructed, so as to conform to his pragmatically liberal approach. Nonetheless, Butler offers an excellent introduction to the terminology of deconstruction, pointing up its power for challenging and disrupting established philosophical models or norms of interpretation: 'deconstruction is an opportunistic method, one of strategic dislocation, a criticism from within' (64). It is hardly surprising that Butler should be suspicious of the idea of 'free play', with its unrestrained capacity for crossing textual boundaries – although many of his reservations prove well-founded. Yet he demonstrates the strength of his comparative stance in explicitly linking deconstruction with scepticism, an attitude which is already thoroughly familiar to Anglo-American philosophy. And he reminds his readership that deconstructive analysis is clearly appropriate to the wide range of post-modernist texts which comprise John Barth's 'funhouse' of fiction (75), not to mention 'problematic texts' from other periods (68). It is a pity that he could not spread the net wider still, so that he might conveniently encompass poets like the Romantics, who have formed a focus of deconstructive attention for such influential critics as Bloom, Hartman, Hillis Miller and de Man.

This appraisal should not suggest that Butler offers unqualified support to the practice of deconstruction. On the contrary, he regards it as one type of critical discourse among others, and perceptively reiterates the advantages arising from a relatively stable and growing body of philosophical knowledge. At the same time, he recognizes the significance of historical and ideological forces for literary enquiry. Nonetheless, this confirmation of epistemological values is offset by Butler's corresponding consciousness of the multiform peculiarities of individual texts. So he concludes by paying tribute to deconstruction's efficacy in undermining any 'overconfident, unifying view of language as a system of representation' which may impose 'a particular ideology or an idealizing unity on the text'. And he pertinently notes that 'the text itself may be disunified or fissured by precisely those aporias or contradictions that the deconstructive method is peculiarly able to reveal' (91). This cue should alert the contemporary critic to the fruitfulness of considering the conceptually disintegrative tendencies within literary works, as well as those factors which promote cohesion.

The final phase of Butler's commentary shifts the focus to historical concerns and the integrative capacity of ideology. In two sensible and well-documented, but occasionally rather laboured, sections, Butler defines his frame of reference and discusses the 'hidden' operation of ideological influen-

ces within various cultural settings. After summarizing the leading characteristics of several selected Marxist interpretations of literature, he embarks upon one of his most promising lines of enquiry: an examination of the relationship between moral and political modes of evaluation. Conrad's *Lord Jim* provides a concrete locus for the debate, and Butler throws into relief the opposition between those readings which concentrate upon a character with moral motivations, and those which present Jim as a product of his socio-political moment. Moreover, Butler dispassionately records the blurring of distinctions between apparently irreconcilable ideologies. Can the writers who focus upon individual moral responsibility afford to ignore the appropriate social contexts? And can socialist thinking (or even the 'science of Marxism') plausibly deny all moral commitments? Butler begins to probe a number of similar inconsistencies, but his overall result is disconcertingly vague and inconclusive. It would be unreasonable to expect him to provide a series of incontrovertible answers – such a programme could only run counter to the tenor of his entire argument – but his questions are inadequately formulated and insufficiently elaborated. The reader is left to ponder teasing possibilities for a closer interaction between literature and moral philosophy, and to hope that this complex field will in due course be more creatively investigated from the perspective of literary theorists, like Butler.

In spite of these deficiencies, *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology* offers numerous instances of illuminating philosophical perception, balanced critical judgement, and sane good sense. The work may vacillate uncomfortably between its project as an introductory account and its aspirations as an original conceptual venture, but Butler has attempted to mediate among a formidable group of disparate and taxing literary theories. Nonetheless, there is a strange and significant omission from his catalogue of key subjects. With 'interpretation' as a central facet of this study, surely some scope should have been given to reader response theory, especially as this cluster of diversifying approaches has gained considerable currency in the United States, as well as on the Continent? From this point of view, Butler might have been able to investigate more thoroughly questions of textual disintegration or coherence, or to elaborate the range of possible reactions to textual ideologies.

