

Bespreking / Discussion

Die redaksie het die volgende kommentaar ontvang op die resensie van *Donker weerlig*:

la van Zyl skryf:

In *Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* (1989: 382–387) verskyn 'n resensie deur C.N. van der Merwe van Jan Senekal (red.) se *Donker weerlig: Literêre opstelle oor die werk van André P. Brink* (1988). Hierin word onder meer my bydrae getitel “Die ‘fenomeen’ André P. Brink: Teoretikus/Skrywer/Kritikus” uitgesonder vir omvattende kritiek.

As 'n resensent kritiek lewer op wat wel in die teks geskryf staan, kan 'n mens nie kla nie. Wanneer hy egter verkeerdlik 'n bepaalde interpretasie aan verskillende teksgedeeltes heg en dan die skrywer kritiseer op grond van sý wanlesing, is dit 'n ander saak.

Om hierdie rede sal ek graag enkele sake in hierdie verband wil regstel.

Van der Merwe skryf: “Naas die geregverdigde kritiek van Van Zyl is daar ook myns insiens voorbeelde van onregverdigde kritiek. Sy beweer (1988: 22) dat Brink homself nie 'n Christen noem nie, dat hy egter die basiese Christelike waardes onderskryf en meen dat hierdie waardes nie in die samelewing tot hul reg kom nie. Hierdie idees is dan vir haar 'n aanduiding dat Brink ‘in die rigting van die radikale beweeg’”. Hierop lewer hy dan soos volg kommentaar: “Daar is waarskynlik nie baie mense wat Van Zyl se betekenis aan die woord ‘radikaal’ sal heg nie.”

Ek stem met Van der Merwe saam dat dit inderdaad 'n vreemde opvatting van “radikaal” sou wees as ek geskryf het wat hy voorgee ek geskryf het. Dit is egter hoegenaamd nie die geval nie.

Wat ek wel gesê het, is die volgende: “Uit sy teoretiese geskrifte wil dit verder voorkom of Brink se ideologiese ingesteldheid ten opsigte van die Christendom ook – soos sy literêre opvattinge – 'n verandering in die rigting van die radikale toon. Brink (23: 136) haal ‘Jesus se woorde’ goedkeurend aan. (Hierdie uitspraak kom uit 'n lesing wat in 1979 voor die Skrywersgilde gehou is.) Vyf jaar later stel Brink (17: 71) dit egter duidelik dat hy geen Christen is nie: ‘... I must insist that I am not a Christian and cannot, therefore approach this subject (die kulturele situasie in die Suid-Afrikaanse apartheidsgemeenskap – I.v.Z.) as a Christian.’”

Tot sover die gedeelte waarop my gebruik van die woorde “in die rigting van die radikale” (my huidige kursivering) gegrond is. Hierná volg 'n gedeelte wat ter relativering (dus ten gunste van Brink) bygevoeg is, soos blyk uit die gebruik van die woord “egter”. Hierdie gedeelte lui soos volg: “Hy dui egter aan in bogenoemde lesing dat hy wel die basiese Christelike waardes onderskryf (...). Die suggestie van die lesing is dat die Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap *nie* hierdie Christelike waardes ondersteun nie.” Laasgenoemde

sin is bloot 'n informatiewe stelling. Van der Merwe lees blykbaar 'n negatiewe oordeel hierin. 'n Wanlesing.

Van der Merwe gaan verder: "Ook haar siening (1989: 30), waar sy die apokaliptiese visie verbind met 'n denkgigting wat die bestaan van God verwerp, is onaanvaarbaar. Wat dan van die ou Testamentiese 'dies irae' en die apokalips van Openbaring – die idee van 'n apokalips is hier tog nie deur 'godeloses' uitgespreek nie?! Dus, nog 'n voorbeeld waar Van Zyl onnodiglik 'n etiket om Brink wil hang."