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### *Lexicon van Literaire Termen*

Van Gorp, H. e.a. (reds.). (1979), hersiene druk 1984  
Leuven: Wolters

Van Gorp-hulle se *Lexicon* is veral onder Afrikaanse letterkundiges bekend en die hersiene uitgawe sal allerweë deur plaaslike literatuurwetenskaplikes en studente verwelkom word. Dié gesaghebbende werk met sy 348 bladsye terme wat meestal uitvoerig verklaar word, is om verskeie redes vir die Afrikaanse literatuurstudie belangrik. In die eerste plek is daar nog geen

vergelykbare leksikon in Afrikaans beskikbaar nie – die omvangryke glossarium onder redaksie van T.T. Cloete nader tans voltooiing – en op grond van die nou verwantskap tussen Afrikaans en Nederlands kan die Belgiese boek die leemte goed vul. Tweedens het die Afrikaanse literatuurwetenskap veel hegter bande met die sentraal-Europese literatuurstudie as met bv. die Amerikaanse en Britse. Die klemplasing in die *Lexicon* kan trouens tot interessante besinnings oor die beoefening van die literatuurwetenskap hier te lande lei, omdat die boek ontstaan het in 'n gebied waar talle Afrikaanse letterkundiges en nagraadse studente 'n belangrike deel van hulle skoling ontvang het. Wat meer is, die afgelope jare het hulle besonder vrugbare skakeling gehad met die Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, waar die kern van die *Lexicon*-redaksie gesetel is.

Die boek bied kernagtige en verbasend geskakeerde verduidelikings van genres, subgenres, struktuurelemente, teoretiese benaderings, stylvorme en -figure, en enkele belangrike teoretiese en skrywerskole. 'n Hele reeks retoriese en stylfigure, ook uit die antieke literatuur, sal vir die meeste Afrikaanse lesers totaal onbekend wees. Dit verhoog egter ook die bruikbaarheid van die boek vir klassici.

Ek het die volgende belangrike lemmas as besonder insiggewend aange-merk (dit sal die leser ook 'n idee gee van kernbegrippe wat behandel word): barok, Renaissance en soortgelyke eras (die Middeleeue ontbreek vreemd genoeg), dekonstruksie, drama, Dadaïsme en soortgelyke bewegings, evaluasie, ideologie, interpretasie, ironie (meer soorte, soos kosmiese ironie, behoort behandel te word), kritiek, leser, literatuur, metafoor, mite, persona-sie, resepsie-onderzoek, rym, roman, semiotiek, struktuur, teks, tyd, vers en vertaling.

Die verskillende teoretiese benaderings en skole word vrywel onkrities behandel, en dit is ook reg so, maar 'n mens verwag ietwat meer inligting oor reaksies wat deur hulle uitgelok is. Dit is jammer dat daar nie 'n poging aangewend is om metaterme meer te standaardiseer nie, al is dit slegs by wyse van 'n voorkeurgebruik van bepaalde terme. Alternatiewe soos *auctoriale/auctorïele* en *personale/personele* vertelsituasies skep ook in Afrikaans steeds 'n probleem.

Die meeste lemmas is beknopt en tot die werklik essensiële beperk, met kruisverwysings waar nodig. Daar kom nogtans ietwat verrassende lang inskrywings vir kleiner onderdele voor, bv. vir *objective correlative*.

'n Klompie inskrywings sal Suid-Afrikaanse lesers besonder interesseer, bv. oor sensuur (beskryf as die publikasieverbod van kunswerke waarvan die ideologiese or morele strekking as subversief deur die politieke, religieuse of juridiese owerheid beskou word) en die verhouding tussen pornografiese en erotiese literatuur (daar word tereg gesê dat die grense moeilik te trek is). Die lomp en in Afrikaans so geliefde verbinding 'lewens- en wêreldbeskouing' word minstens een keer gebruik (by ideologie). Breyten Breytenbach word as 'n voorbeeld van 'n geëngageerde skrywer genoem, maar ek kon geen verdere verwysing na die Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde opspoor nie. Ook interessant vanuit ons perspektief, is die duidelike onderskeid wat tussen joernalistieke en (akademies-) wetenskaplike kritiek gemaak word. Volgens die same-

stellers behoort die hoofmomente van analise, interpretasie en evaluasie ideaal gesproke by kritiek aan die bod te kom.

Dit is natuurlik geen kuns om leemtes in so 'n omvangryke leksikon aan te toon nie, en 'n mens moet begrip hê vir die medewerkers se probleem om uit 'n groot verskeidenheid te kies. Daarbenewens veroorsaak gevestigde terminologie in die Afrikaanse literatuurwetenskap vir die lesër hier plaaslik probleme: hy sal bv. tevergeefs probeer om 'n lemma oor handeling of gebeure op te spoor en hy kan uiteindelik slegs by onderdele soos *fabellsubjek* en *plot/story* geholpe raak.

'n Klompie belangrike leemtes moet hier aangestip word. 'n Mens verwag 'n vollediger stuk oor *narratologie*, al word daarin slegs 'n reeks kruisverwysings gegee. Ook die *aktansiële model* word te skraps behandel.

*Genres* word as vastighede behandel en daar word min gesê oor die rol van konvensies wat genre-indeling onderlê. Dieselfde gebrek aan 'n gevoeligheid oor die rol van konvensies is ook by die behandeling van die begrip *literatuur* ter sprake. Die samestellers is nietemin versigtig genoeg om 'n vooropgesette, statiese definisie van die begrip literatuur as 'onsinnig' te verwerp. Dit is opvallend hoe sentraal die begrip *sisteem* in die omskrywing van literatuur funksioneer: iets waarmee party teoretici nie sal saamstem nie. Die sisteembenadering kry trouens ook elders heelwat aandag en dit is in 'n sekere sin jammer dat daar uiteindelik op die enger (literêre) polisisteembenadering gekonsentreer word (241). 'n Mens mis 'n duidelike aansluiting by die algemene sisteemteorie, soos veral deur Von Bertalanffy geformuleer. Dit is egter myns insiens 'n wins van die leksikon dat 'n funksionele sisteembenadering so 'n sentrale rol speel by die omskrywing van literêre fenomene.

In die lig van die deeglik verantwoorde benadering wat deurgaans by die verklaring van begrippe gevolg word, is dit vreemd dat die skrywers by 'n paar kernsake in teoretiese slaggate trap. Die blote koppeling 'wetenskaplike kritiek', wat bo aangehaal is, is reeds onder verdenking, omdat kritiek volgens 'n invloedryke denkskool nie wetenskaplik kán wees nie. ('n Mens vermoed dat hier by die wyer Engelse begrip 'criticism' aangeleun word.) Daar word verder kort en klaar gesê dat die objek van die literatuurwetenskap 'literariteit' is, sonder vermelding van literatuur (in die wydste sin van die woord), literêre kommunikasie en so meer, wat immers ook direk aan die ondersoekobjek gekoppel kan word.

Meer bevredigend is die geskakeerde omskrywing van die term *teks*. Tradisionele teksopvattinge word naas eietydse benaderings gestel en daar word veral klem gelê op die siening dat die teks geen gefikseerde betekenisgeheel is nie, maar 'n diskursiewe moment in die betekenisproduksie. Mens sou nietemin graag meer oor die radikale alternatiewe van die Dekonstruksiekritici wil sien, hoewel die wese van hulle teksbenaderings aangeraak word. Mens kan ook bedenkinge daarvoor hê dat Dekonstruksie kortweg saamgevat word as 'n 'manier om (literêre, filosofiese) tekste te lees'. Die kern van die post-strukturalisme kan eerder by die ganse benadering van Westerse vorme van diskoers gesoek word. Die *Lexicon* kom nietemin by verskeie lemmas by die filosofiese hart van hierdie benadering uit. Dit is weer eens iets wat Afrikaanse literatuurwetenskaplikes ter stigting kan lees, want hoewel Dekon-