Vir my wil dit lyk of Van der Merwe deur selektiewe aanhaling hier onnodiglik 'n etiket om my nek wil hang. Sy argumentasie lyk in elk geval na die tipies sillogistiese argument. Ek glo nie dit kan ontken word nie dat Brink se apokaliptiese visie, soos uitgewys deur verskeie kritici (vergelyk Senekal 1988: 30) en dekonstruksie, insluitend die omverwerping van die bestaan van God, 'n gemeenskaplike seem + [vernietiging] bevat. Dit beteken egter nie dat ek alle gevalle van die apokaliptiese visie, dus die apokaliptiese visie *per se*, as verbonde met die dekonstruksie ens. beskou nie. Daar is manifestasies én manifestasies van dieselfde verskynsel, wat *bepaalde*, maar nie *alle* kenmerke nie gemeen het. Net so kan 'n manifestasie van 'n bepaalde verskynsel in 'n bepaalde era en konteks radikaal verskil van die manifestasie daarvan in 'n ander konteks en era. Miskien is 'n aanhaling uit J.J. Burden & W.S. Prinsloo (eds) se boek *Dialogue with God – The literature of the Old Testament Volume 3* hier verhelderend: "The whole book of Daniel is steeped in the apocalyptic-eschatological view of its times and is therefore not only incomprehensible to a modern secularised world but also unacceptable if it is directly applied to our situation" (1987: 221).

Sonder om verder op die saak in te gaan, kan ek miskien tog byvoeg: Daar is 'n apokaliptiese visie *met* God en een *sonder* God.

Voorts sê Van der Merwe: "Sy gee (1989: 30 e.v.) 'n oorsig van 'uiteenlopende menings' oor Brink as kritikus. Maar die menings is glad nie so 'uiteenlopend' nie – sy konsentreer op dié wat negatief teenoor Brink staan, en voeg dan nog haar eie negatiewe kommentaar by", ens.

Die menings wat ek gee, is wel uiteenlopend. Daar is naamlik sowel positiewe as negatiewe kommentare. Is dit my skuld as daar meer negatiewe as positiewe kommentaar beskikbaar is? Dit is seker nie verniet nie dat Koos Human Suid-Afrikaanse resensente in die bondel beskuldig het dat hulle "'n selfversekerde klomp bliksems" is omdat hulle na sy mening weier om die goeie in Brink raak te sien (vergelyk Senekal 1988: 14). Facts are facts!

Laastens beskuldig Van der Merwe my dat ek dieselfde woorde van Brink gebruik om in die een geval te sê dat hy in 'n bepaalde opstel 'n sterk pleidooi *vir* die aanwending van die *littérature engagée* lewer, terwyl ek in die ander geval sê dat Brink *teen* die aanwending daarvan praat. "Die aanhaling", sê Van der Merwe, "word dus net so gebruik soos wat dit in die argument pas."

Op die twee bladsye waarna hy verwys, gaan ek egter *in albei gevalle* uit van die standpunt dat Brink 'n pleidooi *vir* die gebruik van die *littérature engagée* as sodanig lewer. In die tweede geval (Senekal 1988: 22) kwalifiseer ek egter (in 'n meer gespesifiseerde verband) dat Brink in hierdie opstel "nog bedenkinge" daaromtrent gehad het. (Miskien sou my bedoeling wel duide-

liker gewees het as ek geskryf het dat hy *wel* nog *enkele* bedenkinge gehad het oor die *presiese* manier waarop dié soort literatuur aangewend moet word.) Ek presiseer wel die bedenkinge deur te sê: “Hy wys daarop dat die *littérature engagée* op sy beste dikwels juis nie direk herkenbaar ‘betrokke’ is nie, maar veral *effektief* is wanneer dit, in sy term, ‘oblique’ fungeer” (my huidige beklemktoning). (Die “dikwels juis nie” het hier betrekking op die woorde “direk herkenbaar” en nie op die gebruik van die *littérature engagée* as sodanig nie.)

Ek meen die sin wat ek hier aanhaal, maak dit duidelik dat Brink, *ten spyte van sy enkele bedenkinge*, hier meen dat dié soort literatuur effektief aangewend kan word (as wapen “ten einde ’n verandering te help teweegbring in die sosio-politieke *status quo*”), ’n feit wat ook duidelik uit die res van sy opstel spreek.

Ek wil dus graag toegee dat my formulering (1988: 22) miskien tog vir sommige lesers misleidend mag wees en hoop dat ek dit in ’n volgende uitgawe sal kan regstel. Aan die sonde van dubbelpatery waarvan Van der Merwe my beskuldig, is ek egter myns insiens onskuldig.

Raymond Williams and the Social Construction of the Subject (A Reply to John Higgins 1990.

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I find myself in the odd position of wanting to “defend” Raymond Williams from a colleague who has devoted several years to the study of Williams’s work. And yet John Higgins’s “A missed encounter: Raymond Williams and psychoanalysis” (1990), published recently in *Journal of Literary Studies*, should not be allowed to pass without comment. Higgins and I share the belief that Williams’s work can contribute significantly to the study of cultural practices in South Africa. Precisely that shared belief compels me to respond to his article, since in my view it threatens to introduce into South African literary and cultural studies what I believe to be serious misrepresentations of Williams’s work.

It is not immediately clear precisely what it is that Higgins objects to in Williams’s work. Initially it seems that Williams’s error was to depend on “second-hand” versions of Freud, “never encountering Freud’s work as such” [sic] (p. 74). It would seem, then, that Williams is guilty of the dubious academic practice of gaining (or pretending to gain) knowledge of an area of inquiry purely from secondary sources, and that what he crucially lacked was “any direct encounter with Freud’s own writing” (p. 67). Yet from Higgins’s own account it is clear that Williams *did* know Freud at first hand. That knowledge, however, far from absolving Williams, makes him all the more culpable, since, for instance, he “quotes a notorious passage from the twenty-third of Freud’s *Introductory lectures*” (p. 64). To compound his error,

Williams admits to having worked through Freud's later writings on history, civilisation, and art – a transgression Higgins finds unpardonable (p. 68). All this leaves us in a somewhat awkward position since to Higgins's accusatory question regarding "what particular version of Freud's work" (p. 66) Williams derives his views from, the answer must in good measure be: from Freud's version of Freud's work.

As we read further into Higgins's commentary, it becomes increasingly clear that Williams's error was not so much that he did not read "Freud's work as such", or even that he went to second-hand sources, but rather that he went to the wrong second-hand sources and failed to take up certain more acceptable (though equally second-hand) versions of Freud, namely, "the new version of Freudianism proposed by Althusser and following the lines of Lacan's momentous 'rereading' of Freud" (p. 68). Such work, we are assured, offers us "an improved form of Freudianism" (p. 72). Some second-hand versions are obviously to be preferred to others.

If we are to posit any sort of significant "encounter" (to use Higgins's word) between Williams and Freud (or more precisely, Freudianism) it can only be on the grounds that Freudianism could in some way or other contribute an otherwise missing element to Williams's central project, which Higgins succinctly describes as "the Marxist understanding of social reproduction" (p. 72). We have already seen that Freud's own late work in sociology and ethnology had nothing to offer Williams in this regard – a point on which Williams and Higgins would agree, though for different reasons. Where Williams should have turned, according to Higgins, was to the "version" of Freudianism developed by Althusser and Lacan – in short, to a poststructuralist Freudianism.

The core of Higgins's argument, then, is this: there is "an essential component" (p. 69) missing from Williams's cultural materialism. That component can be supplied only by poststructuralist Freudianism. Williams, for a variety of reasons (early training at Cambridge; antipathy to the work of certain British Freudians, especially Herbert Read; possibly – Higgins seems to suggest – ignorance of poststructuralist developments, and so on), remained in a state of "blindness" (p. 74) to this possibility. This blindness, in turn, is consequential even "perhaps to the extent of damaging the explanatory reach and power of his own cultural materialism" (p. 74).

Do Higgins and I agree on any of this? Yes, we agree that poststructuralist Freudianism is absent from cultural materialism as Williams developed it. Where we disagree is over the significance of that absence. In fact, the one part of Higgins's argument that does not make sense is the "perhaps" in the last quoted sentence: "*perhaps* to the extent of damaging". If he were to allow that the absence of poststructuralist Freudianism might *not* have damaged Williams's project (as I am convinced it did not), then there would be no serious grounds for disagreement between us. But then there would also be little purpose in his commentary. After all, many things were not included in cultural materialism – an explanation for black holes, for instance. Their absence is significant only if the theory is thereby impaired. I have tried to avoid putting words in Higgins's mouth; nevertheless, I think we have to

assume that he does indeed believe that the absence of a poststructuralist Freudian dimension in Williams's thought is a damaging limitation.