struksiebenaderings die afgelope jare 'n welkome bevrydiging vir ons plaaslike literatuuropvatting gebring het, word die raakpunte met ander teoretiese benaderings maar te dikwels verontagsaam. Talle inskrywings in hierdie boek onderstreep die feit dat daar nie netjiese skeidslyne tussen Dekonstruksie-, resepsie-, semiotiese, sistemiese en ander benaderings te trek is nie (wat natuurlik nie wil sê dat begrippe op 'n slordige en dubbelsinnige wyse gehanteer moet word nie).

Juis ter wille van groter begripsverheldering sal 'n mens graag die volgende wil sien: by *engagement* behoort die bedoeling met hierdie soort literatuur duidelik ter sprake te kom (sommers met 'n waarskuwing teen die 'intentional fallacy'); die belangrike implikasies en voorbeelde van die *aktansiële model* behoort verder uitgespel te word; die onderskeid tussen *semiotiek* en *semio-logie* (op sy beste maar 'n wollerige verdeling) behoort duideliker uitgewys te word, en die *literatuursosiologie* is bepaald veelkantiger as wat die inskrywing laat vermoed. 'n Belangrike tekortkoming is die omskrywing van *resepsie-ondersoek*, waarin die lyn glad nie na ontwikkelings in die Verenigde State (Holland, Fish, Riffaterre) deurgetrek word nie. Dit is opvallend dat Afrikaanse navorsers hulle ook in verreweg die meeste gevalle slegs tot die Duits-Nederlandse groep beperk in plaaslike resepsie-ondersoeke.

Die enigste ernstige punt van kritiek wat ek teen die werk het, is die aanduiding van literatuur vir verdere leeswerk. Dit kan nie 'n beswaar wees dat slegs enkele bronne genoem word en dat daar op Nederlandse bronne gekonsentreer word nie, maar die bronneverwysings is soms onverklaarbaar selektief en karig. Segers se bekende inleidings ontbreek bv. by sekere lemmas waar 'n mens hulle sou verwag, daar word geen bronne by mite/mitologie of vertelinstansie gegee nie, terwyl daar by die vertelsituasie slegs na Stanzel se 1955-werk verwys word. Werke soos Charles Grivel se moeilike dog omvangryke *Methoden in de Literatuurwetenschap* (1978), Jacques Kruihof se *Tussenspraak* (1982) en J.J. Oversteegen se *Beperkingen* (1982) ontbreek bv. geheel en al, ook by Algemene Studies.

Hierdie soort besware mag egter nie afbreuk doen aan 'n mens se eindoordeel nie: die *Lexicon* is volledig genoeg en bevat soveel pitkos dat dit een van die indrukwekkendste teoretiese inleidings in die Nederlandse taalgebied bly. Dit is punt vir punt vergelykbaar met ander naslaanwerke wat die afgelope tyd verskyn het of hersien is, bv. W.H. Abrams se *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1981<sup>4</sup>), O.F. Best se *Handbuch literarischer Fachbegriffe* (1980<sup>2</sup>) en M. Gray se *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1984). As die *Lexicon* naas die bekende Nederlandse inleidings tot die literatuurwetenskap (Bal, Blok, Bronzwaer, Fokkema, Van Luxemburg en Maatje) geplaas word, is dit duidelik dat die Nederlandse literatuurwetenskap op teoretiese vlak reeds merkwaardige hoogtes bereik het. Van Gorp-hulle se leksikon is 'n fyn afgeronde werk deur vakmanne wat die ganse literêre toneel tot in die vesels ken. Dit is 'n onontbeerlike naslaanwerk vir almal wat in literêre terme en teorie belangstel.

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