If my outline of Higgins's argument is granted, then the question to be posed next is, What is the missing element that poststructuralist Freudianism can supply? Higgins indicates at several points what he takes it to be. He speaks for instance of the "psychoanalytic conception of language as deeply constitutive of human subjectivity" (p. 65). Later he asserts: "That which belongs to the metapsychological theory and concerns the construction of the subject in language . . . is absent [from Williams]" (p. 69). The point is made most clearly and forcefully when he writes: "What is absent from Williams's account of Freud is then the understanding of Freudian theory as a theory of the constitution of the human subject in and through language" (p. 69).

The expression "We are constituted as subjects in and through language" has by now taken on the status of a mantra in poststructuralist thought. So formulaic and axiomatic has it become that it is difficult to focus on the expression sufficiently closely to be able to reflect on its possible meaning.¹ For the expression is a bit peculiar. It might even be silly. Does it say, We are constituted as subjects in and through language, *and nothing else*? Or does it say, We are constituted as subjects in and through language, *among other things*? If the latter, what other things, and where does language rank among them? And if the former, what was there before there was language? Or are we to believe literally that "In the beginning was the word"? More to the point, is it really plausible to accord to language exclusive and total determining power in this way? Would it be plausible for Williams, or any other Marxist, to do so? For "language" are we to read "language as system" – *Langue*? And if *Langue* is implied, is it the *Langue* of particular languages? Does "language" then mean "English", for instance, or "Arabic", or any other actually existing language? Does it matter in what language, or in what dialect of a language, I am constituted? Or does "language" mean something even more abstract – "linguisticity" say? So far we have not even raised the question of what *precisely* "subject" means in the expression, though it would be difficult for Higgins to make a convincing case that it carries the same meaning for both Althusser and Lacan.

I do not want to pretend that these questions are necessarily unanswerable, but I would insist that they cannot be taken for granted as they have been in so much poststructuralist work. I would also want to insist that they have not gone unnoticed by Williams.

Higgins's phrase "missed encounter" leaves unstipulated the reasons for the absence of such a conception of language in Williams's work. Are we to assume that Williams did not know about the work of Althusser and Lacan and the people they influenced? Alternatively, had he perhaps read their work but was incapable of understanding it owing to his "blindness" in these matters? Or had he read it and dismissed it? Was there really no "encounter"? Moreover, is it entirely accurate to suggest that Williams did not believe that language was constitutive, even "deeply constitutive" in Higgins's phrase (p. 65)? I would suggest that there was an encounter, that unambiguous evidence of the encounter can be found in Williams's work, that Williams

deliberately, and for compelling reasons, declined to incorporate into cultural materialism the conception of language underlying the poststructuralist Freudianism which Higgins endorses, and finally that Williams did understand language as constitutive, but in a way significantly different from the way such a conception is formulated in poststructuralist Freudianism and in poststructuralist thought generally.

In support of these assertions, I will confine my remarks to Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Circumscribing my discussion in this way will enable readers to check more easily on the accuracy of my descriptions of Williams's position, and ensure that any quoting out of context or similar tactic will not escape notice. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the underpinnings of the position Williams outlines in *Marxism and Literature* were already present in fairly clear form in earlier works like *The Country and the City* (1973) and of course *Keywords* (1976), and were further elaborated and clarified in the work that followed *Marxism and Literature*.

For the issue at hand the key chapters in *Marxism and Literature* are "Language" in Part 1 and "Signs and Notations" in Part 3. In the former, Williams notes that "language is then distinctively human; indeed, *constitutively* human" (p. 24; emphasis added). He is not just "conceding" this point, as if under the sheer weight of recent theory he has to make some sort of gesture of accommodation. On the contrary, it is a claim he is determined to make about language since it affords him the standpoint from which he goes on in the chapter to construct his critique of modern linguistic theory.

Any effort to specify this linguistic theory more precisely brings us up against a slight terminological problem which will require me to digress for a moment. The theory of language that underpins poststructuralist thought is not precisely Saussurean, but it is not exactly post-Saussurean either. It might be best to think of it, drawing from an expression used in scientific ascriptions, as "after-Saussure", or even more awkwardly, the "after-Saussure" theory of language. Williams is explicit about his reservations regarding such theory:

Marxists have ... to notice ... that history, in its most specific, active, and connecting senses, has disappeared (in one tendency has been theoretically excluded) from this account of so central a social activity as language.

(p. 28)

He is equally clear about how his notion of language as constitutive differs from the poststructuralist account:

It is precisely the sense of language as an *indissoluble* element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as "constitutive". To make it *precede* all other connected activities is to claim something quite different.

The idea of language as constitutive is always in danger of this kind of reduction.

(p. 29)

Now for Williams even to be speaking in these terms requires familiarity with the sort of theorising about language and the subject that was widespread in the 1970s, requires, in other words, the very encounter Higgins says was missed. At the same time, Williams declares his distance from many of the assumptions accompanying those theorisations, thereby demonstrating that he did not miss the encounter, he worked through it and, from his materialist standpoint, found certain central poststructuralist formulations wanting.

In "Signs and Notations" Williams continues his critique of poststructuralist or "after-Saussure" conceptions of language, now taking up the theory of the sign. Here his main assertion is that "the 'sign' is 'arbitrary' only from a position of conscious or unconscious alienation. Its apparent arbitrariness is a form of social distance, itself a form of relationship" (p. 168). He continues in the same paragraph:

To reduce words to "arbitrary" signs, and to reduce language to a "system" of signs, is then either a realized alienation (the position of the alien observer of another people's language or of the conscious linguist deliberately abstracting lived and living forms for scientific analysis) or an unrealized alienation, in which a specific group, for understandable reasons, overlooks its privileged relationship to the real and active language and society all around it and in fact within it, and projects onto the activities of others its own forms of alienation.

(p. 168)

Here again, Williams's every phrase bears the traces of the poststructuralist theories from which he is determined to distinguish his own project. It is difficult to see how he could be said to have missed the encounter with these theories.

It would appear that what Higgins is wanting to claim is not that Williams "missed" the encounter with poststructuralism, since such a claim is clearly contradicted by Williams's comments on language. Rather, what Higgins regrets is that Williams *decided* to abjure poststructuralism. And Higgins regrets this because he values both Williams and poststructuralism. The question is whether one can have both – or have both in a synthesis that is something more than mere eclecticism.

Fredric Jameson (1977), writing at almost exactly the same time that Williams was engaged with *Marxism and Literature*, is prepared to argue that poststructuralist Freudianism is compatible with Marxism, or can be made to be so. At first glance that would seem to separate him from Williams; however, something rather more suprising and paradoxical seems to be the case. Such a *rapprochement*, even for a Marxist as Hegelian as Jameson, would sooner or later require reversing the idealist and hypostatizing tendencies in "after-Saussure" linguistic theory, and would necessarily substitute for such tendencies the assumption of a material and social reality within which language is not just constitutive but is itself constituted – a theory, in short, of the social construction of the subject. And that is precisely what Williams insists on.

Surprisingly, then, we are left with a choice between two conclusions or,

more accurately, two ways of saying the same thing. Either we can see Williams as having confronted ("encountered") poststructuralist Freudianism and rejecting it in favour of his own carefully worked out conception of language as a material social practice, or, we can see this very conception as precisely Williams's point of convergence with poststructuralist Freudianism. Either, then, given his materialist standpoint, he could never under any circumstances arrive at the accommodation Higgins desires, or he has already long since arrived there, and Higgins is lamenting the absence of something that – *mutatis mutandis* – is in fact present.

Unless he is prepared to advocate low-level eclecticism, Higgins cannot reasonably suppose that Williams could have imported into cultural materialism a notion that "We are constituted as subjects in and through language" without thoroughly rewriting that description, specifying the material, historical, and social forces and relations in which such a conception would necessarily have to be embedded in any materialist theory. That comes very close to describing what he in fact does in the two chapters at which we have been looking. Higgins is, naturally, free to wish that Williams had *abandoned* cultural materialism in favour of poststructuralist Freudianism. (Of course, one could equally wish that Lacan had abandoned poststructuralist Freudianism for cultural materialism.) But if Higgins is seeking *rapprochement*, convergence, an "encounter" – *one that nevertheless enables Williams to retain the Marxist content of his project* – then he already has it. It is called *Marxism and Literature*.

Notes

1. I am not suggesting that the conception is *always* used unthinkingly. John Brenkman's recent work on the constitutive power of language (1987), for example, is a cogent statement of the position (see especially chapter 5).

References

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A reply from John Higgins will be published in the next issue of *JLS*.